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Protest in the Poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal

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ABSTRACT

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993 also known as Kath Walker) is an Aboriginal Australian poet, writer and activist. Her poetry criticizes the long-term effects of white colonialism on her people in Australia. It focuses on topics such as white racism and prejudice, inequality, discrimination, oppression and subordination, dispossession of Aboriginal land, the policy of assimilation and urbanization, and the annihilation of Aboriginal identity and culture.

The aim of this paper is to analyze Oodgeroo's poetry within the perspective of protest tradition because of its overt social and political message. Her poetry will be examined in the context of the social, political and cultural crises of the Aboriginal Australian people.

Keywords: Aboriginal Poetry, Protest Poetry, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People*.

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Introduction

Protest

Michael Lipsky defines protest as a "mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions."[1] To C. Marshall , protest "happens when there is something in the society that people do not like; it may be the law, institutions, cultural traditions or practices that are not right or fair."[2]People protest to express their anger against social ills like corruption, deprivation, grievances, frustration, injustice, oppression, racial discrimination or marginalization etc. Protest can lead to a positive change and transformation in a given society inflicted with such social ills.

Protest Literature

M. Abrams points out that "Protest literature derides and ridicules disorders in the society evoking attitudes of contempt, moral indignation and scorn in order to correct human vice and folly."[3] However, G. Lukacs believes that "it is not enough to highlight weaknesses in criticizing since this would produce pessimists and non-believers who do nothing to solve their problems."[4] Therefore, the real target of protest literature should be directed towards social transformation which can change wrong systems and it can help awakening people to the injustices around them. Protest literature has the power to "offer revelations of social worlds to which readers respond with shock, concern, sometimes political questioning."[5]

Protest in Aboriginal Australian literature

A short review of the colonial experience in Australia is necessary to understand the theme of protest in the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Wars, genocide, dissemination of diseases among the Aboriginals, oppression, racism, marginalization, assimilation through the suppression of native cultures, languages, traditions, and dispossession of land are the main characteristics of the Australian bloody colonial history. Lisa Bellear, an Aboriginal poet, comments on the consequences of this history by indicating that "Each one of us is aware of how colonization has and is still impacting on our lives…the trauma of being both sexually and psychologically abused".[6]

Oodgeroo Noonuccal as a Protest Poet

In his book, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, Adam Shoemaker indicates that "if there is any 'school of Black Australian poetry, it is one of social protest," arguing that "most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art's sake argument and feel that their work has at least some social utility."[7] This indication applies perfectly to Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993 previously known as Kath Walker). Oodgeroo is a well-known Aboriginal Australian poet, writer and activist. She was born on 3rd of November 1920 in her native country, Minjerriba, North Stradbroke Island east of Brisbane. She was baptized Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska. In

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1988 she restored her traditional name Oodgeroo meaning 'paper bark tree' to protest the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. She justified changing her name by saying that "I have renounced my English name because the House of Commons and Lords in England have neglected us for 200 years. They could not spell the Aboriginal names so they gave us English ones."[8]

Oodgeroo was fully aware of her responsibility as an Aboriginal spokeswoman who must use her poetry as a means to protest against all forms of colonial injustices and ills. Oodgeroo is proud of being a protest poet, saying that "I'm dead the day I stop protesting."[9] With this regard, Mudrooroo Narogin points out that:

> Social protest is stated not to be the legitimate field of poetry, and though we might query this — especially in regard to poetry which stems from other than the European mainstream tradition — Oodgeroo's poetry from the first was labelled as "social protest" verse and was denied to be poetry. If this position is taken to be a negative judgement, then we are forced into attempts to rescue Oodgeroo for poetry.[10]

Penny Van Toorn indicates that Oodgeroo's poetry:

> Effectively documents, analyses and laments the effects of colonialism on Aboriginal people and the land. Some poems call Aboriginal people to action; others directly address the unhappy white race in angry, accusing, disdainful, and sometimes pitying tone.[11]

Oodgeroo published three volumes of poetry; *We Are Going* (1964), *The Dawn is at Hand: Poems* (1966), and *My People: A Kath Walker collection (*1970). *We are Going* was the first book to be published by an Aboriginal writer. Critics indicate that contemporary Australian Aboriginal writing has begun in 1964 with the publication of *We Are Going.* The aim of this collection is to protest the injustices and wrongs committed by the white colonizers against the Aboriginals. James Devaney indicates that in writing *We Are going*, Oodgeroo's purpose was to reveal "the plight of the Aborigines, the public apathy, the color bar that still exists and apartheid in the minds of Australians."[12] The collection also encourages the Aboriginals to remember their ancestral traditions with pride and self-respect as a means of survival.

In the poem entitled" We Are Going", which is perhaps Oodgeroo's most loud protest against the socio-economic ills and the dispossession of land, and which Oodgeroo herself regarded as a protest poem[13], she denounces this dispossession of native land and the resultant cultural dislocation and displacement suffered by the Aboriginal Australians:

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground

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Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
'We are as strangers here now,
but the white tribe are the strangers.[14](*My People*, 78)

The opening lines tell much about the current miserable living conditions of the Aboriginals; people who were once the native inhabitants of the land are now suffering from displacement and poverty reflected in 'semi-naked'. Moreover, the lines indicate the fact that the Aboriginals were 'subdued' and 'silent' because of colonial oppression over them. Moreover, the dispossession of their land has precipitated the loss of their cultural identity. The Aboriginals had come to their native land to see for the last time their sacred 'Bora ground'. A bora ring is a sacred circle of ground "where certain initiation ceremonies are performed by the Aborigines."[15] They were shocked to see that their sacred ground was desecrated and not respected because it was changed into a white residential area. Their shock was worsened when they discovered that this 'Bora ground' had been turned into a waste collection point. They are emotionally confused to realize that they are now strangers in their land because of the white colonizers.

Oodgeroo links the dispossession of land to the erasure of the old traditional rituals and ceremonies. Losing land for the Aboriginals has resulted in a loss of their heritage and culture because they were so deeply connected with it. Land strongly reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural links that the Aboriginal people have. In an enthusiastic speech delivered in 1979 at the Australian National University, Oodgeroo stated that "in the traditional society, each group of Aborigines has a close and permanent relationship to a clearly defined tract of land. This land was not only their source of livelihood; it was also their spiritual center, the land of their ancestors and the source of their social cohesion."[16] William Stanner points out that the Aboriginals' relation with the land requires a special definition:

> No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word 'home', warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the aboriginal word that may mean 'camp', 'hearth', 'country', 'everlasting home', 'totem place', 'life source', 'spirit center' and much else all in one. Our word 'land' is too spare and meager. We can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets.[17]

Though these Aboriginals cannot articulate their true feelings and thoughts, they still have the same strong sense of belonging to the land:
We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,

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We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires.
We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon. (*My People*, 78)

The repeated use of use of the pronoun 'We' reveals a desire by Oodgeroo to be the speaker and the voice of her culturally dislocated people. Alexis Wright says that "Oodgeroo's poetry spoke for those who could not be heard. She gave voice on paper for those Aboriginal people who had suffered and died from oppression and dispossession without being heard across this land."[18] "We" enhances the Aboriginals' pride in their vibrant old culture and emphasizes their insistence on existence as rightful owners of the land. In his essay "Poetry and Politics in Oodgeroo," Bob Hodge argues that

A major part of Oodgeroo's poetic work went into the construction of this complex 'we', this emerging, contradictory and shifting Aboriginal subjectivity which incorporates suffering and hope, anger and goodwill."[19]

In the above lines, The Aboriginals remember the old days when they used to hold joyful festivities in order to celebrate ancestral rituals and traditions on this very sacred land. Oodgeroo here protests and laments the discontinuity and destruction of the strong ritualistic and spiritual links between the Aboriginal people and their land, "We are nature and the past, and the old ways/ Gone now and scattered."(*My People,75*) To keep alive the Aboriginal traditional rituals, Oodgeroo lists the various cultural features that make the Aboriginal true identity. Oodgeroo is adopting here a collective voice of the surviving Aboriginals who struggle to sustain their traditional ways.

Because of the dispossession of their native land that has resulted in their resultant cultural dislocation, Oodgeroo protests in "We Are Going" the pains of the disappearance and vanishing of the traditional way of life with all of its cultural connotations:

The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone. (*My People*, 78)

The dispossession of land by the White Man has also caused the destruction of the natural environment; the two traditional symbols of Australia, the 'emu' and ' kangaroo', are no longer extant now because the white man caused irreparable destruction to Aboriginal nature. As their native lands, animals and sacred sites are

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'gone', the Aboriginals realize that they themselves are doomed to annihilation. The poem ends with a sad declaration of forced withdrawal 'And we are going'.

In the poem "Gooboora, The Silent Pool" Oodgeroo reiterates her sharp protest against the destruction and the disappearance of Aboriginal old sites and sacred places which have cultural and spiritual significance for the Aboriginals because they are connected with their belief systems:

Gooboora, Gooboora, the Water of Fear
That awed the Noonuccals once numerous here,
The Bunyip is gone from your bone-strewn bed,
And the clans departed to drift with the dead.

Once in the far time before the whites came
How light were their hearts in the dance and the game!
Gooboora, Gooboora, to think that today
A whole happy tribe are all vanished away! (*My People*, 75)

Oodgeroo recognizes the cultural significance of the Lake Gooboora which has been taken over by colonizers and its name changed to Lake Karboora. She tries to remind her people of their rich cultural heritage and traditions. Her voice acts as a means to speak for the Aboriginal people to reassert their identity by sharing their stories of loss and destruction of their sacred places. The silent pool remains, but her people, and their connection with it do not. With its ritualistic connotation, the lake loses its cultural value and significance and becomes like any other lake:

Gooboora, Gooboora, still here you remain,
But where are my people I look for in vain?
They are gone from the hill, they are gone from the shore,
And the place of the Silent Pool knows them no more. (*My People*, 75)

The last stanza reflects Oodgeroo's lament and anguish for the destruction of such cultural symbol as Gooboora pool :

Old Death has passed by you but took the dark throng;
Now lost is the Noonuccal language and song.
Gooboora, Gooboora, it makes the heart sore
That you should be here but my people no more! (*My People*, 75)

Similarly, in "Municipal Gum ", there is a vehement outcry against the displacement of the Aboriginals in Australia. Oodgeroo uses the image of the gum tree, a sacred tree for the Aboriginals, as an indication of the plight and misery of dislocation suffered by the Aboriginal people. Watching an isolated 'displaced' gum

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tree in the street, Oodgeroo criticizes its forced removal from its original habitat, the forest:

Gumtree in the city street,
Hard bitumen around your feet,
Rather you should be
In the cool world of leafy forest halls
And wild bird calls. (*My People*, 80)

The natural habitat of this tree is "In the cool world of leafy forest halls / And wild bird calls" but it is now cut off and displaced "in the city street" confined by "Hard bitumen around your feet." The roots of the tree are covered by bitumen and it is surrounded by concrete. The ugliness of the city reflected in the 'hard bitumen' is contrasted to the natural beauty of the forest and the singing of birds. Just as many Aboriginal people have been displaced and uprooted by the colonizers, the gum tree is cut off from its natural habitat and the rest of its kind by the bitumen around its roots. It has become part of a strange and ugly habitat. Using a simile, she also compares the gum tree to a cart castrated horse:

Here you seem to me
Like that poor cart-horse
Castrated, broken, a thing wronged,
Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged,
Whose hung head and listless mien express
Its hopelessness. (*My People*, 80)

The use of the extended simile denotes the torture and suffering of the gum tree just like the cart horse. The speaker reveals her inner emotions and feelings of suffering and sadness to see the tree imprisoned in an unnatural environment:

Municipal gum, it is dolorous
To see you thus
Set in your black grass of bitumen. (*My People*, 81)

"Municipal Gum" can be read as an allegory, personification and a metaphor to reveal the Aboriginals' real living conditions of humiliation, hopelessness, suppression, degradation and depravity which Oodgeroo holds the white colonizers the full responsibility. "Gum Tree" ends with a powerful rhetorical question confirming the symbolic significance of the tree "O fellow citizen, /what have they done to us?"(*My People*, 81)

Oodgeroo's poetry is filled with images of such displaced Aboriginal people. In the poem "Cookalingee,"for example, Cookalingee (cook for whites), is an Aboriginal woman who is divided between the white and Aboriginal societies because of the displacement problem:

Cookalingee, now all day

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Station cook in white man‘s way,
Dressed and fed, provided for,
Sees outside her kitchen door
Ragged band of her own race.
Hungry nomads, black of face. (*My People*, 21)

Though she lives now with a white family, she looks nostalgically to her pre-displaced life:

Wistfully she muses on
Something battered, something gone.
Songs of old remembered days,
The walkabout, the old free ways
. . . . . .
Trained and safe and civilized
. . . . . .

Lonely in her paradise
Cookalingee sits and cries. (*My People*, 21)

According to the Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo, “the Indigenous writers who arose in the sixties were the products of assimilation revolting against assimilation.”[20] Those remaining displaced Aboriginals, like Cookalingee, who live nowadays in cities, have suffered greatly from the Australian policy of assimilation which was assumed to change Australian aboriginals' traditional native life to a higher standard of living brought in by "Western Civilization". In the opinion of Wright, Oodgeroo in “Cookalingee”:

> described the troubled interior world of an Aboriginal woman working as a cook on a cattle station, possibly at the time when the poem was written in the early 1960s. Cookalingee is separated from her own people who are themselves suffering and hungry from the theft of their land. But she is still regarded as a lubra (Aboriginal woman) to the white people, even though she is dressed and provided for in the white man's way, and working all day as their station cook. She feeds the "hungry nomads", the ragged band of her own race outside her kitchen door.[21]

The poem, 'Then and Now', reflects the effect and impact of the white assimilation Policy on the life of the Aboriginal people who at present live in cities where they are far removed from their Aboriginal traditions and culture:

In my dreams I hear my tribe
Laughing as they hunt and swim,
But dreams are shattered by rushing car,

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By grinding tram and hissing train,
And I see no more my tribe of old. (*My People*, 18)

Because of white colonization and its subsequent assimilation policy, the Aboriginal people's "dreams" are 'shattered' by cars, trams, and trains. The laughter of their tribe is heard only in the dream. They are forced to change their culture and adopt a new one:

Now I am civilized and work in the white way,
Now I have dress, now I have shoes:
'Isn't she lucky to have a good job!' (*My People*, 18)

The Australian Urbanization Policy has completely separated the Aboriginals from their native land:

Where that factory belches smoke;
Here where they have memorial park
One time ludras dug for yams;

As I walk alone in the teeming town.
I have seen corroboree
One time our dark children played
There where the railway yards are now. (*My People*, 18)

The 'factories', 'memorial park' and 'railway yards,' have replaced the place where once the Aboriginal people dug yams and their children played. These lines show the poet's protest against the effect of the assimilation and urbanization policy on the Aboriginals and their environment and culture. By juxtaposing the old and present ways of living, Oodgeroo aspires to restore the Aboriginal traditional lifestyle which existed before the white colonization, "And where I remember the didgeridoo/Calling to us to dance and play."(*My People*, 18) The poem also expresses Oodgeroo's anger because the land has been changed to a tool for making material profit:

Offices now, neon lights now,
Bank and shop and advertisement now,
Traffic and trade of the bust town. (*My People*, 18)

This disastrous change in the nature and role of land has led to the absence and destruction of the cultural rituals and ceremonies of the Aboriginal people:

No more woomera, no more boomerang,
No more playabout, no more the old ways.
Children of nature we were then,
No clocks hurrying crowds to toil. (*My People*, 18)

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Donelle N. Dreese indicates that:

> Part of the postcolonial condition is a loss of the identity, a cultural alienation involving an eradication of cultural traditions, a history, and national character. A response to the alienation is the attempt by colonized cultures to retrieve and reestablish a sense of cultural identity."[22]

In "No More Boomerang" Oodgeroo heavily satirizes the tragic consequences of the assimilation and marginalization policy on the Aboriginal traditional life. The first stanza laments the abandoning of the traditional lifestyle of the Aboriginals because of the Assimilation policy:

No more boomerang
No more spear;
Now all civilized —
Colour bar and beer. (*My People*, 54-5)

Oodgeroo accentuates the difference between the past and the present through an expression of a nostalgic preference for Aboriginal tools which are replaced by the colonizer's modern tools. The repetition of the words "no more" is used to voice alarm at the annihilation of culture and to warn that these two traditional items,' boomerang' and 'spear', are vanished. The line "Colour bar and beer" satirizes implicitly the white settlement. "No More Boomerang" reflects what Homi Bhabha calls "a mode of living, and a habit of mind' for those 'who have been displaced or marginalized on the grounds of their cultural, civilizational, or, as it is often described, moral and spiritual backwardness."[23] The poem is written from an Aboriginal's perspective on the effect that white men have on their way of life. The Aboriginals feel they no longer have a culture because it has been destroyed by the settlement of white people on their land. In the second stanza, Oodgeroo implicitly denounces the replacement of the traditional dances, which were the major source of delight and fun for the Aboriginals, by watching modern movies:

No more corroboree,
Gay dance and din.
Now we got movies,
And pay to go in. (*My People*, 55)

Oodgeroo uses Juxtaposition to portray the radical changes caused by the urbanization policy such as the introduction of currencies, clothing, food and medicine:

Now we track bosses
To catch a few bob,

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Now we go walkabout
On bus to the job.

One time naked,
Who never knew shame;
Now we put clothes on
To hide what's a name. (*My People*, 75)

"No More Boomerang" ends with the last stanza telling of complete destruction:

Lay down the woomera,
Lay down the waddy.
Now we got atom-bomb,
End *every*body. (*My People*, 55)

In the poem entitled "Time is Running Out", Noonuccal denounces the greedy work of the mining companies in the Aboriginal land:

The Miner rapes

The heart of the earth

With his violent spade,

Stealing, bottling her black blood

For the sake of greedy trade. (*My People*, 94)

These companies dig the earth to get rich natural resources though this digging will cause a catastrophic damage to earth and its inhabitants. This damage can be regarded as ecocide brought by the colonizers. Ecocide is a term used to "refer to any large-scale destruction of the land and natural environment or over-consumption of critical non-renewable resources."[24] Mark Allan Gray points out that "states, and arguably individuals and organizations, causing or permitting harm to the natural environment on a massive scale breach a duty of care owed to humanity in general."[25] He proposes that "such breaches, where deliberate, reckless or negligent, be identified as ecocide ."[26] Oodgeroo bitterly protests this ecocide by describing the colonizers as savage people because of the destruction and contamination they brought to Aboriginal land and environment.

In "Time is Running Out", Oodgeroo adopts a new form of protest which, according to Brewster, indicates:

> A rejection of the pathos of the earlier poetry and an intensified sense of protest. If in the early poetry the Aborigines' spiritual bond with the land was depicted largely in relation to the traditional Aborigines who were "going", "Time Is

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> Running Out" changes the focus of loss and also the strategy with which to combat it. In this poem it is the land itself that is threatened and the encroaching mining industry is identified as the enemy. Time is running out then, not simply for the traditional Aborigines and their way of life, but for the conservation of the land.[27]

Therefore, protest in this poem is accompanied by a militant exhortation from Oodgeroo to her people urging and encouraging them to take an action against this ecocide:

Come gentle black man Show your strength;

Time to make a stand.

Make the violent miner feel

Your violent Love of land. (*My People, 94)*

She calls them to fight back firmly in order to protect their land against the threat imposed by the thieves (the colonizers) who "will destroy old nature ‘s will/ For the sake of filthy dollar" (*My People*, 94).

During the sixties, Oodgeroo become a prominent figure as she wrote and spoke for Aboriginal Rights. In 1960, she attended the annual conference for the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement and then became Queensland’s first state secretary in 1962. She was the main figure in a campaign for the reform of the Australian Constitution to allow Aboriginal people full citizenship for Australia. As part of the tradition of protest, in many of her poems Oodgeroo depicts the Aboriginals as victims of colonization and the fatal changes it brought to them. For Example, the poem “Aboriginal Charter of Rights”, read at the 5th Annual General Meeting of the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement in 1962, lists all the necessary needs, requirements, and natural rights of the Aboriginals such as justice, equality, decency, understanding, recognition, freedom, self-respect, self-reliance, free choice, development, brotherhood, love and fellowship:

We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism,
Black advance, not white ascendance:
Make us equals, not dependents.
We need help, not exploitation,
We want freedom, not frustration;
Not control, but self-reliance,
Independence, not compliance,
Not rebuff, but education,

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Self-respect, not resignation.
Free us from a mean subjection,

From a bureaucrat Protection.
Let's forget the old-time slavers:
Give us fellowship, not favors;
Encouragement, not prohibitions,
Homes, not settlements and missions.
We need love, not overlordship,
Grip of hand, not whip-hand wardship. (*My People*, 12)

These lines reveal the real sufferings of the Aboriginals because of the repressive White's policy of racial discrimination, slavery, exploitation, oppression and socio-economic, cultural and political inequality which have given a strong momentum and motivation for the rise of the high tone voice of protest in Oodgeroo's poetry. It rejects all of the various malpractices of the Australian government against the Aboriginals.

In Oodgeroo's protest poetry, there are discernible illustrations of the deplorable and degraded conditions of the Aboriginal people who tended to be subjected to the worst form of squalor, depravity, hunger and economic exploitation. Oodgeroo aims to convey a moral and political message to the white people that the Aboriginals do not want to be mistreated and that they want the inequality to be ended. Using a critical tone, juxtaposition and repetition to emphasize her point, she voices out loudly the hardships faced by her people and how they want to be treated as equals. She juxtaposes all the urgent demands of her people with their real living conditions. She delineates a vivid picture of the wrongs of the government 's policies and laws regarding the Aboriginal people. She asks for equality and understanding, for assistance and education that would allow the Aboriginal people to live better and more productively in their home country. She also rejects religious indoctrination of her people:

Give us Christ, not crucifixion.
Though baptized and blessed and Bibled
We are still tabooed and libelled. (*My People*, 12)

She reminds the white people that the Aboriginals are in fact the natives of the land. She hopes that her people can restore their pre-colonial time where they used to live in peace, love and harmony. The poem 'Gifts' depicts such a pre-colonial simple and peaceful life of the Aboriginals:
'I will bring you love', said the young lover,
'A glad light to dance in your dark eye.
Pendants I will bring of the white bone,
And gay parrot feathers to deck your hair.'
But she only shook her head.

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‘I will put a child in your arms,’ he said,
‘Will be a great headman, great rain-maker.
I will make remembered songs about you

That all the tribes in all the wandering camps
Will sing forever.’
But she was not impressed.
‘I will bring you the still moonlight on the lagoon,
And steal for you the singing of all the birds;
I will bring the stars of heaven to you,
And put the bright rainbow into your hand.’
‘No’, she said, ‘bring me tree-grubs. (*My People*, 39)

In "Corroboree" Oodgeroo accentuates the Aboriginals’ deep connection to community, family and land which has been severely broken up and shattered by the dispossession of land by the colonizers:

Hot day dies, cook time comes.
Now between the sunset and the sleep-time
Time of playabout.
The hunters paint black bodies
by firelight with designs of meaning
To dance corroboree.
Now didgeridoo compels with
haunting drone eager feet to stamp,
Click-sticks click in rhythm to swaying bodies
Dancing corroboree.
Like spirit things in from
the great surrounding dark
Ghost-gums dimly seen stand at the edge of light
Watching corroboree.
Eerie the scene in leaping firelight,
Eerie the sounds in that wild setting,
As naked dancers weave stories of the tribe
Into corroboree. (*My People*, 20)

"The corroboree" is a "ritual ceremony of a religious nature observed in Aboriginal culture."[28] The Aboriginals use dance and song to celebrate their culture and to pass along the stories of their history to ensure that future generations will be educated in their traditional way of life. Catherine H. Berndt states that:

> Because Aborigines were traditionally non-literate, fundamental instructions in information about the land and its resources came through words, in word-of-mouth transmission – not so much through drawings, cave paintings and visual

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symbols, but predominantly through *words*, spoken and sung: stories and songs were a major means of transmitting and sustaining Aboriginal culture."[29]

Oodgeroo herself believes that poetry is a natural progression from oral storytelling:

I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for Aboriginal people because they were storytellers and song-makers, and I thought poetry would appeal to them more than anything else.[30]

By indicating the significance of the ritualistic dance and singing for the Aboriginals, the poem "Corroboree" demonstrates the innate connection, ties and interaction between the Aboriginals and their land that is based on spiritual beliefs and practices. Having such a rich cultural history which can be transmitted to future generations through traditional practices, ceremonies and rituals, Oodgeroo expresses in ' Song of Hope" her optimistic and bright outlook for a promising future for her people after centuries of suffering and pain:

Look up, my people,
The dawn is breaking,
The world is waking,
To a new bright day,
When none defame us,
Nor colour shame us,
Nor sneer dismay.

Now light shall guide us,
And all doors open
That long were closed
See plain the promise,
Dark freedom-lover!
Night's nearly over,

And though long the climb,
New rights will greet us,
New mateship meet us,
And joy complete us
In our new Dream Time.
To our father's fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow. (*My People*, 20)

Oodgeroo's optimism is highly appreciated by Shoemaker who indicates that:

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Oodgeroo Noonuccal introduced an Aboriginal perspective into contemporary Australian literature for the first time. She celebrated Aboriginal survival in the face of adversity, lamented prejudice and oppression, and offered an optimistic view of the potential for interracial harmony in the country.[31]

Conclusion

Oodgeroo aimed to use poetry as a resounding voice and a vehicle of protest against the long-term effects of white colonization of Australia. She expressed grievances and concerns of her people for the suffering they have because of the deplorable treatment, racial discrimination, subjugation, exploitation, inequality, loss of identity, the dispossession of their land and the destruction of their environment. She laments and mourns the cultural dislocation of her people and the discontinuity and the decline of their spiritual beliefs and traditional practices due to their displacement from their lands. Her protest poetry has a political message calling for the improvement in the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of her people. It also affirms the importance for the assertion of native identity and values through the revival and celebration of their unique old traditional ways of life, the deep-rooted links between the Aboriginals and their land and environment. These calls prove that protest poetry can be used as a vital and indispensable tool for a positive change in the life of Aboriginal peoples all over the world.

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