

Article

Organic Relationship with the Natural Land: A Study of a Few Aboriginal Writings of Australia

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Abstract: Sense of place as the 'sense of being and belonging' forms a strong and passionate relationship between 'physical environment and human beings. It instills a strong sense of cultural identity among certain people. Throughout the ages different indigenous traditions have been making efforts to be close to nature. For Australian aboriginal people there is a relationship to land that is based on spiritual beliefs and physical communication with the natural world. "The land, for Aboriginal people, is a vibrant, spiritual landscape." Aborigine in Australia regard nature not as commodity but they continue a kind of filial relationship treating different animals and elements of the traditional land as members of the family and live in close proximity. They humanize their traditional land as their mother. Australian aboriginal literature depict not only land or nature itself, but the association of their particular indigenous groups to natural land and all that it signifies for them as a culture. For this purpose the paper intends to study some literary endeavours of Australian Aboriginal writers. Descriptions of the surroundings in these writings are images of cultural convention linking themselves and their people to their indigenous land. The act of writings permit them to pass on cultural traditions through a form that is parallel to their native practice and belief, to resist the dealing of their indigenous lands and people, and to reclaim identity for their culture through the act of weaving their cultural uniqueness into literature.

Keywords: Aborigine, Natural land, organic relationship, cultural identity

We do not own the land – the land owns us!ⁱ -*Dhuwarrwarr Marika*

I'm a Wiradjuri Woman

Born of this land.ⁱⁱ -*Wiradjuri Woman*, Kerry Reed-Gilbert

This definition of an Aboriginal identity by *land* or place has initiated a reading of Aboriginal literature. The objective of this paper is to study the writings of some Aboriginal writers from Australia to explore the manner in which they show concern for their land. For this purpose the paper intends to study the various forms of Aboriginal literature including poems and novels. Nature and the human civilization have an intimate relationship since time immemorial. Throughout the ages different indigenous traditions have been making efforts to be close to nature though we come across certain instances of disrupting it with the advent and influence of colonialism. Amitav Ghosh, a prominent public intellectual from the Global South, offers critical insights into ecological degradation and the climate crisis, exposing the pervasive influence of colonialism and its epistemological effects on our understanding and appropriation of the natural world. Ghosh's work highlights the damaging impact of Western-centric thinking on our relationship with the land or environment, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and holistic perspective on nature. In his novels, such as "The Hungry Tide" (2004), "Sea of Poppies" (2008), and "The Gun Island" (2019), Amitav Ghosh interweaves rhetoric on colonialism, modernity, and capitalism to explore ecological issues and the climate crisis. His nonfiction works also demonstrate a critical understanding of how colonial modernity constructed a Eurocentric epistemic worldview that supported various forms of European capitalism. Ghosh's historical analyses reveal that these capitalist drives, often presented as progress and modernization, established a "master narrative" that separated environmental and land disasters from their historical roots, branding them as a unique 'planetary emergency' of the modern era. (Santa Ana et al. 2022, 2). Ghosh argues that Western modernity's preoccupation with empiricism, which stems from the Enlightenment philosophies of figures such as John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, and Frederick the Great, has ultimately hindered our ability to fully grasp the severe consequences of environmental disruptions and the loss of traditional land. This fascination with empirical evidence has led to a reduction in imaginative power and passionate cognition necessary for comprehending the gravity of the ecological crisis.

An understanding of the Australian aboriginal culture and cosmology gives the view that all indigenous people across the world share a profound spiritual communion with the land, which is permeated with special meaning. It means the very essence of aboriginal lives, as their 'life source' 'totem place,' 'spirit centre' all at once. Indigenous or Aboriginal Australians deeply share this *topophilia*. *Topophilia* is from the Greek *topos* meaning 'place' and *-philia*, 'love of.' It also expresses what the Chinese-American geographer Yi Fu Tuan in 1974 book, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* illustrates as a 'sense of being and belonging' that forms a strong and passionate relationship between 'physical environment and human beings', which instills a strong sense of cultural identity among certain people.

On the other hand, in recent years, there have been several attempts to raise public consciousness about environmental degradation all over the world. Awareness has been created in media and by government organisations for preservation of nature. Aboriginal literature of Australia does have significant notes for creating a kind of ecological consciousness. But unfortunately the discourse about conservation of nature views nature from a utilitarian point of view. It views nature as resource or commodity to be preserved for the future sustenance of human beings. Hopefully it is remarkable to note that certain indigenous communities like Aborigine in Australia regard land or nature not as commodity but they continue a kind of filial relationship treating different elements of the traditional land as members of the family and live in close proximity. Marcia Langton notes the relationship between the land and Aborigine: "The land, for Aboriginal people, is a vibrant, spiritual landscape. It is peopled in spirit form by the ancestors who originated in the Dreaming, the creative period of time immemorial. The ancestors travelled the country, engaging in adventures which created people, the natural features of the land and established the code of life, which we today call 'the Dreaming' or 'the Law'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Aboriginals humanise their traditional land as their mother. Their observation about the universe is worth quoting here. They consider the universe "A living thing... everything is connected to everything else and everything is alive and is responsible to its relationship in every way. The human being is not the crowning glory of creation and certainly not its master. We are but a small, but nevertheless vital, part of the universe... because everything is alive and because we have responsibilities to all living things, we cannot force the rest of nature to do what we want."^{iv}

Aboriginal indigenous writers show their love of their native people, culture, traditions, and land. This love pours forth into their literary forms. And it both wonderfully portrays their indigenous ties to and laments the loss of what they love through the history of colonization of their lands. The act of writings permit them to pass on cultural traditions through a form that is parallel to their native practice and belief, to resist the dealing of their indigenous lands and people, and to reclaim identity for their culture through the act of weaving their cultural uniqueness into literature. A few writers chosen for this study depict not only nature itself, but the association of their particular indigenous groups to natural land and all that it signifies for them as a culture. Descriptions of the environment are images of cultural convention linking themselves and their people to their indigenous land. For aboriginal people there is a relationship to land that is based on spiritual beliefs and physical communication with the land and the natural world. This interaction was broken up by European colonization and most of the situations the indigenous people were displaced from their spiritual and cultural stand, resulting a breakdown of their cultural identity. The oppression on aborigines started when Captain James Cook 'discovered' Australia in late eighteenth century. During these days British Parliament was looking for a place to deport and unload their convicts and in 1787, the British Parliament decided to turn Australia into a penal colony. The decision was to rule Australia as *terra nullius*, i.e. land belonging to no one's, brushing away the legal, supernatural, emotional, traditional and sentimental claims of the aborigines. It reduced the Aboriginal land to a commodity to

be owned, possessed, used and exploited. "The land as space to conquer, or the land as commodity, that is the land in the gaze of the colonisers, fails to account for the mythical perception of the land as a sacred and vital space, an entity, a force, and even a human condition, that is the land in the Aboriginal gaze." But a glimpse of symbiotic living of Aborigines with the natural land is reclaimed through the various literary expressions. The expressions reproduce the pains of aborigines who are unjustly thrown out of their native land and these works are provocative and emotional and sought justice for Aboriginal people.

Kath Walker preferred to be called by her Australian Aboriginal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal through her poetry and essays assists to drive home the lost connection between aboriginal people and the native Australian land. Poems from Oodgeroo's *We are Going* (1964) and *My People* (1970) illustrate her application of nature and poetry as a process of reconnecting Aboriginal people to their land. For example, the very sign of renaming the native title 'Oodgeroo,' meaning 'paper-bark tree,' from Kath Walker confirms her love for the land. Her poems overflow the images of aboriginal people. Her various characters are aboriginal people engaging in traditional activities living happily within their tribe. These poems are full a joyful people going about their lives. Some poems are about the consequences of colonization on the aboriginal people and land where the individuals live in unhappiness and loneliness, in an apprehensive state. The arrangement of these poems gives us an image of colonization. Her poems of Dreamtime and the walkabout are fundamental for asserting the Aboriginal bond with the land. Her poetic efforts claim that aboriginal people did not want, nor did they benefit from, the colonization of their time-honored lands. Because they utter of their land-

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 sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
 (Oodgeroo, *We Are Going* 25)

She gives a strong message against the destruction of environment. In her poem 'Time Is Running Out' from *My People*, she portrays the picture how the miner takes all of the minerals and destroys the land. Her words are-

In his greedy lust for power,
 He destroys old nature's will.
 For the sake of filthy dollar,
 ...
 that violence
 of his destructive kind
 Will be violently written
 Upon the sands of time.

She even urges the 'gentle black man' to show their strength to 'defend their timeless land'-

Make the violent minor feel
 Your violent
 Love for land.

In their sacred 'bora ground of sacred ceremonies' and the 'laws of the elders,' white men scurry about like 'ants' and the 'Notice of the state agent reads: 'Rubbish may be Tipped here.' Oodgeroo emphasizes the loss of land and culture in the poem "Municipal Gum" giving a voice to a gum tree for the subjugation of Aboriginal people. Poem "Corroboree" (*My People*, 20) gives a glimpse of community, family and association with the land that are not found in white society. Here the aborigines are equated with the elements of nature. She says: "We are nature and past, all the old ways /gone now and scattered." These lines bring out the wretched condition of the aboriginal people. People who are closely connected with the history and nature of the Australian continent are now 'scattered.' Besides destroying the livelihood of natives the colonized rulers have caused irreparable damage to the nature- upset the environmental balance. The poem records the 'scrubs' are gone and symbols of Australia such as emu and kangaroo are also almost extinct now. The native life was a symbiosis with the nature. After the loss of that symbiotic environment they are unable to live on. So there is an extreme pathetic cry when they say, "And we are going." Thus by narrating numerous features of the Aboriginal living, tradition and colonization, Oodgeroo has emphasized a relationship between the Aboriginal people and their traditional land and in doing so she has preserved their identity. Oodgeroo Noonuccal's belief, the traditional Aboriginal belief in general, that people are actually descended from the land is worth quoting here. In her book *Stradbroke Dreamtime* she tells of "The Beginning of Life":

In the Dreamtime all the earth lay sleeping. . . . Then one day Rainbow Serpent woke from her slumber and pushed her way through the earth's crust . . . She travelled far and wide . . . upon the earth she left her winding tracks. . . . All the animals, birds and reptiles awoke and followed the Rainbow Serpent, the Mother of Life, across the land. . . . The Rainbow Serpent made laws . . . the lawbreakers were turned to stone, and became mountains and hills, to stand for ever and watch over the tribes hinting for food at their feet. But those who kept her laws she turned into human form, and gave each of them his own totem of the animal from whence they came. . . . So the tribes lived together in the land given to them by the Mother of Life, the Rainbow Serpent. (Oodgeroo, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* 59-61)

The Aboriginal poems present a holistic system of the natural world believing there is a chord that connects human beings with environment, landscape, and animals etc. These poems reveal the emotional attachment of the aboriginals to their land and forests. The aesthetics of Aboriginal poems echoes the deep faith in interconnectedness of the mysterious universe including physical and spiritual spaces. Like Oodgeroo other Aboriginal poets express a strong sense of Aboriginal identity. They ruminate on various facets of their community culture, such as respecting the mother land, kinship with the natural world, their creation story, rainbow snakes and the 'Dreamtime

ancestors.' Hyllus Maris, an Aboriginal activist, poet and educator beautifully gives voice to the land in her poem 'Spiritual Song of the Aborigine':

I am a child of the Dreamtime People
 Part of this land, like the gnarled gumtree
 I am the river, softly singing
 ...
 I'm part of the rocks and the red desert earth
 Red as the blood that flows in my veins
 ...
 I am this land
 And this land is me
 I am Australia.^{vi}

The white colonisers usurped the spiritual place of Aborigine world and looted the natural properties of the land. Like Noonuccal other poets depict the violation of traditional sacred sites of the aboriginal people by the colonisers. The theme of this loss of land is the main emphasis of W. Les Russell's "A Ballad in Tears":

The reason you cry: they've taken your soul, babe
 The reason you cry: they've stolen your land.
 The land you're a part of back since the beginning.
 That's why you cry, babe,
 you cry for your land. (qtd. in Christi Shanthi 29)

Mona Tur, a Black Australian writer who writes under her tribal name of Ngitji Ngitji gives the same expression in her poem 'Uluru.' Her 'sincerity and heartfelt grief' is communicated in the poem:

My heart bleeds, our beloved Rock,
 To see you torn apart.
 Our dreamtime tells of your forming,
 You put forth your beauty at dawning.
 As evening comes, your haunting beauty
 Mirrors beauty beyond compare. (qtd. in Shoemaker)

Feeling of deep nostalgia for the traditional ways of life and a celebration of the natural world is expressed in Leila Rankine's 'The Coorong':

Land of my father's people,
 Place of my ancestors past,
 Never will forget you
 For, you are dear to my heart (qtd. in Shoemaker)

Kevin Gilbert's poems especially "Mister Man" is worth quoting in this context. The poem captures the spiritual and physical association of Aboriginal identity with the land. It highlights the Aboriginal perception of the universe as a "continuum of the past and the present, of the dead and the alive, of the coexistence of the material and the spiritual in an everlasting symbiosis." It is an occasional poem as the context of Gilbert's

poem is indicated by its epigraph which reads "Written after watching a tribal Aboriginal berate Judge Furnell for his facile cleverness and his incomprehension of the affinity of the Aboriginal and his tribal land"^{vii}. Gilbert writes:

My image goes deep in the sand
 The soil and the rocks and the trees
 The souls of my people are here
 The birds and the clouds and the breeze
 The sun and the moon and the stars
 Talk to me are of me they dwell
 Inside me they each are a part.^{viii}

So Aboriginal poems are the expressions to re-claim and re-inscribe indigenous spatial identities. They are the reflections of the cultural discourse which struggle to affirm its own presence in the region. In similar fashion, the cultural link of identity and place is mirrored in Aboriginal fictional works as they render nearness to, love of, and responsibility for native land. While discussing about this relationship, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that "the Australian aborigines ... have a much stronger sense of history. Events leading to their present world are recorded in features of the landscape, and each time people pass a particular cleft, cave, or pinnacle they are enabled to recall the deed of an ancestor and cultural hero" (Tuan 189). Because of his/her strong connection to the environment, "the native's identity ... is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterholes he can see and touch. He finds recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of the immortal beings from whom he himself is descended, and whom he reveres. The whole countryside is his family tree" (Tuan 157-58).

Kate Grenville's Australian-Aboriginal novel *The Secret River* (2005) is a fictional history of Grenville deals with the Aboriginal land not only as concrete location, but also as community memories- more of an Aboriginal psychological landscape. In the very novel William Thornhill, the white-settler's understanding of owning a land has been counteracted by the resistance of 'speaking Aborigines as well as of speaking place.' William, through a great hardship and battle with Aborigines became a landowner in New South Wales. His possessions were of a colonizer. A fine house, 300 acres of land, a stable full of horses, boots for his children, servants, a stout wife, the best tea and liquor, even a full-length portrait hanging in the drawing room were all in his possessions now. He had the decisive assertion to the land on which he erected the mansion He literally erased the testimony of the Aborigines' traditional habitation on the landscape. The well-fortified building and fenced garden with high wall stand for the victory of the colonizers' aspiration to triumph over the whole Australia. But the Aboriginal people of the Hawkesbury River seem to be the part of the Australian land. They live in consonance with the nature. The peaceful life of the Indigenous inhabitants is destroyed by the white settlers who are obsessed with the possession of the land. But most important is that Thornhill's realization what he has done and how the land is important to all Aboriginal people. He has an apprehension of ghostly existence of the natives who never gave up their spiritual ownership of the land. Thornhill seems to be

envious of the fact that Long Jack, the Aboriginal man is the legal inhabitant of the Australian territory- 'a place that was part of his flesh and spirit.' Long Jack's unyieldingness and muted assertion that he was a part of the land illustrated the meaningless pursuit of William's ownership of the land:

No, he said.

It was the first time Thornhill had ever heard him use an English word.

Jack slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. *This me*, he said, *My place*. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head. (SR.329)

The novel of Grenville does not speak of coloniser's days of glory. Instead it presents his sickness, his loss of power on the land and his catastrophic failure in creating Thronhill place within a native wilderness. Therefore the native voice of attachment with Aboriginal land finds *secret* resonance in the archive of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*.

Again in Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) the Aboriginal bond to the land is so well-built that it assists the main protagonists, Molly, Daisy and Gracie to turn back to their families. Through the hostile and unfavorable weather they indomitably head for home. Although they have to go through the parts of the land they have never been to, they manage to cope with the differences. During the journey they look forward not only to their parents but also to the land where they were born. Only two of the girls finally reunite with their family and their land:

"Both girls took in the familiar landscape of the red earth, the dry spinifex grass and grey-green mulga trees. There was nothing to compare with the beauty of these plains that stretched out in all directions" (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 123).

Uniting with the land and being able to participate in various activities again in the land where they have grown up means everything for Molly and her sister Daisy. Further it defines their identity. Again Rita Huggins' *Auntie Rita* (1994) shows the organic bond with the Aboriginal land. In the ordeal of deportation the story evokes a unique aboriginal consciousness that is achieved through the profound sense of bonding with 'land' and 'home.' Rita Huggins suffered a lot and experienced the disturbance of deportation. But during her sufferings the home land always remains for her a core constituent part of Indigenous existence: 'It will always be home, the place I belong to'^{ix}.

In Kim Scott's *Benang* (1997) the protagonist Harley realizes that his link with the land stems from a spiritual unity with it. He believes that his spiritual association with this definite territory is inalienable. For this Harley recalls his sense of belonging by opposing his grandfather's 'genocidal vision.' His act of fighting is personified by the frequent metaphor of the tree, a natural element confidently grounded in the reality of the land. Again Scott's *True Country* (1993) portrays this relation to the land where Billy tries to identify with his Aboriginal roots and re-connect himself to the place where his ancestors lived. This novel shows the assimilative White missionary activities which

have made the Aboriginal people oblivious of their culture and devoid of their own land. These peoples have experienced a constant sense of fragmentation caused by the forced removal from their own society and land. Billy becomes aware of the spiritual and emotional connection that he requires to get familiar with the land his kinsmen live in. Billy's understanding of the *trueness* of the country is the *trueness* of the relation with the nature. He finds a great knowledge of the Aboriginal children in association with natural living on the land. While walking along the coast, Billy wants to use his watch and sun to work out compass directions but Deslie, an Aboriginal boy, finds it useless: "I don't need to do that, eh? Do I, Sir? I don't need make those reckonings. I know this country, I'm here, I'm Deslie" (*True Country* 135). At the end Billy becomes conscious who he is and where he belongs as he "...recognized the land below him" (*True Country* 254).

Thus, Aboriginal writings in its various forms keenly involve in several levels of geopolitical importance, defining general methods for self-determination, reclamation and cultural pride, as well as reclaiming indigenous spaces of "multiple sovereignty." Aboriginal land, rather than merely being a wild landscape, is constitutive of egalitarian attitude and holistic view of the universe. As a physical site, it empowers native land rights struggles and communicates that all parts of natural world have intrinsic value.

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Endnotes

ⁱ From Elizabeth Strohscheidt's "Land Rights for the First Australians". *Aratjar Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*. Ed. Dieter Riemenschneider and Geoffrey V. Davis. Netherlands, 1997. 7-15. Print.

ⁱⁱ From the *Black Woman Black Life* (1996) by Kerry Reed-Gilbert found in the Teaching Guide for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* www.macquariepenanthology.com.au

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted by P.V. Asha in "Mapping the Ecological Consciousness in Select Australian Aboriginal Poems." Page.42.

^{iv} Ibid

^v Di Blasio, Francesca. "A path of words: the reception of autobiographical Australian Aboriginal writing in Italy." *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography* 17 (2008): 29.

^{vi} From <https://allpoetry.com/Spiritual-Song-Of-The-Aborigine>

^{vii} Found in <http://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/23131/1/Unit-4.pdf>

viii 'Mister Man' poem found in <http://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/23131/1/Unit-4.pdf>

ix Huggins and Huggins 1994: 7.

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