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Legendary Tales of Australian Aborigines: Finding the Reflections of Eco-Conscious through Their Myths and Legends

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A race is enriched by its tradition of legends and mythological stories, the paradigms indicating the thought-pattern of the people concerned. Australian Aborigines too are rich in their possession of such wealth and the readers can have an access to them through the works of David Unaipon and Oodgeroo Noonuccal. In the present era of environmental disaster, these stories are much more relevant than ever. An intense study traces out the existence of a complete harmony between man and nature inherent in these stories. The Aborigines consider themselves part of nature and acknowledge the dependence of human existence upon ecological balance. For the theme of their legends and myths, they mostly have different elements of nature. This paper, therefore, tries to draw the attention of the civilized people towards the sensitivity of these aboriginal people concerning environment. This paper further tries to reconsider the chances to resolve the problems of environmental disaster by taking lessons from them.

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The belief in something spiritually divine, a Supreme Being accompanied by religious instructions, religious ceremonies and other means of worship is universal and belongs to everyone irrespective of age, colour, language or clime. The monuments and fragments of wonderful temples could be found erecting among the ruins of the valley of Nile or the jungles of Indo-China or the glories once belonging to Rome. These evidences prove human beings to be worshipping creatures since time immemorial. The Aborigines of Australia, though they neither build monuments nor erect altars for worshipping, believe in the existence of a Great Spirit. Now according to *Belief of the Aborigine in a Great Spirit*, the Great Spirit sent a great teacher, Narroondarie, to deliver His commands to the Aborigines. Narroondarie addressed their forefathers introducing himself as 'the Whole Spirit', the 'Provider and Protector' whereas the

listeners were 'part of the whole'. During the short life-span one should educate himself to conduct with others 'with the knowledge that they are part of Myself' (the Great Spirit) (Unaipon 12). They should control appetite and other desires. They have been further instructed to be generous to all, show kindness to others. Selfishness causes misery and is never allowed by the Great Spirit. These teachings sow the seeds of friendly co-existence among all the elements of nature, leading to an eco-friendly environment.

The Aborigines believe in the existence of a Spirit within the elements of nature—Myeyea(Wind Spirit), Pa nee(Rain Spirit), Kallitthe(Hail Spirit), Sunlight Spirit, Cloud Spirit, Spirits taking the forms of Trees, Bush Shrubs, Plants and Rocks. A beautiful story has been ascribed to the Green Frog (Gul Lan Naga) coming into existence from the Water Spirit. The sound of the water flowing upon the rocks and stones, murmuring and gurgling, has been imagined as the song of the Water Spirit. In *Gul Lan Naga*, a Spirit, dwelling in the tiny bubbles rising from the stream, peeps out of its 'watery windows' (Unaipon 53) and watches the little fishes swimming and darting here and there, some strange objects moving in the water, then bursting forth and flying out over it. It wishes to have such a wonderful life. Then again it imagines enjoying the thrills to touch the gentle leaves of the water-lily, to be swayed by the gentle breeze coming from Karramia (east), to sing the song of the little water-bird and be thrilled, be amused at the merry laughter of the Kookaburras. In short, it cherished the wish to become a part of this beautiful world. And with the help of the Sunlight, gradually took the shape of a Green Frog to have an experience of the life upon this earth.

The Aborigines, following the primitive ways of life, depend mainly upon hunting for their livelihood. In bush craft and hunting, these people stand alone without parallel. And the secret behind it is their wide knowledge of the forest. From the early childhood they are trained to observe keenly the jungle, plain land, bushes and also the streams and rivers. These are the abodes of their preys—the animals, birds and fishes. These people also acknowledge the benign effect of the environment upon all the living beings. They are also aware of the ability of these living beings to adopt themselves to the colours offered by plants, water or the ground.

In the legend of '*Narroondarie's Wives*' we come across a beautiful description of two young and tender grass trees 'swaying gracefully' in the Kolkamia (west wind). Actually these were two young maidens captivated by the 'Selfish Spirit of the grass Tree' (Unaipon 121) for being too beautiful. This story shows the dislike of the Aborigines at any natural element being captivated. They strive for nature at its original form.

In another story, '*The Voice of the Great Spirit*', it has been told that in the beginning the Aborigines could hear the voice of the Great Spirit every morning. But gradually they became tired of listening to a voice they couldn't see, and preferred to enjoy them by arranging corroborres instead of joining the morning-assembly. The Great Spirit realized this and decided to show them a sign that they would understand. He sent the message through Narroondarie to gather the people in a meeting around a large gum tree. And the tribes saw the huge gum tree being split open and a Thalung (tongue) coming down from the sky and disappearing into the middle of the tree, causing the tree close up again. Later the 'wise old black-fellow', Wy young gurrie, explained its significance that the Great Spirit is present within everything upon this earth. He speaks through every form of nature— voices of the winds, out from the thunder, through the bush, birds, flowers, fish, streams—everything. And as each and every natural element is a part of the Great Spirit, the Aborigines take great care as to preserve them.

As David Unaipon writes, the Australian Aborigines have a keen power of observation. As soon as a child is able to sit up, the lesson to recognize each and every creature in the bush and to draw their pictures in the sand begins. The story about Wanga and Nudu shows these two boys to watch a small lizard crawling, climbing the tree, to observe its footprints in the sand and the scratch-marks it made upon the bark of the tree. And as an outcome of such training, when these Aboriginal people go a-hunting, they never begin haphazardly; rather they would search for it according to the nature of that particular prey. For example, to hunt a black-duck or a swan, they would never seek for it in a running stream near its sources; neither would they venture to hunt a pheasant in a plain country with scattered shrubs. In Par bar rarie (the springtime of the year) the young people of the tribe are taught to identify the love notes of the wooing birds and also to watch the impulses for mating among the animals. In *Immortality*, we find all the creatures assembling in a meeting to solve the mystery of Death and Immortality. Here, there is reference to the hibernation of the reptiles, though they could not solve the mystery as they were unable to change their forms. Then the insects offered to go for the test and returned successfully—referring to the process of metamorphosis. Now these people not only observe nature so keenly, but also try to weave them into their legends. According to David Unaipon, “My people delight to give a reason to everything they observe, as well as to draw a moral lesson from it all.”(164) There are plenty of evidences to support this statement.

The Gherawhar explains the marks upon the Gherawhar’s (Goanna’s) body. The Goannas, after the change into their abode and climate, became very idle. Instead of hunting for food, they would like to steal it from their neighbours, mostly the Wandhillie and the Peenjullie. One day when the Wandhillie were getting prepared for a-hunting, the Gherawhar proposed to accompany them. And after hunting, when the Wandhillie became much tired, the Gherawhar suggested them to have a nap while they would prepare the food and wake them up. Taking the advantage of this opportunity, the Gherawhar tried to steal away the hunted possums. But they were caught by the Wandhillie and chased with burning fire sticks being thrown at them. Those burning firesticks left their marks upon their body and ‘these marks have been handed down ever since to all the Gherawhar’ (Unaipon 46). These Gherawhar were selfish, too. Once a draught visited the country with no rain and dry water-sources. The neighbours of the Gherawhar, the Wandhillie and the Peenjullie, were in great trouble. But the Gherawhar possessed the knowledge about a large reservoir and weren’t ready to share it with the neighbours. Now the Teal Teal, the wife of the Gherawhar, with the help of the Tuckoonie (little men living in the thickly timbered country), went up the mountain and released the water from the reservoir. It resulted in the emergence of a stream flowing down and separating the Gherawhar from their wives, the selfish from the generous. The Aborigines relate this story to the nests of the Teal Teal saying that they build their nests after the shape of that mountain containing water. And the Gherawhar, in the grief of the separation, go into the holes under earth in the cold wintry season and weep. The habit of hibernation has thus been woven into a beautiful story.

Once, as ‘*The Coming of Light*’ presents, the Birds and the Animals in the jungles were involved in a severe quarrel in which the Bat didn’t participate in the battle. Being an opportunist, he was just waiting with his force, watching the situation with the intention to support the winning side. Eventually when there was reconciliation between the two families, the Bat proved himself to be false to both. So they had to go and live in isolation. Thus the Aborigines attempt to explain the peculiar nature of the bat of remaining in-between the Birds and Mammals. Though it has wings and can fly like birds, instead of laying eggs, it directly gives

birth to its young ones like the mammals. This story again gives a reason behind the owl being pecked by other birds when they come out into daylight. These nature-loving people have also watched the other phenomenon of nature—the particular action of walking of the lizard, the broken voice of the frogs, and the shell of the tortoise etc and connected them to such wonderful legends. Now attributing human qualities like idleness, selfishness, generosity etc. provides the scope to mistake the attitude of the people as anthropomorphism.

About the beginning of life on earth, the Aboriginal belief is that in the Dreamtime the whole earth was sleeping. The Rainbow serpent was the first to wake up from her slumber. Then she travelled on the earth, far and wide, in all directions, leaving tracks behind her. When she became tired, she slept curling herself into a heap. Then she called the frogs to come out. Water came out of their bellies filling in the tracks and the rivers and lakes were thus created. And with water, life began on earth. Now the Rainbow Serpent set rules for them. They were strictly prohibited to eat the flesh of their own totems so that none would have to starve.

The Aborigines believe in the existence of Spirits in the elements. The story of the Green Frog relates the emergence of life from the Water Spirit. Thus a great importance has been given to the inanimate objects of nature in these legends and myths. A cluster of stars, Mirrabooka, is claimed to be actually a good tribesman turned into stars by Biami the Good Spirit. Later, when the white people invaded the land, they renamed it as the Southern Cross. But the idea of renaming was never accepted by the Aborigines. For them, it always was Mirrabooka, and would remain so forever. These stories also provide the readers with the reason why the Sun rises in the east. Some other stories explain the increasing and decreasing size of the Moon, the Discovery of fire, the noise of the night winds blowing into the cave etc. *Wanga and Nudu*, a story about the two naughty boys shows the Sun threatening the boys by hiding himself behind a huge black cloud. This is probably an allusion to the cosmic event of the Solar Eclipse. Again *Boonah*, the story about the Bloodwood gum introduces the readers to earthquake, with shivering mountain and the stones rolling down from it.

As has been mentioned earlier, the Great Spirit commanded the Aborigines through Naroondarie to be generous to all as all of them are His part. He further taught them not to be selfish. These instructions are strictly followed by the tribesmen. One of the prominent traditional customs, 'Pan Parl Lowa' means 'Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you'. And this custom might be presented as the foundation of the social and religious life of the race. The children of the tribe have to undergo severe training to control pain and appetite before been declared as men and women. After that they are expected to take the responsibility to protect not only their own tribe, but the whole neighbourhood. During the Burr-Nong training, the boys are taught the tribal legends which they have to learn by heart. Again, they are given the lesson how to live happily in a perfect harmony with nature. No element within the nature is more important than the other. So, all of them should help one another during their struggle for existence. Lots of evidences of this spirit of harmony shared by these people are scattered through their legendary tales. When the Mischievous Crow of the legends, in order to cut the tree along with the Pelican babies, drew the axe from the camp of the Pelicans, the axe refused to betray its master. Same was the case with the fire stick. The fact that the tools refused to work against their masters symbolizes the refusal of the elements of nature to disobey their Ruler, the Great Spirit, to harm any of his parts. Elsewhere in this story we see almost all the animals and birds—the Possum, the Kangaroo, the Mulderie, the Blue Wren— trying their best to rescue the

Pelican babies. Another example of this spirit is present within the depiction of the revolt of the Teal Teal, the wives of the Gherawhar, against their husbands. The story *Mai* is concerned with the punishment of an old woman for not sharing the food grains with others. As we see in 'The Story of the Mungingee', these people perceived that a selfish person can never be happy. Real happiness can only be attained by thinking of others and ignoring the necessity of the self.

The Aborigines further possess the power of perception about the possible environmental problems such as the need for bio-diversity, population explosion etc. One of the key concerns of the wildlife discussions is the extinction of some species. In 1992, the Rio Earth Summit reconsidered the threat of extinction by codifying a new understanding of the topic. It redefined the local or national problem of conservation as the globalized issue of 'biodiversity'. As Stephen Yearley puts it, there are three levels of biodiversity—

1. between and within ecosystems and habitats
2. of species
3. genetic variation within species (121-2)

Though critics from ecologically rich Third World countries, such as Vandana Shiva, finds such environmentalism as neo-colonialism, doubting an 'unholy alliance' between ecology and biotechnology. At the same time, excessive increase in population of any particular species i.e. population explosion too causes problems in the ecosystem.

The legendary woman Oodgeroo took on herself the responsibility to search the long-lost stories of her tribe, so that she could trace out the lost tribes through those stories. The threat of the abolition of the Platypus family due to the flood has been depicted in *The Flood and its Result: Berrwerina Tribe, Darling River*. The threat caused much anxiety among the other tribes. They tried their best to find out any trace of the race. At last after nearly three years they could gather information about the Platypus from the Yoldie(cormorant) and endeavored much to protect the remaining ones. In *The Gherawhar (Goanna)*, in place of flood it was the draught that was about to cause the end for some other races. One more instance of rescuing a race from being extinguished could be found in the story of the Whowie. This time the race was Itty-itta (Kangaroo Rat). The other issue about which the Aborigines reflect/show awareness is the problem of population explosion. Once, as has been depicted in *The Flood and its Result: Berrwerina Tribe, Darling River*, all the creatures on earth multiplied themselves so numerously that the earth failed to accommodate them all properly. As a result often one was trodden by the other. So the Animals, Birds and Reptiles sent their representatives to discuss and solve the problem. Eventually, that time the problem was apparently solved by the occurrence of the flood causing a great loss of lives. Apparently these signs may appear to disclose the anthropomorphic attitude.

These people have noticed every minute detail about the different types of plants and have woven them into some human connections. In the story about Oodgeroo or the paper-bark tree, the readers are introduced to an old woman in search of the stories of her lost tribe. She set out with her yamstick and the dilly-bag. One day she came upon the ashes of fire used by her tribe long ago. She sought help from Biami the Good Spirit in her mission. Biami told her to get some bark from the paper-bark tree and collect the charred sticks in her bag. She had to do this every time she found dead fire of any lost tribe. After many years of travelling, Biami suggested her ways to revive the lost old stories. She placed the paper-bark on the ground and drew the charred sticks across it and watched the marks on its surface. Thus she could recall the old

stories. Now this woman, much loved by the paper-bark trees, was taken into their tribes so that she would never feel any dearth of paperbark she needed for her work. She was given a new name—Oodgeroo.

Tuggan-Tuggan depicts the account of love of a hunter for a beautiful tree. These people imagine the Talwalpin (Cotton-tree) and the Kowinka (Red-Mangrove), always grow side by side, one on the bank and the other in the water, to be the lovers in their former life. To immortalize their love for each other, they were turned into plants by Biarni, the Good Spirit. Since then these two plants are always found growing side by side, Kowinka guarding Talwalpin forever. Again, the Blood-wood Gum with blood-like gums on the barks and leaves pointed towards the ground, the Pomera that looks like the nulla-nula when all its creamy flowers are picked off by the birds and such other plants have been connected to some human origins in these stories. According to these people, they were turned to plants to carry the marks of some particular incident.

The practice of considering the relations between humans and animals gathered its force from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975). As the Utilitarian 'principle of equality' expresses that everyone, irrespective of family, race, nation or species, possess the right to equal moral consideration. Singer argues, "If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (9). Mary Midgley, in *Animals and Why They Matter* (1983), expresses less radical position by introducing animal 'welfarism'. She supports the view that sometimes the interests of the human beings should be given more preference. She forwards the concept of anthropomorphism. The term anthropomorphism was first applied 'to the false attribution of human shape and qualities to God' (Garrard 137). Mary Midgley uses the term for the imposing of some human qualities such as desire for love to the animals involved. As the critics regard, the practice of connecting the plants and the animals to the human world reveals the anthropomorphic attitude of the people concerned, which is much close to anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is, as it is defined in *Ecocriticism*, a 'system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms' (Garrard 183). The environmentalists chiefly argue for preservation of natural resources for the sake of humans and this view is anthropocentric, whereas the deep ecologists strive for the recognition of intrinsic value in nature. The attempt of the Aborigines to link the plants and the animals to the human world has been wrongly linked with anthropomorphism. . But now it's time to reconsider that severe allegation. If the Aborigines present, through their legendary tales, the plants as to be humans formerly, then there are also evidences of just the reverse. In *The Beginning of Life on Earth* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the Rainbow Serpent, after creating life, made some laws for the inhabitants of the earth. She declared to reward those creatures who would obey the rules by turning them into human beings. According to this belief, the human beings come from some animal, bird, reptile or plant. And this belief strongly rejects the allegation of anthropomorphism. These people actually feel within their hearts, a strong kinship with the elements of nature. For that reason they try to interweave the human and the non-human world into their legends. Therefore, instead of reflecting anthropomorphism, their attitude rather supports the view of Greg Garrard, "The boundary between human and animal is arbitrary and, moreover, irrelevant, since we share with animals a capacity for suffering... (116).

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