

Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading Of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's Select Poems

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Abstract

This paper titled “Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s Select Poems” attempts to delineate Oodgeroo Noonuccal poems as strong voices that breaks the western philosophy of binary opposition “Culture/Nature” by equating images of natural world with the images of cultural and oral tradition. The paper analyzes Oodgeroo Noonuccal poems - “We are going”, “Gooboora” and “Return to Nature” within a postcolonial ecocritical framework. Postcolonial ecocriticism gives an ecological aspect to postcolonial studies. Colonial masters exploited and abused not only people but Nature as well. They polluted both the native Culture and Nature. During the pre-colonial period Nature was part of Culture. ie. Nature, people, culture were not separate entities. During and after colonization, a rupture between Nature and Culture happened. The poems lament the loss for the rich past and highlight the need to reclaim that glorious past. The strong bond between Nature and Aborigines are revealed through the different roles played by Nature.

Keywords:

Postcolonial ecocriticism, colonization, environment, literature and ecology, postcolonialism

Culture and ecosystem are the closely knit elements integral to a place. Any defilement of indigenous culture has repercussions on Nature. Colonial occupation of Europe in the past centuries robbed the Aboriginal tribe of Australia both their land and culture. This paper titled “Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading Of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s Select Poems” endeavors to explore the intricate relationship of Aboriginal community with Nature and Culture through a postcolonial ecocritical reading of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s three poems:

“Gooboora, The Silent Pool”, “We Are Going” and “Return to Nature”. It shall try to prove Nature and Culture as a ‘unity’ or single entity challenging Cartesian dichotomy of Culture/Nature. This paper also looks upon the different roles played by Nature which highlight the emotional and physical importance of ecosystem and the people.

For the native people of all lands, Culture and Nature did not represent two forces opposing each other but as entities that together form a unity. In the pre-colonial era, the Aboriginal community lived in closed union with the Nature, consuming and conserving the biodiversity of their land. Their belief that land was a spirit evoked a sense of awe and reverence to the ‘living’ Nature and helped to preserve the purity of the Nature. The rupture of a singular and conscious dwelling space to multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological places is a consequence of the ‘civilizing mission’ in Australia by the Whites. According to the Cartesian view, Culture and Nature are opposite sides in a dualism in which the former “as an agent actively strives for domination over nature” and latter as a “source of hardships has to be mastered by human rational action” (Haila 155). Colonization paved way not only for political and social domination, but also cultural imperialism and environmental exploitation. It ignored the Aboriginal understanding of sustainable development and ecological balance, instead imposed the Western understanding of development which equated Nature as a mere resource to used and over-used. Dereck Gregory says, “Colonization also involves the importation of ideas about nature; perhaps most significant among them, the separation of nature and culture which is central to European modernity” (84).

The need to study postcolonialism and ecology simultaneously sprouts from the understanding that colonial occupation in the colonized countries had detrimental effects on the natives’ ecosystem. According to Vandana Shiva, the ancient civilizations and several communities thrived on the basis of “an ontological continuity between society and nature -the humanization of nature and the naturalization of society” (39). The shift from this ecological thought of dialectical harmony of Nature and Culture to the idea of binary opposition between the two forces is clearly the aftermath of colonial advent in the Aboriginal territory. Postcolonial

ecocritics adopts a holistic inquiry into the impact of colonialism. Postcolonialism, which until recent decades was seen as an anthropocentric discourse, studies ecological concerns as well. “These critics place renewed pressure on the nature/culture and human/animal binaries that facilitate imperial privilege and colonial dispossession”, thereby challenges the dichotomies (Vadde 565). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin term this postcolonial ecocritical study as Green Postcolonialism.

Noonuccal’s “Gooboora, The Silent Pool” is a lamentation at the loss of Aboriginal Culture with the advent of the colonizers. In this poem, the persona addresses the subject of loss to Gooboora for it is mightier than all and survives the cruelties of White man: “Gooboora, Gooboora, still here you remain,/ where are my people I look for in vain?” The poem arises from the poet persona’s belief that Nature, the universal consoler could be a solace for her as well positions the Nature as an active participant here. Like a mother who patiently listens to her child’s complaints, the person persona presents her lamentation which is the cry of the Aborigines. She/he reminisces a past when they, for joy, did “dance and game” and mourns that “they [Aborigines] are gone from the hill, they are gone from the shore”. Gooboora gives them a sense of identity and belongingness, and that is why the tribe in the darkest time, both literally and metaphorically, comes near the pool. Nonetheless, this also points at the futility of its existence when there are no dances, games, language and songs left. The interconnection between Nature and Culture can be explored here. “Gooboora, Gooboora, it makes my heart sore/That you should here when my people no more!”.

However, “Gooboora, The Silent Pool” simultaneously explores the exploitative nature of European intrusion has defiled the pool. The alternate reading renders the poem as a postcolonial ecological text. The Whites with their ways have robbed the spirit of the pool, rendering it lifeless. So the poem becomes an elegy for the Gooboora. The cultural loss, loss of the “Noonuccal language and song” is intertwined with the pool. As the title indicates, it is now “silent”, dead as a corpse and remaining just as water body whose presence is indicated by the line “you should be here” and whose lifelessness is indicated by the conspicuous absence of

words admiring its qualities. There is not anything left to “Fear” the water, fear used in the sense of wonder and awe.”No one will drink of your waters cold” is not only because “the whole happy tribe are all vanished away”, but also because the pool is “cold” and lifeless as Lake Karboora. Here she does away with the dichotomy of Culture/Nature.

“We are going” is one of Noonuccal's many poems that shows world as a complex web of flora, fauna, inanimate and humans. They are an ensemble of Nature and Culture evident when the persona says, “We are nature and the past”. The tribal people who lived in oneness with the Nature now feel estrangement in their own land because of the colonizer-strangers. The lines “The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place...And we are going” reaffirm the significance of the natural world for human world and the absence of human/animal dualism. For Aborigines, their lives are integrated with the lives of the fauna world. “We” is a holistic term that stands for the integrated Aboriginal community that includes the land, people and animals. According to Alice Brittan, “Land was sacred, indivisible, connected to a physical, imaginative, and spiritual life, no more a commodity for sale than a parent or child” (74). The poem also foregrounds environmental pollution and habitat destruction as a part of European occupation. When they appropriated the indigenous lands, they not only considered it as ‘resource’ and a commodity, but also a junkyard of the West. The board that reads 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here' (“We Are Going”) near the old bora ring challenges and violates the sanctity of Nature as well as the honour of their land. This instance of ‘othering’ of Nature exposes the colonial attitude towards postcolonial lands which according to the Britishers were ‘terra nullis’, land belonging to no one.

...the damage done to Australia’s ecosystems was already permanent and irreversible. An Australian test case recommends itself because that country’s modern history is ... not just a history of human beings. Many of its victims ... are non human. (Clark 116)

When corroboree and the bora ground, ceremonies, the laws of the elders, wonder tales of Dream Time and the tribal legends turn into things of past, they also become symbols of endangered identity and existence of the Aborigines and their land.

The third poem, "Return to Nature" is a confession made to Nature, an ever-forgiving father like in the Biblical parable of prodigal son. The villain of the poem is the "civilized me". Although on a surface level, it might seem like a self-accusation or confession of an Aborigine who has assimilated into a culture of domination, a deeper understanding reveals that the poet persona has her finger pointed at the root cause. The transformation of the poet is understood by the contrast between the two lines: "Was it yesterday/ Or a thousand years/ My eager feet/ Caressed your paths" and "Now my civilized self/ Stamps its imprint/ On reluctant sands. This brutal change from "caressing" to "stamping" can be attributed to the European 'civilizing mission'. Both for the Nature and the poet persona, the enemy is the "civilized me", a by-product of colonization. The White man's burden to civilize the native Australians denied them warmth and love of the Nature, their refuge and solace at all times.

In all the three poems, Oodgeroo Noonuccal perceives Aboriginal identity as a cumulative of tradition and land and she vociferously establishes the reciprocal relationship between Nature and Culture. Nature endures and suffers the brutalities of the colonizers and the repercussions are felt even today. Through the postcolonial ecocritical analysis of the poems, not only is the ecological destructive side exposed but also of a past when mutual interdependence was the underlying principle of Aboriginal lives. Noonuccal's clever use of "images of nature and its meaning for these individual cultures allows the poet to, in a nearly tangible way, reclaim that lost land and the traditions that went with it for their people" (Woods 8). The purpose of her poems is not merely to expose the ecological consequences of colonialism but to highlight the harmonious lifestyle of indigenous population of Australia. Undoubtedly, her poetry can be perceived as a clarion call to reclaim that rich past with one's own indigenous wisdom.

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