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THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY: PEOPLE AND PLACES IN PABLO NERUDA'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Pablo Neruda's search for identity is largely associated and driven by the mode of past memories which works as a metaphor to access his past. It instills inspiration to accumulate experiences from the deepest part of the conscience. It creates nostalgic feelings and burning passions to search one's self with the help of past events and memories. Neruda's quest for identity invades him in the realm of people and places. It includes his personal and impersonal experiences that ranges from father, mother, friends to the forest of Chile. For Neruda memory works as a permanent scar not to be healed by any remedy. It is the window through which he can go back into past and enjoy the sonorous moments of his bygone days. Poems like, 'The More Mother', 'The Father', and 'The South' express Neruda's persistent quest for identity. The poet uses memories as the vehicle to commute into different time zones to search his identity. For Neruda past memories are the recurring line that connects and effects his present and future poetic activities and identity. Hence, Neruda uses memories in different perspectives but with one aim to transfix his poetic salve and recurring identity into eternity.

Keywords: Pablo Neruda, Identity, Self, People, Places, Memories

Introduction

In the world of flux where identity is transformed and transfixed in such a way that one has quest for one's identity. Man is a combination of complex selves that he folds and unfolds time to time. In the quest for identity, memory plays a vital role as it assimilates past experiences and reevaluates identity and present scenario. For Pablo Neruda, a Chilean Poet and Diplomat, identity is a constant periphery which circles around his multiple selves. Born and brought up in a small village of Chile, Neruda is passionate about Nature, places and people. Inexhaustible traveler and incessant acquaintance with the different people creates a deep influence on his creative writing. The range of Neruda's poems indicates clearly that the poet persona has cultivated and lived several selves at a time. As Adam Feinstein in his book *Pablo Neruda a passion for life* quotes Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca's words for Neruda that he is 'closer to blood than to ink' (Feinstein, 2013, 2).

The Quest for Identity: People and Places in the poems of Pablo Neruda

Let us see how people and places have helped him to find his identity. As far as people are concerned, particularly family members and friends Neruda is deeply attached with them especially, to his mother, though she is a step-mother, still Neruda remembers and longs for her as she plays a definitive role to build-up his specific identity in his childhood days. The poet Persona writes in his poem 'The More-Mother' in his book *Isla Negra*:

my more-mother, Dona
Trinidad Marverde,
soft as the tentative freshness
of the sun in storm country,
a frail lamp, self-effacing,
lighting up
to show others the way. (IN, 2005, 09)

The stepmother is expired long back but she lives in Neruda's memory and emerges as the embodiment of integrity and selflessness. Her generosity and dedication for family is invaluable. In *Memoirs* first chapter "The Country Boy" Neruda writes about his mother:

My father had married again; his second wife was Dona Trinidad Candia Marverde, my stepmother. I find it hard to believe that this is what I must call the guardian angel of my childhood. She was devoted and loving, and had a countrywoman's sense of humour and a diligent, inexhaustible kindness. (Neruda, 2001, 10)

The poet persona's real mother expired when he was two months and two days old. Neruda has not even faint memory of her just, a photograph to visualize how she was looked like. Hence, Neruda expresses:

Dear more-mother-
I was never able
to say stepmother!-
at this moment
my mouth trembles to define you
for hardly
had I began to understand
than I saw goodness in poor dark clothes,
a practical sanctity- (IN, 2005, 9, 11)

The poet persona calls her step-mother as "more" mother because she proves herself superior to the real mother in terms of love, care and responsibility towards her family. Neruda never realizes the loss of his real mother. The poet reminds his Mother's surging household works of feeding bread to all and giving warmth in winter to handle leaky terrace of the house in a rainy season. She performs all her duties silently and submissively as a country woman of that time. Mother's genial nature and selflessness creates imperishable memories and space in the poet's mind that it is impossible for him to forget her mother for a moment. Even so the poet is not sharing any genealogical or biological identity with his stepmother still; he is carrying her traces and sharing his surname of real mother. As Dominic Moran writes in his book *Pablo Neruda Critical Lives* in the first chapter 'From the Frontier to the Metropolis':

....Trinidad Candia Malverde, a stepmother Neruda grew to love dearly and whom he would refer to affectionately as his 'mamadre'. (Moran, 2009, 14)

In the last stanza the poet describes his mother's manual activities of cooking, ironing, washing clothes, planting and soothing fevers by her gentle hands. At last she fulfills all her responsibilities and rests in her small coffin where she becomes silent in the hard rain of Temuco. In Neruda's poems childhood memory especially, related to mother becomes the reagent to quest the identity. The poet remembers his mother while he is away from his native place. Neruda's poetic self-emerged and cultivated by dedicating his first poem to his stepmother. That's why, remembering his mother is the way to associate his native land that is dark and deep woods where, the poet persona's interior-self curved and composed. The critic like Hernan Loyola calls:

“motionless forests of the interior” which is considered as “maternal impulse” ..
..Neruda later referred to the former as a sort of protective womb, a ‘maternal wood’. (Moran, 2009, 16)

Spending his time at Isla Negra Neruda recollects his childhood memories in the last years of his life to quest and reevaluate his underpinning identity which is formulated by his native land and its people.

Father is the person who has first and foremost composed Neruda’s outer and inner selves during his upbringing years. Nevertheless, Neruda’s father was a disciplinarian, authoritarian and traditionalist man who is completely opposed to Neruda’s disposition. Hence, Neruda’s relationship with his father is a lurid mixture of conflict and lure. The memory of his father unfolds the layers of childhood in his autobiographical poetry collection *Isla Negra* in 1964 when the poet persona describes his father in the poem ‘The Father’:

My blunt father comes back
from the trains.
We recognize
in the night
the whistle
of the locomotive....
and later
the door shivering open. (IN, 2005, 13)

Neruda’s father Jose del Carmen was a railwayman in southwards at Talcahuano in Chile. Carmen did not fulfill his desire to be an entrepreneur. Neither was he accomplished farmer nor a middle man on the Talcahuano dam. He criss-crossed whole nation to get a good job but he ended with locomotive driver. Ofcourse, Carmen was a true railwayman by heart. Conflict with life and job makes Carmen stubborn and dictatorial. Neruda recalls his father coming back from shift:

On Jose’s return home from his shift at four in the morning, ‘the door shook,
the whole house shook, the stairs groaned, a loud voice uttered hostile recri-
minations.’(Feinstein, 2013, 9)

The poet has skilfully combined vindictive Nature and continuity of rain with that of father’s stiffness. Further, the poet describes his father’s hardship and manual duties being a locomotive driver. Hardly, he sees sun shine during his journey. He has to prepare his lamp, coal and geographical marks to stop the train in heavy mist. In the next stanza Neruda considers “railwayman is a sailor on earth.... without a sea line” (IN, 2005, 15). When long run’s trains end their journey they rest and friends gather there for party. Such gathering of his father’s friends perpetually marked on Neruda’s childhood memories that even at his sixties he is rejuvenating such experiences. The poet says:

friends come together,
come in, and the doors of my childhood open,
the table shakes
at the slam of a railwayman’s hand,
the thick glasses of companions jump
and the glitter
flashes out
from the eyes of the wine. (IN, 2005, 15)

Occasionally, Neruda’s father takes him on a long train journey into the deep forest, mountain and mud that cultivates Neruda’s love for nature and he comes in contact with many strange human beings, mostly his father’s friends and rail workers. These people have violent and malicious past. Their revengeful and vivid tales shapes Neruda’s imagination and ignites creativity. In the last stanza the poet persona describes the end of his father’s journey:

one day, rainier than other days,
the railwayman, Jose del Carmen Reyes,

climbed aboard the train of death, and so far has not come back. (IN, 2005, 15)

The poet's father Carmen Reyes's life is like a running campaign full of hustle and bustle. The father has fulfilled all his responsibilities and finally, he makes the journey of a train that ends his life. In short, father's excessive traveling in the inner most part of Chile and congregative attitude paved the way to Neruda to develop his first basic Native Indian (Araucana) self. Although, completely opposite to his father's stiff, disciplined and mechanical attitude Neruda develops wanderer, soft and compassionate self. The poet persona's childhood impressions and observations nurture his love for Nature. Neruda's father has lined-up a ground of ample experiences for him. Hence, the memories of father and mother become the epicenter of Neruda's quest for identity and research for his self.

Neruda is a born traveler who travels around the world and Latin America inexhaustibly. He is a man of earth and deeply connected with its tentacles say, sea, forest, mountain and air. Therefore, places occupy a pivotal role in the quest of Neruda's identity. The poet was born and brought up in a Country where nature is the integral part of every habitant. Neruda's unfathomable love for his homeland urges him to visit and revisit his country and home-town regularly. The present poem 'The South' from his book *Isla Negra* narrates Neruda's ardent love and intimacy for Nature of his country. Chile is a narrow belt in the Western part of South America, looks like a curled serpent. In fact it is rich in natural resources and minerals. This poem is a blend of his childhood journey with his father on the train in the deepest part of southern Chile and recollection of these memories as an old-aged poet at Isla Negra. As Jason Wilson states in his book *A Companion to Pablo Neruda*:

...when in reality Neruda at this age and stage was self-involved and self-exploring. His present obviously tampers with his past. (Wilson, 2014, 211)

This southern part is more or less untouched and unexplored by the Invaders (Spanish Conquistadors). So, its Araucanian culture and nature is preserved and intact till the beginning of 20th century. The poet re-claps on his Childhood memories and narrates:

The vast frontier. From
the Bio-Bio
as far as Reoncavi,
by way of
Renaico, Selva Oscura,
Pillanlelbun, Lautaro,
and even further, partridge eggs... (IN, 2005, 19)

The poet digs out the mine of his past memories and remembers the places of South Chile which are full of life and vividness. Prominently and purposefully the poet uses the term "Selva Oscura" means the dark forest. "This term was used in Dante's Inferno.1.2. This dark wood is chaotic, unformed and unnamed-as a type of primordial wood. Neruda compares himself indirectly with that of Dante's initial stage in the "dark wood", it means Knowledge to be a learning Process" (<http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/prologue.html>). Hence, the poet describes various creatures in the dense forest of South Chile. A critic and biographer Feinstein writes in his book about Neruda's childhood memories of nature:

Nature made me feel inebriated. I must have been about ten years old, but
I was already a poet. I was not yet writing verse, but I was attracted to the
birds, the beetles, the partridge eggs. It was a miracle to find them [the eggs]
in the ravines, greasy, dark and gleaming, the colour of the barrel of a shotgun.
I was stunned by the perfection of the insects. (Feinstein, 2005, 10)

Spider's crafted web, snake's quick glistening disappearance, spiky rodents, and shrill voices of glacial birds all these discoveries astounds the poet and lost himself in the heavy greenness of the dark forest. After soothing his eyes with varied discoveries in the jungle, now the poet voyages back to the roots of his origin and consider this jungle as the "natal", his birth place and his Mapuche community as "deep" and "dark" where the poet stands alone. Neruda tactfully reverses time-line and enters again in the past memories in his poems, where he adds his present experience to reevaluate and reconnect his selves. Hence, the poet mythically describes

his adventure in the forest as, he is lost, tired and not seeing any light of hope and suddenly, the poet says “I am alive again” (IN, 2005, 23). Even, here the poet says that the Neruda, who was roaming in the jungle, is dead but when he sees a light of hope to come out from the dark forest, then the new Neruda is born with new self and identity. He buries himself in the dark forest and asks a question that, is he come back with the secrets of jungle? Finally, the poet expresses:

There, in the somber light,
it was decided and made,
my contract with the earth. (IN, 2005, 23)

The poet has made inseparable bond with his motherland and earth. In his Book *Memoirs* Neruda expresses his perennial love for homeland and mother-earth:

I cannot live without having my feet and my hands on it and my ear against
it, without the feeling the movement of its waters and its shadows, without
feeling my roots reach down into its soil for maternal nourishment. (PN, 2001, 165)

Neruda remembers his motherland and deeply associates his identity with its landscapes, creatures and, peculiarities. The poet remembers the natural dark forest, his existence with it and transformation of his self and identity.

Conclusion

To sum up, Neruda has created as Robert Pring-Mill says his own “personal cosmology” (Feinstein, 2013, 175) of people and places in his poems in such a way that it creates and disseminates a novel experiences. Through people and places Neruda explores and searches human experiences, different perceptions, visions and possibilities to shape his own world of experiences and identities. For Neruda past memories become the gateway to enter in different time zones to introspect and retrospect his identity which is shaping his various selves, experiences and visions. The poet’s persistent quest for identity ultimately settles in the omniscient self. The poet seeks universal perpetual identity therefore; flux becomes his self cum identity which is constant in time and space.

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