

Dispossession and Resistance: Land and Identity in the Poetry of Harpur and Noonuccal

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Abstract

This research investigates the portrayal of forceful land-grabbing and its brutalities in Australian literature, focusing on the poetic works of Charles Harpur and Oodgeroo Noonuccal. The research problem addresses the gap in existing scholarship by examining how these poets, spanning different historical periods and cultural backgrounds, represent the dispossession and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and the land. The methodology involves close textual analysis of selected poems, exploring themes of displacement, resistance, and ecological damage. Key findings reveal distinct approaches by each poet: Harpur's voice of the settlers and Noonuccal's powerful voice of Indigenous protest. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of colonial history and its ongoing impact on contemporary Australian society. The implications extend to contemporary land rights debates and the need for reconciliation and restorative justice.

Keywords: Land grabbing, Colonialism, Indigenous resistance, Australian poetry, Ecological damage.

INTRODUCTION

Land, serving as a cornerstone of existence, deeply intertwines with the cultural fabric and individual identities of countless communities globally. However, a growing concern looms as the ties between people and their ancestral lands face increasing threats, primarily stemming from extensive land acquisitions earmarked for agricultural endeavours, igniting the contentious issue of land grabbing on a grand scale, which precipitates profound repercussions spanning environmental well-being, economic stability, social equity, and fundamental human rights. The forceful appropriation of land by governmental bodies, a practice deeply rooted in historical precedent, elicits a myriad of inquiries into the ethical and legal dimensions of such actions. Notably, the colonial era witnessed widespread land occupation executed through coercive means, underscoring the centrality of land as a focal point of contention and exploitation. Charles Harpur (1813 – 1868), an eminent figure in Australian literature, distinguished himself as a pioneering voice who fearlessly confronted local realities, crafting literary works that resonated with the essence of the Australian experience. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993), an iconic figure in Australian Aboriginal literature and political activism, emerged as a leading voice in contemporary Aboriginal protest writing, challenging prevailing societal norms and advocating for Indigenous rights. This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of selected works by Charles Harpur, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, endeavouring to elucidate the mechanisms of land grabbing and the maltreatment inflicted upon the land by colonizers.

Charles Harpur, a distinguished Australian poet, holds a distinguished position as the first Australian writer to grapple earnestly with local realities, crafting literary works that authentically portray the Australian experience. His poetry delves into the intricacies of Australian landscapes, societal dynamics, and the evolving cultural identity of the nation, thereby offering invaluable insights into the historical and social context of 19th-century Australia. Harpur's poems serve as a window into the colonial era, capturing the essence of a transformative period marked by exploration, settlement, and the burgeoning sense of national consciousness. Harpur's works, characterized by vivid imagery and astute observations, offer a nuanced portrayal of the Australian landscape and its inhabitants.

Charles Harpur has written the poem "An Aboriginal Mother's Lament". This is written in the format of a dramatic monologue. In this poetry, Harpur depicts the struggle of an aboriginal mother. The invaders use the phrases "aboriginal" and "aborigine" to refer to Australia's indigenous inhabitants. This poem describes the predicament of an aboriginal mother. The aboriginal mother flees the savage white men with her small child. She must travel further to avoid the "unsparing" white men. The white men's hands are stained with blood. The white men do not notice the mother carrying her child into the dark woodland. Despite the fact that thorns pierce her feet, she continues to walk in the dark.

"O moan not" functions as a refrain in a song. Moaning is a subdued sound produced by an individual conveying physical or psychological distress. The mother endures both mental and physical agony alongside the boy, yet she prioritises comforting him. She asserts her readiness to relinquish "the braid", a gift from her late husband, in exchange for a "palmful of water" for her child. The poet depicts the struggles of the indigenous mother, whose sole aim is to protect her child. The infant leaps with joy upon hearing her father's name. However, the mother instructs the infant not to "spring" upon hearing his father's name, as he is deceased. The father is reduced to ashes beneath the destroyed gum tree. He has been deceased, and his remains are incinerated and disfigured by the flames. In that extensive conflagration, he was killed alongside his relatives. The mother believes she would have perished beside her husband, however, she must continue to live solely for the sake of her young child. She implores her child to heed the death cry. She desires to flee from these sanguinary individuals. She cannot forget her spouse, who perished, bleeding in the raging flames.

The mother reflects on her husband's fame. Currently, the loud noise produced by him wielding the thomahawk, a type of axe utilised by the indigenous peoples of Australia, is inaudible to others. His proficiency with the spear remains unrecognised due to his brutal death at the hands of the white men. His leadership within the family and the community has diminished. His hunting call will no longer resonate in the mountain. The mother ultimately discovers hope in her child. She is prepared to exchange the precious braid bestowed by her husband in order to secure a "palmful of water" for her child. "An Aboriginal Mother's Lament" effectively illustrates the theme of land appropriation through the perspective of maternal sorrow and bereavement. The title effectively conveys the significant emotional consequences of forced removal from ancestral lands. The lament represents both the physical loss of territory and the disruption of cultural practices, the severance of spiritual connections, and the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous communities. The mother's viewpoint emphasises the personal and severe impacts of land dispossession, illustrating the human cost associated with colonial expansion and its lasting effects. A sorrowful tone pervades the poem, underscoring the grave consequences of land seizure on Indigenous populations.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, a pioneering figure in Australian literature and Indigenous activism, stands as the first Aboriginal writer of the modern era to employ her literary talents as a vehicle for protest and

advocacy. Noonuccal's writings serve as a powerful testament to the resilience, cultural richness, and enduring struggles of Aboriginal Australians, thereby contributing significantly to the ongoing dialogue on Indigenous rights and social justice. Noonuccal's poetry, characterized by its lyrical beauty and unwavering commitment to social change, amplifies the voices of marginalized communities and challenges prevailing narratives of colonization and dispossession.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "We Are Going" serves as a poignant lament for the loss of Indigenous land and culture due to forceful land grabbing. The poem powerfully depicts the displacement and dispossession experienced by Aboriginal people, highlighting the injustice and brutality of colonization. "No More Boomerang" further emphasizes the devastating impact of land grabbing on Indigenous traditions and ways of life, portraying the disruption of cultural practices and the severing of connections to ancestral lands. Noonuccal's poetry gives voice to the grief, anger, and resilience of Indigenous people in the face of colonial oppression, offering a powerful critique of the historical and ongoing injustices related to land rights in Australia. These poems stand as testaments to the enduring strength and spirit of Aboriginal people, while also serving as a call for recognition, justice, and reconciliation. Noonuccal's poems reflect the devastating effects of nuclear weaponry. Noonuccal's work lays the foundation for Australian Indigenous anti-nuclear activist poetics and highlights the relationship between language, belief and technology.

In "No more Boomerang," Oodgeroo Noonuccal elucidates the ways in which purported civilisation has destroyed their culture and territory. The indigenous population has experienced a loss of valuable tools such as the boomerang and spear, while acquiring less beneficial items like the bar and alcoholic beverages. They have lost corroboree, the traditional Aboriginal singing and dancing, characterised by joyful movements and vocal expressions, in favour of films that require payment for viewing. Historically, individuals shared the animals hunted by the hunter; however, contemporary practices have shifted towards a system where individuals must earn money to purchase goods, eliminating the previous communal sharing model. They must seek out employers to earn some money. Bob refers to a unit of currency in colloquial usage. They are unable to sustain themselves through hunting and must rely on the white population for their sustenance.

In a time when they existed in their natural state, devoid of shame, they now find themselves in a society that necessitates clothing, which in turn requires financial resources. Currently, they do not reside in a gunya, which is a rudimentary shelter constructed from bark and sticks, traditionally used by Aboriginal peoples. However, they are now compelled to acquire a bungalow through hire purchase, committing to payments over a lengthy span of twenty years. They have exchanged their conventional implements, such as the stone axe, for those crafted from steel. Oodgeroo perceives that they must endure and subsist in a manner akin to servitude in order to achieve financial stability. The individuals of European descent mocked the fire sticks employed by the indigenous people, and the electric stoves provided as a substitute are equally inadequate. The indigenous Australians held a belief in bunyas. The Bunyip is a legendary creature said to dwell in the waterways. It represents a mythical entity or being within the lore of the Australian Aboriginal culture. Bunyips are said to inhabit rivers, swamps, creeks, and billabongs. Their primary objective in existence is to instigate a sense of dread during the night by consuming the individuals or creatures within their vicinity. They are celebrated for their fearsome vocalisations during the night, having instilled such dread in the indigenous peoples that they would avoid any water source where a bunyip could be lurking, poised to consume them. Now, the white settlers have transformed into the bunyips.

Oodgeroo believes that contemporary paintings cannot compare to the ancient cave paintings. The emotions conveyed on the cave walls by the indigenous people communicate more than the abstract artworks of the white artists. The Indigenous Australians hunted kangaroos for sustenance, while the settlers pursued them for profit. Oodgeroo perceives the white doctors as witch doctors adorned with dog collars. The young boys and girls have no source of entertainment other than television. In that era, the aborigines utilised message sticks. A message stick serves as a traditional means of communication among Indigenous Australians. A solid piece of wood, typically measuring 20–30cm in length, is intricately etched with angular lines and dots. Historically, message sticks were exchanged among various clans and language groups to convey information and relay messages. They were frequently utilised to invite nearby groups to corroborees, set-fights, and ball games. The television programs also feature a greater number of advertisements. Noonuccal highlights the cultural knowledge systems where visual information has been respected.

“We Are Going” examines the devastation inflicted by British colonialism and the obliteration of Aboriginal Australian identity. The poem simultaneously presents a compelling rebuttal to this obliteration. The poem commences with a portrayal of Aboriginal Australians that may reflect a white, colonial perspective, however subsequently articulates an Aboriginal viewpoint, honouring Aboriginal identity and culture while lamenting its degradation. The poem, in response to colonialism, affirms the beauty and resilience of Aboriginal Australians, while underscoring the significance of prioritising and appreciating Aboriginal experiences and viewpoints.

Noonuccal’s poem serves as a poignant illustration of the enduring repercussions of colonialism on Aboriginal Australian culture, identity, and connection to the land (Hall 50). Her words serve as a summons to confront historical injustices and champion the recognition and preservation of Aboriginal heritage. Noonuccal’s poem gives voice to the oppressed and dispossessed (Kumari 128). Noonuccal’s poem encapsulates the sentiment of dispossession experienced by Aboriginal Australians as a result of colonisation. She is considered the first modern-day Aboriginal protest writer (MacDonald and Steenbeek 32).

In Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s poems “We Are Going” and “No More Boomerang”, the theme of land grabbing is central, though expressed through different facets of dispossession. “We Are Going” poignantly portrays the loss of traditional hunting grounds, sacred sites (the bora ring), and cultural practices (the corroboree), signifying the forceful removal of Aboriginal people from their ancestral lands. The poem’s lament highlights the profound impact of land grabbing on Indigenous identity and connection to Country.

“No More Boomerang” further explores this theme by depicting the disruption of traditional ways of life. The boomerang, a symbol of Aboriginal culture and hunting practices, becomes a metaphor for the broader loss of cultural heritage and autonomy resulting from forced dispossession. The poem’s title itself suggests a sense of finality and irreversible change brought about by colonization and land grabbing. Both poems offer a powerful critique of the historical and ongoing injustices faced by Indigenous Australians due to land dispossession. (Claiming the Land) They emphasize not only the physical loss of land but also the devastating social, cultural, and spiritual consequences. Oodgeroo’s poetry lays the foundation for Australian Indigenous anti-nuclear activist poetics and highlights the relationship between language, belief and technology. These poems underscore the need for reconciliation, recognition of Indigenous rights, and a re-evaluation of land ownership and stewardship in Australia (Dolin 32). In several collections, Charles Harpur seeks to develop an ethically reflective account of ownership of land taken from others, critiquing the dominant idea of property and articulating an alternative way of living in the land based on co-

existence (Dolin 32). The rights of the dispossessed traditional owners are central to a new mode of “writing the land” (Dolin 32).

Land grabbing and the brutalities inflicted upon it constitute a recurring theme within Australian literature, serving as a poignant reflection of the historical injustices and ongoing struggles faced by Indigenous Australians. Through the works of Charles Harpur and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the multifaceted dimensions of land dispossession, cultural erasure, and environmental degradation are brought to light, prompting critical examination and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in Australia’s colonial legacy (Parks 395). These literary voices collectively contribute to a broader discourse on reconciliation, Indigenous rights, and the imperative of re-evaluating land ownership and stewardship in Australia. Charles Harpur felt a sense of connection to the place (O’Loughlin 72). Before one’s country can become accepted as a dwelling place for the writer’s imagination, it must first be discerned, experienced, expressed, and as it were fully engaged.

Conclusion

The exploitation and forceful acquisition of land, alongside the brutality inflicted upon it, constitutes a recurring motif in Australian literature, notably exemplified in the works of Charles Harpur and Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Charles Harpur brings out the reality in true hues. Noonuccal’s powerful voice directly confronts the brutal realities of dispossession, giving voice to the grief, anger, and resilience of Aboriginal people. Her poetry serves as a powerful act of resistance, reclaiming Indigenous identity and challenging colonial narratives. By examining these poets together, we gain a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of colonization on both the land and its people, highlighting the ongoing struggle for recognition, justice, and the healing of historical wounds. The echoes of dispossession and the strength of resistance continue to resonate in contemporary Australian society, urging the readers to confront the past and work towards a more equitable and just future.

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