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The Revelation of Truths: The Preoccupation with Life, Love and Loss in Kate Llewellyn's Poetry

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Kate Llewellyn is one of the most important contemporary Australian poets whose poems deal with a variety of themes – life, love, loss and pain along with the delineation of her emotions and experiences gathered while leading her everyday life. Thus she has taken for her themes simple, everyday sentiments which are intense enough, leaving deep impressions on her mind and in the process giving rise to these emotions which she has recorded in her poems. An attempt will be made in this paper to look into the different aspects of her poetry and to analyse the ways in which she uses her rich experience to uncover truths about life and its myriad shades.

Kate Llewellyn is one of the most important contemporary Australian poets whose poems deal with a variety of themes- life, love, loss and pain along with the delineation of her emotions and experiences. In recent years, she has emerged as an influential voice in the field of Australian poetry. Born in 1940, she has been writing and publishing poems for almost twenty six years, her poetry books numbering seven in all till date. The first collection of her poems was titled *Trader Kate and the Elephants* and was published in 1982. This collection was followed by other collections as *Luxury*(1985), *Honey*(1988), *Figs*(1990), *Crosshatched*(1994) and *Later Poems*, the last collection being written between 2000 to 2005.

Any study of all these poems in these collections would bring out a common characteristic- their themes deal with the poet's personal experiences gathered in the course of living her life. The mood of these poems is a mixture of joy, sadness and melancholy and they deal with the poet's immediate felt experiences. Thus they have intensely emotional and subjective qualities which bring out the poet's innermost feelings. In each volume of poetry we can observe this trait manifested through the various themes she has chosen.

In her very first collection, *Trader Kate and the Elephants*, there are poems which deal with various interesting themes drawn from different spheres of life. Thus a study of the titles of the poems will reveal the wide range and scope of her themes. Thus the opening poem of this collection is titled "Elephants" where the poet tries to capture the intermixture of beauty and power that is associated with these beasts :

such a creature
thick grey beautiful
as a calling cloud. . .
. . . their volcanic groans
have deep song
I dance when I hear . . . (2-4, 12-14)

Thus, the poet is visibly fascinated by these huge creatures, getting the dual impression of tremendous strength and beauty that is perhaps not celebrated generally. We are naturally reminded of William Blake, the 18th century English Romantic poet and of his remarkable poem “The Tiger” where he was equally fascinated by the beauty and majesty on the one hand and the strength and ferocity of the beast on the other. Of course, there are differences in the way the two poets look at the two creatures, but the similarity lies in their appreciation of these animals’ strength and beauty.

From an appreciation of the elephants, Llewellyn shifts to a very personal subject, a description of the lives of her aunts who are presented as old and decrepit women in the poem “The Aunts” :

All my aunts are dying
their bones
in the tissue paper parcels
of their hands. . .
they lie
gesturing vaguely
at their future
which is as clear
as the water
in the glass jug. (1-4, 19-24)

Thus this description of the sad condition of these old women serves as a premonition of the impending death of the poet’s old aunts who had once been quite lively and loving individuals and had shared a lot of things with her. The poet is very much aware of the inevitable fate that awaits each aunt and it is clear that the end of these lives would mean that the poet would be left with the many memories linked with her aunts. We can discern a note of personal loss and tragedy being struck in this poem, a sense of helpless surrender to old age and death which all creatures are subject to.

In the poem titled “Stupid”, the tone is half self-mocking and half wonder at her own seemingly all round abilities and yet at times an unexplained incapacity to think and act in a most foolish manner. On the one hand, Llewellyn celebrates womanhood and

enumerates the numerous jobs that a woman is expected to perform, from so ordinary and commonplace a job as cleaning to the ultimate and supreme one of bringing a new life on this earth and taking care of a helpless infant, and, at the same time, she is critical of foolish acts that she herself as a woman may be said to have committed. These, when placed side by side, appear to be extremely absurd and incongruous, and as such call for light-hearted banter on her part. Life has got many shades and Llewellyn as a sensitive individual delights in recording the impressions that impinge on her mind's eye as time goes by.

In the next poem, Llewellyn takes us to a very intensely personal situation where the mere title of the poem, "Finished", is very clearly indicative of the termination of a relationship, the reaching of the final point :

There'll be no more
 lying on your shoulder love
 or listening for your car
 there'll be no more
 drinking on the verandah love
 or eating roasted veal. (1-6)

We may notice here that the poet continuously uses the word "love" and the feeling of loss and loneliness is heightened each time it is used. The one overwhelming effect that is created is that love has disappeared from their relationship and that the poet is aiming at an ironical effect is evident when we read the concluding lines of this poem :

there'll be no more
 hits across the mouth love
 and crawling on the floor. . .
 there'll be no more
 love love. (10-12,19-20)

Thus though at the beginning of the poem, we may discern a tone of wistful sadness, with perhaps a real sense of longing and regret for a past relationship, but soon, as the poem progresses, the tone changes and the sense of loss is overshadowed by remembrances which are not altogether sweet or even to be cherished. This poem, thus, can be read as a record of a lost love, a feeling that had once been fulfilling and refreshing but which has now been destroyed forever.

Again, in "The Flames", a poem dealing with the poet's child is equally full of intense emotions, though entirely happy ones. Thus Llewellyn remembers how her baby used to react on seeing her :

You used to lean

on that cot rail
and wait
with the vigour of a flame
to leap into my arms
two feet tall and two years old. . . (1-6)

This poem is indeed a beautiful specimen of the tender relationship between a mother and her baby and this aspect has been finely delineated by the poet through the delicate touches here and there which gives us the impression of a happy child ready to welcome his mother. Thus this poem is in sharp contrast to the previous one and it shows us one very important relationship, of the strong bond between mother and child.

Apart from the very personal memories being recounted in these poems, the poem entitled “The Bed” is also singular because of the diverse associations it evokes in the mind of the poet :

This bed has seen a lot of action
trouble toil and sorrow
if it was a soldier
it would have a medal
if it was a nurse
it would be a matron. . .
it heard my drunken snores
and my sounds of grief
in the worst despair
it held me
when I couldn't walk
and simply crawled to make a cup of tea. (1-6, 27-32)

Obviously, it is clear from this vivid description that the bed has been a mute witness to a series of events in the life of the poet, mostly unhappy and sorrowful. The poet thus considers this bed to be a most faithful and dependable companion during the worst times in her life. She confirms that this bed has proved to be much more than just a piece of wood in her life, it is a real source of comfort for her. Therefore, she can proudly declare that it has been

more faithful
than I've ever found a man
it accepts me for what I am
and in return I love it. (41-44)

These last lines not only emphasize the fact that this lifeless piece of furniture has come to occupy a position that would have been perhaps occupied by a male companion. So, in spite of being a bed, it has acquired human qualities and has become almost capable of feeling. Here, we may cross refer to the Anglo Saxon poem “The Dream of the Rood” where a cross, in spite of being simply a piece of wood, develops the power of speech and becomes a co-sharer in the sufferings of the Saviour of Mankind, Jesus Christ.

We may now turn to a poem which deals with a common enough sight, a dead frog, but which, through various associations, brings back to the poet’s mind her lost love for her partner. Thus, in this poem, simply titled “Frog”, the poet has described a strange feeling that unlike the love that did not last, this dead frog would continue to be present at the back of her mind :

a stain on the mind
a flat black shape
with a name (17-19)

Thus this frog, which looks like “a black shape on the grass” , will be ever present in her mind.

Moving on from a correlation of her lost love and a dead amphibian, Kate Llewellyn, in her poem “Divorce” states the unusual reactions of her children when they were told of her separation from their father. She takes care to tell us how she read a number of books which dealt with the right way one should reveal such distressing occurrences to children:

Before I told my children
their father was leaving
to live with his mistress,
I read three books on the topic
to see how it was done.
After that news
they went on eating their chops,
Amazed, I could see the books were right-
If you’re calm, they will be.
Yet the boy said, ‘But we’ll be lonely’.
‘No we won’t’, I said.
‘he’ll come and visit us
and you’ll visit them.’ (1-13)

The reaction of her children at first surprises her but later she realizes that it must not have been a very painful development for them, as their emotional attachment to their father was almost minimal. Therefore, in this poem, Llewellyn deals with a breakdown of family relationships and the disappearance of the bonds between parent and children. Thus this is another sad and melancholy aspect of her life that the poet reveals before us.

The collection of poems titled Sofala which was published in 1999 has one poem called “Egg” where the poet appears to be nostalgic and aware of the fact that time passes quickly and that each day is unique:

There never will be
 another day like this
 no matter what book
 you are reading
 this day is better.
 Fish jumping in the slow river
 as I sit here on the bank
 a rooster crowing
 geese asleep in the sun. . . (1-9)

This is a general peaceful picture of nature and its various aspects, of life flowing on at its own steady pace. There is underneath this placid presentation of nature an undercurrent of sadness because of the superior quality of the day that is soon going to be lost for ever in a few hours’ time. The poet thus enjoys the quiet beauty of nature sitting on the river bank, the scene exercising a soothing effect on her mind.

An examination of all these poems will bring out one major quality- the intense feelings and emotions that accompany each poem and the poet’s expression of them in very simple yet forceful language. Kate Llewellyn as a poet has tried, in all these poems, to present before her readers the various experiences of her life in as simple, straight forward a style as possible. We can observe that in the process of living her life, she has recorded these impressions faithfully and these portray her attitude to life, love and the loss of things once cared for deeply. It is easily seen that all her poems arise out of her deep personal emotions and are therefore the expressions of truths realized in the process of the journey through this world.

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