

ISSN 0975 - 3516

HERMES

A Bi-annual Literary Research Journal

Volume IV

Issue II

March 2012

President & Chief Editor
Rev. Dr. A. Sebastian S.J.
Principal



PG & RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)

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**The Impact of Colonization on the Social Scenario of New Orleans:
A Study of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter***

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The imperialistic policy of the colonizers influenced the socio-political scenario of the entire world. The quest for power coerced many European countries to colonize the distant parts of the world. They aroused growing inequality and unrest between different factions of society. In addition, the process of migration incited during the colonial period endowed in an increasingly hybrid scenario. The seclusion of economically backward people and the racial minorities engendered impoverished condition in the colonized countries. The heightened tension that ensued due to the wide scale discrepancies between members of the same country insists massive reformations in the attitude of the power seekers.

In the novel *Coming through Slaughter*, Ondaatje foregrounds the deplorable state of people by delineating the social condition of New Orleans after the civil war. He evinces that the multicultural scenario of New Orleans effectuated during the period of colonization has a great role in shaping the social, economic and cultural conditions of African-Americans in nineteenth and twentieth century. The city has been situated on a nexus of French, Spanish, and British territory. The control of all the three powers created a unique environment for people of different cultural backgrounds to live in the same place. New Orleans was considered as a hub of commerce with booming economic prosperity before the civil war but the condition transposed in the years following the war. The African culture is also bestowed to New Orleans as a result of the slave trade.

The ethnic differences in the hybrid environment were highly transparent as the people were ghettoized based on the differences. The Storyville district of New Orleans was segregated into two divisions

them. The inhabitants of New Orleans lived in economically bad condition. They resided in dismantled buildings where all "the houses almost falling down, the signs the porches and the steps broken"

The inhabitants of New Orleans practiced thousands of women to indulge in illegal activities. They sought unfair means of earning money so as to cope up with their life. Ondaatje adverts that by the end of the nineteenth century; more than 2000 women were involved in flesh trade. There were at least 70 professional gamblers, 30 piano players in the locality involved in illegal flesh trading. Danny Barker remarks in the book *Buddy Bolden and the Last Days of Storyville* that "New Orleans throughout its history had, according to many noted authorities on the subject, just about the largest and most organized Red Light District in the Western Hemisphere" (10).

The automatic drug addicts endangered the life of millions of people in the locality. They ventured into brutal acts of violence causing tumults in the society. Murders were regarded as common day and night occurrences. The streetwalkers were haunted by the "bestial habits and ferocious manners" (2) of the men who came to visit them. They killed their lovers in order to escape from their clutches but in some cases they were themselves stabbed to death by their lovers. Ondaatje makes remarks of the condition of a streetwalker named Mary Rich who "was stabbed by her boy-friend and had her head beaten in with her own wooden leg" (3).

The women involved in the flesh trading were affected by deadly diseases. They became deformed as a result of ill health. They became invisible when they heard the approaching steps of fat rich persons. Ondaatje notices that "their lives have become simplified by seeing all the rich and healthy as dangerous and they automatically run when they see them" (124). They were depressed by the trauma they endured in the society. They felt that the continuous exposure to the sufferings around

them made their life more awful. They begged for alms to run their lives but were neglected from social interaction. They were deserted from the rest of the society and were barred from entering Storyville. The afflicted women who entered the locality were haunted and whipped down by the paraders. Ondaatje opines that the women who were "riddled with the pox, remnants of the good life good time ever loving Storyville who, when they are finished there, steal their mattress and with a sling hang it on their backs and learn to run fast when they see paraders with a stick" (124).

The agony endured by the people of New Orleans made them susceptible to several mental disorders. Ondaatje catalogues some of the main causes of insanity as "ill health, loss of property, excessive use of tobacco, dissipation, domestic affliction, epilepsy, masturbation, homesickness, injury of the head" (155). The authorities opened up several hospitals in the city to protect the mental health of the people. The Hospital in East Louisiana was opened in the year 1848 and it treated the patients of all ages.

The hospitals did not possess favourable sanitary conditions for the patients. The unhygienic condition of the crowded wards made them vulnerable to diseases like dysentery. Ondaatje highlights the lamentable condition of the hospital by referring to a minority report from a special committee that stated that the patients in the hospital lived in "direst poverty and lacked sufficient food. Dinner consisted of a tin cupful of soup, meat about the size of a hen's egg, and a small piece of bread. Breakfast was bread and coffee. Supper was bread and tea" (155). The women patients were not properly clothed and the cells in which they were accommodated were not properly ventilated. The rooms lacked the warmth necessary to live. Moreover, the patients in the open wards were made to work throughout the day. The patients protested against the authorities when they could not tolerate the atrocities committed against them "guard rapes, bad plumbing, labour, lack of heat" (160).

The personal tragedies encountered by the patients reflected a broader, more disturbing social reality. Ted Gioia observes in the book *The History of Jazz* that "[t]he average lifespan for a black native of New Orleans in 1880 was only thirty six years" (29). The mortality rate reflected by Gioia expresses the abbreviated lifespan of the black society

in late nineteenth century New Orleans. Ondaatje states that the same condition prolonged in the beginning of the twentieth century. The East Louisiana State hospital recorded that in the years between 1912 and 1914, “[t]he death rate was 1.1% per year” (156).

Ondaatje adumbrates the influence of the social conditions of New Orleans on jazz music that is originated from the African-Americans. He evinces that the jazz was regarded as a marginal music due to its socio-cultural associations. It is mainly colligated with the bordellos and prostitutes of New Orleans and to the alcoholics and the drug addicts of the nightclubs in New York and Los Angeles. The jazz musicians did not enjoy the straightforward commerciality of rock and popular music and was not even afforded any public support that is offered to classical music and opera.

Buddy Bolden, son of a domestic servant belonged to the black populated area in Storyville district of New Orleans. He was raised in a post civil war society that did not match the prosperity and general wellbeing of pre-war New Orleans. The jazz musicians like Buddy Bolden lived a life of utmost poverty as they were too measly paid for their performances. He attests this by describing the condition of Bolden who was engaged in multifarious jobs such as an editor of the magazine, photographer, a cornet player, and as a barber. He attempted to grapple with the meager resources but the financial sobriety haunted him throughout his life.

The money that Bolden received was spared for all the preparation a musician had to undertake while organizing the band for music. Moreover, they were prohibited from congregating in any public park. The musicians who performed violating the rules were either imprisoned or made to pay the fine. The rigorous conditions imposed on the musicians made them to shift their performances to an open-air area. In the book entitled *The History of Jazz*, Ted Gioia mentions about the various venues in which the jazz musicians played music:

Lincoln Park and Johnson Park were other favorite locations for crowds to gather to listen to New Orleans bands, and a wide range of other venues — including restaurants, assembly halls, and meeting places — commonly featured music, as did virtually every major

event, not only the frequent parades and marches, sporting events, or the celebrations of Mardi Gras and Easter, but even the solemn occasions of funeral and burial. (31)

Ondaatje excogitates the manner in which Bolden played the jazz music during his weekend performances. He played music by marching around the parks like a big parade. The audiences who had assembled in the park to listen to his music also joined him in his parade. He “walks out of the crowd, struggles through onto the street and begins playing, too loud but real and strong you couldn’t deny him, and then he went back into the crowd. Then fifteen minutes later, 300 yards down the street, he jumps through the crowd onto the street again, plays, and then goes off” (36).

The marginalised status of the jazz music overturned with the end of the First World War. In the decade after the war, vast population of blacks migrated to northern cities such as Chicago, Illinois, and New York. The Great Migration influenced the whole range of black society including musicians. They believed that the northern cities would provide them with good prospects that segregated southern cities failed to offer. They sought a new land for better life, for greater opportunities to work and to lead a peaceful life with full freedom. Ondaatje mentions that the musicians like Louis Armstrong, Bunk Johnson, and Freddie Keppard who migrated from New Orleans popularized jazz music far beyond the city limits.

The jazz music became a significant contribution of African-American’s to the entire world. The music which was confined to New Orleans jazz enjoyed a revival in the 1940s. Ondaatje evinces that in the postmodern era the jazz music was widely recorded. The contributions of the musicians were also immensely recognized. He states that in the year 1965, the pianists were paid the salary of “\$1.00 to 1.50 a night, plus tips. Money was worth a lot more then” (164). He notices that during this period, several attempts were taken by the historians to conduct studies on the life and social conditions in which the musicians lived. He pinpoints the interviews of some of the musicians like Frank Amacker, whose interviews were published in the popular magazines like *Digest*. He considers that the musicians gained a broader scope and

greater popularity due to the significant changes in the field of recording and mass communication.

Ondaatje apprehends how the process of emerging out of the hybrid environment of the colonial world turned as a prominent milestone in liberating the ethnic art forms like jazz music from the restricted segregated society to the outside world. The versatility of jazz music and the musicians began to reach wider audience. This has led to a considerable change in the economical condition of the musicians. Moreover, he urges the rulers of the country to promote racial and ethnic harmony. He believes that the discouragement of ghettoization, violence and racial discrimination would create endearing circumstance for the peaceful coexistence of various cultural groups.

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Biographical Criticism

This approach “begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author’s life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work.” Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer’s life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic “focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author’s life.... [B]iographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material.”

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