

# **Documenting Aboriginal Australia: A Study of Jack Davis' Poetry**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Australian Aboriginal culture is regarded as the oldest continuous culture of the world by many critics. However, this culture came to the brink of extinction due to colonialism. The White people who colonised Australia not only massacred the Aborigines, but also took the children away from their parents, which stopped the transmission of the culture. Australian Aboriginal literature is an attempt to revive the Aboriginal culture. Australian Aboriginal culture not only documents the culture, but it also makes clear that the Aborigines were not stone-age people as depicted by the colonial narratives. This paper studies how Australian Aboriginal poetry depicts the relationship between land and people.**

Most researchers concur that Australian Aboriginal culture represents the oldest extant culture globally. The Aborigines lived in one of the most challenging places on Earth and evolved a civilisation that not only helped them survive on the driest continent but also helped them protect Australia's delicate nature. Every myth, ritual, and ceremony of the Aborigines was distinct and intended to safeguard their culture, which was profoundly linked to the land. However, the colonial invasion eradicated numerous ceremonies, as the materialistic Western culture did not connect with the land. From a Western point of view, the Aboriginal civilisation was seen as strange because they didn't live in an organised way. Because Australia was too dry for farming, the Aboriginal tribes lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

They couldn't settle down and make a writing system for their languages, but that doesn't mean they weren't creative. The cave paintings in Australia show that they appreciated art, and their song cycles and myths about the creation of the Australian continent show that they were similar to other cultures. However, westerners didn't recognise all of this and tried to prove that the Aborigines were physically and mentally inferior to Europeans. Aboriginal literature is the Aborigines' way of trying to change the unfavourable ideas that Europeans have about them. Like other civilisations around the world, Aboriginal ingenuity originally found a voice in poetry. A lot of Aboriginal writers composed poetry with a purpose. The goal was to show the world who they were and let others know where they stood in the world. The Aboriginal poets not only express their pain at being taken away from their homes and the genocidal practices of the White Australian government, but they also show how their culture is different from the mainstream culture.

The land is significant to Aboriginal people. The connection is a main theme in Jack Davis's poems. The Europeans view the land as a commodity, referring to it as "my land.". In contrast, the Aborigines perceive it as an extension of themselves, leading to greater harm because of their intrinsic connection to the soil. The land and the people are one (Hill). Because of displacement, more than any other colonial government strategy. Jack Davis enforces this special relationship in the poem "Yadabooka":

The desert wind, the harsh sun, your tribal land  
Is part of you, your very soul.  
How can a stranger understand? (21)

For the Aborigines, the land is a living identity, an ancestor, and the source of their culture and life. For the white people, on the other hand, the land was just a way to get money. In the poem "Land" he delineates the relationship between the land and the Aboriginal race:

Oh white man  
How can I make you understand  
This love of land?  
It has the touch of a child's fingertips  
To a mother's lips. (32)

These phrases make it obvious that the relationship between the aborigines and the land is not just one of dependence; it is also one of importance and can be compared to the most important human relationship, that of a mother and a son. Another important thing about this picture of a mother is that the land is not just a passive observer; it is an active participant who cares for her children like a mother.

The mother earth image occurs in the other poems as well, but here the mother earth is a source of identity for these people:

Where are my first born, said the brown land, sighing  
They came out of my womb long, long ago.  
They were formed of my dust-why, why are they crying  
And the light of their being barely aglow? (Davis, "The First Born" 1)

This is where the Aborigines completely identify with Mother Earth. The word "brown" used to describe the mother shows that the Australian countryside is dark. The problem of identification happens when someone is completely lost, like the Aborigines are dark because their mother, because they were forcibly taken from their land and this made them feel that they were estranged from their mother for a long time. The Aboriginals also went through this phase where being apart from their mother took away their identity. This pain is articulated by almost every Aboriginal writer:

You have turned our land into a desolate place.  
We stumble along with a half-white mind  
Where are we?  
Who are we?" (Davis, "Desolation" 36)

Aboriginal Land Rights became a potent movement in 1970s because of the identity crisis faced by the Aborigines. Without the land the Aborigines had become a race which had lost its identity. Bradford Morse rightly says: "It is submitted that the two most essential elements in safeguarding the survival and unique identity of indigenous peoples is respect for their land and their law. Possession of a land base permits the preservation of culture, language, values, lifestyle and law. It further ensures the retention of powers of self-government and the right of self-determination" (Morse 184). The Aborigines have won the battle for the land rights in the Australian court, but the writers have made the people aware of the problems their people have faced. The creative writers have presented this beautiful relationship in the most beautiful and moving details in both prose and poetry.

There were several reasons why the Aboriginals' relationship fell apart. One cause was that the white people were granted enormous areas of land to farm and raise dairy cows, even though there were already people living there. The second reason was the white Australian government's "Stolen Generations" program. The concept was meant to "assimilate" Aboriginal people into mainstream Australian society and was sold as a welfare policy. However, Aboriginal writers have called it a "gentle genocide" in their work. This is how the literature has been utilised as a political instrument to get things done.

The policy separated youngsters of mixed descent from their families in order to teach them. It is very interesting to note that" 1861, there were 201 white men to every 100 white women in rural areas; by 1900 there were 171 men to every 100 women. Adding to the predominance of bachelors were the Chinese, Japanese, Javanese, Malay and other south-east Asian and pacific Island immigrants who worked in tropical agriculture, ocean and goldmines" (McGrath 13). The statistics indicates that in 1861, there was no white woman for every 101 men. These men got into formal or informal relationships with Aboriginal women, resulting in children who were classified as "half castes" by the authorities and then removed from their mothers. The data is strong enough for us to believe that there were a lot of these kids. These removals were also a significant blow to the Aboriginal tribes because they made their numbers much smaller. Jack Davis mourns this situation in his poem "Whither?":

So we stayed on the Reserve in desolated peace  
Now and again we saw the police  
Take the brown skinned child,  
Tearful, subdued, half wild. (31)

The "Stolen Generations" program was probably the worst thing that ever happened to the Aborigines. It not only messed up the most essential relationship between a mother and kid, but it also stopped the passing down of culture. The children who were taken away could not learn their language, their traditions, and the major ceremonies that were so crucial for their mental and physical health. Other poets like Eva Johnson have also written about the "stolen generations" in most poignant terms:

When whitefella came from over the sea  
Teacher official and missionary  
They hearded us on to reserves and agreed  
It was all for for our protection. (Johnson 29)

But this strategy of protection was costly for the Aboriginal people because they had to give up their land, culture, and self-respect.

Aboriginal literature does not encompass environmental topics nor does it discuss the dreams or characteristics of their homeland; instead, it serves as an expression of grief. The situation of the Aborigines can be assessed by the fact that the invaders in the 1960s granted the original inhabitants of the area citizenship rights; before that, the Aborigines were rendered invisible in all Australian government surveys. Roberta Sykes, a well-known Native American writer, asks readers to observe the blood in "gaols" and the blood of "infants in corrugated iron shacks." These feelings are evident throughout Aboriginal Literature. Eminent poet Bostock writes in "Black Children":

Society has cast you aside  
And you've been made to hide  
And grovel in the gutter,  
And you've done is to sit and mope  
And mutter About life without hope. (Bostock 17)

Jack Davis has also touched the theme regarding the mass murders of the Aborigines in the poem like "One Hundred and Fifty Years" which was written in protest at the non-inclusion of Aborigines in the celebrations of 150 years of European settlement in Western Australia:

And that other river, the Murray,  
Where Western Australia's  
First mass murderer Captain Stirling,  
Trappings, flashing, rode gaily  
At the head of twenty-four men.  
For an Hour they fired  
And bodies black, mutilated,  
Floated down the blood-stained stream. (Davis, "One Hundred and Fifty Years" 31)

The killing of Aborigines, the rape of Aboriginal women, and the destruction of Aboriginal culture are all key themes that crop up over and over again in Aboriginal poetry.

Another prominent issue in Aboriginal poetry is the environmental challenges common worldwide due to the materialistic culture of the capitalist West. Because channels like Discovery and National Geographic are so popular and have such a broad reach, people are now much more aware of the environment. Most people now know about environmental disasters like global warming and the extinction of species. Aboriginal poetry shows that Western imperialism is mostly to blame for these difficulties because the native religions were the ones that suffered the most under imperialistic governments. Most native religions were founded on local beliefs centred on protecting the environment of their home areas. There are numerous sides to the environmental issues in Aboriginal poetry. The poets emphasise the importance of protecting forests and wildlife, yet they also strongly denounce mining operations. Kath Walker has criticised mining operations in the poem "Time is Running Out":

The miner rapes  
The heart of earth  
With his violent spade  
Stealing, bottling her black blood  
For the sake of greedy trade. (Walker 197)

Another essential aspect of Aboriginal writing is that they don't just want to protect the beautiful things; they appreciate everything and recognise that everything has its own special place in the world. This is what is done by Jack Davis in the poem "Mr. Crow":

But when nature manufactured creatures,  
Wise she thought of all features.  
Now if her realm should be beauty,  
Who then would master meaner duty?"(Davis, "Mr. Crow" 6)

Aboriginal poetry addresses a range of environmental issues. The Aborigines' wisdom can teach the world a lot. The world's problems will solve themselves if we live like Aborigines.

Some critics have said that Aboriginal poetry isn't deep enough, but when we talk about the artistic value of Aboriginal poetry, we have to remember that Aboriginal writing has "never been divorced from the Aboriginal struggle for economic freedom, legal recognition and reform of basic living conditions... it asserts (that) literature is one of the ways of getting political things done" (Wilde 17).

Clearly the Aboriginal poetry is written with a purpose and that purpose is made clear by writers like Jack Davis who writes:

We used to speak in those days when we were talking about politics-black politics-of how we were going to make ourselves heard within the white Australian society. And even in those days we went back to our dingy rooms, we said (referring to among others, Kath Walker, Faith Bandler, and Ken Colbung 'Well we've got to write about this, we've got to tell the people. (quoted in Watego 11)

The statement makes it clear that Aboriginal people began writing out of necessity. They used the white man's instrument against him. At first, imperialism was something that made the natives feel bad; but now that the natives are using Whit man's medium to show the terrible things that the invaders did, it has become something that makes the colonisers feel bad. The locals have accepted the white man's method of speaking, thus they may not be very good at it; nonetheless, they exploit this lack of competence to communicate what they have been through effectively.

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