

Australian Landscape through the Lens of Oodgeroo Noonuccal: An Aboriginal Perspective

Dr. Bhavna Sharma

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana

Email - bhavna18sharma@gmail.com

Abstract: *Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an aboriginal poet, has exalted the beauty of Australia in her verses celebrating Australian landscape in a harmonious way. Being an aborigine, she considered herself to be a child of nature and woman of nature as she could communicate with the birds, animals and with the living things around her. With reverential awe, she describes everything growing under the blue cloak of nature. She acutely studies the relationship of man and nature that preaches moral and ethical values. The land, according to her is considered to be important and intrinsic to one's development as it is the essence of aboriginal spirituality. Her relationship with the earth as a mother is sacred and unbreakable and preserved through the totems. She believes that land and man are inseparably linked forever as earth is the mother of humankind. Noonuccal brings forward the viewpoint of aborigines who consider themselves as part of nature and acknowledge the dependence of human existence upon ecological balance. In all, Noonuccal observes nature with a divine eye and her ethical imperatives and admiration of nature's abundance and beauty ignite theological reflections. It is indeed, interesting to observe her love for the motherland with the same overtones like William Wordsworth turning to nature for deeper understanding of man.*

Keywords: *aborigines, totem, ecological, humankind.*

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, a renowned Australian poet, grew up on North Stradbroke Island, near Brisbane surrounded by the sea and the bush land. She wandered off for hours exploring nature which became very close to her as she had it around her all the time. She considers the environment and the landscape as a setting for understanding cultural, political and literary concerns as well as embodiment of human spirituality and emotion believing the land to be a place that gives and receives life which is just not imagined or represented; it is lived in and lived with. Being an aborigine, she considered herself to be a child of nature and woman of nature as she could communicate with the birds, the animals and the living things around her. As Broome stated regarding the aborigines' love of the land: "The land not only gave life, it *was* life" [Broome,14]. The belief of the aborigines supports the view of Greg Garrad "The boundary between human and animal is arbitrary and, moreover irrelevant, since we share with animals a capacity for suffering" [Garrad, 116]. Feeling so close to nature, the aborigines did not place themselves above anything in the hierarchy of nature rather they believed that everything in nature was equal and to be respected. To add, their closeness to nature was expressed through totems which in turn shaped their mythologies and their vision of the world. A totem was virtually anything found in nature: "plants and animals of all kinds- anything in the entire floral or faunal realms; wind, rains, storms, thunder, lightening, stars, sun, moon and clouds- anything of heaven; tools and weapons, food and cosmetics, fire and smoke, mist and spume, fresh water and salt- anything on earth; the human exuviae and genitals- almost anything of the human body" [Stanner, 129-130]. It represents what a plant, animal, or other object was when the world was created. Many aboriginals see totem as a part of themselves. Their totem unites them with nature's activities and species in a bond of mutual life-giving. It is a world-view in which a human is an integral part of nature, not distinct from other natural species, sharing with them the same life essence.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal's love for nature is explicitly explained in her verses. She describes the external world with an artistic eye illustrating God and his glory. She skillfully and lucidly describes the contours of the landscape and the long-stretched hills and mountains. In the poem *China...Woman*, she admires the great wall meandering like the Rainbow Serpent in the ranges:

High peaked mountains
Stand out against the skyline.
The great wall
Twines itself
Around and over them,
Like my Rainbow Serpent,
Groaning her way
Through ancient rocks. (MP,94)

Aboriginal people believe that the land is spiritually alive and that certain places are the resting places of the creator, the mother of life, the Rainbow Serpent. These areas command absolute respect from the aboriginal people “Since the Alcheringa, that thing you fulla call Dreamtime, this place has given man shelter from the heat, a place to paint, to dance the sacred dance and talk to his spirit” (MP,113) remarks Oodgeroo Noonuccal. She also ties her knot with the trees and the floral world closely and intimately exhibiting a spontaneous regards for them and admiring their subtle charm and wildness. She is seen as a minute and accurate observer of nature highly sensitive to their external impressions. Trees in her poems are not just representation of nature but have symbolic meaning as well. Noonuccal notices the bursting of “pine trees” and blooming of “hop trees” as a way of God giving further direction to life. In the poem *The Rainbow Serpent* she conveys: “The pine trees, they burst into flower. That’s his way of telling us it’s time to hunt the big mullet fish” and to add “when the wild hop trees bloom, that’s his way to tell us the oysters are fat on the shores of our great sea spirit, Quandamooka” (MP,114). Noonuccal agrees with David Unaipon’s remark: “My people delight to give a reason to everything they observe, as well as to draw a moral lesson from it all” [Unaipon, 164]. She wishes that her thoughts could stand like trees and inculcate a pioneering spirit. The poem *Municipal Gum* features imagery of a “gumtree”, an indigenous tree surrounded by “hard bitumen”. The poem teaches endurance to humanity to stand for itself in all circumstances and learn to draw strength like the gumtree.

The poem *Gifts* point towards the restorative qualities a tree possesses and its importance in the lives of the aborigines. The lover promises to adorn and embellish his beloved with the most beautiful and desiring elements like pendant, tribal songs, stars, parrot feathers but the beloved adamantly disapproves of them and asks him to bring “tree-grubs” (MP,38) that provide immense satisfaction to her. In the poem *The Woor Woman* the trees act as a character being aware of the bad omen falling on Bhoori, the hunter as “all the world grew sad and still” and “The trees whispered as he went by”(CP,42) giving him signs as not to fall a prey to his vicious desires. Trees also stand as a true confidant to human beings, understanding their pain and loneliness:

Hello tree;
Talk to me.
I’m sick
And lonely. (MP, 53)

It is empathetic with mankind and acts as a reliever to his pains “Talk a tree!/ Can’t you see;/ My troubles/ Trouble me” (MP,53). In a philosophic tone Noonuccal expresses the long association of trees with man holding onto their secrets and talks of mankind. Trees acts as a great reliever to the sorrows of man and guides him with its silence:

Silent tree
Let me see
Your answers.
ANSWER ME. (MP,53)

Oodgeroo Nonnucal admires the simple and cheerful world of birds and keenly observes and appreciates their aspects of nature with deep insight. She brings out the essence in the life of the birds that remain unperturbed by the worldly sadness. Their presence lightens the pressures of the world outside and inspires man to move ahead in life. Birds according to Noonuccal bring joy to life. Focussing on the activities of the birds in *The Child Wife* she writes: “Happy the small birds/ Mating and nesting, / Shrilling their gladness” (MP, 12). Pleasing sights and sounds of these little singers of nature unite the poet with a philosophical insight and she passionately enjoys their little voices. She celebrates the past when nature was bounteous and not interfered with by the whites. Her affinity with the bush life was always in harmony with nature with background music of chirping birds. As compared to the nature’s vast size and shape, birds are the smallest creatures yet they are a source of joy and happiness to human heart. Such felicity is expressed in *Summer* where the poet exhibits the charming activities of birds taking place in the land of Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island). It is a colourful poem depicting the delightful world of Australian birds.

I welcome summer’s yearly appearance here. To awaken to the dawn of another day, listening to the happy twitter of baby birds in their nests.

The early calls of the kookaburras and their young trying to copy them are a delight to hear. (MP, 89)

Noonuccal feels fascinated to hear the melodious voice of these young birds. “Comes morning, and a willy wagtail chatters and darts about, catching the flying insect coming from the smoky pines” (MP,91). She admires the punctuality in their routine full of cheerful activities of these birds that start chirping at the fixed time. Her grasp and understanding of the world of birds is well recognized in *Summer* where she refers to the birds as “the Bushman’s alarm clock”:

The first call of the kookaburra at five o’clock in the morning and then again at six o’clock is better than any man-made awakener. Truly they have earned the title of ‘the Bushman’s alarm clock’.

.....

By nine a.m., the bush is alive with the call of the cicadas, and the melodious voice of the thrush can be heard as she and her mate flit from branch to branch, eating their breakfast of golden orb spiders. (MP,89)

She admires the relation of the mother bird and her babies, a relation just like human beings nurtured with intimacy and devotion. She allures the little ones and admires their grooming. She feels delighted to remember how the ‘young kookaburra chicks’ learnt to laugh “Young kookaburra chicks have to learn to laugh; they are not born laughers. I have discovered that, like all children, some are fast learners, some average and some slow” (MP,89). Her world too becomes energetic and bouncy watching the little playful bustle of these creatures. The poet’s heart is filled with joy to “count twenty pelicans cruising along outside the mangroves” (MP,93). Her eye to observe the details of the storm bird is seen in *Summer* where she describes the process of mating and the dangers faced due to the friar-birds:

Before dawn breaks, the storm bird is calling to his mate. After mating they seek out a ready-made nest where the female can lay her eggs. Usually the friar-birds are the victims. After hatching the storm bird’s chicks, the friars become very angry and do their best to throw the baby storm birds out of their nest. This pattern is repeated every summer. (MP,89)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal possesses the forte to minutely observe the details of the birds and express them accurately. She was extremely attached to birds and could also understand their language. “The ti-trees’ heavily scented blooms become decorated with the beautiful coloured lorikeets, screeching their happiness and well being from the swamp lands” (MP,92). “The sea-curlew calling from the mud flats at low tide” (MP,91) catch her breath. The call of the plover is a simple and joyous connection with the land “Karra-karak!/ Keerk-keerk!/ Karaka-karra-karak!” (MP,57) giving a romantic tone to her expression. Like a pagan she could make out that something wrong is going to happen if a bird sang in a different way. Such affinity to nature makes her more conscious of environmental balance as in the poem *The Food Gatherers*. Noonuccal understood the importance of the relation between man and nature and how the survival accolade the strength of water. Her writing is filled with love and respect for the great water spirit. The poem *Biami* is a conversation between son and mother discussing the powers of Biami which has created the “great wide river” and changes the colour of sea. Even the whites venerated Biami who made the world and men. The poem shows the anxiety in the heart of the child who is charmed to see the different colours of water “Mother, what is that one sea,/ Sometimes blue or green or yellow?/ ‘That’s Biami’s waterhole./ He big fellow.’” (MP,78). The association with such spirits render tranquillity to the aboriginals. *Gooboora, the Silent Pool* is another poem where the relation between aboriginals and the revered spirit is highlighted. “Gooboora” is considered the “Water of Fear/ That awed the Noonuccals” and lets some “mystery lurk” around it (MP,68). It was the place where the aboriginals were “a whole happy tribe” as they made their hearts light with dance and games but after the displacement the place is deserted:

What mystery lurks by the Water of Fear,
And what is the secret still lingering here?
For birds hasten by as in days of old,
No wild thing will drink of your waters cold. (MP,68)

The mysterious water definitely captivates the mind of Oodgeroo Noonuccal but the ferocity of these bodies also catches her poetic attention. Talking of the massacre taking place at *Blue Lake* where the bodies were “set fire and pushed out into the middle of the lake” she pens down her feelings”:

I visit Blue Lake, the spirit lake of the Noonuccal Tribe, to meditate, to pay my respects to our long-departed dead, whose bodies were placed on rafts of paper bark, set fire to and pushed out into the middle of the lake, so they could sleep their last deep sleep in the arms of the water spirit of the lake’s deep waters. (MP,92)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal considers seasons to be nature’s “precious gifts” to be appreciated “All seasons are precious gifts to all living things to be shared with all” (MP, 93). A sense of connectivity moves on between various seasons of nature, sprinkling their respective colours and shades into the world. It not only builds a bond of sharing and unity but also “brings with it the laughter, the tragedy” (MP,92). Idealizing the “summers of Minjerribah”, Oodgeroo Noonuccal writes: “The summers of Minjerribah are movements of actions, and all living things are our reminders of the Earth Mother’s balancing of her realm”(MP, 93). Referring to God’s way of beating the heat of the summers, Noonuccal artistically writes: “The heat of the summer morning air disappears with the arrival of the cool afternoon sea breezes, blowing themselves from across the Bay” (MP,92). The showers of rain during summers beat “out a tune in monotonous repetition during the big wet. The dry sandy soil welcoming its cool contact” (MP, 91). Oodgeroo Noonuccal appreciates the abundance of comfort and cure given by nature to man. Sharing her sense of belongingness with mother earth she writes: “I will always come back to this place to share the feeling of the land with all living things. I belong here where the spirit of the Earth Mother is strong in the land and in me” (MP,115). Describing the exquisiteness of Minjerribah she writes:

Living on Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) is beautiful all year round.

Minjerribah is situated about sixteen kilometres from mainland Australia, off the bayside township of Cleveland, near Brisbane, and is the grass-root home of the Noonuccal tribe. (MP,89)

The land, according to Oodgeroo Noonuccal is considered to be important and intrinsic to one's development as it is the essence of aboriginal spirituality and entrusted to their care. "Kabul", "the mother of us all" and "the spirit of the land" is considered to be all colourful and beautiful. Her relationship with the earth as a mother is a sacred and unbreakable relationship which must be preserved. It is a spiritual bond that touches and soothes her heart: "Take time you earth fullas. Let the spirit of this mighty land touch you as it touches my people" (MP,115). She believes that land and man are inseparably linked forever as earth is the mother of mankind and that humans are born of the land. There is a clear and deep binding with the warm, blue-skied land; "We are different you and me. We say the earth is our mother -we cannot own her, she owns us."(MP,113). In *Reed Flute Cave* her happiness shows no bounds to find "My Rainbow Serpent,/ My Earth Mother" in "Reed Flute Cave":

I didn't expect to meet you in Guilin
My Rainbow Serpent,
My Earth Mother,
But you were there
In Reed Flute Cave,
With animals and reptiles
And all those things
You stored in the Dreamtime.
Pools of cool water, like mirrors,
Reflecting your underbelly. (MP,96)

Describing her understanding of the importance of the land as intrinsic to the development of aboriginal culture she expresses her interpretation of her people's crucial role in relation to the land: "Aborigines will always be the custodians of their traditional lands" (MP,112). Their land is a sacred place and is referred as the "Rainbow Serpent- the mother of life to all aboriginal tribes". Referring to the strength of the earth she writes:

This rock and all these rocks are alive with her spirit. They protect us, all of us. They are her, what you fullas say now, temple. Since the Alcheringa, that thing you fulla call Dreamtime, this place has given man shelter from the heat, a place to paint, to dance the sacred dance and talk to his spirit. (MP,113)

"The rocks of the Island" are considered as guards, soldiers or protectors. The Earth Mother also acts as a guide and teacher. It sends its spirits to remind human beings to the supremacy of nature "she send her spirit ones with message sticks to help us take time. To remember. To care for her special things" (MP,113). Like an ecofeminist and a worshipper of nature she loud her voice to save the Mother Earth in the poem *The Rainbow Serpent*:

First there is Dooruk, the emu, with the dust of the red Earth Mother still on his feet. He come to remind us to protect the land, to always put back as much as we take.

.....
And Mungoongarlie, the goanna, last of all because his legs are short. He bring the news that we, his children, are forgetting to give time to each other. (MP,113-114)

The Earth Mother spirit is also their Rainbow Serpent. She plays a dual role and she is also one. *Reed Flute Cave* gives expression to this feeling:

Tell me, my Rainbow Spirit
Was there just one of you?
Perhaps, now I have time to think,
Perhaps, you are but one of many guardians
Of earth's peoples,
Just one,
My Rainbow Serpent,
Spirit of my Mother Earth. (MP,97)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal feels like William Wordsworth who also states in his poem *The World Is Too Much with Us* that it is essential for human beings to spend some time with nature. This bond cultivates a deeper understanding for the other creations of God. Noonuccal brings forward the viewpoint of aborigines who consider themselves part of nature and acknowledge the dependence of human existence upon ecological balance. Referring to the aboriginal way of upbringing she remarks that as soon as a child is able to sit up, the lesson to recognize each and every creature in the

bush and to draw their pictures in the sand begins. To say precisely, the more time one spends amidst nature, the better is the understanding of all living things as portrayed by her in the poem *Summer*:

All these living things do not happen every day or night. They come after many years of my watching and learning from the Earth Mother and her beautiful creations. I spend my spare time listening and learning about her beautiful balance of all living things. (MP, 91)

The poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal is sensitive to almost everything in nature. She views the landscape with a divine eye and recognizes its spiritual and metaphysical properties. Her treatment of natural objects is taken as a creed, faith or philosophically. She is seen as a worshipper of nature holding the elements of nature in referential awe as god's essence is found in all the objects of nature. Instead of empathizing with the elements of nature she becomes very much a part of it. She could not imagine her existence without the mysterious nature around her. Noonuccal impresses with her first hand knowledge of aboriginal life and its association with the natural environment. Her ethical imperatives and admiration of nature's abundance and beauty ignite theological reflections. She turns to nature for solace and deeper understanding of man strongly upholding the view that man should spend more time in green outdoor environment which will nurture lifelong positive attitudes. Her poetry mirrors the varied species with a sensual delight and brings to highlight the relationship of togetherness and closeness between human life and natural life. She regards the natural environment to be a source of great blessing to mankind, the bringer of life and gladness to all creatures and thus needs to be preserved.

REFERENCES:

1. Broome, R. 1992. *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance 1788-1980*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin Pty.Ltd.
2. Garrad, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.
3. Stanner, W.E.H. "Religion, Totemism and Symbolism". *Religious Buisness: Essays on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005.
4. Noonuccal, Oodgeroo. *My People*. Queensland: The Jacaranda Press.1990 (Quoted as MP)
5. Unaipon, David. *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2001.