

Reflective Piece on “Festering Hope”

by

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Upon reading the second stanza of A. D Hope’s *Australia*, and especially the verses “A woman beyond her change of life, a breast/ Still tender but within the womb is dry” (ll. 7-8) a chord was struck within me. And even though A. D Hope personified Australia as a woman, I felt like this woman could stand alone, outside the context of Australia. Soon enough a train of thought began, starting from the general connotations of fertility and ending up in the impression of the “dryness within the womb.” For me, it exudes a futility which can be condensed in this sentence: No woman is free of suffering, awareness or ignorance of her oppression, hope or no hope; she will always be the prey. But what does this mean?

Every little girl, unbeknownst to her and since the very moment of her birth, has a sword of Damocles hanging over her head, an invisible chain holding her bound which she can’t even fathom yet. The system within which this instilled burden operates is represented in the poem through the entities of the Bush, the Nation, and the Tongue. As soon as the girl matures into a woman, an abstract maturation marked by society with menarche, she identifies this sword of Damocles as the masculine. The Bush represents the patriarchy, the Nation the institution that sustains patriarchy, and the Tongue female expression. The presence of those forces within her awareness is mitigated as soon as a girl is viewed and treated by society as a woman.

Menarche is the milestone according to which, subconsciously, patriarchic society draws the distinction between girl and woman, and it is based on the biological

culmination of her reproductive capacities and the development of her secondary sex characteristics. Yet this distinction bears no foundation and it is rather unfair since it is constrained merely to what catches the eye and completely disregards the cognitive maturity and general socioemotional development that differentiates women from girls (Gwartney 2016). By identifying girls as women, their innocence and childlike characteristics are lost; therefore they are automatically and justifiably targeted within the patriarchal society. This is portrayed in my poem in the lines “the dark red across her white sheets,/ felt as if with her blood/ she had shed her girlhood.” It contrasts the violent connotations of blood on the white sheets which connote innocence and purity. In the other words, it is the beginning of the end. This sense of stolen purity is captured in the second image I chose, where a white lamb, symbol of immaculacy, is hogtied.

Therefore, sexism applies to girls as much as women. Simultaneously, the majority of them have awareness of their victimhood and the predator who is after them; men. In the face of this systemic brutality, women have only one thing they can anchor themselves to: hope. This is the only way they can cope with the fruitlessness of their efforts to compensate for their fabricated inadequacy and fight back. This hope is like an open wound that will never be mended and with each passing moment, it festers. This poem stands as a reflection of how women of all ages suffer under the force of men and the perseverance of a futile hope for freedom that will only be materialized generations after their passing, if ever. I attempted to portray this sense of decay and dread with the first picture I chose which depicts a woman holding the thoracic cage against her upper body.

While a woman’s greater hope is her freedom from the masculine force, men hope for the maintenance of female subordination. We see this in marriage, the institutionalized

relationship between the two sexes, which reinforces this very hope of men (Singh, 2013). This subordination is also implicit through the infliction of bodily shame initially by men until it is internalized by women themselves and forwarded to other women. I wanted to bring forth this strategic mortification with the juxtaposition in the line “her revered, unorthodox body.” The most common source of feminine shame is menstruation, which connects again tied to the previous mention of menarche as an abstract binary of innocence and corruption. Menstruation is a bodily function that should be revered as something sacred since it defines a woman’s body as a vessel capable of bringing life on earth. Yet, it is portrayed as something inherently dirty, nefarious and inconvenient, therefore reflecting the false narrative that “women’s bodies inherently are their enemy” (Mandziuk, 2010). Hence my choice to incorporate a picture, the one with the girl in the white skirt holding the pomegranate, a symbol of fertility and sanctity with a white background which connotes purity.

Another prime example of female bodily shame is nudity, specifically the conjectural censorship exclusively of the female nipple (Faust, 2017). The only condition a woman can expose her body under is to profit off it, which again circulates back to male gratification and female objectification and subordination, all under the guise of female empowerment. I think it is of high significance to point out how female bodies are either concealed or capitalized instead of worshipped for their miraculous ability to create life. It is truly unfathomable to me how this mere ability does not equate, if not elevate, women with men.

Of course, this is only theoretical. Men as a whole will never recognize women’s abilities and everything they have to offer. They have constructed a system against women, represented by the piano in the poem and depicted in one of the pictures, with

the sole purpose of keeping them inferior and under their control. And they can do so simply due to their physical strength. This is the reason why this hope for a society that is not patriarchal will always fester; women biologically lack something that enables men to impose themselves, something which strips them of any humanity within. This violent, uncontrollable urge for physical and mental domination is reflected through the line “to plant the Cross upon your forehead sky”, derived from A. D. Hope’s *Australia*, which also alludes to religion being weaponized by men and incorporated in the systemic subordination of women.

In general terms, my inspiration predominantly came from A. D. Hope’s poem and his depiction of a rather weathered Australia which felt familiar and relatable to the circumstances under which women are conditioned to live their lives. I intended to depict the sense of injustice that rushes through women and the subsequent nurturing of hope for freedom from this brutality. And though the poem exudes a certain hopelessness, the ending stanza implies that there will come a generation of women who will not feel the rot spread in their chest. When the storm will wash away all the blood and mud from the piano, women will be able to reclaim their place on the stool, place their own music sheets on the music stand, and play their own sweet tunes without the brutal fingers of men intervening.

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