

Poetry of Social Resistance in Modern Australian Aboriginal Poetry: A Study in Selected Poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Assistant Lecture

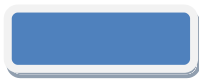
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Modern Aboriginal Australian Poetry reveals an epoch-making change in attitude towards the Aboriginal issues as presented through the lens of Aboriginal people. Aboriginality has always been presented through the White Australians or European invaders as nomadic and savage people that would give the legality for the White man to exploit their lands and people. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993), a writer and political activist who is most commonly known as the first Aboriginal poet to write poetry. She is also an active campaigner for Aboriginal civil rights. Noonuccal tried effortlessly to reveal pride in her Aboriginality to the wide range of audience, and to convey issues that killed her people like inequality and Aboriginal rights through her poems. Noonuccal strived to draw the intention of the world to the negative influence of European

invasion and their technologies upon Aboriginal people and culture. Blended into her poetry is a reverence for the Aboriginal history, discrimination towards the Aboriginal people, calling for fighting back against the European settlers, demanding for maintaining the Aboriginal traditions and rituals and preserving the land and the environment.

Key Words: Aboriginal Poetry, Indigenous, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Land.

Aboriginal Poetry

Introduction

Aboriginal people have been writing about their Aboriginal culture and traditions in non-literary contexts and unfortunately, their voice was not heard. Indigenous people image was carried out by white Australian society in which they were described as undervalued and primitive people.

Therefore, the early descriptions of Aboriginal people come through the lens of white Australian writers like Judith Wright and Les Murray who wrote about Aboriginal concerns and plights. Until the 1960s, Aboriginal poets and rising tide of writers held the flag of Aboriginal poetry truly from colonized countries. Aboriginal poets, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, and Colin Johnson, were seen as pioneers of modern Aboriginal writers and activists. Indigenous continent inhabitants defy European settlers and try to retain their folklore, tradition and land through different means; one of tools of protecting their people was literature, in particular, poetry (Harris,1990: 4).

Modern Aboriginal poetry constitutes a crucial part in Aboriginal art and culture, where writers express their fear and challenges in dealing with non-indigenous folks as well as issues specific to their lives. Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first collection of poetry, *We Are Going*, breaks the ice and opens a new window for Aboriginal people and writers alike. She turns the mainstream society and media towards Aboriginal issues that have been neglected for years. Oodgeroo sets the example for other indigenous writers to call for justice, land rights, racial discrimination, stereotyping, and national identity.

Oodgeroo's poetry stems from her political stands towards issues that she has been involved in since 1960s. She denounces, documents, and mourns the consequences of colonialism on Aboriginal people and their lands. Some of her poetry demands her people to react against white supremacy; other poems demand land and human rights. She attacks the European settlers in disdainful and accusing tones. Some poems look for the stolen past before the invasion and chaos (Webby, 2000: 29-30).

Australian Aboriginal poetry can be broken down into three groups: poetry that looks back in time, a glorious time of intact culture before the arrival of white man, and poetry that deals with the dispossessed and marginalized indigenous folks, and those poems that look forward for better future. A great deal of poetry includes more than one aspect; usually golden past with demolished present or hopeful future that helps to paint the clear whole picture of Aboriginal culture (Harris,1990: 4).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal as a Poet and as a Woman

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993) or formerly known (**Kath Walker**) started writing poetry in her first collection, *We are Going*, (1958) and since then she was known as the first

Aboriginal poet in the context of Australian community. Her father, Edward Ruska, is from Noonuccal tribe—the indigenous people of Minjerribah. He called for improving conditions including increased wages for local native workers and left a strong and enduring feeling on his daughter. Like father, like son, Oodgeroo Noonuccal takes to Aboriginal issues like a duck to water popularizing her Aboriginality among her readership. She joins ‘the Realist Group in Brisbane’ which is a group that takes on their behalf to promote and reproduce the socialist realism in literature in Australia. She also has a liaison with the Communist Party for its opposing views against the segregation and discrimination towards Aboriginal people (Read, Haebich and Peters-Little, 2008: 60).

Noonuccal suffers from being called as a propagandist rather than a poet. As reviewers attack her poetic skill naming that, her strength springs from her message, which is mostly about Aboriginal issues. She turns to be the mouthpiece of indigenous folks to get their social justice and rights. The matter of criticizing her poetry takes a different path away from credibility. Her poetry was being accused to be written by some communist adherent. Some other critics, like Katharine England, see

that Noonuccal’s poetry is nearer to be called propaganda rather than a part of literature. She believes that the reason why she writes good poems is that she is not a full blood; she’s got white man’s blood coming out in her (ibid: 61).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s Aboriginal Poetry

The colonization of Aboriginal Australians took a long period process. Botany Bay was chosen as a spot for British to build their first colony, and Aboriginal Australian lands were taken over by colonizers that ensues war, diseases and mass murder, which dismantled and disrupted the very fabric of Aboriginal Australian communities. British established their colonies and Australian natives were obligated to desert their lands, displaced, and being located in small areas like prisoners. Aboriginal Australian community was taken as a dying race and the examples are many starting with children taken from their parents and ending in mass slaughter.

In the early 1960s and late 1970s, a great portion of movements appeared to demand for stolen rights of Aboriginal Australian communities in the context of politics, social life, and literature. **Oodgeroo Noonuccal** (1920-1993) was the prominent leader of

changing the image of Aborigines and regaining their rights, after they were being described as nomadic and retard people through the lens of colonizers. She was the trigger to reform the Australian constitution for the sake of having Aboriginal Australian people citizenship.

One can see a lot of pictures in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry which depict true Aboriginal characters who have nothing to do with colonization and lived in fear and loneliness. Some of her poems describe the effects of colonization on the Australian communities that would bring relief for Aborigines and show the plight of colonization of Aboriginal Australian lands. Noonuccal, as an activist, made a great progress towards the betterment of Aborigines through her writings and holding rehabilitant programs. Critics, like Mudrooroo, come up with the term, Poetemics, mixing poetry and polemics to emphasize the message over the traditional aesthetic concerns. The majority of Noonuccal's poetry can be listed within protest poetry, which neglects the centrality of her imperative to send the cultural, political, social meaning (Charles, 2015: 948).

The present study aims at showing how have Aboriginal Australian poets responded to colonization and confiscated their

lands and culture. How have Aboriginal Australian poets rejected or acquiesced to environmental disruptions caused by the British colonizers. The appearance of ***We Are Going (1964)*** immediately took place with the emerging of the Aboriginal civil rights movement spotted by successions of protests across Australia. Oodgeroo Noonuccal starts her collection with a poem carries the same title of the collection, "We are Going." In this poem, Oodgeroo Noonuccal puts all her efforts to summarize the suffering of her people and atrocities committed by the land-stealers, the colonizers. The poem starts with:

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old
bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry
about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish
May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old
bora ring (We are going: 1).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal starts describing defenseless town, which has nothing to hold to protect its inhabitants. A tribe returns to their town and found a demolished, smeared land by colonizers. Here, Oodgeroo Noonuccal critiques the Western society, namely, the White. The tribe found the place, "Old Bora Ground," which is probably a

symbol of cultural and religious place as semi-naked an adjective, which describes the state of the town and its denizens. Colonizers took almost everything valuable and destroyed the place. Town inhabitants are subjected forcefully and remained silent carrying no weapon in their hands. They were obliged to leave their old bora ground, their original place. Oodgeroo Noonuccal is smart enough to compare the colonizers as ants, A sense which denotes three things: their huge numbers, the ability to eat whatsoever comes before them, and their organized horror activity. The top officer commands his soldiers to dump rubbish on the sacred place of indigenous people; a kind of social, cultural disinheritance. Not only occupied not only their lands, but also they prevented them from doing their rituals:

We are as strangers here now, but the
white tribe are the strangers.
We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora
ground,
We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the
elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time,
the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing
games, the wandering camp fires.
(We are going: 2).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal continues describing the state of Aborigines.

They were seen as strangers to their lands, at least physically, which is already occupied by invaders. The poet wants to emphasize the point that is her people were detached physically, but they were connected to their lands spiritually; that is what early invaders lack. This is clear when she states that her people are of old ways, those who keep doing their traditions and laws of ancestors. Her people preserve, corroboree, which is a nocturnal social event where Aborigines wear costumes and paint their bodies in different colors interact with music and dance. One method employed by indigenous writers is to concentrate on the black Australian history, a history of pre-contact with the Whites in order to popularize their pride in Aboriginal heroes and chieftains of former generations. People can name Red Indian chief or famous tribe easily, but they cannot name Aboriginal hero of tribe because the Aboriginal history either neglected or unknown for the audience (Gilbert, 1978: 3).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal stresses the importance of bora ground, which is a raised ground where initiation ceremony of Aborigines takes place. Aborigines who reach puberty or achieve the status of men or doing some scarification or doing some rituals, they would go into the bora ground. The poet keeps her roots by

emphasizing their old habits, which are hunting and setting fires at nights. It is a habit for Aboriginals to tell stories of heroes, family ancestry hunting games, and retell the stories to keep the line with their ancestors. They are the history whereas the early settlers are invaders who did not evaluate the importance of their lands, rituals, people, rights, and history:

The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.

The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.

The bora ring is gone.

The corroboree is gone.

And we are going (We are going: 3).

Noonuccal puts an emphasis on the damage caused by the early settlers physically and spiritually. The poet keeps doing two things throughout the poem; firstly the lamenting tone where she stresses the dwindling of her nation, traditions, songs, rituals, habits and people. Even the animals like eagle and kangaroo are killed and deserted the place. Secondly, she reaffirms and confirms her voice through the repetition of Aboriginal traditions, aspects of nature, and bora ground. The atmosphere of evanescent scents or watching in her eyes the collapse of her culture, old ways hit firmly the chords in the poetry of indigenous poetry. Noonuccal intended the poem, "**We are Going**," to be a cry for help, a

cry for their voice to be heard a cry for their dispossession from their lands, a cry for lost heritage, and a cry for displacement of her people (Shoemaker, 2004: 205).

In another poem entitled, "*Time is Running Out*," from her second collection, **The Dawn is at Hand**," Noonuccal describes the reckless activity of miners who keep digging the earth for sake of oil and other natural resources regardless the negative influence on the nature and its people. The first stanza in the poem starts as:

The Miner rapes
The heart of the earth
With his violent spade,
Stealing, bottling her black blood
For the sake of greedy trade (Time is Running out: 7).

The poet describes the early settlers, Westerners, as savage people who are violent and destructive. They look for their self-interest. They came with an intent on stealing the oil and other minerals from Aboriginals who live a simple life:
In his greedy lust for power
He destroys old nature's will
For the sake of the filthy dollar,
He dirties the nest he builds (Time is Running out: 7)

The poet confirms the image of savage miners who keep digging

the earth and contaminating the environment without even calculating the destruction they cause to the nature. The money they get from their filthy trade motives them. Implicitly, Noonuccal refers to the inequality where the natives did not benefit from their natural resources, only the destruction they get:

Come gentle black man
Show your strength
Time to take a stand
Make the violent miner feel
Your violent
Love of land (Time is Running out: 8)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal tries to increase the confidence of her people and regain their courage to fight back and take their rights. It is no time to keep low profile and be mastered by invaders. It is time to show courage against servility. It is time to show the passion for the motherlands, traditions, and rituals. She is immensely affected by and attached to the land. One can see the matter of oneness and unity with the land theme is obvious in her poetry. Her poetry serves the mission of presenting the Aboriginals as victims of white racism; displaced, humiliated, subdued, and dispossessed from their lands. The other image is the fighter image of Aboriginals who show courage, passion and love for their traditions and rituals.

In her essay, “**Indigenous Text and Narratives**,” Toorn, a critic, summarizes the basic concerns of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s poetry:

Her poetry affectively documents, analyzes, and laments the effects of colonialism on the Aboriginal people and land. Some poems call Aboriginal people to action; others directly address the unhappy white race in angry, accusing, disdainful, and sometimes pitying tone. Other poems are more reflective, some looking back to happier times before the coming of the white man (Toorn, 2000: 30).

Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s poetry is full of fighting images of her people, and this is clear in her next poem, “*Assimilation No!*” The poem starts in denouncing white supremacy over Aboriginal culture:

Must the genius of an old race die
That the race might live?
We who would be one with you, one
people,
We must surrender now much that we
love,
The old freedoms for new musts,
Your world for ours. (Assimilation No:
22).

The poet criticizes the earlier trials of white people to abandon Aboriginal culture and traditions and be immersed in western culture. Aborigines cannot take risk of leaving their traditions and rituals for the sake of assimilating or blending

in culture. So, Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry is a cry for rejecting the new system. The poem continues:

We are different hearts and minds
In a different body. Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother.
To change the unchangeable.
The gum cannot be trained into an oak.
We will go forward and learn.
Not swamped and lost, watered away, but
keeping
Our own identity, our pride of race.
(Assimilation No: 22).

The scheme is to absorb Aboriginal population into the mainstream of whites. By so doing, it will facilitate the Aboriginal culture to shrink and pass away and white empire becomes easy to build. The poem calls for the rejection of any kind of assimilation with the white. It expresses the fear of losing the identity of Aboriginals. Oodgeroo Noonuccal confirms the idea of rejection through the image of gumtree, which is a tree known for its root that can be left out and can be changed into an oak. She wants to send a message of being proud of Aboriginality, land, ritual, past, culture, and traditions.

Many of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poems were meant to be read aloud as statements or well-formed speeches given to the public. "*Aboriginal Charter of Rights*" is

one of best poems in her poetry. Her poems concentrate on the duality of victim and murderer. This is can be illustrated in the following lines:

We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism
.....
Make us equals, not dependants.
We need help, not exploitation,
.....
Homes, not settlements and missions.
We need love, not overlordship.
(Aboriginal Charter of Rights: 25)

The poet draws a clear picture through putting all requirements of Aboriginal people with the reality of what they see in the behavior of the whites. She presents a vivid picture of lies and hypocrisy of the government. In her poetry, she asserts the ability of her people to live without struggling. She encourages her people to live in the program, without overlordship in homes rather than settlements or missions. One of her famous poems, "*No More Boomerang*," in her second collection, **The Dawn is at Hand**, the poet criticizes the marginalization of Aboriginal people and their culture by numerating all Aboriginal tools which are replaced by latest modernist European tools. She mentions the boomerangs, spears, a gunya, (a type of a shelter) woomera or spear thrower, and firesticks:

No more boomerang
No more spear;
Now all civilized-
Colour bar and beer.
No more corroboree,
Gay dance and din.
Now we got movies,
And pay to go in. (No More
Boomerang: 54).

The poet criticizes the whole situation, and she is not looking after the boomerang only, but the message is that Aboriginal people lost their traditional touch and their way of life as their ancestors' way of life. Many parts of traditional life have either taken away from them or replaced by modern European tool (Charles, 2015: 948).

The last poem discussed in this study is, "*The Municipal Gum*," which is a short poem, where the poet expresses her inner thoughts and feelings towards a tree. The poem follows:

Gumtree in the city street,
Hard bitumen around your feet
Rather you should be
In the cool world of leafy forest halls
.....
Here you seems to me
Like that poor-cart horse
Castrated, broken, a thing wronged
Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged
Whose hung head and listless mien express
Its hopelessness.
.....
O fellow citizen
What have they done to us? (The
Municipal Gum, 118).

Just like the Aboriginal people who had been cut out from their lands and culture, the tree was cut from its original place, which is the forest with rest of its kind. However, one can see the tree surrounded by buildings in the city. It is required for the tree to acclimatize to a new state of being, that is an integration into the white society. Oodgeroo Noonuccal uses the tree as a symbol to denote the state of Aboriginal people. They were forced to integrate into white society. The tree was given the voice needed to express its suffering and the suffering of Aboriginals. The tree is like a horse but castrated, its movements are restricted and his head is down. It denotes the state of hopelessness. Oodgeroo Noonuccal shows her poetic craft in expressing her endearing kinship towards environments, and her deepest emotions and feeling towards the tree. She talks to the tree as a person, relating the inflicted suffering, which is taken upon them; people, lands, and animals. Oodgeroo Noonuccal uses imagery and personification to shed light on the tree that has been moved and forced into different terrain as Aboriginals did and they were obliged to obey and adopt man's white ways. The main purpose of the poem is to show the gravity of discrimination inflicted

upon the Aboriginal people by European invaders.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has come to a conclusion that the Aboriginal Australian Poetry shows a marked change in attitude towards the Aboriginal issues, which are different from the White man's perspective. The traditional perspective is that the indigenous people are nomadic and savage people who need smart rulers to control and develop their lands. Oodgeroo Noonuccal is considered the mouthpiece of Aboriginal people who sets a different track for Aboriginal issues. She writes in a resisting tone, trying to get Aboriginal lands from the Europeans. She insists upon the Aboriginal culture, traditions, ritual, songs, lands, and even their trees and animals.

Many of Noonuccal's poems, as in "*Aboriginal Charter of Rights*," are set in an extreme duality; like the

duality of victim and the victimizer, the dependent and independent, the equality and inequality of social life, and the innocent and the murderers. By doing so, Noonuccal stresses the point of difference between the different cultures. She believes in the simplicity of the Aboriginal culture, people and the connection to their lands. She develops a sense of spirituality between people and the lands as exemplified in the following lines, "**We are the corroboree and the bora ground \ We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.**" Oodgeroo Noonuccal succeeded in spreading the word of Aboriginal culture overseas through different ways, and one of them was her connection to her predecessors and ancestors. She fights modernity with the rituals of her Aboriginality, Aboriginal history, and Aboriginal traditions. The majority of her poetry are statements-based poetry that can be delivered through the podium. Her poetry is characterized by simplicity and easiness.

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