



**Monstrosity under the Guise of Civilization: Critiquing the Project of Colonialism
in the Selected Poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *We are Going***

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Abstract:

In the 18th century, Australia became the victim of British colonization. Since then, the British colonizers has taken Australia, broken Australia, and made Australia a new. They tried to civilize the native Australians, in their own way. But in the process, they themselves have been turned into a barbaric citizen and brutally killed the tribal Australians to have possession in their own land. Now in the 20th century there remained only 2% aboriginal Australian people in the present Australia. In such a critical situation, some people among them have picked up their pen to paint their pains and agonies in their writing, and questioned the notion of civilization formed by the white peoples- is it the real civilization? Is it a fair civilization for which the British Australians are taking pride? Or it is a destruction of a unique “native Australians civilization” by the so called “civilized” in the name of development? The objective of my paper is to discuss all these questions and to find out how the project of British colonization of Australia is inseparably related to the project of eviction and deforestation, with special reference to some chosen poems of “We are Going”, a collection of poems, published in 1964, written by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Australian aboriginal poet. In the process of the development of the argument, this paper may refer some branches of eco-criticism like Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism, Environmentalism etc.

Key Words: British colonization. Australia Aboriginals, Civilization, Deforestation, Eviction.



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The 15th century which is known as the “age of discovery” marks the beginning of the colonization. The journey of the colonization was led by the Spanish and Portuguese empires. The European colonial period was the era from 16th century to the mid- 20th century, when several European powers established colonies in Asia, Africa, America, and Australia as well. In the 18th century Australia became the victim of British colonization. Since then, the British colonizers has taken Australia broken Australia, and made a new Australia. They tried to civilize the native Australians in their own way. But in the process, they themselves have been turned into a barbaric citizen and brutally killed the tribal Australians to have possessions in their own land. Now in the 20th century there are only 2% aboriginal Australian people in the present Australia. And some people among them have picked up their pen to paint their pains and agonies in their poetry, and questioned the notion of civilization by the white peoples-is it really the civilization is? Is it a fair civilization for which the British Australians are taking pride? Or it is a destruction of a unique “native Australians civilization” by the so called “civilized” in the name of development? The objective of my paper is to discuss all these questions and to find out how the project of British colonization of Australia is inseparably related to the project of deforestation and eviction ,with special reference to some selected poems of “ We are Going”, a collection of poems, published in 1964, written by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Australian aboriginal poet .The issue of deforestation and eviction clearly indicates that the British colonization has not only oppressed the aborigines but also destroyed their natural environment . In the process of the development of the argument, this paper may refer some branches of eco-criticism like Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism, Environmentalism etc.

As the paper is going to make a critical study of the British colonization in Australia and its devastating effects on Australian aboriginals depicted in the poetry of Oodgeroo, *We are Going*, it should introduce a brief history of Australian colonization. In 1770 lieutenant James Cook made a pacific voyage for the first time, and claimed the possession of the east coast of Australia for the British crown. Two years after the decision of Cook to colonize Australia, Captain Arther Philip





arrived at Sydney cove with 1500 convicts, crew, mariners and civilians, and thus Australia started emerging as a British colony. In order to replace the overcrowding convicts from Britain they made prison in Botany Bay in Sydney of Australia. Then consequently the British people also started to live there and thus made Australia a settler colony. They formed not only prisons but also roads, buildings, railways etc. In the process the greater damage was done to nature and the aboriginal Australian people who lived in/with nature. At the time of British settlement there were more than 500 indigenous communities of people inhabited the Australian country, approximately 750,000 people in total. They had their own communal identity like Muri, Kooris, Noonuccal, Ami, Amijangal etc. They had their own language. They were living there for almost 40,000 years, with their own culture and religious belief. Each group lived in a close knit with nature and with custody over their own country. But the British rulers has snatched their own identity and put them under an umbrella identity “aboriginal” which is an English word. They have not only snatched their identity, their religion, culture, but also their lives. They killed them brutally to occupy the land as their own. As a result of their brutality, only 2% of total Australians remained alive. Once upon a time it was only their land. Protest was there against this savage activity of the British colonizers, guerilla attacks were there, but all defenses were useless. One of the British colonizers, Edward Wilson has said:

In less than twenty years we have nearly swept them of the face of the earth .We have shot them down like the dogs .In the guise of friendship we have issued corrosive sublimate in their damper and consigned the whole tribes to the agonies of an excruciating death .We have made them drunkards ,and infected them with disease which have rotted the bones of their adults ,and made such few children as are born amongst them a sorrow and a torture from the very instant of their birth .We have made them outcast on their own land ,and are rapidly consigning them to entire annihilation (Wilson, Edward).

This statement proves the brutality of the British colonizers as a truth. In this way, the British captured the entire land, and they wanted to create a white Australia altogether. The British rulers also tried to eliminate the history of Australian aboriginals by converting their children into civilized Christian. They used to snatch away the children from their aboriginal parents and taken to different Christian’s home to convert them, and to make them forget their own traditional culture. But they failed in the process. After 1960s these aboriginal scholars became very active and started criticizing the policy of assimilation. Oodgeroo is one of them. However, it is not that aboriginals did not kill any Europeans, but comparably very little in number. John Harris in his article “Hiding the Bodies: The Myth of the Humane Colonization of Aboriginal Australia” has





stated that the true history has been “duped” by the rulers. He is of opinion that about 2,000 non aboriginal Europeans were killed by the aborigines, and about ten times of this number 20,000 aboriginal people were killed. Such a bloody history like Australian colonization is very rare in the history of the world.

There are some branches of eco-criticism which are relevant in the discussion of the theme of this paper. So, it is needed to introduce the core issues of those branches of eco-criticism. Deep ecology is one of them. The very slogan of deep ecology is “earth first”. Two important ecologists are Arne Naess and Sessions. Their logic is that the nature should be protected at any cost. Nature is not a cure for the needs and demands of human beings. They consider human beings as the cause of the damages done to nature in general, and that’s why they excluded human beings from the discourse of eco-criticism. Thus, deep ecology sometimes goes to complete erasure of mankind. On the other hand, the Marxist eco-criticism talks about the destruction of nature by human being but with little difference to the deep ecologists. The Marxist critics like Karl Marx and Engels have given their views that all the human being cannot be blamed as the cause of the damages done to nature. They blamed the capitalist as the destroyer of nature not the poor oppressed people. Eco-feminism is another branch of criticism which is related to this paper. The basic points of eco-feminism is the identification of women with nature, and it shows how the patriarchal society is consuming and suppressing both women and nature.” Value dualism” is an important concept of eco-feminism. Value dualism is the human attempt of conceptualizing the world in terms of binary-one and the other-this is good and this is bad, and thus the patriarchal society is always given priority to their own values neglecting the values of the nature and women class as other. And in this way, they use them for their own purpose. Anthropocentrism is one of the influential branches of eco-criticism which speaks for the mankind. Anthropocentrism is, as it is defined in Eco-criticism by Greg Garrad, a ‘system of beliefs and practices that favour humans over other organism’. The points of anthropocentrism are that eco-critics should not have responsibility only for nature; they should also have the responsibility for the human beings are also a part of larger nature. All human being are not responsible for the destruction of nature, there are some people who are living in and with nature, they sleep in the lap of nature and take what nature offer to them. They become a part of nature, to help nature means to help them, and to damage nature is to damage them also. So human being should be included in the discourse of eco-criticism, this is the subject of anthropocentrism. Ramachandra Guha, Peter Reading, Lawrence Buell and Bryan Norton are the major anthropocentric critics. Bryan Norton has divided anthropocentrism into narrow and weak anthropocentrism and broad and strong anthropocentrism. In the system of strong anthropocentrism man is beyond any criticism and nature is considered nothing but the



store house of raw materials for the satisfaction of human preference. On the other hand, weak anthropocentrism gives a little priority on nature.

This paper is going to make a survey on the fact that how the project of Australian colonization is inseparably connected with the project of deforestation and eviction which is projected in the collection of Oodgeroo, *We are Going*. There are 31 poems in this collection. The basic focus of the poems is eco-colonialism, one of the most influential branches of eco-criticism. The very issues which are studied in this branch are the issues of deforestation and eviction. It shows how the notion of colonial development causes a rash destruction of nature. In the process of building buildings, roads, banks, offices, malls the first attack is always on nature and then to those who are living inseparably with nature i.e the aboriginals. Oodgeroo Noonuccal has given a crystal-clear depiction of the devastating effect of Australian colonization on the aborigines. In the way of protesting as a representative of Australian aborigines to the colonial ways of development she makes a comparison between the white man's so-called civilization and the civilization of their own, and then bitterly criticizes the so-called civilization and celebrates the ways of life of the native Australians before the advent of colonization.

In the pre-colonial era the Australian aboriginal peoples used to live a primitive life. They were highly happy with their own civilization. They lived in close harmony with environment and consider themselves as a part of nature. They never cause any damage to nature. They survived by accepting what nature offers to them. They used to hunt in the forest only for survival. Though they used to collect animal, birds, fishes, these people acknowledge the benign effect of the environment upon all the living beings. The very word 'we' in the title of the collection suggests clearly the cordial bond between the aboriginal community and the nature. The word 'we' includes the human beings, birds, plants, hills, sunbeams everything. Their bio-centric attitude is clearly felt when Oodgeroo says in the title poem *We Are Going*-

We are the lightning -bolt over Gaphembah hill
Quick and terrible,
And the thunderer after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quite day break paling the dark lagoon (16-9).

The aboriginal lifestyle can be seen in an anthropocentric perspective, the native peoples are living in the midst of nature, they are living with nature, they do not harm nature rather they become the part of biodiversity. So, deep ecologists are not just to consider the human being as homogenous. Human being cannot be blamed as the destroyer of nature in general. Another point



is that the attempt of the aboriginals to intertwine the human and the non-human often misleads the critics to bring the allegation of anthropomorphism which was first applied 'to the false attribution of human shape and qualities to God'(Garrad 137).The practice of considering the relation between humans and animals gathered its force from Peter Singers Animal Liberation .In The Beginning of Life on Earth Oodgeroo Noonuccal has given some beliefs which strongly rejects the allegation of anthropocentrism .These people actually feel within their hearts, a strong kinship with the elements of nature .For that reason they try to interwove the human and the nonhuman into their legends .Therefore ,instead of reflecting anthropomorphism ,their attitude rather supports the view of Garrad, "The boundary between human and animal is arbitrary and moreover, irrelevant ,since we share with animals a capacity for suffering..."

The Australian aboriginal people were very happy with their primitive life. They were swimming, hunting and laughing all through the day. But when the British rulers came in their land, they are reduced to "a semi naked band silent and subdued". Their liberty of speaking their own thought is taken away. The colonial masters were so much barbaric that they have scattered the aboriginals and destroyed their natural abode, and all the animals like eagle, emu, and kangaroo are gone. In this collection We Are Going the aboriginals and the nature is identified by Oodgeroo-

"We are the nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered." (*We are Going*, 21-22)

This process can be seen in the perspective of eco-feminism. Here nature is subdued and oppressed as the patriarchal society oppresses women in the society. British colonization has replaced the bio-centric attitude by anthropocentric one. Oodgeroo is very much critical about that. On the other hand, she has celebrated 'hunting', the marker of wilderness, which also opposes agriculture which is the first step of civilization. Question arises which one is desirable hunting or civilization? Though it is obvious that the tribal life is not desirable it is nobler than the so-called civilized life. In order to make a proper development we should be civilized with enough concern for the nature world.

The ironical question may arise that if colonization comes can deforestation be far behind? The obvious answer is no. The "colonial notion of development" is always connected with the destruction of nature. Australia was one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet there the human inhabitants is very small in number and it has been responsible for extensive deforestation

and degradation of natural forest since European settlement in the late 18th century. One of the scholars from Chinese Academy of science and the Botanical society of China has made a survey and documented the rate of forest loss and degradation in Australia. According to his documentation:

Overall Australia has lost nearly 40% of its forests, but much of the vegetation is highly fragmented. As Europeans colonizers expanded in the last 18th and 19th century deforestation occurred mainly on the most fertile soils nearest to the coast. In the 1950s, South Western Australia was largely cleared for wheat production. Since the 1970s, the greatest rates of forest clearance have been in South Queensland and Northern New South Wales, although Victoria is the most cleared state.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal in her collection “We are Going” has given a clear projection of deforestation in different poems. The poet is retrospectively looking at the earlier life when the native Australian people used to live in the lap of nature happily. Now they can have a dream only of those days when they were hunting and swimming although the day in the midst of forest, in present she can hear only the sound of development- “In my dreams I hear my tribe

Laughing as they hunt and swim,
But dreams are shattered by rushing car.
By grinding tram and hissing train,” (*Now and Then* 1-4).

As the forest is replaced by train yards, road, banks, offices, malls there is no scope they have lost their natural abode, and the hunting is no more possible so their laughing is also gone. The poet laments in the poem ‘We are Going ‘-

“The scrubs are gone and the laughter” (23).

They considered the forest as a holy deity, they worshipped the forest, it was their natural abode. And as a result of the eviction of the Forest not only the native people had not lost their shelter but also many kinds of animals like kangaroo, emu. And birds like eagle had gone into the verge of extinction. Oodgeroo writes in her title poem “We are Going”-

“The eagle is gone, the emu and kangaroo are gone from this place” (24).

The poet also says that once from where the lubras dug, meaning the aboriginal maidens used to collect yams, meaning flower is now become a memorial park, and where the children



played is transferred into railways. All the forest is deserted by the colonizers, and that's why now most of the lands are infertile. Thus, the colonial project has disturbed not only the aboriginal flow of life but also the ecological balance. The process can be seen in the light of Marxist eco-critical perspective, it clears that not all the human beings are the cause of the damage done to nature, but only the capitalist who destroys the aborigines and their abroad natural forest.

Apart from the issue of deforestation which is inseparably connected with the “notion of colonial enlightenment” is the issue of eviction. Australian colonization causes a rash destruction of nature, and the destruction of nature is related to the notion of eviction, particularly of the aboriginal people who were living in/with the nature. They were forcibly evicted from their natural abode where they lived for hundreds of years. The inhumanity and the brutality are well exposed in this collection of Oodgeroo, “We are Going”. She shows the British colonization not only causes the destruction of environment but human being also. She strongly criticizes the ways of so-called development of the white people. There are clear indications of eviction in the poems of the collection. Throughout the whole poem, titled “Acacia Ridge” the poet clear projects the fact that how much ruthless the way of white people development is. The white British men came to Australia, destroyed the forest and evicted the aboriginals, at the same time they also tried to change the history, geography and cartography of the land so that their marks is totally wiped out. The poet writes in the said poem-

“White men, turn quickly the earth of Acacia Ridge, Hide the evidence lying there” (1-2).

In this way the British rulers has made the natives strangers to their own land-
“We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers” (9 lines).

In the poem ‘Acacia Ridge’ she portrays the ruthless incident of Acacia Ridge, a place near Brisbane where there was a small native settlement of the aboriginal people. They were forcefully evicted by the British Government indifferently. They were so much inhumane in their treatment to the aboriginals that in a day of pouring rain bulldozers came and smashed down the small settlement without providing any kind of shelter to them. They were simply left to the pouring rain-

Homeless now they stand and watch as the rains pour down;
This is the justice brought to black man there,
Injustice which to whites you would never dare,





You white with all the power and privilege
Who committed the crime of Acacia Ridge (16-20).

This issue of eviction is also political. Only the poor black men are the victim of this eviction. They have no power to question the authority of the British people who captured everything and enjoy the privilege to all powers. Question arises that what is the development? To them development means high buildings, roads, malls, banks, offices etc. But is it a real development? Such development only creates discrimination in society in terms of money, status, power. To the poet it is a crime in the name of development. In this context William Rueckert 'notion of development is relevant. William's comment on this issue is like that- the present concept of development is suicidal...the conceptual and practical problems upon which the two communities -the human and the natural- can coexist, co-operate and flourish in the biosphere. This should be the ideal model of development.

The notion of cultural baggage is an important factor in the collection "We are Going". It is clear that civilization is not only related to deforestation and eviction, but also it changes the system of values. The British colonizers has destroyed their forest, evicted them from their natural abode and tried impose their own culture on the native Australians. The colonial history also says that the British used to capture the children of the aboriginal parents and tried to admit them in their own school so that they developed as the whites. They tried to convert them into civilized Christians. It was a project of making them to forget their own tradition and culture. Thus they tried to eliminate the aboriginal cultures, though they were failure in the process. After certain time the scholars started to criticize this process. However, the British tried to replace their culture of hunting by the culture of agriculture, their faith in various gods and goddess is also changed. Earlier they in worshipping the Holy Spirit in the forest and the forest itself, Biami was one of their god. Their faith in religion also changed into the Christian faith. Prior to the British colony they lived with their own culture and civilization. They used to hunt from the forest for survival, they have their own weapon to hunt like woomera, boomerang etc. They used to celebrate the festival of corroboree, a ritual of initiation from childhood to maturity. The mature man had to take the responsibility of their community and the nature, as they considered nature as their own part. Thus, they were very much happy with their own civilization. The British people came with their own culture and replace their old culture by their own. They gave them clock which is the marker of the chronological, systematic, forward movement of civilization whether the native aboriginal people believed in the psychic movement of time. Oodgeroo, the poet and the representative of the Australian aboriginals is underestimating and rejecting the imposed culture of the British masters

and lamenting for her own old culture and civilization, her eyes are searching for the corroboree, didgeridoo, bora ground etc, but instead of that she is finding the clock, dilli bag, good dress, shoes and, good job. The questions arise that which culture is better and desirable. Obviously, the culture of the British white people is much more desirable than the Australian black aboriginal people. It is true that there are many things which are hostile to the aboriginals. The culture of the aboriginal people was much more innocent and bio-centric in their attitude on the other hand the white people's culture is problematic. This culture gives the birth of division .it creates discrimination based on money, power, status etc. They believed in Christianity but they have committed the sacrilegious sin of murdering Jesus Christ. They also discriminate people in term of colour. Colour bar is also another important issue in the colonial project. Oodgeroo retorts by saying –

“The colour bar, it shows the meaner mind of moron kind” (5-6).

Thus, while one culture is back dated and peaceful the other culture is forward and full of discrimination.

There is a particular form of eco-feminism that is value dualism. The two major important critics are Karren Warren and Val Plumwood. Value dualism is the human attempt of conceptualizing the world in terms of binary -either good or bad. This value dualism is deliberately used by the British rulers. The colonizers considered themselves as one and the aboriginals as the other. Everything belongs to them is taken as good and perfect and to others as rubbish. Thus they underestimated and rejected everything related to the native culture, their language, religion, culture, identity and all the ways of living. In the very collection of my focus, “We are Going” this value dualism is used and subverted by Oodgeroo. The entire colonial project began with this value dualism, the old ways were rejected and the new modern was adored. And now Oodgeroo identifies with old ways and rejected the modern civilization with bitter contempt. As a representative of the black she criticizes the religion culture education and their development. In the title poem “We are Going” she compares the modern British people with ants-

“They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants” (4-5).

By this comparison the poet wants to imply two important things of the white people of Australia- one is the lack of direction and the other is the lack of goal. In a mocking way she says that the

modern people does not know how to go and where to go. They are blindly following the others almost like the ants. She also criticizes their religion –

“The Christianity you hold so high
Is but a lie” (Colour Bar-15-16).

The poet also satirizes their religion in the poem titled “White Man, Dark Man”-

“White fellow true
You had more for pride
You had Jesus Christ but him you crucified.” (16-19)

She criticizes their education as the instrument of making them obedient. In the poem “The Teacher” she writes-

“Poor black heathen, we will teach
Sense of sin and fear of hell
Fear of God and boss as well” (2-4).

Further in the same poem she says-

“We will teach you work for play
We will teach you to obey. (5-6)

Thus she has thoroughly rejected the British ways of life. Though she confesses that British culture has given them dress, shoes, jobs but in comparison to their old life happiness and freedom they are nothing to them. She considers them as an unhappy race. She has also written a poem entitled ‘The Unhappy Race’ where she writes:

“White fellow, you are the unhappy race” (1).

On the other hand, she has celebrated the life when they lived with nature as a family. This is a counter strategy to what Peter Singer called “speciesism” meaning the tendency of any species of thinking only of that species ignoring the other. The humanbeing is the worst example of that. But the aboriginal people are not like that they say that we are everything. They not only concern for their own species but also their surrounding nature and its every parts. In this ground they are far better than the whites. In comparison to other colonial history, the history of Australian colonialization is seemed to more barbaric. The British people did not stay for hundred years and looted them and then went back to their own land leaving them in their own condition. Instead, they settled their and destroy their natural abode and evicted them from their own land and killed them brutally. They even wanted to eliminate them from the world. Oodgeroo in her poem “The dispossessed” says

“Peace was yours, Australian men with tribal laws you made



Till white colonials stole your peace with rape, murder, raid;
They shot and poisoned and enslaved them until, a scattered few” (1-3).

In their own land they are devoid of their land. Everything is snatched from them. Ironically in their familiar place they become strangers-

“A dying race you linger on, degraded and oppressed,
outcasts in your own native land, you are the dispossessed” (11-12).

It is obvious that the British colonisers has snatched their freedom and everything what they had their own. But it cannot be negated that the native aboriginals did gain something from the British peoples. First of all, technology has been brought to the rather primitive land. Aboriginals did not have even the concept of using wheel, nor did they know how to build road, buildings, sewerage systems, aqueducts or even work farms. Even the Romans had engineers and architect who could design these projects 1800 years before. European colonization brought al the modern innovation to Australia then Australia contained numerous natural resources like gold, iron, ore and coal that could be extracted but they did not about that hidden treasure and the use of them. Europeans brought reality to the indigenous Australians. The simple nomadic lifestyle of hunting and gathering is more similar to that of in 500B.C. They encountered to the worldwide development. Thus they got many rewards from the British domination. But a must not forget their brutality. They have done many things but for whom? Now there are only 2% native Australians in the country Australia. Others are eliminated from the world. However, what more can be expected from the bloody oppressors. Tame, an eco- critic argues that colonialist formed a myth and with which they justified their deeds. One of which is that development is always completed with the conservation of nature and without destruction of nature and the poor people no development can be possible. Opposing the views of the development of Ruckert, Tame argues that development cannot be executed without the destruction of ecology. Though it not sounds well it is the reality because most of the project of development in the present world is always connected with the notion of deforestation and eviction.

Finally, after a critical study of history and Oodgeroo’s realistic presentation of the Australian colonization in her brilliant collection of poetry *We are Going* it can be held that the British rulers have come with both as a bane and boon to the Australian aboriginals .British people has brought the light of development to which the native Australians were thoroughly ignorant .They are introduced to a new world of reality .But on the other hand, the British causes a large damage done to the native people and to their natural abode. Of course, they have brought development to Australia but to whom? They have already minimized the number of the natives by killing them brutally. So there is nothing to feel about such kind of civilization. If the British



rulers would have a little consideration for the natives and would have allowed them to live with their own culture it would be a better civilization.



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