



# Interpreting the Select Australian Aboriginal Poetry: A Critique

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**Abstract**— The Australian literature mainly includes the aboriginal songs, bush poetry, folk tales, desert narratives and ballads. The Australian literature is denoted by the Australian history, known for the many conflicts which include the tensions between the settlers and indigenous and the traumas of colonization and dominance. Prominent writers like Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, Judith Wright, Patrick White, Kath Walker, A.D.Hope, etc. have promoted the Australian literature. The Australian literature also showcases the struggles between native and British writings. This paper discusses four poems which explicate the colonial conundrum of the indigenous in Australia. The poems “Bora Ring” by Judith Wright, “We Are Going”, “The Unhappy Race” and “Namatjira” by Oodgeroo Noonuccal are chosen for the study. The poems depict the crisis of colonization and the loss of land and culture, along with indigenous concepts.



**Keywords**— Australian Aboriginal poetry, Crisis of colonization, Poems selected for the study

## Australian Literature

Australian literature encompasses folktales, bush songs and aboriginal narratives. The major notions of Australian literature include mateship, records of the settlers, aboriginal concepts and colonial crisis. The literature in Australia gradually developed in the genre of short stories. Before the invent of colonization, the Australian literature existed in the form of orature or aboriginal literature. The early stage of Australian literature which developed after the colonization was mostly imitative. Many of the Australian writers did follow the narrative style of the English writers. This development gradually began to cause tension among Australian writers. They had two antagonistic opinions regarding the Australian literature. Firstly, to imitate the English and secondly, to develop one's own style of writing. There were many more tensions amidst the progression of Australian literature. To quote,

Australian history and literature do reveal the many tensions that have gone into the making of the Australian nation. These are: the tension between the old country of England, the

metropolitan colonial center and the new country of Australia on the antipodean margins of the British empire; the tension between settlers and the indigenous aborigine; the tension between the early wave of settlers and more recent immigrants; the tension between the old language, images and literary forms of British literature and the idiom, images and literary forms taking root in the new environment of Australia. All these tensions shaped the themes and forms of Australian literature. (6)

Nevertheless, the Australian literature has developed not only under the influence of British writings and themes, but also under the major notions of Australian history and culture. The crisis of colonization is the major theme in Australian literature. Most of the Australian history begins from the colonial invasion. Australia was known as a terra nullius, an empty land, where it was found out that the colonizers were the first to be invading this land. The presence and existence of Australian aborigines has not been recorded. However, the Australian literature is dominated by the aboriginal writings, ballads and bush

songs. It includes the folk traditions of the aborigines, the crisis with the colonizers, the crisis with the immigrants and their impacts which have formulated the Australian literature. The major writers of Australian literature are A.D.Hope, Judith Wright, Patrick White, Kath Walker, Mudrooroo, Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson etc. Australian literature includes major themes like colonization, settlement issues, aborigine, immigration.

### Australian Aboriginal Poetry

Australian poetry began its existence in the forms of bush songs and ballads which are the earliest part of Australian folk traditions. The aboriginal poetry of Australia explicates the problems faced by the aborigines, the antagonistic views of tradition between the aborigine and the white, crisis of identity, sense of alienation and the hyphenated position. The Australian poetry has benchmarks of bush legacy and movements for poetry. To substantiate,

Bush songs were devised by ordinary, everyday people are a record of the people's experiences of living, surviving and dying in the bush, as well as the colorful slang of bush life. The most famous of these bush ballads is "Waltzing Matilda", Australia's unofficial national song about a swagman shearer. Many songs and lyrics, written down for private use, were later assembled and published by A B (Banjo) Paterson as Old Bush Songs (1905). (Pillar 4)

The Australian history misrepresents the aboriginal stories and their survival. The aborigines have not been documented in the history and hence the aborigines began to represent their views about the colonizers and the disaster they have created in the name of civilization. To quote,

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. (Mustafa 2)

The aboriginal poets have been struggling to put forth their prominent history, their significant efforts to save the aboriginal concepts of tradition and culture, insist that they have been dominated by the colonizer. Hence, the aboriginal poetry includes diverse and vivid aspects of their lives and lifestyle. To explain,

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. (Mustafa 3)

### Crisis of Colonization

Colonization is a disaster which has destroyed the generations throughout the world. Colonization is deeply engraved in our body and minds, which has become torturous and undeniable. The Australian aborigines were also colonized and bear the same effects of colonization. They were the original people in Australia. To quote, "Aboriginal people have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. They were a hunter-gatherer people who had adapted well to the environment. There were between 300,000 to 950,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788.3 At that time there were approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects". (4)

The aborigines are the part of Australian land and culture. However, in the past, they were not considered to be the citizens of Australia. The Europeans conquered Australia without any struggle as the aborigines were innocent. To verify,

When Australia was discovered by the Europeans it was declared to be *terra nullius*. This notion of international law with respect to acquisition of new lands presupposed that the land discovered was not inhabited by humans and could thus be claimed by the crown as settled rather than conquered. Even though the discoverers and the first settlers had some contact with Aboriginal people in the first years - which in some cases developed into violent fights - these indigenous Australians were not considered to be in possession of the land. On the contrary, the British held that since the Aboriginal

cultures had no obvious social structure, there was no requirement to seek permission to use their land. Thus, the Australian continent and Tasmania were settled by force without even raising the question of a possible contract or even by lawful conquest. (Schillhorn 444)

### Poems Selected

The poems selected for the study are “Bora Ring” by Judith Wright, “We Are Going”, “The Unhappy Race” and “Namatjira” by Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Judith Wright was an aboriginal activist and a poet. She is widely known for her works and the themes of human and environment, Australian aborigines, crisis between settlers and aborigines etc. Her collections of poetry are *Woman to Man*, *The Moving Image*, *The Two Fires*, *Birds* etc. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) was an aboriginal activist, educator and poet. She has many collections of poetry in which she mainly explores the sufferings of aborigines and colonization. Some of them are *We are Going*, *White Australia*, *My People: A Kath Walker Collection*, etc.

### Bora Ring

Bora Ring is a sacred place for the aborigines, where, mainly the males gather for performing the rites and rituals related to men. The poem “Bora Ring” by Judith Wright depicts the pain of the aborigines who have lost their land, traditions and life. The first stanza denotes what the aboriginal have lost. The poem begins in a tragic note and mentions that the song and dance which are the significant parts of the aborigines are gone. Their rituals are useless now as the bora ring has been exploited by the colonizer. Their story is lost in an alien’s tale, i.e. the colonizer. The poem continues to explicate how the aboriginal activities have diminished into just a mime. The corroboree is no more happening and there is just a murmur of the broken chant. The aborigines have lost their identity as hunters, their spear splintered underground and their nomad feet are still. The last stanza denotes that, only the rider can decipher the disaster of colonization. He halts at a sightless shadow, with many unsaid words and feels that this is a curse of colonization, a fear as old as the Cain. The last lines are highly symbolic as they explain the fear, alienation and crisis of identity because of colonization.

Bora Ring is an epitome representing the lost lives of the aborigines. Because of the colonization, the bora ring and corroboree have disappeared. They have been alienated in their own land where they stand as a past without any future. Colonization is a curse which has broken their chants and induces fear in their heart. This poem presents the crisis of colonization in the lives of aborigines. It illustrates the exploitation of the colonizers over the religious and

traditional customs of the aborigines. Judith Wright has symbolically explicated the atrocities over the aborigines in this poem.

### We are Going

*We are Going* is a poetry collection of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, which includes poems on the Australian tradition and themes. Like the previous poem, this poem also discusses the loss of aboriginal traditions. The beginning of the poem brings forth the aboriginal tribe, which has been subdued and silenced by the Whites. Their old bora ground is exploited by the Whites, who move their like ants. The bora ring has been transformed into a rubbish ground and the aborigines have become strangers because of the Whites’ exploitation. They cannot claim their belongingness to this place. The aborigines have lost their corroboree, bora ring, ceremonies and laws. They were the tales of the Dream Time, the hunts and the wandering camp fires in the past. The poet illustrates the loss of aborigines in the middle section of the poem. The poem shifts towards the tragic notes, as the poet mentions about the past. The poem continues to express the strength of the aborigines, that they were the lightning bolt over Gaphembah hill, like the thunder after the Whites. The poet compares the aborigines to a daybreak and shadow ghost. But they have lost all their traditions related to the hunt, past and nature. The eagle, emu and kangaroo have gone. Nothing literally remains. And so, the aborigines also conclude saying that we are going too.

The poem throws light on the aboriginal customs and rituals which have been destroyed because of the exploitation of Whites. The poem breaks silence on what the aborigines have lost and because of whom. Though the poet focuses more on the losses and changes, she mentions about them in the poem as White tribes, strangers and loud fellow. The poem also highlights the strength of the aborigines in the past and juxtaposes with the present. The title of the poem resonates with the meanings which include the reasons for the aborigines to leave. The poem brings forth a tragic space as they decide to leave their place, bora ring, forests and the birds. Since everything that belongs to them has vanished, the poem concludes with the title We are Going.

### The Unhappy Race

Another poem by Oodgeroo is “The Unhappy Race”. This poem denotes that the Whites are an unhappy race. The poet claims that this is the only race which has abandoned nature and framed laws for their selfish deeds. They have enslaved themselves in the grip of power and rule. The poet questions the White man, for all the mishap that he has created. She condemns the way white man treats his own folks, who are in jail and the women who scrub the

floors. The white man ridicules the Black and threatens them to imitate him. He demands that the Blacks should be slaves, forget freedom and leisure, and be civilized to work under him. The poet continues to say that the white man should leave Blacks and the Aborigines alone as they are not interested in collars and ties, routines and compulsions. Instead, they seek the old aways of their past and the joy they experienced before the existence of white man. The poem ends with a line calling the white man as a poor man from the unhappy race.

This poem directly engages in the way the Whites colonized the other races sand tribes. The poet is critiquing the unhappy White race for all the disaster that they have created. Colonization and the domination of the Whites are the major aspects that the poet discusses here. The reasons mentioned by the poet for claiming that the white race is an unhappy one are, that they put their own people behind the bars. This aspect reveals the nature and psyche of the White that there is no harmony, brotherhood or equality amongst themselves. The poet also interrogates them that they practice class hierarchy and gender disparity. She questions the White ways of civilization to sacrifice freedom and leisure. She clearly proacts that her tribe doesn't need collars and ties like the Whites. Her tribe needs the older customs and traditions which have vanished because of the exploitation by the Whites. The poem concludes by declaring the White race as the unhappy race as they have been trapped in their own ties of power and hegemony.

### Namatjira

The poem "Namatjira" is about the Australian aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira. The poet describes his life and achievements in this poem. This poem also focuses on the treatment of an aboriginal. In the first stanza, it is noted that Namatjira, mentioned as the Aboriginal man who was recognized for his beautiful paintings on the Australian countryside became very popular. Even after being such a popular painter who was honored, the White government did not permit him to enjoy all the rights and rules. The poet condemns the government that Namatjira didn't break any law, as his clan mentions that one should share everything with one's fellowmen. Though he was honored by the White government, the same government jailed him. He was respected as a genius but was jailed, which was heart breaking.

Albert Namatjira, was a well known painter, who was recognized by the government. He was awarded the Queen's Coronation Medal in 1953. He was the first person to be freed from the restrictions for aboriginal people. However, he was poorly treated by the government, as he was prisoned for leaving a bottle of rum in his car which was consumed by a man who later killed his wife. This

poem is a tribute to him where the poet describes him as a victim under the rule of White government. This poem reveals and represents that though the talent of the aborigine was recognized, their talent and growth couldn't be tolerated by the Whites. The painter was therefore punished and victimized. The poem discusses concepts of domination, oppression of the government, victimization of the aborigines, and subjugation of an art. This poem is an epitome of the treatment of aborigines by the Whites and their psyche. The indigenous art and the artist are suppressed because of colonization.

In the conclusion, all the poems selected discuss the crisis and aftermath of colonization in the lives of the aborigines. The poems reveal and analyze, the exploitation of the government, loss of tribal customs, rituals, traditions which have vanished under the colonization. The poems examine the characteristics of colonization, the helplessness of the aborigines, alienation and identity crisis and loss of their self. The poets have justified the turmoil of aborigines because of colonization, in their poems.

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