

An Ecocritical Perspective on *Australian Aborigine* by Jack Davis

Dr. G. Srilatha

Associate Professor in English,

PB Siddhartha College of Arts & Science

Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India

gslatha@pbsiddhartha.ac.in

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study Jack Davis poem *Australian Aborigine* from an ecocritical perspectives.

The poet laments on Warrwa people of Western Australia. The atrocities of the Europeans that happened in the history are briefly revealed in the poem. The poet highlights on the struggles faced by the aborigines and touches upon several events to show how a tribe was erased without any trace of existence. The poet expresses anger in a straight forward manner. The brutalities of the European colonisers are vividly shown. The oppression and suffering that the colonizers caused to them is the heart of the poem. The loss of people living around the Lake George Hills and Murray tribe without a trace are the major focus. The disaster has taken place by all ways and means to such an extent that the race has disappeared. As a result the aborigines cultural values, children and lands were snatched away.

Keywords: Australian Aborigines, Oppression, Eco Consciousness, Colonial Expansion

Jack Davis is a notable Australian twentieth century poet. Davis hails from Yarloop, a small town in Western Australia. He is referred as the twentieth century Aboriginal Poet Laureate. His works explore the Australian Aboriginal experience. He has developed an interest in the local Nyungar Aboriginal language, which he eventually mastered, along with a deep knowledge of the tribal culture. The poetry of Jack Davis is full of poignant regret for the past and vehement protest about contemporary injustice. He covers 150 years of Aboriginal

European contact in Western Australia, with glimpses of an idyllic time before white settlement.

Australian Aborigines have a tradition of 60,000 years or 1,20,000 years ago. Australian Aborigines are believed to be the oldest tradition in the world. The aboriginal adventures had to cross straits and navigate across about 100 km to reach Australia. When they reached Australia they were a coastal people. They adopted hunter-gatherer life style and they changed their life style accordingly. They depended on nature for food. They developed intimate knowledge on land and the seasons. They preferred to move from place to place rather than settle in permanent residences. With such a background an ecocritical perspective study of the poem *Aboriginal Australian* may highlight the features of aborigines kinship with the land.

Ecocriticism originated in 1970's and ever since then scholars have shown wide range of interest under this branch. Cheryll Glotfelty defines "Ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Ecoliterature is a kind of literature that uses ecological holism as its ideological base; views the whole interest of the ecological system of the highest value; inspects and represents the relationship between nature and man; and explores the social roots leading to the ecological crisis. The outstanding features of ecoliterature are eco-responsibilities, the eco-ideal and eco-warning. The study in ecoliterature is interdisciplinary and it is combined with the subjects of ecology, ecophilosophy, ecological ethics, ecopolitics, and so on.

Ecocritics examine human perception of nature and their interconnectedness. Each and every living organism is interconnected to one another in a network. This enormous combination of network is analysed in this paper. Neil Evernden's perception on environment, beauty and self is as,

The aesthetic experience, in Dewey's terminology, lies in the relationship between the individual and the environment, not simply in the object viewed, nor in the

mind of the viewer. Rather than a subject-object relationship in which the observer parades before the supposedly beautiful view, we have instead a process, an interaction between the viewer and the viewed, and it is in that joint association that the aesthetic experience lies (97).

According to Neil Evernden there is a beauty in our connectedness with one another. There is an aesthetic experience in our relationship with one another. When human beings experience relationship with the sky, the mountains, the rivers, the wind, and with the seasons it is aesthetic experience.

Gary Snyder an environmental activist puts his ecological philosophy to emphasize on the need to change consciousness, while advocating for social changes to reharmonize human's relationship to non-human nature. Critics view his poetics as an assertion of the interconnectedness of all things. Snyder has established a pattern of identification between poem, land and work. He exhibits a deep anxiety about seeing the land as poem.

Australian Aborigines from the beginning of their occupancy of the land, developed a very rich oral literature. Their oral literature contains long song cycles, shorter communal songs for dancing and entertainment, songs of love and of mourning, songs of contemporary events, spoken poems and prose tales. The aboriginal songs are not simply songs. They are dance, body painting, music and social ceremony as well. The ceremonial songs are traditional and often secret. Those who perform them believe that the inspiration for the sacred song cycles came from the mythical time of the Dreaming and that in his dreams and in performance the poet is in contact with the ancestral spirit. In contemporary poems, too, the songman or songwoman is thought to have attained material and inspiration through communion with his or her personal spirit in dreams.

Much also concerns the right relationship that human beings must have with the land, its creatures, relatives, and others in the clan and the spirits some of it is concerned with sacred sites, some of it with secret symbols whose meaning is known only to be initiated, some of it with the rituals expressing the meaning of puberty, marriage, old age and death. The aborigines lived in diverse ecologies, ranging from seashore to woodland, river banks and desert. They were all hunters and gatherers using the same basic tools of stone hammer, knives, axe-heads, which were all carefully flaked, chipped or ground into shape. They developed an economic relationship with the land. For the aborigines the land not only gave life, it was life. Special significance was given to the creation and resting places of the great ancestors. Each site has a significant and sacred event and were hidden the sacred objects of the group.

The aborigines believed that the trees, landscape, and mountains are spiritual. They visited a sacred site once a year, but only by the initiated men of the tribe, no other men dared to visit. So as the aborigines moved across their landscape they saw a richly symbolic and religious world. These were not simply rocks, trees but places which the great ancestors had created and where they still lived. For them the ancestors were the rocks and trees.

The aim of this paper is to study the Eco consciousness in aborigines. According to deep ecologist there should be an intrinsic bond between the human and the non-human. Ecocritics believe in being one with nature and their aim is to preserve it. The non-human here comprises of plants, trees, landscape, mountains and rivers. Australian Aborigines exhibit this intimate relationship with their physical environment. They lived in harmony with nature and changed their places without destroying nature.

The essence of this religious belief is the oneness of the land. Each adult after initiation and men especially, had to perform increase ceremonies every year at the sacred site of his or her totem to enable the life force to be released to ensure an ongoing supply of the natural species. They comforted themselves with the knowledge that these rituals helped the great

spirits maintain the creation of life. All the people were deeply religious and followed their parents and ancestry. There was no revolution. They were stable over long periods and were rarely disrupted by struggle for wealth or power.

The aborigines intimate relationship with nature, made it truly an admirable culture. Jack Davis poem Aboriginal Australia illustrates the close association of the Aborigines with the land and the brutal violence of the white over the blacks. The poem briefly describes the aboriginal life from the white settlement. The opening lines of the poem run as:

*To the others,
You once smiled a friendly smile,
Said we were kin to one another,
Thus with guile for a short while
Became to me a brother.

The above lines indicate the European invasion and how they grabbed the land from the aborigines who were dependent on nature for their living. The poet uses the term “friendly smile” to illustrate the kind of exploitation that has taken place. The irony is that the aborigines had often helped the European explorers and the first settlers as they bumbled through the bush loaded down with equipment and plagued by inexperience. Had they known the implications of the arrival of these strangers, they may have met the intruders more frequently with violence.

As time passed the Aborigines realized that the Europeans were permanent intruders who aimed to use their land. So as a first step the Europeans have grabbed the land which was highly religious and highly spiritual to the aborigines. While the aborigines saw the land as an intimate part of themselves and all life, the Europeans saw it economically as a commodity to be taken, exploited, bought and sold. Moreover, due to the rapid expansion of flocks, several million hectares of Aboriginal land was occupied by the Europeans. As the sheep moved over

the land eating the grasses and trampling the watering places, the land was taken over by the whites.

Initially, the aborigines were always able to traditional foods, but the European presence made hunting difficult. Thus the aborigines lost access to their sacred places. Aborigines who were rooted in their long experience as hunters and gatherers arose anger at this disruption to their traditional life. Apart from grabbing the land, the Europeans also succeeded in taking the aboriginal half caste child into their missionaries. They translate their Christian ideas into rules and regulations in the hope that the Aborigines could become Christians by simply following them. The irony is that by 1890's the aborigines depended on the European invaders since their land and food sources were gone. In the words of the poet,

Then you swamped my way of gladness,
Took you swamped my way of gladness,
Took my children from my side,
Snapped shut the law book, oh my sadness
At Yirrakala's plea denied.

The poet laments at Western Australia aborigines who lost their land, children and culture. An old aboriginal man complains angrily that the Europeans first grabbed their country and then they were stealing their children by taking them away to live in huts and work, and read books like white fellow. The half caste children were forced to stay in missionaries and adopt their culture there by suppressing the aboriginal identity.

However, the European expansion has resulted in killing the aborigines. The government created a native police force created of an aboriginal resistance. Several hundred aborigines were being encouraged to kill other aborigines in the service of colonial expansion. The aboriginal troopers expressed confused loyalties. Many troopers never accepted European values or perception. Some deserted, despite the unofficial penalty of execution, and some

actively fought with their own people against the settlers. Others remained in the force but passively resisted their officers who often treated them harshly. A number of these young men began to internalize European values and lose their aboriginal identity.

Overall, the troopers were young men lost between two worlds, trying to cling to their traditional ways on one side and on the other side trying to adopt European ways. In the poem the poet expresses the killing of the aborigines as,

So, I remember Lake George hills,
The thin stick bones of people.
Sudden death, and greed that kills,
That gave you church and steeple.

Thus, the Europeans established themselves and imposed their culture on the aborigines. The poem expresses the poet's concern for Warrarra men who are separated from their children. The poet longs to write an account of the aboriginal sufferings. He mourns for the Murray tribe that has disappeared from the place.

I mourned again for the Murray Tribe,
Gone too without a trace.
I thought of the soldier's diatribe,
The smile on the governor's face,

The poet laments on the injustice shown by the Government by killing many aborigines. The aborigines believed on the sacredness in nature. They lived in harmony with nature without disrupting anything in nature. But the Europeans used their military power and have destroyed them.

You murdered me with rope, with gun
The massacre of my enclave,
You buried me deep on Mclarty's run

Flung into a common grave.

The amount of destruction caused to the aborigines by the Europeans goes endless. They were disturbed psychologically, and culturally. Yet the poet mentions a few as they were propped with Christ, tobacco, fears, disease and lordly rape for a long time. The aborigines were trying to offer the Europeans a compromise: food payments as compensation for their land. However few Europeans saw the morality of these aboriginal women had to form liaisons with European men. The aborigines had to work in a European fashion and generally lose a great deal of control over their lives.

Since the European invasion the aborigines lost their traditional diet which contained a wide variety of vegetables, fruits and animal meats which they collected themselves in health-giving, short bursts of hard and energetic work over 5 or 6 hours each day. When they gathered on the station to gain access to European foods, the aborigines received flour, tea and sugar with occasional bits of meat. Their dependence increased as traditional food vanished from the former hunting areas. Thus most aboriginal people became sedentary, less fit, and had a great deal of free time which led to boredom. In response to this new found boredom in life, many aborigines developed a great craving for tobacco and alcohol.

The exploitation of the aborigines for several years is written as

You propped me up with Christ, red tape,

Tobacco, grog and fears,

Then disease and lordly rape

Through the brutish years.

The aborigines were suppressed and oppressed during colonial period in various ways. The dreadful depopulation took place due to disease, malnutrition, European violence, aboriginal violence against other aborigines, death from natural causes, and alcohol were the greatest killers. While some European men formed satisfactory and lasting relationship with

aboriginal women, quite a number of Europeans on the frontier, took aboriginal women in relations not of agreement or care, but of force, violence and rape. The last few lines of the poem intensify the memory of the aboriginal people who were crucified.

Now you primly say you're justified,

And sing of a nation's glory,

But think of a people crucified

Today although the nation sings of its glory, the poet still thinks of the aborigines who were crucified. The poem laments on the loss of the aboriginal people, their culture and their identity. As the aborigines lived close to the land they developed a close kinship with the landscape. Once the Europeans grabbed it, the aborigines were left helpless without land, food, and above all a loss of culture and identity. The poem indicates aborigines harmonious life with land and nature without causing any destruction. But the European invasion has disturbed their lifestyle and ruined them. This shows that aborigines have been uprooted when they are colonized. Here the poet brings to light the loss of Warra people.

To conclude, the poem exhibits a close kinship of the aborigines with the land and physical environment. Until the colonial rule the aborigines led an undisturbed free life in nature. Rather they lived in harmony with nature without destroying anything thus they exhibit their eco consciousness. Moreover, they treat nature as sacred and offer their prayers. But the European intrusion has disturbed their lifestyle to an extent of extinction of the tribal community.

Conflict of Interests: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Dr. G. Srilatha retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper

attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms

References

Davis, Jack. *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia* (1977)

Dousset, Laurent. *Australia Aboriginal Kinship: An Introductory Handbook with particular Emphasis on the Western Desert*, Pacific Credo Pub, 2011.

Evernden, Neil, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy", *The Ecocritical Reader*. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Johnson, Loretta. *The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism*. Pub. Choice Dec 2009.

"Reading Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*". Stanford Humanities Conference, 1998.