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UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Gaston Berger,

BP 234 Saint Louis, Sénégal

Tel +221 77 718 51 35 / +221 77 408 87 82

E-mail : babacar.dieng@ugb.edu.sn / khadidiatou.diallo@ugb.edu.sn

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Mody SIDIBÉ

Associate professor

Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal

Résumé

Le présent article étudie les coutumes et les traditions de la communauté de pêcheurs du village de Riasgan situé sur les Hautes-Terres écossaises. Dark Mairi, le personnage principal du roman connaît les vertus thérapeutiques des plantes et les utilise pour guérir les villageois de plusieurs pathologies. Ces savoirs constituent une composante essentielle du patrimoine immatériel de la communauté. Les populations rurales ont recours à ces éléments de la nature de manière rationnelle dans le souci de respect de l'équilibre des écosystèmes pour préserver leur milieu. Nous proposons de relire le roman de Neil Gunn à la lumière de la théorie écocritique afin d'identifier les principales pratiques de préservation de l'environnement en milieu traditionnel. Neil Gunn, l'un des fondateurs du mouvement de la Renaissance écossaise du vingtième siècle montre dans *Butcher's Broom* sa grande conscience environnementale et écologique. Le roman fait un inventaire des principales menaces environnementales en Écosse au début du vingtième siècle. Il ressort des analyses que la modernisation a joué un grand rôle dans la destruction de la relation harmonieuse entre l'homme et son environnement naturel. Dans un contexte de réformes domaniales entraînant l'éviction des fermiers traditionnels, le déclenchement de la guerre et les autres formes d'agressions liées à l'avènement du modernisme, la migration semble être la seule alternative qui s'offre à la communauté de pêcheurs. Dans un langage plein de symboles et d'images, le narrateur décrit une société en profondes mutations.

Mots-clés : coutume, tradition, pêcheur, plante, patrimoine, éviction, modernisme

Introduction

Neil Gunn belongs to the literary and cultural movement known as the Scottish Renaissance; and along with Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon and other prominent scholars, they fought for the preservation of the Highland languages, customs and traditions. Among the themes developed in *Butcher's Broom*, the place of traditional life threatened by modernization looms large. The story told in the novel is set in a pristine rural environment where characters have lived in perfect harmony with nature until the reorganization of the land and the breaking out of war oblige them to change their old practices. Neil Gunn came from Dunbeath, a small fishing and crofting village and is both land-and-sea oriented. In *Butcher's Broom*, he chronicles the social and economic life of a remote community largely dependent on nature. This article explores the intimate relationship between man and the natural environment in a remote fishing Highland village before the advent of modernization and the breaking out of war. The various means of environmental preservation will be analysed using ecocritic literary theory. Chapter one describes the natural environment where the action takes place with the rural populations taking full advantage of the various elements of nature that are necessary for their survival in a sustainable manner. Chapter two revisits the rich repertoire of customs and cultural practices that compose the legacy of the nation. The third chapter studies the advent of modernism and to what extent it is a real challenge to a community that is reluctant to rapid change.

I. The Central Place of the Natural Environment

Butcher's Broom belongs to the tradition of the Scottish rural novel of the twentieth century. The novel opens on the central character named Dark Mairi, an old woman standing on the Darras known as "the doorway between the bright sea and the hills" (Gunn 7). From the very outset of the novel, there is a beautiful picture of the fusion between man and immediate surrounding environment. The elements of nature are beautifully personified to establish the intimacy between man and nature. The closeness with the fauna and the

flora explains the unique and rich knowledge this community of fishers possesses. In the attempt to capture and sometimes recreate the most ancient past of the Scottish people, the narrator uses flashback techniques to bring the reader to other historical periods with the purpose of presenting rustic populations who are not affected by some vicious forms of modernization.

If the physical environment is affected by innovations and aggressions, characters like Dark Mairi do their utmost to preserve the immaterial legacy of the Riasgan community. The beauty of Neil Gunn's writing lies in the allegorical description of the various elements of the natural world that are endowed with a soul.

Neil Gunn believes that in remote and isolated villages, the inhabitants live in communion and timeless harmony with their natural surroundings (Scott and Gifford 113). The Riasgan community to which Mairi belongs is in direct contact with the external world and is almost totally dependent on the sea:

A person could always tell what the weather is to be by smelling the sea. There is the grey dark smell, cold inside the nostrils, ominous; the damp raw smell, husky to the throat, unsettled, the keen dry lifting tang of wind; but when good weather has newly come, how the sea brims and sways and breathes its sweet fragrance on the air.
(Gunn 8)

The closeness to the sea has sharpened fishers' senses to an extent that they can recognize a great variety of smells. There is a personification of the elements of nature with the sea which is sometimes in a good or a bad mood. The valley where Dark Mairi of the Shore has her cottage is described in human form with "slender flanks", "fluent spinal ridges", "swelling breasts", and "wandering arms" (Gunn 12). The personification of the valley creates visual illusions since in the fiction of Neil Gunn, the language of nature is visual. The narrator goes beyond the literal meaning of the conventional signs called words in order to arouse the reader's emotion (Turbayne 114). The communion with the natural environment could be explained by the fact that Neil Gunn is very much influenced by the English Romantic tradition and the attempt to recapture "*William Wordsworth's moment of timeless harmony*" is central to his writing (Gifford 4). Although Gunn is not a staunch believer in

a dogmatic Scottish nationalism like Hugh MacDiarmid, he celebrates in his writing the lost golden age of the Scottish nation (Gifford 10).

The global organization and occupation of space conjures up the picture of houses that are scattered about the land, leaving some distance between the dwelling (Gunn 140). Such an occupation enables a better circulation of air. Children can also use the space vacuum for playground and remain within adults' sight range. The distribution of land is based on old Scottish and Gaelic customs. There is a connection between human beings and nature that is beautifully illustrated in the occupation of space:

In the head of the cottage lived the humans, in the abdomen the beats, and from the tail-end drained away what the whole ejected. There were little herds of these cottages at long intervals, and every now and then an odd cottage by itself like a wandered beast. (Gunn 15)

This rather simple pattern is very meaningful and the development of modern architecture indicates that every section of a house has to be positioned in a certain way for the house to be well ventilated. Cottagers have succeeded in building houses that achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability. Dark Mairi's cottage is situated on the upslope side of a hill which stands for a natural protection from the strong winds and other manifestations of the severe and unfriendly climate. A good knowledge of land occupation is necessary due to the physical geography of the Highlands. The old lady has organized her dwelling in a way that she can get most of what she needs for her sustenance:

In the front of the cottage lay the cultivated ground, the potato and the cabbage patch, the yellow oats, and the lighter – coloured narrow tongue of bear over towards a stony water channel that was a cataract in the winter but was a small enough trickle now. (Gunn 20)

In a society that is unwilling to innovation, land is given to people as a present out of recognition for services or blood kinship: *“No such gift was ever conveyed in writing, for in old Gaelic days, a gentleman's word was more held in honour than clerkly scrawling on parchment”* (36). Populations do not feel the necessity to have a written evidence of agreements because

everybody is attached to a code of honour. Rural populations have developed very old but efficient sheep farming techniques:

The system followed by the Border store-farmers is very exact. They divide their flock into hirsels; for instance, the ewes are a flock by themselves; when the lambs are three months old they are taken from their mothers and put into a separate herding; when they are twelve months old, at which time they give their first fleece, the males are generally separated from the females; the females are returned to the ewe hirsels and give their first lamb at two years old, and the males are sent to wether ground, from which after a year and a half, they are sent to the feeders. The ewes are sent to the feeders after giving three lambs. (Gunn 243)

No modern technological device is mentioned here and the whole system is centred on a pragmatic distribution of the cattle. The farmers have a thorough understanding of the different phases in the breeding of the sheep. The distribution of the *hirsels* or flock of sheep on the land is never done at random because farmers want to maximize the yield without resorting to biochemical substances that might have harmful effects on people who consume the meat and the dairy products from those animals. Modern farming, on the contrary makes an abundant use of chemical products that affect man's health. The issue is all the more crucial since today there is an ongoing debate on the genetically modified food to find a definitive solution to hunger and malnutrition.

Mastering adequate farming techniques is crucial to the Scottish people since the physical geography is very hostile. Ian Finlayson eloquently states that “*there is no loveliness in that grey country, with its rainy, sea-beat archipelago, its fields of dark mountains, its unsightly places, black with coal*” (63). It goes without saying that life in this country is dull and repressive. Paradoxically, this apparent difficult situation has been taken as an advantage: “*The Scot, raised in these testing conditions, turns out thrawn, hardy, self-sufficient, perceptive, imaginative and virtuous*” (Finlayson 64). Life is a permanent struggle for survival to find the means of existence in an unreceptive milieu. As a result of the hard school where they have been brought up, the Scots' heart becomes hard and they thrive hard to find their

means of survival. They have developed a sentimental memory and have sentimentalized the land (Finlayson 645).

With a reasonably good understanding of the agricultural calendar, populations have succeeded in developing botanic knowledge without the use of chemical fertilizers. In the evolution of the seasons, farmers take into account the two critical moments: “*the first in April between the fading of the cotton grass and the springing of the deer hair, and the second in August between the fading of the deer hair and the coming of the harvest moss*” (Gunn 253). There are appropriate plants to cultivate at each period of the year. The farmer Angus Sutherland has introduced a system of crop rotation (Gunn 36). He is shrewd enough for having understood that monoculture which consists in producing a single crop every year has adverse effects. Monocropping can destroy the nutrients from the earth and leave the soil very poor. Cultivating barren soils requires the use of chemical fertilizers to increase the yield and those substances are harmful to people’s health and to the environment. Crofters who are entirely dependent on nature have learned how to use the various elements of nature in a rational way. Analysing the accurate description of the traditional farming techniques developed by villagers of Riasgan, Robert Crawford considers Neil Gunn “*an ecological writer*” (578).

What is valid about plants is also valid about farm animals and the farmers proceed in a very meticulous way. There is a well-organized process based on a solid knowledge. Mr Heller and Mr James find it necessary to discuss the arrangements of the sheep including the number and the disposition of the shepherds and more importantly the most appropriate breed of sheep for the place. After a thorough inquiry, they have decided that the cheviot is the right species:

The merinos, for example, range all in a lot, but the cheviots spread over the ground in twos and threes. The same quantity of ground in the north will keep three hundred cheviots for one hundred merinos, with one half the care and one third the winter risk. Within the last fifty years, too, the cheviot has been very much improved in his quarters and in the staple of his fleece by crosses with sheep remembered long ago. (Gunn 253-254)

The choice of the cheviot breed of sheep in the place of the merinos is determined by the necessity to make a rational organization of the plot of land allotted to sheep farming. To find arable land in the Scottish Highlands is very difficult and as a result, farmers do their best to get the biggest production. In a context of scarcity of the resources, the creative imagination and inventiveness is very sharp.

II. Survival of Traditional Beliefs and Practices

The title of the novel is very telling about the paramount role and symbolic meaning of plants in the novel. Butcher's Broom is a plant that has many medicinal and magic properties. Highlanders are famous for their knowledge of traditional herbs for healing purposes and a symbolic means to bond with the ancestors (Hopman 115). Pharmacology and botanic knowledge are central to the life of the Riasgan fishing community. Dark Mairi, the central character who goes among "*the companionable hills*" never forgets to fill her bag with numerous kinds of medicinal sea plants and shells (Gunn 8). Her favourite species are the clear pink dulse; she makes a strenuous effort to collect them because they are located in a stony area. It is important to highlight that the hostile natural environment characterized by a harsh climate and the scarcity of rains plays a central role in shaping the Scottish identity (Jenner 10).

In the popular Scottish imagination, symbols like the tartan and the bagpipe are considered to be the only trappings that define Scottish identity. Michael Jenner thinks, on the contrary, that to understand the true nature of the Scottish people, one has to consider the strong determinism of the unfriendly milieu. The old lady usually collects the pink dulse which a variety of algae that has medicinal properties:

Eaten raw, it had a cleansing effect; boiled, with a pinch of butter added to the infusion, it acted as a tonic, bracing the flesh, making it supple, and drawing taut the muscles of the stomach. (...) When the dried dulse was ground into powder and taken fasting, it sickened and expelled worms. Other ailments, like the stone and colic, yielded to it. (Gunn 8)

As a traditional doctor, Dark Mairi who has a solid knowledge of herbs is called upon everywhere to heal the sick. One day, she is called to heal a relative by marriage who is suffering from a mysterious illness which prevents him from sweating. After examining the patient for a while respecting a medical procedure only known to her, she administers to the patient a drink. The miraculous effect is spontaneous because in no time the man's body becomes a white dry furnace: "*He was being consumed, burned up. Out of that heat the storm burst. The drops run into runnels. These runnels tickled his face and his chest, and made his eyes water*" (Gunn10).

The lexical field of fire is used in a hyperbolic manner to show the effect of the medicine on the patient. The frightening scene creates the impression of a person who is being inflicted excruciating torture. The dulse is an efficient medicine which is also eaten by farmers or used as a beverage in the form of an infusion:

A man walking in the field could put a dry blade or two in his mouth and chew away at them. At first they were tasteless as gristle, but in a very short time they yielded back their juices, which began to run about the gums and fill the whole mouth with a richness that had to be frequently swallowed. (Gunn8)

Due to the unfriendliness of the natural environment, farmers working in the fields or soldiers in the battlefield can put dry blades of dulse in their mouth and chew them while walking. The nutrient juice from the sea dulse provides enough strength to these men to enable them to keep on working for very long hours without taking breaks to eat and drink. People need this food supplement in order face the hostility of the natural environment because as Ian Finlayson puts: "*Life in Scotland can be difficult, tedious, repressive, cold, wet, introverted, and all the rest*" ('64). In terms of time management, the Highland traditional farmers manifest a surprizing efficiency thanks to an appropriate diet. The nutritive properties of the algae gives to farmers enough strength to increase their productivity. In her study of the Scottish herbs, Ellen Evert Hopman lists the numerous medicinal properties of the dulse. This medicinal plant is helpful for stomach problems; it also relieves colic, constipation and headache. The herb has gynaecological properties and is used for expelling the placenta after childbirth (173). Farmers who have a

good botanic knowledge make an efficient use of the plants for various purposes. After the rigours of winter and when the cattle is weak, farmers often give slake to the beats. The plants which grow up in a rocky terrain play the role of a supplement and add nutrients and other rich substances to the poor food animals consume during certain periods of the year.

In these rural areas, social life is organized around ceremonies and celebrations of which harvest festival is the most important. As any village festivity, harvest festival has a symbolic meaning. It is a joyful moment during which the members of the community gather and enjoy themselves and forget for a while the hardships of life (Gunn 34). In addition to the joyful side, the celebration has a deep religious and spiritual dimension and begins with prayers said by Angus: *“He asked God to bless to bless them in these the first fruits of the harvest, and in the harvest itself, in each home and in all homes; and he thanks the bountiful Giver and promised that they would remember His name”* (Gunn 45). All the festival participants are excited and very agitated. In the midst of the distress caused by the war and the impending eviction, the rustic populations always find an opportunity to enjoy themselves. Norman Sutherland invites Davie to give them a tune in order to lift their heart and rejoice. The joyful company around Norman Sutherland organizes an extemporized dancing party in the honour of the soldiers going to war:

Davie broke into a reel. The whole company got caught up. Bright faces challenged and laughed. Davie was playing with such a fire that his face went pale and his hair shook over his brows. The girls look at one another slyly. In half an hour a dance was in full swing in the clear night; an hour and some whisky was presented to Angus. They must celebrate the occasion; drink to the lads who were away. What would they like better? (Gunn 219-220)

Ancient heathen superstitions and practices are still deeply rooted in people’s minds and in many circumstances, they resort to residual paganism. When Dark Mairi goes out to the sea to harvest medicinal plants, she always takes three pebbles from the water and puts them in her bag (Gunn 9). In numerology, the number three is a sacred number in Indo-European tradition. This number refers to the three worlds of land, sea and sky. These locations

are also known as middle earth (the realm of humans and nature), the underworld (the realm of fairies and ancestors), and the sky world (realm of gods and goddesses) (Hopman 34). Since the plants are located in a remote place, collecting them is very risky and the three stones lying at the bottom of her bag are a talisman which protects her.

In Riasgan, many stories are told about the existence of fairies and other supernatural beings. There is the case of a middle-aged in a cradle like a baby who is said to have shrunk to the size of a child: “*a little withered old man, wrinkled and impotent, and dreadful to look at. The lips were blue, the eyes lidded and half-closed, the forehead deeply scored*” (Gunn 142). Inhabited by what French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl refers to as a primitive mentality, villagers explain that fairies have stolen a woman’s baby and have replaced it by their own child (Gunn 141-142). All the physical and physiological reasons explaining the degeneration of the old man are completely ignored and for Lévy-Bruhl, any phenomenon that does not have a rational explanation is either attributed to spirits or to witchcraft (127-128).

The harvest festival is not a mere entertainment; it is a ceremony replete with religious and sacred meaning. As the ceremony reaches its climax, the participants form a moving circle around Anna and her two assistants in order to perform a ritual:

A skin was spread on the floor, Anna held a fistful of cornstalks in her left hand and in her right a stick. Seonaid lid a piece of bog fir at the fire and when it was blazing like a torch held it out towards Anna. Anna lit the ears of a corn at it. They flared up. At the right moment, she hit the ears with her stick and the kernels fell pattering on the skin. Elie on her knees gathered them with a little pitching motion through her hands. (Gunn 45)

The central place of women during the harvest festival can be explained by the fact that agricultural activities mirror fertility rituals. The seed that is planted in the earth reminds of semen in the mother’s womb. The harvest festival is comparable to childbirth after months of pregnancy.

The harvest festival has an important pedagogical dimension. Education is central to the crofters who organize contests on riddles and proverbs to help

young people learn their culture and sharpen their intelligence. Activities include story-telling in a very joyful atmosphere: “*The drink went round with the usual little speeches of respect and good wishes to the lady of the house and to the house itself*” (Gunn 54). Communal life and mutual help are very much valued. Populations have implemented what resembles an embryonic banking system that is totally different from modern banking in the sense that “*it never closed its doors and provided a dividend only for those who have nothing invested*” (Gunn 24). This unusual banking system is inclusive and is not based on the maximization of profit. Landowners in a similar manner accept several days of labour in addition to an affordable amount of money for the renting (Gunn35).

The ceremony is a festive gathering which gives the members of the Riasgan community the opportunity to enjoy themselves. The tune of the bagpipe fills the room with excitement and children are marvelled by the piper who appears as an extraordinary being whose chest and the bags of his instrument of music swell and dwindle in unison: “*His chest and his pipes and all the upper part of him seemed to swell and grow tall in the stillness of concentration*” (Gunn 48). The children are very excited by the wonderful scene they are witnessing and very quickly leave their position of observers: “*Out of the dark they came running with peats from the nearest stacks with the guilt of half-theft stinging their mirth. They would make a fire as big as the world and blind the moon and the stars*” (Gunn 49). Riasgan has a rich and old musical tradition with a wide variety of repertoires according to the event that is celebrated. When the young people were going to war, Rob Roy played “*The lament for the children*”, a melody traditionally played in situations of sorrow and grief. The impending war is therefore an appropriate moment for such a music. The sad tune is played to console the families and boost the morale of the soldiers in this moment of uncertainty. Patrick Moi MacCrimmon who descended from one of the greatest families of pipers is considered to be the composer of the lament. Pipers were instructed in special piping schools like that of the MacCrommons (Ross 27). According to Francis Collinson, the most important event in the history of the Highland bagpipe was the appearance on the scene of MacCrimmons who brought a radical change in the art of piping. They were instrumental in raising the status of the

pipe from that of a rustic instrument to a national instrument in many countries in the world: “*In this they bequeathed to Scotland and to the world in the course of over two hundred years a legacy of great music that belongs to the pipes alone*” (Collinson 142). Being a piper was a very prestigious occupation and pipers were given a salary and free housing (Collinson 99).

The festive gathering, the joy and the various forms of the entertainment display profound gender disparities. Women dance in a more refined and orderly manner: “*The women faced each other between the lines of the men, dancing woman to woman, then advancing, linked arms and whirled in a giddy spin*” (Gunn 49). This picture of quiet and disciplined women contrasts with the whirling violence that characterizes male dance:

All the wild male energy now tore out of them; their deep-throated cries rose upon the night, piercing the night with exultation; the dance attained its moment of mad frenzy ; linking arms, they set their strength to the swing (Gunn 49).

There is a marked distinction between feminine sociability and male one. Women are confined to domestic tasks. Even if a man is willing to perform a woman’s work it would not be tolerated. Men, on the contrary, carry out activities like cattle-drawing, marketing, hunting and war. Women are the custodians of the traditions and the cultural legacy of the nation. The inhabitants of the Riasgan have lived for years a peaceful life while respecting basic environmental norms but are threatened by the introduction of new farming techniques and the breaking out of war.

III. The Onslaught of Modernization and the Archaic Beliefs

The peaceful Riasgan village is threatened by vicious forms of modernization as well as archaic beliefs and traditions. The change of the land tenancy system will bring upheavals in the social organization at the core which is the clan. The concept of clan is different from that of tribe in the sense that the central feature of clan is consanguinity whereas that of tribe is a territorial basis. The members of a clan from the chief down to the lowest ranking individual are bonded together by blood relationship. The clansmen bear a

common name derived from a common ancestor who is considered to be a semi-god. (Ross 24).

Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh Mac Diarmid lament on the decline of Gaelic culture consecutive to the dismantling of the clan system which is at the core of Scottish social organization. The clansmen face the inevitability of change. The old Scottish military organization based on a clanic system is utterly dismantled and soldiers are now obliged to comply with the new situation:

Now, however, it was proposed to raise the regiment of the line, where there were to be professional soldiers under any officers who might be placed over them. The old organization of chief and clansmen as one body in the common cause was gone. For a long time that organization had been disintegrating; and though for many a year to come old conceptions might linger with a sweet bitterness in the blood, yet the day of the men and their natural leader is dead. (Gunn 74)

When the war breaks out, many young men manifest their willingness to join the military, an attitude the elders cannot understand: *“They mistrusted the appeals of the powerful: join for your king and your chief! What was the king to them but a great menacing power at a distance? Their chief ... left them dumb”* (Gunn 74). From a gender perspective, war and fighting appear as male preoccupations and according to Elie, the only reasons why Colin wants to go to the battlefield are mere adventure and an inclination to depart. The excitement to show his courage and bravery could be seen on the young man’s face as Elie notices it: *“She saw him marching away gaily, laughing, forgetting ... men’s faces, all men; men going away and leaving their women. That terrible unreasoning fighting lust of the men of the world”* (Gunn 95).

The gay image of Colin leaving for the battlefield reflects his simple mindedness. He is totally unaware of the terrible consequences of war. The band of joyful men have no idea that some of them will return pensioners, severely injured or die a violent death. The youth who represent the future and the hope of the nation are sent in foreign battlefields to fight for a cause they know nothing about. All promised made to them have turned out to be chimera: *“Besides, all the talk about giving land to the soldiers had been a*

lie. It was all a lie, everything” (Gunn 234). War has brought sorrow, grief and death in the peaceful fishing village. To console herself from Colin’s departure, Elie hums a special ditty: “*an ancient song of love forsaken, in the music to him but all the impulses and longings of his immemorial race caught for an immortal moment in body and brain*” (Gunn 102). Beyond the musicality of the song, the lyrics can reach not only people’s ears but their hearts and souls as well:

The sheer unconditional nature of this music has nothing to do with thought or intellect but only with absolutes like beauty or terror. They are apprehended in the blood and in the bowels, and the soul gives them light fragrance, or the blindness of insight. (Gunn103)

This music that reaches the listener’s inner self and soul is meant to console and comfort a person in a moment of sorrow and pain. The Scottish nation has a rich musical repertoire composed of “*rowing songs, reaping songs, milking songs, churning songs; songs to soothe the tired infant, songs to lighten the heavy task of querning the grain*” (Ross 14-15). These traditional limericks are replete with meaning about Highland customs and way of life.

Even if women did not take an active part in the conflict as soldiers, they are undoubtedly the victims who have paid the most expensive price. The war has left a sad effect on women who are abandoned by their lovers who seem to be more interested in masculine pride. Elie who has been very much affected by Colin’s departure is now in a weak position in a male dominated society. The narrator exposes both vicious form of modernization and the retrograde mentalities. The young lady who has nobody to help her is obliged by the circumstances of her life to leave the village where she is seen as an outcast. Unfortunately for her, one night she was raped by her employer and turned out by the farmer’s wife. The victim is given the treatment of a guilty person. As a consequence of that sad event, Elie begins a wandering life and is on several occasions mistaken for a vagrant. She has once been helped by a tinker to deliver out of a medical environment regardless the risks to herself and the baby:

Myself and the child would be taken up as vagrants and sold into bondage. If I stole anything, even a turnip of a field, I would be put in prison or transported to the plantations beyond the seas. And the

boy himself would be working twelve hours a day before he was six years old and would be slaving like that for ever. (Gunn 184)

The sexist society where Elie has found refuge has no consideration for the power woman who has nobody to comfort her. A woman who gives birth to a natural child is sentenced to penal deportation, one of the most severe forms of punishment. The paradoxical situation is that in case of fornication, the man is forbidden while the woman is condemned. Analysing the plight of women in the Riasgan sexist society, Dark Mairi makes this observation: “*It’s hard on women ... It’s always hard*” (Gunn 233). The anaphoric repetition of the adverb hard and the use of the adverb of frequency always are a way of highlighting the timelessness of the ordeal women undergo.

Elie’s case reveals much about the outdated criminal justice system that needs to be thoroughly reformed. Theft is considered to be the most terrible crime which explains the severity of the punishment: “*A woman was transported to slavery beyond the seas for seven years for stealing a cotton gown ... A woman and her child were put in prison for sixty days for taking a little meal*” (Gunn 185). Sending very young children to factories where they have to work for long hours is a punishment for a crime they have not made. After many years of a wandering life, Elie decides to return to Riasgan but is unfortunately stigmatized and ostracized because of the illegitimate child she has brought with her. The woman is convened to a searching assize composed of elders with the mission of carrying out investigations to determine the circumstances in which she has become a single mother. Elie appears before this popular tribunal where she is interrogated by elders who put much pressure on her to oblige her to tell the truth. They force her to give a detailed explanation of the fornication. The questions are very direct and humiliating. When Elie returns home with young Colin, Anna refuses to put the blame on her son who is fighting on foreign lands. Colin’s mother has interiorized the ideas of female subjugation and passively accepts that in a situation of fornication, women are the guilty: “*Was it not sad that the very sacrifice she had made of her son should be dirtied in this way? And Elie’s own mother, ashamed in her heart; and her sisters and father, ashamed before the people of his place – to which Elie had come back*” (Gunn 193). Deep in her family

members' hearts, Elie's return is far from being a moment of joy because her conduct has tarnished the reputation of her family.

Elie's return with her child is seen as an insult to a community who expects women to have higher moral standards. Elie is first and foremost identified as a single mother. She is neither recognized from her race nor from her family background but from her being a sinner. When asked the question to know who the woman with an uncovered hair is, the captain answers: "*Neither a married woman nor a virgin. She has had a bastard to Colin the son of Hector*" (Gunn 237). This way of castigating women results from the patriarchal beliefs prevalent in Riasgan. Australian feminist thinker Dale Spender explains the basic foundation of such a society: "*A patriarchal society is based on the belief that the male is the superior sex and many of the institutions and much social practice is then organized to reflect this belief*" (1). Many men see Elie just as a mere object of pleasure. When she visits Rob the Miller in order to get food, the man tries to rape her (Gunn 197). Single mothers are vulnerable creatures with a complete lack of protection.

In addition to war, the introduction of the sheep is has destroyed the traditional system of social and economic organization. The coming of the sheep is the main cause of the dismantling the old Scottish estate system. The populations are so afraid of the sheep and describe it as a sinister monster resembling a dragon or a hungry lion reeking to devour them by the thousand or the ten thousands (Gunn 153). In the description of the sheep, the narrator uses hyperbolic language assimilating the beast to dangerous ravenous animals. American literary theorist Kenneth Burke defines the metaphor as a literary device that allows to see something in terms of something else (Turbayne 21). The comparison of the sheep with dangerous a dangerous animal reveals people's great fright of the forthcoming evictions:

Eviction was a terrible thing, for it meant the tearing up of life by the roots and the throwing of it on a sea-beach or on a foreign strand where everything that made life comely and happy and to be desired would forever be denied; where life itself, through exposure and lack of physical sustenance, would become wretched beyond reason and starve and die. (Gunn 191)

It appears from the foregoing that the indeterminate fate of the Riasgan caused the breaking out of war and the introduction of sheep farming, departure remains the only viable alternative. The landlords drove the clansmen from the fertile inland glens to the barren coasts for the crofting lands to be given over to the more profitable grazing sheep. The sad picture of poor people packing their little belongings is a catastrophic uprooting of a whole people from centuries-old-traditions and history. Beyond the loss of arable lands, one may reasonably assume that the highland Clearances appear as a terrible event in the dismantling of Highland traditional life (Scott and Gifford 127). Like the rest of the villagers, Elie and young Colin would like to leave but their final destination remains a mystery. Studying the subject matter of modern Scottish fiction, Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney have come to the conclusion that migration is a dominant theme: *“Mass emigration is one of the definitive aspects of modern Scottish experience. In that massive nineteenth-century exodus from the Old World to the New, Scotland played a disproportionate part. Between the 1820s and the Second World War, around 2.3 million Scots emigrated”* (11).

The traditional crofting lands have to be cleared for the implementation of a new system of economic production based on modern farming techniques. Mr James who wants to set up a modern farm thinks that he has the moral obligation to help the farmers who have been living in the glens in idleness, filth and dire poverty. It is in their best advantage to move them in order to make the land profitable to everybody (Gunn 256). The dismantling of the old crofting tradition has created a situation of general anxiety and sadness. The sad ending of the novel reflects more broadly the uncertain and tragic fate of the Scottish nation that is threatened by the advent of modernization. The clan system and the Gaelic culture were broken as a result of the eviction of the population by a small group of private individuals. The Risagan villagers need an introspection in their culture and society in order to get rid of outdated beliefs and practices. The future and the survival of the community recommends an acceptance of the inevitability of change.

Conclusion

The inhabitants of Riasgan have for years lived a peaceful life with a harmonious exploitation of the natural resources. It is to a large extent a friendly environmental and sustainable form of existence. The cultural legacy has been dearly preserved thanks to the central role played by women like Dark Miari who are the custodians of the tradition. The novel that pays tribute to women paradoxically happens to be very sexist in the treatment reserved to single mothers. The narrator denounces retrograde customs that threaten the existence of the community the same way war does.

Populations consider the rhythm of the seasons as the time markers for a better organization of social, economic and cultural life. The natural elements that provide the means of sustenance to man are exploited in the most rational and balanced way. War and modern farming techniques have brought an upheaval in the once peaceful fishing village. Gunn has used innovating literary techniques to describe the fictional village of Riasgan in order to describe a population who lives in perfect harmony with nature. In *Butcher's Broom*, Neil Gunn displays his wide botanic knowledge to lament on the main environmental dangers threatening the Scottish Highlands in the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not an exaggeration to qualify Neil Gunn as an ecological novelist.

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