

## Medical Trauma and Spatial Isolation in Alan Brennert's *Moloka'i*

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### Abstract

American Literature is a unique literature, predominantly written or produced in the United States of America and its preceding colonies. Alan Brennert an American author exhaustively screens out the nineteenth-century untold Hawaiian leper colony. Brennert's powerful and scrupulous fiction *Moloka'i* encapsulates the horrors of the disease in order to build up the enticing story in the Hawaiian Island. Nature is beautiful not only because it meets one's several needs and paves way to render the feeling of bliss but it also helps people to connect with their true 'selves'. Through different dimensions, it focuses on how nature stands as a healer in a Pacific paradise. The people of Hawaii spin with an exile, widowed, orphaned, legally dead, and physically dying with Hansen's disease and struck root in a new community, Kalaupapa. In the novel Brennert conveys the effects of Hansen disease, instead of living in a co-dwelling family that men and women live in separate colonies, whose children are removed soon after birth to prevent diseases. The present paper explores the touching account of a seven-year-old Rachel who undergoes sterilization when she rises above the limitations of a devastating illness and isolation within Kalaupapa community.

**Keywords-** Hansen disease; Healer; Illness; Segregation.

### INTRODUCTION:

Naturopathy is a wide range of therapy that supports human wellness. Nature cure is a drugless therapy that involves the use of the five great elements of nature to restore, to build-up, and to maintain health. Naturopathy means "a system of alternative medicine involving the treatment or prevention of diseases by diet, natural drugs" (Waite 604). The treatments footing enriches with natural herbs, sunlight and freshwater which balances the entire body and heals. Naturopathy stimulates and improves one's ability through transforming and cure various ailments in the body. This paper aims to explore how natural herbs heal men from the Hansen's diseases in Kalaupapa community in Alan Brennert's fiction *Moloka'i*.

Leprosy or Hansen's disease can permanently damage one's skin, nerves, arms, legs, feet and eyes. The skin sores are pale in colour. The island of Hawaii is situated in North America which once symbolized as a paradise for the people, but now it is like a hell in which people are filled with horrible pains. The lepers are forcibly removed from their homes and are

transported by boats to the Kalaupapa community placed in shacks far enough to stop the disease from spreading. Thousands of sufferers are between 1865 and 1930, and many were buried in unmarked graves. Though Kalaupapa brings so much pain, to its inhabitants now converted as a place of joy. In the *Holy Bible* leprosy is describes as plague and unclean “All the days where in the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone” (Lev. 13: 46). The disease has long been feared to be highly contagious and its symptoms include skin sores and nerve damage. In severe cases, one’s limb becomes disfigured and deformed. In the Kalaupapa community the patients of Hansen’s disease, live like a normal human being but their life time remains mystery in the annals of history.

In the novel *Moloka’i* Brennert narrates the problems faced by a seven-year-old protagonist Rachel Aouli Kalama that her mission and vision in fighting against the leprosy disease. Hansen, a Norwegian scientist predicts that “leprosy to be an infectious disease that these bacteria were indeed the causative agent for leprosy is neither a hereditary disease nor a curse given by god that lepers must suffer for their sins” (Ghosh and Soumik 220). Through this passage it can be identified that leprosy is resembled to be an infectious hereditary disease. In the novel Rachel’s father Henry Kalama who is a trader in the Honolulu Harbour and her mother is Dorothy Kalama. The plight of Rachel is described as: “Dorothy quietly extracted from a pin-cushion, the tip of which she now touched to the rosy spot on Rachel’s thigh poke the pin all over the blemished skin” (*Moloka’i* 26). One day, Rachel’s mother Dorothy examines the site of the wound, and quietly touched the rosy spot on her thigh and realised that her daughter gets symptoms of Hansen disease and applies a fresh bandage to cover the blemish skin. Also Rachel’s mother Dorothy instructs her not to tell anyone at school due to the underlying cause of the harmful disease.

Kalaupapa is a small unincorporated community situated in the island of Moloka’i, within Kalawao community in the United States of Hawaii. The Hansen’s disease patients remain at the isolated Kalaupapa, a leprosarium which is a hospital for leprosy patients established in 1866 on a remote, but breathe taking beautiful spit of land on the Hawaiian island of Moloka’i. The protagonist Rachel Kalama’s harmful sores by leprosy get reflected in the novel through the following lines:

The harbour to Kalihi, is a marshy triangle land jutting into the sea west of the harbour. A thick grove of algarroba trees obscured the Receiving station from the sight of both tourists and residents. It was nothing more sinister than a neatly landscaped complex of dormitories, cottages, schoolhouse, hospital and an infirmary encircled by a tall wire fence. The iron gates swung open to admit them and Henry struggled to maintain his composure as the carriage, coming to a halt was quickly surrounded by curious patients. (*Moloka’i* 39)

The above lines focus Kalaupapa land, scarcely landscaped with complex of dormitories, cottages, hospital and infirmary, encircled by a tall wire fence. Rachel has separate dormitory to live and take treatment to get cured from the Hansen’s disease. Rachel is to the isolation room, the doctor pokes with a metal instruments seeming to see her not as six-year old girl but as a teeming culture of bacillus laprae in the shape of six year old girl. Thus, it shows the isolation of a little girl Rachel in the land with pathetic way. The patients are unable to get united with their respective families with freedom rather they were seen as like an untouchable. Sister Mary Catherine Voorhies serves as a nun in the Bishop Home arrives to Kalawao, from the order of St. Francis charity. The nun shows her concern towards Rachel through her genuine warmth smile towards Rachel and welcomes her to Moloka’i. Ambrose Hutchison a resident superintendent, frames that Rachel cannot live with her uncle Pono she needs to be shifted to the Bishop Home. The sisters prefer that all girls under the age of sixteen should

reside in their care at Bishop's Home. Sister Mary Catherine Voorhies is a kind hearted woman who helps the patients with commitment that is in the following lines:

Sister Mary Catherine Voorhies was gruesomely ill. She had spent the better part of an hour here in the infirmary, dressing the sores of leprous girls and women, outwardly exhibiting nothing but compassion and good cheer. With thick swabs she cleansed pus from ulcers as though she were polishing tableware, scooped maggots of dead flesh like ants, snipped away skin as if cutting cloth for a dress pattern. She smiled into ravaged faces, said prayers with the devout or merely frightened and made a small talk. Somehow she managed to keep the bile from rising too far up her throat. (*Moloka'i* 78)

The above lines focus that Sister Mary Catherine Voorhies as a dedicated woman in the Bishop home who takes care of children who all infected by the leprous disease. She always has a smile on her face with good heart towards the patients. Lindamae Maldonado, of Kalaupapa her birth mother who has lost during her birth is a leprous patient in Kalaupapa who is of the view that the discovery about the place Molokai is heartbreaking and uplifting. Maldonado's most of the pain is about thousands of children are probably born to patients in Kalaupapa, children grow up without an intimation about their past because of custody laws and stigmatization. The children are estranged from their parents, entire bloodlines and all are potentially erased.

The stains of leprosy in the protagonist Rachel make her to feel panic with pain. The former physician for the Moloka'i Leprosarium, Dr. George Fitch opens up that: "leprosy is actually a fourth stage of venereal disease. Syphilis was a great scourge of our nation in the early years of this century and now this disease born of impurity and immortality festered into deadlier plague" (*Moloka'i* 35). The doctors in Kalaupapa are of the view that leprosy is a deadly disease which makes man as ugly, terrible pains and lot intake of medicines. Thus, the Hansen disease festered as a deadlier plague in Hawaiian island and threatens people with extinction.

The pain of isolation is very much severe in the life of Rachel when she gets separated from her family all love had shattered due to the disease. Her mother Dorothy goes to church on every Sunday, while that particular day the sermon in the church by Reverend Waiamau: "Leprosy and the Hawaiian People" (*Moloka'i* 34). He says that detailing about the history of the disease in Hawaii. Also he denotes the value of the Hawaiian family and community. The people all around in a sober look, indeed that leprosy is more than a physical ailment; it is a moral disease as well. Leprosy is a chronic, curable infectious disease mainly causing skin lesions and nerve damage. John Tayman a writer and columnist say that "Leprosy is not a fatal disease. Neither is it highly infectious. It is chronic illness caused by a bacterium and communicable only to persons with a genetic susceptibility" (*Colony* 2). Leprosy harms one's own health and leads in to the risk factors. The disease begins with a small reddish ring and ruin each day in a state of frantic worry and helpless depression. The protagonist Rachel's body has sores and there is a conflict born which ends in a grief due to the crucial Hansen disease. Dorothy terribly panics if she brings Rachel to a Haole doctor and if it is identified as leprosy the doctor would report it to the Board of Health. So Dorothy takes Rachel to the Kahunas, who is an important person in Hawaii, who is also a Christian who reconciles the old ways with the teachings of Christ the Saviour. Dorothy goes to a Kahuna to meet a thin bony old wise man and naturopatist Ua and tells about the blemish on Rachel's skin, its colour and insensitivity of pain. Ua as a healer with nature herbs explains about the medicines as:

Began taking down jars from the shelf, jars filled with leaves and powdered herbs, yellow flowers and narrow seed pods. It is used to clear disruptions of the skin. He put them in a large bowl along with four sea urchin shells, a teaspoon of salt, and papaya and kukui-nut

juices. As Ua entered and poured the yellow fluid into the bowl there was no mistaking the familiar pungent smell. He wrapped the pulp in coconut fibres and squeezed the juice into another jar, presented to Dorothy. Apply this to the blemish three times a day for five days. (*Moloka'i* 27)

Ua triumphs about the medicine to give Rachel for three times a day for five days also directs her to pray each night to the Lord God Jehovah to add his love and power to this medicine. Dorothy takes the jar and gratefully pays Ua two dollar as fee. Through this pathetic mean time Dorothy dutifully prays and applies the medicine to Rachel. Miraculously, at the end of fifth day the blemish disappears and Dorothy thanks God for his goodness in saving her daughter. Thus, the traumatic suffering of the child exposes due to the rosy spot vanishes out through the natural herbal medicine from the Hawaiian island.

The agony of Hansen's disease can be seen in every leper remained in Kalawao. Their struggles cannot be overlapped with joyous streams but instead it causes severe scratch in to one's psyche. The lepers are snubbed into too many things. Around Haleola's settlement the neighbours are stiff with lot of pains. Haleola is a healer and a resident physician, who helped many people in Kalaupapa. Harriet Chu's asthma is greatly improved since taking herbs which grew abundantly on Molokai. The character name Jose Dominguez, is running a high fever, Haleola gives him some of the tamarind seed to reduce his temperature. Few patients died from leprosy and mostly weakened by diseases. The people are the prey to their own diseases like dysentery or pneumonia.

To cure many diseases nature serves as a pioneer in the house of healing, in which people use herbal medicine for good health. In order to improve well and maintain one's life herbal plants play a vital role in the usage of traditional medicine. The protagonist Rachel redeems and gets cured through the natural herbs available in the Hawaiian island. The people of Hawaii struggle to maintain faith form a loving community, and help one another stay alive is one of the most extraordinary acts of overcoming with hope and survives.

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