

## Social Disparities in the Select Poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Dorothy Hewett

<sup>a</sup>S. Angelinfemilet, <sup>b</sup>R. Margaret Joy Priscilla

<sup>a</sup>(Reg No:17213284012001) Full Time Research Scholar, Department Of English, Women's Christian College, Nagercoil, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Thirunelveli- 12, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>b</sup>Guide, Professor And Head, Department Of English, Women's Christian College, Nagercoil, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Thirunelveli – 12, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

The Paper attempts to analyse the social problems prevailing in the Aboriginal community in Australia. Focusing on Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Dorothy Hewett's concern for social atrocities and its negative impact the article precisely and systematically analyses their poems. The poems of the chosen authors are important in today's scenario because apart from environmental concerns, they focus on race as the cause of social exclusion, social marginalization and social inequality. The article shows that the annihilation and destruction is the outcome of certain biased thinking and it must be eradicated to achieve the ends. Ecosocialism calls for an awareness and demands attention of diverse groups to form a holistic and clear understanding on which to form necessary action.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* 'Disparity' can be defined as 'a difference' and social disparity deals with the social difference which exists in the society on the basis of rich and poor. 'Disparity is the condition of being unequal, and a disparity is a noticeable difference. Disparity usually refers to a difference that is unfair: economic disparities exist among economic groups, there is a disparity between what men and women earn in the same job. This noun derives from Latin 'dispar' which means 'unequal'. The difference in society results in social exclusion, social marginalization and social inequality.

Australia, a unique land of flora and fauna, has witnessed a social interface between the Aboriginals and the Europeans. The tremendous encounter between the people from the two distinct races has been marked by misunderstandings and apprehensions, which have destructed the overall social structure. The arrogance and racism among the people ends with frustration, friction, disharmony and conflict.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1929-1993) and Dorothy Coade Hewett (1923 –2002) strives poetically to draw the attention to the impacts of Ecosocialism on the Aboriginal people and the country. Born in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island in south-east Queensland, Oodgeroo Noonuccal was a prominent activist, spokesperson and educator. Her father, Edward Ruska, belonged to the Noonuccal, the indigenous tribe of Minjerribah. His campaigning for the improved conditions including increased wages, for the local Aboriginal laborers left a strong enduring impression on his daughter.

Although she ran unsuccessfully for political office in Queensland in 1969 and 1983, she went to join the struggle for land rights and protested the 1988 Australian Bicentenary marking two hundred years since the arrival of the First Fleet by changing her name from the Europeanized Kath Walker to her ancestral appellation. In her later years she dedicated her time for the development of environmental and cultural education programs while also touring internationally as a writer and a spokesperson. In her poems she concerns for environmental protection and the respectful, judicious use of natural resources.

The Australian feminist, poet, novelist and the playwright Dorothy Coade Hewett was a member of the Communist Party for a period, though she clashed on many occasions with the party leadership. In recognition of her twenty volumes of published literature she received the Order of Australia, and has a Writer's Walk plaque at Circular Quay and a street named for her in Canberra. The Dorothy Hewett Award for an unpublished manuscript was established in 2015 by UWA Publishing. Marxist orthodoxies including social realism, social exclusion and social inequality can be witnessed in her poems.

"Exclusion is the process of excluding or the state of being excluded" (Waite 322) and social exclusion is the process of being excluded from the society. It is the social disadvantage or confusion which arises in the society and it is a term used widely in Europe and France. It is the process in which the individuals or people are systematically denied from various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group and which are fundamental to social integration and observance of human rights within that particular group on housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation and due process.

The indigenous people of Australia living for at least forty thousand years formed one of the oldest societies on earth. Compared to other ancient societies such as the Indians in America or the Indigenous people of Africa one can say that due to the late European contact the Aboriginal culture is the one, which has survived the longest. Their culture is very precious and fascinating although it might be hard to fully understand their way of life if seen through the eyes of Europeans or white Australians.

The expression "Aborigine" originally comes from Latin and means something like "to be descended from or "to be a native". It stands for a person or living thing which has existed in a country or continent since the earliest time known to people. It generally refers to "the Indigenous people of Australia" which is the politically correct term. Today about 400 000 Aborigines live in Australia and they form only about 2% of the population of Australia. Nevertheless the Aboriginal culture is present in non-Aboriginal society. Many places have Aboriginal names such as "Wollongong" or "Woolloomooloo", which are close of Sydney. Even the name of Australia's capital, Canberra, which means "meeting place", originally comes from an Aboriginal word. (Blickle 1)

In Noonuccal's *Why not Street* she discusses the exclusion of the aboriginal rights. If an Englishman submits a petition against the Aborigines, without proper enquiry the officers will sign the notice for further action. She says:

Officiously, they hawked about  
'petition' to keep abos out,  
And slavishly, without a peep,  
The feeble Yes-Man signed like sheep. (1-4)

While the same thing happens to an aboriginal, when he tries to make some complaint against the English men, the officials may say:

No abos here! Why not, Why not?

And if black-balling and boycott,  
First black-ball pride and arrogance,  
Boycott this vile intolerance. (9-12)

The Rights of the aboriginals are denied and the poet cannot tolerate the exclusion of the Aboriginal rights in their own land. Social exclusion can be connected to a person's social class, race, skin colour, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, educational status, childhood relationships living standards or appearance. The outcome of social exclusion affected individuals or communities and prevented from participating fully in the economic, social and political life of the society in which they live. This may result to a resistance in form of demonstrations and protests from the excluded people. In the name of race the Whiteman tortured the Aboriginals and excluded them. Noonuccal's *Racism* is a powerful poem in which the poem warns the Whites of the non-Indigenous population proving to be potentially dangerous in their reactions. Racism is entrenched in Australian society and is the major cause of racial hatred, social violence and social exclusion. It was during the nineteenth century that idea of race emerged. She says:

Take care! White racists!

Blacks can be racists too.

A violent could erupt

And racists meet their death. (7-10)

Noonuccal has explored the Blackness, the very nature of her origin and originality in her writings. Instead of nurturing any inferiority complex she asserts pride in her identity as an Aboriginal. In the poem *All One Race*, Kath Walker, condemns and dismisses the colour barriers that have blurred the vision of her people.

As far as Aboriginals the protest against racism is continued in the poem *Spinners*. As the title of the poem suggests, the Whites are called the Spinners who have spun the racist yam in the socio-cultural fabric of the Australian society. Racism is personified as a White monster, designed by "White iron will" (9) to control the Black. However, the evil would spread out of control and destroy its own creator. Thereafter, in place of a White monster, there would be a Black monster created out of the Black iron will that would perform the task of:

Of spinning  
wheels,  
in wheels,  
in wheels. (24-27)

Social exclusion results in the search for identity which is the overriding theme in Aboriginal literature. The Aboriginals find themselves in no-win situation as they cannot revert to the lives of their ancestors or take place beside White Australians on equal social footing. Yet they are keen to retain their dignity and identity. Noonuccal's *I Am Proud* is the most powerful

affirmation of Black consciousness and dignity:

I am black of skin among whites,  
And I am proud,

Proud of race and proud of skin.  
I am broken and poor,  
Dressed in rags from white man's back,  
But do not think I am ashamed.  
Spears could not contend against gins and we were mastered,  
But there are things they could not plunder and destroy —  
I am proud,  
Though humble and poor and without a home ...  
So was Christ. (1-8, 12-14)

Social inequality is the difference found in various measures of social well-being among individuals in and among groups in a population, or among countries and economic inequality sometimes refers to income inequality, wealth inequality, or the wealth gap. Economists generally focus on economic disparity in three metrics: wealth, income, and consumption. The issue of economic inequality is relevant to the notions of equity, equality of outcome and equality of opportunity. Economic inequality varies between societies, historical periods, economic structures and systems. The term can refer to cross-sectional distribution of income or wealth at any particular period, or to changes of income and wealth over longer periods of time.

The Brundland Report produced by the United Nation commission on the environment and development states “the urgent need for concrete action on a world scale to avoid the numerous dangers facing the environment ...is the social democratic criticism of inequalities of income and power” (Kelly 92).

In Hewett's *Clancy and Dooley and Don Mcleod* she clearly portrays the economic inequality of the Australian Aboriginal workers. She talks about an Aboriginal Land Rights Movement headed by Dooley and he asked the police, how much room they had in their jails because they would fill them all. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1946, 800 Aboriginal pastoral workers, from cattle stations on the Pilbara region of Western Australia, went on strike for wages and conditions. It was a never ended strike and when the White boss said:

We Won't pay wages like that no more  
The white boss said: 'STAY OUT OF TOWN,'  
And they ground with their boots to keep us down.  
'We'll starve them out until they crawl  
Back on their bellies, we'll starve 'em all.' (28-32)

The Britishers came with the guns and they have marched towards the camp with guns and laughed:

.....like a whirlwind cloud:  
OPEN THE JAIL AND LET OUT DON McLEOD.  
The squatters are riding round in the night  
Crying: 'Load up your guns and creep out quiet.  
Let's teach these niggers that they can't rob  
The big white bosses of thirty bob'. (47-52)

Here the entire poem brings out the theme of social inequality of the Aboriginal working man.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* 'Marginalisation' is "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events, to put somebody in a position in which they have no power" (938). The marginalization of aboriginal women can be witnessed in the poems of both the poets. The aboriginal women are denied in taking decisions and they have to live what the Whitemen Commands. In Noonuccal's poem *The Dark Unmarried Mothers* she discusses the marginalization of women. Due to the play of the lechers, boses and the station heads most of the aboriginal women are seduced and become unmarried. Since the court of law does not run for the aboriginals they shrugged away the problem and 'wash the hands as Pilate' (41).

In Hewett's *Hands of Girl* she pictures the hardship of the Aboriginal women through the painting of the Italian painter, Tiziana Vercellio. The hands of the aboriginal woman are the soul of the painting and it looks so thin and tired because of her hard work without proper wages and Hewett says "They are the thin and yellow hands of grief" (10).

Thus Social exclusion and inequality, marginalization and poverty, unemployment and fear complex among the excluded, involuntary migration and intense negative impact on the quality of life are the possible outcome of social disparities. Thus both the authors have discussed the interrelated crises of the social breakdown of the Australian aboriginals in the poems.

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