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Dreamtime Stories Retold: Re-Invigorating Aboriginal Ecoconsciousness with Oodgeroo Noonuccal

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Abstract- *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is the finest fruit of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's devotion to reinvigorate Aboriginal culture after she retired from politics. The book was published in 1972. It is divided into two parts: "Stories from Stradbroke" and "Stories from Old and New Dreamtime". Within this paper I have taken for discussion the second part of the book that consists of the collection of the mythical and Dreamtime stories of the Australian Aborigines. The target readers of the book are obviously children. At the same time, the selected myths betray the glimpse of the anxious environmentalist within the story-teller. The stories are indicative of the ecological wisdom of the ancestors of the Australian Aborigines. They advocate the concept of the human beings chosen by God as the steward of nature, which is being told by the modern ecocritics too. The intense knowledge about the proper method of maintaining the ecological balance has also been reflected through these stories. The matter of the choice of the stories to be included within the collection is also very significant.

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Dreamtime Stories Retold: Re-Invigorating Aboriginal Ecoconsciousness with Oodgeroo Noonuccal

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Introduction

When she was at the zenith of her fame as a public poet and an Indigenous political activist, Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote an autobiographical narrative, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*. It was a time of trouble and transition in her political and personal life. She retired disheartened from politics and returned to her homeland at Stradbroke Island. She devoted the rest of her life to educate the children and reinvigorate Aboriginal culture. She also engaged herself in writing prose for children, her autobiographical stories in *Stradbroke Dreamtime* that came out in 1972. The stories of the collection were written when she was staying at Tambourine Mountain in Queensland with the famous Australian poet Judith Wright. Here we see the anxious environmentalist who is always active within her, even during such a relaxing mood. She shares the delightful moments she gathered there amidst uninterrupted nature. The book is divided into two parts: "Stories from Stradbroke" and "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime". In the words of the writer, "The first part of the book are stories I remembered about my childhood on Stradbroke Island, off the Queensland coast, where I lived with my Aboriginal family" (Noonuccal 1972, 10). The second part contains the collection of the mythical and Dreamtime stories of the Australian Aborigines. The target readers of the book were children of nine years and above. Each story was accompanied by black and white illustrations. Within this article I would try to explore the ecoconsciousness of the Australian Aboriginal people that has been reflected particularly through the stories included in the second part of the book.

The manuscript of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is available at the University of Queensland's Fryer Library. It exists in three forms: hand-written drafts, final drafts typed by the author, and the edited proofs. The first sign of editorial alteration is evident in dividing the autobiographical stories and the tribal legends into two different parts. The original intention of the author, as viewed in the manuscript, was the deliberate generic combination of the two. The most significant and frequent changes are related to the reduction or omission of contemporary Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginality and cross-cultural relations which had the potential to challenge the primitivist representation of Aboriginality.

As I have already mentioned, in the second part of the *Stradbroke Dreamtime* Oodgeroo re-tells the Dreamtime stories of her tribe. Here she begins with the story of the Rainbow Serpent creating the lives on the earth. Kabool or the Carpet Snake is the symbol for the Rainbow Serpent to the Noonuccal tribe. She (the Rainbow Serpent) is the Mother of Life. So, we see, to the Noonuccals, the Rainbow Serpent is a female. Hence according to the Aboriginal belief lives were introduced on earth by a female. Surprisingly, we can't find any trace of humans among the creatures she creates initially. Oodgeroo refers to the living beings created till then in the story "The Beginning of Life": "All the animals, birds and reptiles awoke and followed

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the Rainbow Serpent…The Kangaroo, wallaby and emu tribes lived on the plains. The reptile tribes lived among the rocks and stones, and the bird tribes flew through the air and lived in the trees" (Noonuccal 1972, 78). But where are the humans? According to the myth the humans appear at the last phase of the creation. This concept is later supported by Darwin in his Theory of Evolution. In the myth of the Rainbow Serpent (as retold by Oodgeroo) she transforms some of the tribes, who would obey her rules, into human forms. That means the humans are the transformed bodies emerging from some or the other animals. This idea has got a strong scientific base that has been proved by Charles Darwin. According to Darwin humans have been evolved from their immediate ancestors who are the apes. The Aboriginal belief differs here. They believe that this transformation has occurred not from one particular animal, but from a number of animals. They were transformed from the animals, birds and reptiles. The concept of the totem comes from this thought. Each Aboriginal tribe believes to have a particular totem of their own like the kangaroo, the emu, the carpet snake and others. Each tribe considers their totem to be their ancestor i.e. from that animal their tribe was transformed into humans.

The Rainbow Serpent also made a very wise law that 'no man should eat of his own totem' (Noonuccal 1972, 78). If each of the tribes never eats off their own totem animal, there would never be extreme crisis of food for anyone. At the same time, the law also ensures the existence of biodiversity on the earth. No species would be over-hunted and thus not reach on the verge of extinction. This and such other laws are the indications of the perception of their ancestors who were very careful about the balance in the ecosystem.

The Rainbow Serpent made some other rules for the creatures on the earth for their better living. She announces as an encouragement, "Those who keep my laws I shall reward them. I shall give to them a human form. They and their children and their children's children shall roam this earth for ever. This shall be their land" (Noonuccal 1972, 78). So according to this view, the present humans are the creatures chosen and blessed by her for their good conduct. They followed all the rules set by the Rainbow Serpent in their previous life which were chiefly the rules for the better sustenance of the environment. And the present humans have already proved themselves as the capable ones of taking the responsibility as the 'masters of nature', a concept that has later been advocated by Karl Marx and then supported by critics like Parsons and Grundman.

In "Oodgeroo" the writer allegorically relates her own story of finding out the old dreamtime stories of her own people. The story shows a woman who was later called Oodgeroo (meaning the 'paperbark tree') roaming around her country for collecting the remnants of those old and long-lost stories. She stores all those stories for the future generations of her tribe.

In her search for those stories, she gets the help of Biami. Biami instructs her to get some bark from the paperbark trees. The barks possibly serve the purpose of the paper in preserving the stories. Again, these paperbark trees have a special biological feature. They resprout from 'epicormic shoots' after a bushfire. It has been noticed that they bloom within just weeks after burning. So, the tree here becomes a symbol of that spirit of regeneration even after being attempted to destroy. The Aboriginal tribes people along with their traditional lore revigorated likewise withstanding all the assaults to efface them out. She was again instructed to 'collect all the charred sticks' (Noonuccal 1972, 102) from the dead fires of the lost tribes she would come across. This journey of hers is a journey against Time, an effort to defeat him (Time). The dead fires here are the symbol of the ceased lives around campfires. The 'charred sticks' are the remnants of the traditional lives of those tribes' people within which the old Dreamtime stories are hidden. The woman was told to put the image of those charred sticks upon the piece collected from the paperbark-tree, i.e., put down those stories upon paper. This was the way in which the woman was successful in collecting the old Dreamtime stories of the Aboriginal tribes.

This woman was later called Oodgeroo, after the paperbark tree. Her new name is the recognition of her contribution in finding out the long-lost stories of the tribes. And the fruit of her far-going search for those stories is the second part of the book *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime".

The concept of Biami and Bunyip is very interesting. Biami is "one of the wisest men whom the Rainbow Serpent created at the beginning of time" (Noonuccal 1972, 79). The word 'wisest' here is very important. Considering Biami as one of the 'wisest men' indicates to the recognition of his vast knowledge of the responsibilities of the tribes' people so that he can guide them in absence of the Rainbow Serpent. He was blessed by the Mother of Life (the Rainbow Serpent) with special power. With the help of such power, he was regarded by the Aborigines as next to the Rainbow Serpent. And such powers were endowed upon him so that he can 'protect the tribes from harm'. Biami is a spirit (the Good Spirit, "the Mother of Life gave him a spirit form" [Noonuccal 1972, 79]). The existence of such spirits generally gives birth to expectation of some supernatural activities. But here the Aborigines differ from the general convention. To them, protecting from harm means soliciting them in the proper way to avoid the harm. And this soliciting is primarily related to the dos and don'ts of the tribes' people for a sustainable earth, as for performing the role as the 'steward of nature', as has been advocated by the Eco-socialist critics like Michael Lowy.

The story of Bunyip is an evidence of the duty Biami the Good Spirit was laid upon to protect the people. Bunyip was a tribesman. He violated one of the strictest rules by killing his own totem animal. We have already discussed the ecological importance of this rule. And the punishment Biami imparts to him is equally significant. He was banished from the tribe. This verdict indicates the seriousness with which the Aborigines treat such crimes. Those who can't realize the value of their rules have no place in their camps. Bunyip was not only banished; he was also regarded as the evil spirit hence forward. The tribes' people were advised to cease all kinds of acquaintance with him. The purpose behind such instruction was to keep them away from the influence of such person who has no respect for the laws of nature.

The story also relates how some of the young tribes' women came under the evil influence of Bunyip and were transformed into water spirits or the Woor Women. We have seen the poet referring to these Woor Women time and again within her works. She refers to the irresistible beauty of these water spirits. We see the elders warning the young ones against the allurement of the water spirits. So, the Aborigines feared them. This fear performed a practical purpose too. It protected them from drowning in the deep waterbodies. I think the warning also served another purpose. The beauty of nature is a big time enhanced by the mysteriousness of the night. And such overwhelming beauty has got the power to possess a person to the extent of forgetting about everything else and pursue for it till his/her end. These Woor women might be the personified form of the mysticism of the unknown, the wilderness, which has been brilliantly explored by Thoreau within his works like *Walden*, *The Marine Woods*, *Cape Cod* and others and also by John Muir within *My First Summer in the Sierra*. So, under the veil of the fabricated story of the water spirits, the elders actually wanted to warn the young romantic tribes' persons against such possession.

The Aborigines have numerous stories related to Biami and Bunyip. Among them Oodgeroo chooses the ones (Biami as the protector of the Aborigine, Bunyip as the lawbreaker and the story of the water spirits possessing people with mysterious beauty) which have some relevance to nature and the sustenance of the ecosystem. The issue of such choice is significant. It clearly denotes the author's inclination towards making the children aware of the ecological importance of these stories.

"The Midden" relates a very strange rule of the Aborigines. After they had their food, the left-over shells and bones of the animals were gathered. Then these were carefully stacked 'on top of each other' (Noonuccal 1972, 94) at a certain place. "This was a law that they must obey" (Noonuccal 1972, 94). This instruction was given by Biami the Good Spirit. On violation of the rule the Aborigines were to be punished by him. And the punishment is very significant. If they scattered the bones and shells, Biami would scatter the living animals, i.e., the hunts. In this way it would be difficult for the hunters to gather food next time. Oodgeroo says that every Aborigine knew this rule. They also knew that every rule of Biami was to be followed to 'keep their bellies full' all the time. The stacking of the bones and shells of the animals after eating them with such discipline is the reflection of the respect for the food. It also reflects their respect for the dead animals whom they had to kill for the sake of survival. The Aborigines were aware of the importance of the availability of their prey. They realized that the growth of the non-human world is equally necessary for their own survival. Careless behavior caused by the lack of respect for that world would lead to their own existential crisis. The rules of Biami showed them the right path regarding this. Each and every rule set by Biami is meant for a better sustenance of the whole ecosystem. These rules teach them that the actual welfare of the human beings could only be done when the ecosystem as a whole is benefitted. The humans have no individual existence. They are only a part of the ecosystem. And the Aborigines know that 'to keep their bellies filled they must obey that rule (the rule of Biami)" (Noonuccal 1972, 94).

"Mai (Black Bean)" is the story of the conversion of a tribe woman into a black-bean tree as the punishment for stealing. In search of the seeds needed for making flour Mai once met a selfish old woman. That old woman had many seeds in her possession but she was unwilling to share them. Such attitude is strictly against the spirit of the Aborigines. They have always believed in sharing everything with everybody around in the time of need. So, Mai was very angry with the selfish old woman. In order to punish her (the old woman) Mai stole all her seeds. But though for the sake of teaching a wrong-doer a lesson, what Mai did was also a crime. So, both of them were punished by the ants, acting as the agent of nature here. This story is the indication of the fact that whenever any wrong is done in nature, even the tiniest creatures like the ants possess the power and authority to punish the culprit. In this respect it never matters whether the accused is a much bigger and mightier creature than the agent of justice. So, the ants teaching the humans a lesson is very significant from the ecological point of view.

The nature of the punishment imparted to Mai and the old woman is also very interesting. Mai was the supplier of flour for cakes to the Aboriginal women. Therefore, she had to search for the beans from which she pounded the flour. And the crime of stealing was done by her during her search for the black-beans. She was turned into a black-bean tree so that she never had to search for black-beans now. The old woman along with her whole tribe (all of whom were equally selfish) became birds. The natural phenomenon of the birds

flying from flowers to flowers is beautifully linked with this story. The narrator interprets it as if these tribe people are still looking for their seeds within the flowers.

Another interesting thing mentioned in the story is the reference to the hunting trick of camouflaging. The writer doesn't have any good impression of the old woman's tribe. She presents them all as selfish thieves. And camouflaging by painting their bodies with multiple colour helped them to steal successfully. The multicolour paintings helped them to hide themselves within nature. This is also the survival strategy of many of the natural creatures ascribed to them by nature herself.

The story of Wonga and Nudu relates the friendship of these two Aboriginal boys with their surroundings. They were only eight years old and were 'a mischievous pair' (Noonuccal 1972, 95). Instead of helping the women to gather food for the evening meal, they liked to roam about around the lagoon. We see them carefully watching the movements of the lizards. They observe its footprints on earth. Then they follow it when it climbs a tree and studies the scratch marks left by it. This is the way every Aboriginal child learned about everything around them. This study of the environment is the most important part of their education. It was the most important part of 'the knowledge they needed to live in the bush' (Noonuccal 1972, 95).

Then we see them playing around in the bush with different creatures. They save an old Duruk (Emu) from their elder hunters (though unknowingly) by alarming it. Then they find a kookaburra to play with. Oodgeroo writes, "Wonga and Nudu knew every bird and animal in the bush" (Noonuccal 1972, 98). And this is true for each and every Aboriginal child. Their sharp eyes never fail to identify any bird hidden within the branches of the trees. There's also reference to their expertise in mimicking the voices of the bush birds. Wonga and Nudu mimicked the call of the kookaburra in expectation of the reciprocation from the bird. This art of mimicking the birds and the animals around them is also a part of the education the Aboriginal children receive from their elders. They have to listen to the sounds very carefully for it. Along with imitating the sounds of the animals around them they are also taught to recreate the natural sounds they could hear around them. And their expertise in mimicking is the best exhibited in their mastery in playing the didgeridoo. The variety of sounds these Aboriginal people could imitate is vividly presented in Oodgeroo's poem "Community Rain Song".

Moreover, once again we find the reference of the significance of the bird kookaburra to the Aborigines in the present story. The kookaburra is the 'brother and friend' to them. They like his laughter (which is actually the call of the bird that sounds like human laughter). They believe that his laughter brings happiness to the tribe. Hence, they never kill any kookaburra, not even for food.

The story also paints a portrait of Bunyip the Evil Spirit. Bunyip was the only thing that the Aboriginal children were taught to fear. They didn't know where did he dwell. But they thought it to be 'somewhere far away' (Noonuccal 1972, 98). Bunyip's home was under the deep, dark waterhole. He didn't have any particular form. Rather he could take any form to confuse the children. And he didn't like bright sunlight. These features lead me to assume Bunyip as the emblem of the Aboriginal people of the unknown and unresolved mysteries of nature. Bunyip lives deep under the dark waterhole, a region of which the tribe people had no knowledge of. They were unable to know about such places as they could never go there. This concept of Bunyip adheres to some extent to the early concept of wilderness as threat, as has been depicted in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Judaic scriptures, wilderness is depicted as 'the place of exile' after being driven away from Eden. The wilderness and Satan are leagued: "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil" (Matthew 4:1, qtd in Garrard 61). In his *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) Thomas Burnet shows the mountain ranges as a result of God's fury with mankind. This apocalyptic view of Burnet appealed the readers, one of whom is Edmund Burke. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Sublime and the Beautiful* (1990). Now mysteries have no particular form and so is Bunyip. Fear and mystery can appear from within any form of nature and thus puzzle people. So how Bunyip, the symbol of fear and mystery, can be static in form? Bunyip dislikes bright sunlight. His favourite is 'dark, wet, cloudy days—and the dark night' (Noonuccal 1972, 98). Naturally, bright sunlight is not favourable for the fear and mystery of nature. Everything is so visible in sunlight that there is hardly any scope for the unknown and the mysterious. Rather cloudy days and dark nights are very helpful for the emergence of such things. Thus, in the story we find that to frighten the boys the Sun had to hide himself behind clouds to create the darkness. And in the darkness the boys are afraid to hear the thumping and thrashing sound coming from some unknown source. They run, shouting "It's Bunyip!" (Noonuccal 1972, 98). Anything unknown within nature that generates fear is Bunyip. Actually, this fear of the unknown is Bunyip.

The "Burr-Nong" (Bora Ring) is all about learning. According to Oodgeroo, "The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops" (Noonuccal 1972, 88). From the childhood the Aborigines are taught to recognize each and every creature in the bush. They are also taught to imitate every natural sound. The close observation of the animals and birds and reptiles helps them to know the surroundings and its inhabitants very closely. In this way they know that in what situation

which creature would react in which way. It helps them in their survival in the bush. Their ability to imitate the sounds of nature is seen in their expertise in playing the didgeridoo. But these are only the beginning of their process of learning.

The major share of their lessons is imparted to them during the Burr-Nong that starts at the age of around twelve. Within this process the boys are told about their legends and are instructed to store them in their hearts. They Aborigines didn't have any written language. And it proved to be a kind of bless in their case. They were left with no other way except remembering their legends and myths, most of which reflected some kind of ecoconsciousness. And the absence of the written language never gave them the scope to forget these stories even for a moment. Along with these legends, the children are also trained for patience and tolerance. These qualities help them not only in their own survival but also in the sustenance of the environment. Thus, they are told that killing any animal by being possessed with anger or such vices is a crime. For the betterment of their own living as well as of the whole natural world, these two things (patience and tolerance) are the most needed ones. The Burr-Nong process also includes the test for the endurance to physical pain. Oodgeroo is of the opinion that these rules have been laid down upon the Aborigines by the Mother of Life. Previously we have seen that the instructions of the Rainbow Serpent have got some or the other kind of ecological importance. This rule also is no exception. After passing out the Burr-Nong, these boys would be allowed to the secret stories and the sacred sites. The initiation also means that from henceforward they would be bestowed with the responsibility towards the fellow tribes' people as well as towards the environment. And their training in patience, tolerance and pain-bearing prepares them to perform their duties as the 'master of nature'.

Interestingly, the Burr-Nong process is different for the boys and the girls. As soon as the children reach their adolescence, the men of the tribe take charge of the boys and the women of the girls. Nobody from one sex is allowed to witness the Burr-Nong ceremony of the other sex. In "Burr-Nong" we come across with elaborate information about the boys' Burr-Nong ceremony. But about the girls' one nothing is written. This is a bit astonishing. The writer herself is a woman. So, it would have been very natural for her to write about that too. But she is surprisingly silent regarding this. And we, the readers, are unfortunately deprived of the knowledge of what role the tribal women were allotted in the human responsibility as the 'master of nature'.

Note:

Theory of Evolution: Charles Darwin introduced this theory. According to this theory, all the lives on earth are related and descended from a common source-the amoeba. It presumes that the evolution of the complex creatures happened naturally over time from their simplistic ancestors.

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