

THE ZULU GIRL - ROY CAMPBELL

Summary

The Zulu Girl by Roy Campbell focuses on the pitiable plight of African people who are dominated and exploited. The Zulu were the most powerful tribe in SA. This poem emphasises their subservience.

This poem is about a Zulu mother feeding her baby. There is an admiration for the endurance and for the strength of life that is seen in her. There is a prophetic hint in the concluding simile that a different and better state of affairs is bound to come in the future.

Themes

- The plight a once proud warrior tribe that once ruled a kingdom
- rural hardship
- effects of colonialism
- motherhood
- poverty

Stanza 1 – provides details of the plight of the Zulu girl.

Lines 1 - 2

The heat scorches the land where the girl is working.

Sun – implies that it is hot

Red - is the predominant colour of the African earth – suggests heat

hot red acres smoulder – emphasises the intense heat throughout the land, emphasises oppressive mood

smoulder - metaphor – land is compared to a fire that burns without flame (Coal). This can burst into flames at any time. Similarly, the land is so hot that it will burst into flames.

sweating – emphasises the unbearably hot environment, extreme physical labour. Creates sympathy.

Gang – suggests that the workers have no individuality and identity, are treated rather like prisoners, or are being made to undertake forced labour. They have no personal pride or pleasure in the work they are doing.

Lines 3 – 4

These lines emphasize the unpleasant nature of the *gang's* work.

A girl – no identity, impersonal. She is an adult but is referred to as a girl. This is a consequence of apartheid. The description of the labourers as a '*gang*' (line 2), and the reference to the Zulu mother as a '*girl*' (line 3) groups/combines them as a people, rather than individuals.

Flings - She does not just 'drop it' or throw it down: the word 'flings' suggests impatience and exasperation/frustration. This can be seen as an act of defiance – she does not care about the authority. The woman's actions imply a disregard for the labour that she is doing.

Unslings her child – she carries her child on her back while she works. She is forced to look after the child herself. She has no choice but to bring him to the field.

tormented by flies – even the innocent child suffers. It is tortured by flies. It cannot chase them away. The child is helpless; the image of the tormented child is a reminder that he should not be in the hot fields at all.

Stanza 2 – conveys an image of a strong, protective mother.

Lines 5 - 6

a ring – very little shade – emphasises that there is no escape from the intense heat

pooled – a contrasting image to the heat. We associate ‘pool’ with water and a cooling effect.

Irony – no real escape from the heat

thorn-tree – these trees provide very little shade.

purpled with the blood of ticks – “*Purpled*” refers to the dried-out blood of the ticks. That area has become purple with the blood of ticks – emphasises that there were many ticks and that she sits there often and tends to her child. This emphasises the poverty and unhygienic conditions under which these labourers live.

Lines 7 - 8 - The mother searches through the hair of her child for ticks.

sharp nails – her nails have been deliberately sharpened to enable her to kill the ticks quickly. Emphasises poverty and squalor – she does not have any other way dealing with the problem.

in slow caresses – a gesture of care and love. Despite her tough life, she still cares deeply for her child.

ruled – she searches systematically

Prowl – metaphor - her fingers are like a fierce animal searching through the forest for its prey. The way she searches for the ticks is compared to an animal searching for its prey. It is done methodically and carefully.

sharp electric clicks – Metaphor - The sharp electric clicks are produced when she finds a tick and cracks it between her fingernails. The sound of the ticks being killed are compared to the sound of an electric spark. The sharp electric clicks are produced when she finds a tick and cracks it between her fingernails: this produces a sound like that given by an electric spark. Also onomatopoeia.

Stanza 3 – the relationship and feeling between mother and the child is not only physical.

Lines 9 - 10

sleepy mouth – the child is exhausted because of the heat and is languid.

plugged – the child is very small

Simile – the child is compared to a puppy because of how he is feeding. This emphasises the greed and hunger of the boy as he feeds. Also onomatopoeia.

grunting – adds to the animal-like quality of the boy as he feeds. He is too young to talk. The child is ‘grunting’ as he feeds, that is he is feeding greedily and expressing his simple but deep satisfaction.

Lines 11 - 12

frail nerves – the child is very irritable because of the heat and hunger

her own deep languor’s ripple – The mother’s deep tiredness and low energy (*languor’s*) flows through her into her child. He does not only take in physical nourishment. The mother’s emotions are also conveyed to the baby. She has the hope that he will grow up to be a future leader who will fight for their freedom.

Simile – The milk flowing from mother and child– this is compared to a river that flows slowly “sighing through the reeds”

sighing – the sound of the water as it moves through the reeds. This also represents the sound of satisfaction of the baby. Also onomatopoeia.

languours – the girl appears rather weary, unenthusiastic, and hopeless, as though expressing a deep despair and resentment against the situation in which she finds herself.

Stanza 4 – the underlying message becomes clear. The young child is a symbol of the Zulu nation:

Lines 13 – 14

Yet –conveys the idea that it is not only the mother’s languor’s that the child is taking in. The child also absorbs “an old, unquenched, unsmotherable heat –”

old unquenched – an old desire that has not been satisfied – the desire for freedom

unsmotherable – unable to be extinguished by anything

heat – anger/hatred

The river of the mother’s milk can put out the fire in the child’s body, but it is unable to quench the “*unsmotherable heat*” or thirst because the child belongs to the tribe whose fierceness has been ‘curbed’ for generations.

Despite the girl’s mood of hopelessness, her motherhood and the latent satisfaction she has in feeding her child, seem to arouse in her a kind of pride, ‘*the old unquenched, unsmotherable heat*’: a feeling perhaps that her life has some value, that she is taking part in an important life process

Lines 15 - 16

beaten – These lines refer to the African tribes that were forced into submission by the colonisers.

sullen dignity – despite their current oppressed state, these tribes are still ferocious and they keep their dignity even though they are defeated. They are resentfully silent or repressed. Her ‘tribes’ though ‘curbed’ and ‘beaten’ for the time being, ‘have a dignity’ in their ‘defeat’;

and still retain their self-respect, and are ready to 'rise again'. The strength of the Zulu tribe still exists in the Zulu people in spite of the oppression that they experience.

Stanza 5

Lines 17 - 18

Simile – The mother standing over her child is compared to a huge hill that protects a village. The mother stands above her child, but she seems more imposing and stronger than she was at the beginning. She stands guard over her child against anyone who would dare hurt him.

She is no longer just a single, exploited, hardworking individual in some remote part of the veld: despite the suffering and battle to survive, they will triumph. She is no longer just the mother of one child; she represents all the mothers of all the children of oppressed people.

Lines 19 - 20

These lines refer to storm clouds, which look harmless, but bring intense weather that eventually benefits the land.

Metaphor – The Zulu girl is compared to the first cloud that brings the rain that will lead to a harvest. Just as you cannot predict when a storm will arrive, it is the same with this woman and her tribe.

This metaphor suggests that the children of the oppressed people will one day reap the harvest of their suffering; in other words, they will overcome their oppression with help from mothers like the 'Zulu Girl' in the poem.

They are gathering strength and one day will unleash a huge storm on the oppressors and will bring a "harvest" of war just as the rains help bring in a harvest of crops.

cloud so terrible and still – suggest violent storms to come in the near future, but with the prospect of a welcome harvest in the fullness of time.

Tone

Oppression, determination, suffering, defiance, compassion, repressed anger, deep resentment, fear, deep love

Questions

1. How does line 1 set the initial mood of the poem? (2)
2. Explain what the word *flings* (line 3) suggests about the girl's state of mind? (2)
4. How does the poet set the scene of unbearably hot environment in stanza 1? (3)
Substantiate your answer.
5. In stanza 3, the child is feeding from his mother's breast, but taking in more than just milk. What else is being transmitted to the child? (2)
6. What else is the child receiving from his mother, as detailed in stanza 4? Substantiate your answer. (3)
7. Stanza 5 offers visions of the future. Discuss with reference to imagery and diction. (4)