

Environment and the People: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Poetry

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant problems of colonialism was its attempt to impose uniformity on cultures worldwide. The cultures that did not conform to the European standards were considered deviant. However, the native literatures that have come into the limelight emphasise that every culture is unique because it has emanated from a particular land. Australian Aboriginal poetry, for instance, stresses that Australian culture and lifestyle were suited to the place, and that the Aboriginal culture that developed there was a response to the continent's fragile environment. Australian Aboriginal poetry tells readers about environmental problems caused by the White lifestyle. Aboriginal poetry is a wake-up call to protect the environment before it is too late. This paper is a study of Australian Aboriginal poetry.

Ancient cultures which have adapted to their natural surroundings can offer special insights on structuring human societies to exist in balance with their environment. For example, Tibetans are uniquely familiar with life on the Himalayan plateau. This has evolved into a long history of civilization that took care not to overwhelm and destroy its fragile ecosystem.

His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama

What His Holiness has said is true of all of the indigenous cultures, such as the Aboriginals of Australia, the Inuit, the residents of Africa, and the tribes that live in the Amazon rainforests. Indigenous people know which plants are helpful for healing and which ones can help them stay healthy. Indigenous peoples' traditional wisdom is helpful to people living outside their communities in many ways. For instance, modern scientists have learnt to respect the medicinal expertise of the Amazon tribes, the survival abilities of the Australian Aboriginals, the Tibetans, and the Inuit in some of the most extreme climates and areas on Earth where food is hard to come by. But these are not the only things old-fashioned communities can give the world. The present paper examines Indigenous Australian literature to identify remedies for our environmental challenges. The report also reveals that the Aboriginals knew what would happen if people messed with ecosystems. The recent disasters on Earth have caused children to go hungry, species to go extinct, and the weather to become startlingly unpredictable. These tragedies have outnumbered our successes in science and technology.

It is easy to see how important it is to protect nature and natural elements when you see that prominent figures from around the world, like H.H. Dalai Lama, are speaking about it. Al Gore, a former Vice President of what is probably the most powerful country, is making a movie and giving lectures about it. Forest fires, typhoons, floods, and droughts occur all over the world, and they have brought people together on environmental issues. Scientists who used to doubt global warming are now quiet and are working to be a part of the solution that can rescue the Earth.

Scientists on the Discovery Channel talk about putting big mirrors in space and sometimes spraying sulphur to cool down the planet. They forget that global warming is only one part of the enormous damage that the earth's smartest children have inflicted on the planet. We are facing a variety of difficulties right now, the most important of which are species extinction, deforestation, and desertification. These problems are happening only because people and nature do not get along.

These processes are a part of a natural cycle, but people have clearly sped them up by acting as a catalyst. People have changed ecosystems to try to control nature and how it works. These attempts by people to regulate natural processes have not worked out well; in fact, they have made things worse for the globe and put all of human life at risk. The issue seems to be getting worse every day. If people want to preserve themselves and avoid this terrible predicament, we need to go back to the way the Australian Aborigines think. We need to adopt their way of thinking since they are the oldest living group of hunter-gatherers in the world and they have a special connection to the earth that we don't. They have also learnt how to live and thrive in the oldest and driest continent in the planet. For the last 70,000 years, they not

only survived but also kept the continent's delicate environment intact. The partnership is still going strong.

One of the main ideas behind Aboriginal philosophy is that people should not try to control nature, but instead live in harmony with it. They lived in a way that is the same as the phrase "sustainable development." Over time, they learnt to be a friend of nature instead of a ruler. A poem for kids sums it up:

I'm a part of living thing
And every living thing is a part of me
We're all created of this sacred earth
So everything's our sacred family. (Gilbert & Williams)

The poem makes it obvious how different the way Aboriginal people thought is from how modern people think. The Aboriginals believe that everything that is alive is divine, but contemporary, civilised people don't find any divinity in them. This is why they viciously exploit them to satisfy their greed. People today consider that the aboriginals are just captives to a powerful, wild nature that makes them roam the whole continent in quest of food and water, like lesser forms of life. People nowadays don't think they are slaves to nature; instead, they think they have the brains and technology to make nature their slave. The Aboriginal people see themselves as part of the complete ecosystem, but modern people don't see themselves as part of this cycle and think that any changes won't affect them. This is where the problem lies.

In the current situation, it is essential to cultivate the link with the soil and nature as witnessed by the Aborigines. The relationship between modern materialistic man and nature is that of an exploiter and the exploited, while the ties advised by the Aboriginal knowledge is that of a mother and children. Kids merely suck milk from their mother's breast to get rid of their hunger. So we need to take as much from earth as is enough to satisfy our needs, not the insatiable greed. The contrast between the Aboriginal wisdom and modern materialistic philosophy is evident in the following lines:

What white fella want to talk about fight for?
Everybody have plenty still want more.
He has big house,
Money in pocket
Yet he not satisfied,
Want to make bigger rocket.
One day, I bet, pretty damn soon,
Rocket goes straight like spear,
Put man on moon,
Then, I bet, plenty trouble, Moon and Earth burst like bubble. (Davis, "Eulogy" 39)

If we don't do something soon, the "bubble" is going to explode. The phrase "white man" in the lines above might be used to mean everyone who is unhappy and always wants more material things. Our greed is ruining everything. It is taking away valuable non-renewable minerals, stripping mother earth of her green clothes of forests, making the land dry up and killing off wildlife. The elders of the Aboriginal people say that happiness is the most important thing if we want to live on this earth.

The problem of species extinction is serious and happening all across the world. We are working hard to conserve tigers, vultures, and rhinos in India. Since Europeans came to Australia, the continent has lost over eighteen marsupial species. Aboriginal people killed only to fulfill their needs; killing wildlife for pleasure was a crime. Jack Davis's poem "The Boy and the Robin" refers to such a situation:

A new sound now
Cut into the boy's despair,
For in the branches of a lower bough
A nest of tiny robins crying there,
And through the years that lay ahead,
To no man he admitted, The story of Robin dead,
A crime a boy committed. (63)

There are a lot of examples in Aboriginal literature where Indians are represented to be the protectors of wildlife. The above statements also make it very clear that we need to start taking what we need to live on this planet.

Conservation poems Australian Aboriginal writers are the articulation of pain felt at the devastation of environment that had been nursed by their ancestors for thousands of years:

You have stood there for centuries
Arms gaunt reaching for the sky
Your roots in cadence
With the heart beat in soil,
High on the hill, you missed
The faller's axe and saw
But they destroyed the others
Down the slope
And on valley floor
Now you and I
Bleed in sorrow and in silence
For what had been
While the rapists still
Stride across
And desecrate the land. (Davis, "Forest Giant" 63)

According to some environmental groups, deforestation is causing the soil to become saltier, and 7% of Western Australia's agricultural area is affected by it. The Australian continent is unique since it is the driest continent in the world and has a very thin layer of fertile soil that can quickly lose its value if not cared for right away. For the sake of sustainability, Australia should go back to its historic way of using land, where people are spread out across the whole continent and land usage is diversified and mindful of the land's natural constraints. Aboriginals were very good at protecting the land, but they were a hunter-gatherer society, and going back to that way of life is almost impossible because of how nature has changed. Even so, modern people should try to protect the continent, and new farming methods should be used to keep the land safe for future generations. Some countries have realised that being addicted to production is bad for the environment and its resources. A Norwegian scientist writes:

Ideals of productivist agriculture in the western world have faded as the unintended consequences of intensive agriculture and pastoralism have led to environmental problems. In Norway and Australia, there has been an increasing acceptance of the equal importance of social and environmental sustainability as well as economic sustainability. Alongside this shift is a belief that primary production needs to move away from an intensive productivist-based agriculture to one that may be defined as post-productivist. (Bjorkhaug & Richards)

Throughout the colonial period of Australia Aboriginals have been raising their voice against the dangerous exploitation of the natural resources. Although the modern concept of "carrying capacity" was not known to the natives of Australia, yet they kept the ecology of Australia intact.

Not only is deforestation causing the soil to become salty, but it is also killing off creatures. That's why some Aboriginal poems have animals talking about their problems:

The black emu sits silently under the tree
Tries to shout out loud:
"For Christ's sake you bloody human we live here as well" (Grieves 28)

But deforestation is not the only thing that has caused native plants and animals to go extinct; there are other things as well. Bringing in plants and animals that are not natural to the area made it harder for native and non-native species to survive. Natural species often lost this fight. People worldwide are aware of this, but Aboriginal writers are conscious of this difficulty. Alexis Wright talks about a tree that is not native to the *Plains of Promise* (4).

People all across the world are now aware that bringing in non-native species might kill off native species, which can cause a lot of environmental problems. Bringing in exotic species to Australia is quite risky because the land is relatively thin and dry, and too much grazing can cause big problems. This disaster is voiced by Kevin Gilbert in his poem "The New Anthem":

The mud polluted rivers
Are fenced of the gaze
Of travellers and the thirsty
For foreign hooves to graze. (197)

Australia is a one-of-a-kind place, and the plants and animals that have lived there for thousands of years are best adapted to the land. Bringing in "foreign hooves" has put extra stress on Australia's fragile environment, and people will have to pay for that. We are not just responsible for ourselves; we are also responsible for the generations that will come after us. They may ask questions such, "Where are these amazing animals?" after seeing a photo of a tiger. We

have asked similar queries concerning Dodos, too. The last generation hunted the Dodos to extinction, but we need to make sure we don't do the same to tigers, rhinos, and other creatures.

Australia has a lot of minerals in its territory. There are iron, uranium, and other key minerals produced there, but the booming mining sector has caused a lot of new environmental problems. Aboriginal writers have strongly spoken out against these mining operations. Kath walker writes in her poem "Time is Running Out":

The miner rapes
The heart of earth
With his violent spade
Stealing, bottling her black blood
For the sake of greedy trade. (197)

Noted Aboriginal novelist, Mudrooroo, articulates similar emotions:

They did approach mining operations as if it was a sexual act, hard thrusting without a care for the women beneath without a care for the universe, the land beneath.. We'll fix it up when we are done with her, much like the battered wife syndrome. (Mudrooroo, Mining 570)

Most Aboriginal writers have said that mining is like raping Mother Earth. The miners have converted many mountains into horrible pits that have killed the ecosystems in the area. The destruction of the environment has harmed even the white people. The groundbreaking work of Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht has shown this to be true. Some people think that mining is very vital for civilisation to move forward because people don't care as the Aboriginals do. They are right that metals are highly vital to civilisation, but the question is whether we are using metals and other non-renewable materials wisely. We are wasting the metals instead of using them. Companies don't focus on manufacturing things that last and are durable; instead, they focus on making things that are out of date so they can make more money by making new things with small changes and making the newer things more appealing and attractive. Materialism has no bounds, yet natural resources are limited. We must protect and respect nature's and natural resources' tolerance limitations at all costs, just like we protect our own things. So the rule should be to be efficient and thrifty instead of wasting money on things that aren't necessary. We will be able to keep all of these things for future generations if we start adopting the ways of the old cultures, such the Australian Aborigines and the Indians.

Aboriginal poetry is unique because the poets talk about more than only their own difficulties and the harsh colonial government. They also talk about animals, mountains, rivers, and other living things. The aboriginal poetry teaches us how to stop the world from falling apart and getting worse. In "Spiritual Land," Elizabethan writes:

Soon the wind will change course
Swept in fortune, a powerful force
Nature reclaims a desolate mess
Reclaims the race, who relates best. (184)

If we stop taking advantage of this lovely planet and start following the Aboriginal way of thinking, the earth will forgive us like a kind mother and we can save it for future generations. People ought to quit invading the homes of other living beings and show respect for all forms of life. We can only save the planet and its ecology if people come to recognise a divine plan in everything, including all living things like the Aboriginals. It is not only the right thing to do, but it is also necessary in the current situation to learn from the Aboriginals how to live sustainably as a part of the environment instead of being greedy consumers and destroyers of nature.

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