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## THE COMMONS AND THE ENCLOSURES: AN ECOLOGICAL POST-COLONIAL READING OF SELECT LITERARY NARRATIVES

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### Abstract

Before the industrial revolution and European colonialism, the popular mode of economy and property ownership was defined by the system of the Commons. There used to be communally owned land for farming, animal grazing, fishing, hunting, and gathering. These Commons were well managed and properly organised. Everyone was responsible for the upkeep of these Commons. From sixteenth century onwards, this system was under immense pressure. With the onset of industrial and imperial era, the concept of private property and ownership came into being. This concept was popularized as Enclosure. The land was fenced and marked; the woods were walled and given to the rich landlords. Now, the masses were not allowed to use any thing for their own benefit. Everything was owned by capitalist lords. This phenomenon was replicated in the newly established colonies. The present paper aims to link the act of enclosing in European countries from sixteenth century onwards with the larger act of colonialism outside Europe. The paper examines selected short stories from British, Irish, and African writers from the perspective of Commons and Enclosures, highlighting its environmental consequences in the present times.

Keywords: Commons, Enclosures, Colonialism, Capitalism, Property ownership

The world we inhabit today is different from what our great grand-parents inhabited several generations back. There is more comfort, ease, accessibility, and more scientific infrastructure today to what there was four hundred years back when colonialism and capitalism expanded beyond European boundaries. With rapid advancement in science and technology, humans have been able to do wonders with themselves and their surroundings. We as humans have invented and theorized terms and concepts that have proved disastrous for both, human and non-human alike. This paper aims to

theorize such terms as Commons and Enclosures with reference to their nexus with Colonialism and Capitalism. Further, the paper cites selected British, Irish, and African short stories to situate these terms in their post-colonial context with ecological consequences for the contemporary society.

Before delving into an in-depth analysis of the selected narratives, it is pertinent to first understand concepts like Commons and Enclosures. Mahadev, one of the villagers in "The Magic of the Lost Temple" by Sudha Murty, is taking small children out

for walk on the hill near the village when Noon, the city girl enquires about a grassy land with amazement and delight. To satisfy her curiosity, Mahadev tells her and other children that it is a grass land known as pasture. It is not owned by any villager, but the entire village owns it. No one is allowed to buy and sell it. It is a common property and villagers use this land as pasture ground for their animals. The small water pond, as he continues, is also like the land. Here, he informs his listeners that the village animals drink water before, during and after grazing. This land and water body have been as it is since ages. Villagers are supposed to respect and protect it. This description of the common land and water resource is neither new nor unique to this particular village in south India. Since ages, human settlements had the concept of Commons. Wherever villages came into existence, there were commons. Wherever human-beings huddled together, there were commons. There used to be forests where everyone gathered food and wood. There used to be pastures where all grazed their animals. There used to be springs and wells where all filled their buckets and pots. As Derek Wall (2014, 3) argues, "prior to European colonialism, the commons were rule rather than exception". He further maintains that for indigenous Americans and Australians, the land and other natural resources used to be communal property. They had never thought of buying and selling them as their very life was dependent upon them. In India and Africa also, Wall continues, "property rights were communal rather than individual," (Wall 2014, 3). To quote Stephanie Lemenager (2021, 11), "In the English language, the term 'commons' dates to the late fifteenth century, where it means, 'a common land or estate; the undivided land belonging to the members of a local community as a whole'".

Wall divides Commons into several categories. First, there are Commons owned by each one of us, like atmosphere and worldwide resources as contemporary Commons. Secondly, the Commons owned by a community which are not open to other communities like a village ground, well, pond, field, and pasture. Thirdly, the Common owned by an individual, but used and maintained by the entire community. For example, before

industrial revolution, during the medieval ages, almost most of the fertile land in England was owned by landlords and churches. In this case, as Wall writes, "the farmers were free to gather fruits and wood and graze cattle in exchange of their services to the landlords" (Wall 2021, 5). There was prevalent the concept of usufruct according to which the peasants could enjoy the boons of natural resources, but the entire community of farmers, cowherds, labours, and parishioners was required to maintain it.

In short, the Commons are shared property. They are open to everyone. They are well maintained and regulated by the stake holders. They are not accessible to the members of other communities without prior agreement. They thrive upon consensus and cooperation. They fail if they are not regulated or monitored as Hardin demonstrates in his article, "Tragedy of Commons." They work well on the belief that each community has to hand down the natural resources in better and improved condition to the posterity. In other words, they teach the lesson of how to be good and sensible ancestors for the coming generations. To bring in Lemenager again, "Commons represent the idea and practice of the concept of 'Democracy' in true sense" (Lemenager 2021, 12). As Dale Jamieson points out,

One of the central themes of classical philosophy is the persistence and puzzling nature of change. Throughout the history of philosophy this concern appears, disappears, reappears, and never completely goes away. There is a similar oscillation in our sciences between an interest in equilibrium states and a fascination with the sources and persistence of disorder. Which is primary, order or disorder, change or permanence? (Jamieson 2015, 13)

The Commons began to be assaulted constantly from the beginning of seventeenth century. With the advent of colonialism and industrialisation, land was also colonised and commodified. As Shari Huhndorf quotes Cole Harris, "the experienced materiality of colonialism is grounded ... in dispossessions and repossessions of land." Consequently, he insists, any critique of

colonial power must start “not with texts, language, and strategies of representation, but with the dispossession of colonized peoples of their land” (Huhndorf 2014, 46).

Though the Commons began to change shape and character, as Derek Wall observes, from the Norman Conquest itself, but the arrival of capitalism and colonialism proved fatal for both the Commons and the inhabitants. Under the garb of profit and productivity, more and more land was enclosed. It was more than usual to come across fences, embankments, boundaries and borders in Europe from seventeenth century onwards, a tendency which Robert Marzec (2007, 15) terms as “Crusoe Syndrome”. Wherever the Europeans went to colonize, as Marzec (2007, 11) postulates, “they created mini-Europe in their respective colonies”. As Wall (2014, 12) puts it, “enclosures at home accelerated enclosing in the European empires”. The replacement of common property with privately owned property did much damage to both man and his environment. Outside home, it gave birth to the category of colonisers and colonised where the colonisers were always fenced, walled, and inside, and the colonised was always the other, outside, undomesticated and at home there came about the categories of rich landlords who had land which was properly mapped and landless for whom it was important to either be a slave of the master or be a vagabond and remain excluded. As Karl Marx theorises that it was this landless, ostracised, and dispossessed who turned towards rapidly booming industrial towns to provide cheap labour. According to Marx, it was inevitable to enclose and fence the land to create a class of landless and dispossessed men and women to be used as scapegoat for booming economy. Unfortunately, this cartography was practised both at home by the representatives of capitalism and away from home by the representatives of colonialism. This enclosing, at last, proved hostile for both land and human-beings. It impacted environment because everything- land, forest, rivers, hills, pastures, and natural resources were used and reused for maximum profit, which resulted in considerable decline in their number and productivity. It proved disastrous for people because

it converted people at home into wage labours and deprived, and the natives in the colonies into slaves.

To begin with, “The Limerick Gloves” by Maria Edgeworth can be cited for illustration. Set in the first half of the nineteenth century England, it presents a case for enclosures metaphorically. It is a story about stereotypes about Irish people in the hearts and brains of Britishers. Apparently, it unfolds the clash of English and Irish communities and an implicated love story where the lovers are pitted against the social and cultural forces. However, at a closer examination, one can trace the clash of Commons and Enclosures at work at a subtle level.

Mr. Hill, the Verger of Hereford cathedral, discovers that his daughter, Phoebe is fascinated by an Irish glover, Brian O’Neill. He forbids his daughter to wear Limerick gloves gifted by Brian because the latter is an Irish man. He blames Brian of stealing his dog and destroying his rick of oak bark. He further charges him of plotting to blast the cathedral. In order to prove his allegations, he decides to meet a gypsy magician and fortune teller. When he goes to inquire from the gypsy king Bampfyld, the second, the latter only confirms what the Verger thinks:

Now, take my word,  
Wise men of Hereford,  
None in safety may be,  
Till the bad man doth flee. (Ward 2007, 4)

Galvanised by this affirmation, Mr. Hill arrives at mayor’s home where he is convinced by His Majesty that his fears and accusations are misplaced. With ample testimonies, the mayor proves Mr. Hill as prejudiced and exonerates Brian with dignity and respect. Finally, both the families are united and Phoebe attends the lunch party thrown by the mayor with her Limerick gloves and surely enough is wedded to her lover after the story ends.

On the surface, this has nothing to do with either Commons or Enclosures. However, there is something that demands attention. When one revisits the narrative, one finds that all the main characters like, Mr. Hill and his family members, Mr. Brian and his family members, and Mayor and his family members are shown as inhabiting a neat and

clean abode. Their homes are well fenced and properly organised. Likewise, their lives are well planned and meaningfully spent. They have land, gardens, homes, and other material goods which make their lives easy and comfortable. They do not roam around for sustenance. On the other hand, the gypsies with their king Bampfylde roam here and there for mere survival. They do not own any land or home. their staying arrangements are transient and vulnerable. The gypsy king counsels people in the woods, which are away from the settlement and are unmanaged. He sits and performs his foretelling in a thatched roof hut under the trees, which is in stark contrast to the bricked and cemented abodes of the citizens of the Hereford.

His visitors are mostly domestic hands and other poor people of the town. This gypsy king is not only a fortune teller, but a thief also. It was this gypsy king who had stolen the dog of the Verger. He is a vagabond and is surrounded by other thieves and vagabonds. In the end, he is exposed and is transferred to the house of correction. This victory of Hill and Brian is significant as it indicates that the days of Commons are gone and only Enclosures are going to have the last laugh. As Robert Marzec (2007, 22) remarks, "throughout eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were two categories in rural England. There were masters and servants, there were land lords and the land less". It was important, as Marzec deliberates further, for everyone to either relate to the first or second classification. When inhabitants were displaced during the end of sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century because of new policies of land reform, millions were walled out of their Commons. These displaced community either revolted by pulling down fences and boundaries or began to roam here and there. These people were either settled in the newly discovered colonies or were migrated to cities to provide cheap labour. At other times, people took to just roaming and pilfering. As Marzec concludes that it was not uncommon to come across gypsies and vagabonds and thieves in eighteenth and nineteenth century British fiction as these were the people who were in reality most affected by the new act of enclosure of land, and as a result of their eviction from the land on which they

were living for ages, they now took to such a life style, a crucial fact, as Marzec states, is often ignored while reading and interpreting English literature of eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Elizabeth Gaskell in "Old Nurse's Story" reveals the cultural side of the Commons. The story is about a girl named Rosamond who becomes an orphan at an early age and is taken to her mother's relations in Northumberland by her maid Hester. There she encounters ghosts, supernatural creatures and mysterious beings. The story is more about guilt and suffering rather than about Commons and Enclosures. Still, one can notice cultural dimension about Commons in the text. First, James, the oldest servant in the house of Mr. Furnivall, regards his wife below himself as she was a daughter of a simple farmer before their wedding whereas, he was and is a servant in the home of Mr. Furnivall, a rich landlord. As noted earlier, throughout eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was important for the masses in England to either relate with the landlord or with the working class. As a result, a new hierarchy was created in the society. It was very easy and common for the servants in the lord's family to regard themselves as superior to the tenets and farmers who worked in the fields.

Secondly, the setting of the house in Northumberland demands scrutiny. It is a house that is well fenced and bordered. There are trees and vines all around it. It is a huge house with multiple rooms and large amount of furniture. The landlord and his family live there in comfort and luxury. But, beyond the house, there are fells and hills. They are unenclosed. The shepherds graze cattle there. There are wild and wide moors without any vegetation for miles. This part of land is untamed and uncultivated. Supernatural and mysterious things transpire there. As Derek Wall relates that in many cultures, the Commons are perceived as place occupied by ghosts and spirits. All kinds of, as Wall puts forth, creepy and shadowy things happen there. People often think that dead, devil, and divine inhabit such terrains. As Wall argues that people either worship these Commons or are afraid of these Commons. The idea of evil forest and sacred groves is nothing, but product of such a thinking.

In the story also, the place beyond Manor house is such where dead still live. Rosamond is once invited to go up the hill by a small girl of her own age and she follows without any inhibition. Later, she is carried by a shepherd back to her home as she was found lying unconscious under a tree on the hills. She herself confesses that she found a lady there who lulled her to sleep. Whereas, this lady was Miss Maude who had died many years ago. Actually, Mr. Furnivall had turned his daughter and his granddaughter out on a wintery night out on the fells. He had thought his daughter as someone who had disgraced the family by becoming a mother without wedlock. It was frosting and freezing outside. In the morning, the shepherds had reported that they had seen a lady who was laughing crazily and who was lulling to sleep a dead girl. Till date, people in the vicinity regard this Common land as inhabited by the long dead mother and long dead child. In the Manor house, everything is in order and well defined. The life and lifestyle are bracketed and managed with regulations whereas, outside in the Commons, both the land and the phantoms inhabiting it are unregulated and unenclosed. They roam freely and they remain undomesticated throughout. Miss Furnivall's last words are equally relevant in this context, "Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be undone in age! What is done in youth can never be undone in age!" (Ward 2007, 40). Metaphorically, when Commons were once eliminated, it became almost impossible for the European societies to revert to the earlier way of life.

How this practice was replicated outside is a matter of further investigation. Wherever the colonisers went, they created mini-Europe. The land was enclosed, natives displaced, and what was relevant and useful for the indigenous communities was either obliterated or disregarded. "Ding Dong Bell" by Kwabena Annan can be cited to strengthen this argument.

It is a short story of a beautiful village in Ghana. The villagers are happy with their life and culture. They do not want any outside interference. They keep resisting the efforts of the colonial government for the development projects. They have adopted the strategy of saying yes and doing

nothing. The colonial government, on the other hand is desperate to bring development to the village. One of the government officials, while addressing the villagers remark that the British authorities in Ghana have altered the very texture of the capital. Now, there are buildings, clubs, brick houses, and gardens all around. According to Derek Wall, the Europeans believed and practiced the teachings of John Lock who had advocated the confiscation of the land from the natives. His main argument was that the natives could not use the land properly as they had no idea of profit from land. As Wall continues with Lock's perception regarding land, he remarks that the colonisers were desperate to usurp the land from the inhabitants as it was lying useless. They justified this on the pretext of development. They said that they will be able to increase the productivity of the land by enclosing it and various development related projects were the result of all this; however, as Wall concludes, this was only profitable to the colonisers, not for the colonised who had no idea of harming the land by over exploitation.

In the story, "Ding Dong Bell," the villagers do not want to yield their way of collective living. They have their water pool which works as their Commons for them. The entire village takes water from it. Their ancestors used to carry water from it. They are not supposed to pollute or misuse it. As the colonial government is able to force its philosophy in the end, the villagers are convinced to dig three wells. Annan, with humour and wit, Annan is able to expose the internal fears of the villagers. When one big government officer is on inspection, the natives hide their native drink Akpeteshie, which is banned by the Britishers on medical grounds, in one of the wells. When the government official drinks the water from the same well, he feels like spitting and vomiting. On inquiry, the chief Nana tells him, "Owura, he said, addressing the Regional Officer, 'what has been done was necessary and right. The spirits are angry that we have left our forefathers' ways and the pool from which my father and his father's father drew their water. For this reason, we have purified the well and placated the spirits with a little gin" (Grandsaigne 1985, 34).

At this explanation, the officer is satisfied. However, as pointed earlier, Annan, with humour and wit, reveals the process of systematic destruction of the Commons and creation of enclosed territories which gave the colonies a different look than what they were before the actual colonisation. It is very interesting to remark here that the European colonisers remapped the basic geographies of their respective colonies which was another way of enclosing, as new borders sprang up and new walls were erected to satisfy the colonial demands of rigid administration and arbitrary control. Unfortunately, after colonialism was over, most of these border disputes have remained unresolved till date, like the border conflict between India and China, India and Nepal, India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, and Ethiopia and Somalia to add just a few examples.

Once the Enclosures were established, the landlords in Europe and the colonisers in their colonies wanted to protect them. They took pains in eliminating any threat or resistance which could imperil their authority. As Wall records that throughout sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, one comes across countless acts of retaliation in Europe from the old inhabitants whose land was enclosed. Likewise in the colonies also, the natives grouped together to take back their land and dignity. Enclosures symbolised the unbridled domination of the white man in the colonies. And the indigenous population wanted to break that and revert to their own control, which can be signified metaphorically as return to Commons.

For example, "The Master of Doornvlei" by Ezekiel Mphahlele, a South African author, presents this tussle between White master and Black slaves. Mr. Sarel Britz owns a farm which he has inherited from his father. He governs his farm with heavy hand; he is conscious of his boundaries and fences and wants to protect them. He knows that his domination will be challenged if he will act as a kind master. As a strict coloniser, he does not want to let go his control and authority. When a Black man, Tau Rathebe leads the slaves to demand justice, he expels him from his plantation. He understands that the land which was enclosed by his great grand-fathers in South Africa will be snatched back by the

natives if they are not kept under heavy thumb, he asserts, "Take today, for instance. A coming together like this has never been heard of on a White man's farm. And they've left everything in the hands of their leader. No disorder. They're serpent's eggs, and I'm going to crush them," (Grandsaigne 1985, 75).

When his loyal Black overseer, Mfukeri brings his bull on his plantation and defeats his horse, he wants Mfukeri to shoot his bull as he regards the defeat of his horse as his own defeat. When Mfukeri is reluctant to execute his orders, he expels him as well, thereby eliminating another threat to his authority.

Likewise, "The Tender Crop" by Fwanyanga Mulikita from Zambia, can also be cited to elaborate the same point. Here too, a White man, Paul Van Zyl dismisses Chilufya, a Black worker from his plantation. For Zyl, there is no moral obligation when he is expelling his thirty years old slave, he even decides against giving him his last pay. For the White man, sustenance and continuation of his undisputed authority thereby of his enclosure is of utmost importance. He is told by his cook that the old Black man, Chilufya, was heard shouting some political slogans and was noticed shaking hands with some big African politicians. Zyl knows that if the resistance is not suppressed in time, it will topple his kingdom.

What is of more significance in this tale is how natives organise themselves into rebuilding the old system of the Commons to revert the new machinery of oppression. They react collectively and win in the end. They revive Commons which were snatched away from them and converted into enclosures. When Chilufya is asked to leave by his master, he arrives back into his village where he was born.

The village that used to thrive during his childhood, is now deserted and desolate. People have left for towns and White man's plantations to endure the pressures of colonial economy. Here, Chilufya gathers the remaining people and teaches them how to farm effectively. They first help him in building his home and later in the building of a communal farm:

Together Mateyo Chilufya and his relatives and new friends built his new home. Together they went into the forest to fetch poles. Together they drove the poles into the ground. Together they ate and rejoiced. Together they suffered and mourned. Each genuinely appreciated what the other had done for him. (Grandsaigne 1985, 86)

The villagers reverted to the system of Commons to solve their problems. They understand the merit of collective community. They believe in sharing and helping each other. They respect and recognise the importance of one another and build a healthy eco-system. In this way, they recreate a community that controls and consumes like as it used to be during the times of successful Commons. There is a method in their hard work and lifestyle. They consult each other and then decide. They hold a discussion to arrive at the consensus where they give the communal farm to Chilufya in acknowledgement of his sacrifice. After that, they start working on another communal farm. They evolve an economy where collectively they work, produce, harvest, and consume in an organised manner as it used to happen when Commons were everywhere. As Derek Wall points out that successful Commons were those which were organised and well managed, where the entire community pitched together to sustain and maintain Commons whether it was a pasture, fishery, woods, groves, rivers, or wells. This village is also bound to thrive as the villagers join together in organising and maintaining their Commons.

To sum up, it can thus be argued that Commons were the way of life before Enclosures came into existence. They promoted the idea of sharing and collective responsibility. They presented a plea for communal and organic way of living. They only failed where people became selfish and over exploited their Commons, otherwise they provided examples of environmental sustainability. Enclosures, on the other hand, have been popularising the concepts like: Capitalism, Colonialism, Control, and Individualism. Therefore, Enclosures are one of the most important contributing factors towards ecological catastrophes. Literature produced in Europe and the ex-colonies has well documented it, as has been

shown in the above analysis. As Dale Jamieson remarks that it is not possible to ignore the human imprint on the climate, it is practically not advisable to just leave everything behind; the society has to evolve the ethics of care and respect to navigate through the era of Anthropocene. One requires to understand the green virtues of love, respect, humility, and responsibility. In this context, the Commons can provide first-hand experience for a future, which is less deadly and more fertile.

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