



Kath Walker in China: Interfacing Nature and the Nature-Lover

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Abstract

Oodgeroo went to China on 12 September 1984 as a part of a delegation organized by Australia-China Council (ACC) in response to the invitation from the Sanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. During this tour, Oodgeroo was relating her own ancient culture with the Chinese one and at the same time discovering the difference between the two in respect of achievement. This trip to China in September and October, 1984 had a great influence on Oodgeroo. Within forty-eight hours of her arrival in Sanghai, she began to feel the spark. The trip inspired her to write poetry again after a gap of six years. And the fruit of this tour was *Kath Walker in China*. The poems included within this collection reveal Oodgeroo's love for the natural world, her anxiety about the rapid loss of biodiversity, concern for the increasing pollution of different kinds accelerating the degradation of environmental health etc. this paper is only an attempt to find out these aspects hidden within the poems of this collection.

Keywords

China, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, eco-consciousness, biodiversity, anthropomorphism

Oodgeroo went to China on 12 September 1984 as a part of a delegation organized by Australia-China Council (ACC) in response to the invitation from the Sanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. During this tour, Oodgeroo was relating her own ancient culture with the Chinese one and at the same time discovering the difference between the two in respect of achievement. This trip to China in September and October, 1984 had a great influence on Oodgeroo. Within forty-eight hours of her arrival in Sanghai, she began to feel the spark. The trip inspired her to write poetry again after a gap of six years. Manning Clark, another member of the group observes, "China worked a great miracle in her" (*Kath Walker* 1). Clark later wrote the preface to *Kath Walker in China*, the fruit of the tour. Apart from the sixteen poems which Oodgeroo wrote during her visit to China, the collection also includes five more poems written earlier by the poet. Each of those poems from the second section of the book deals with the mythical stories about a particular species. The poems from both the sections of the collection reveal Oodgeroo's concern for the natural world.

"China...Woman" is the first of a series of poems Oodgeroo wrote during the trip. The first thing that attracted her in China was the Great Wall. She found its resemblance with her own mythological Rainbow Serpent. Just like the Serpent, the Great Wall 'twines itself' around the mountain peaks. In the beginning of the poem, we come across a magnificent visual representation of the landscape of China. We see the 'high peaked mountains' (1) standing out against the China skyline. We also see the Great Wall making its way through the mountains in a spiral pattern. The sight reminds the poet of the Rainbow Serpent, who is the creator of life on earth according to the Australian Aboriginal belief system. According to one version of the myth, the Rainbow Serpent rose through the earth to the surface and created the landscape of Australia by thrashing about. The poet reflects:

The great Wall
Twines itself
Around and over them,
Like my Rainbow Serpent,
Groaning her way,
Through ancient rocks. (3-8)

The Rainbow Serpent is the creator and the controller of life's most precious resource, water. She is not only the creator of life on earth; she is its benevolent protector, too. This duty of protecting lives inspires the poet to compare it with that of the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall of China was built to protect the country from the invaders. Its initial purpose was to safeguard the lives of the people of the country from the assaults of the outsiders. But it failed to save them from the internal attacks. Rather, as Oodgeroo observes, later it turned into the emblem of boasting human power represented by the 'liberating army' (10). Now their 'heavy tramp' shakes the mountains. The loose stones start rolling as a consequence, crushing the wild flowers while falling down:

I hear the heavy tramp
Of the liberating army,
Shaking the mountains loose,
Of rolling stones.

Falling, crushing,
The weeping wild flowers,
In their path. (9-15)

The rolling stone in the poem becomes the agent of the human force daring to overpower the natural one. The stones are doing the job of ravaging nature on behalf of the humans by whom they are loosened. The reference to this act also leads to the admonition of the large scale destruction of nature at the time of the creation of the Great Wall. In this way, the once 'protector of lives' has now turned into the cause for ravaging the floras and faunas. This is unlike the Rainbow Serpent. Moreover, the Great Wall was never the harbinger of life on earth, as the Rainbow Serpent is. So it seems that the resemblance between the two is only physical.

In the poem, Oodgeroo also conceives China as a woman, 'pregnant with expectation' (20). This also has some connection with the myth of the Rainbow Serpent. The Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent is closely related to land, water, life, social relationship and fertility. In some of the Aboriginal cultures, the Rainbow Serpent is female, depicted with breasts. According to some commentators, Rainbow Serpent is a phallic symbol, which complements its connection with fertility myths and rituals. Indigenous beliefs put the menstruating female on the same level as the Rainbow Serpent for the creative ability. The Rainbow Serpent is often illustrated as a vagina in the Aboriginal rock art. Oodgeroo extends this link to include China when she conceives her as a woman. For her, China too is full of possibility. She (China) stands before her (Oodgeroo) with a lot of possibility for a better tomorrow.

The busy life of the beautiful Huampu (Huangpu) river, the lifeline of Sanghai, attracted Oodgeroo and she wrote on it in the poem, "Sunrise at Huampu River." The poem depicts how Oodgeroo enjoys the sunrise from the bank of the river. The Huampu River at Sanghai is chiefly known for its cruises. Oodgeroo brilliantly portrays the beauty of the sunrise at the river.

But even such a beauty is not able to turn the eyes of the environmentalist poet from the anti-environmental activities. The chimneys of the factories stacking on the shore of the river alert her. She notices the large undulating masses of smoke (emitted from those chimneys) hovering over the sky, filling the still air. These clouds of smoke are heavily polluting the air of the beautiful Huampu River. The serenity of the sunrise on the river is thus polluted by the man-made machineries.

Oodgeroo visited the West Lake in Hangzhou on 25th September, 1984. She was charmed by its beauty. The natural beauty of the West Lake has influenced poets and painters throughout the ages. It has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011. There it is described as "an idealized fusion between human and nature" (Espanol). Oodgeroo writes about the West Lake in her poem "A Lake within a Lake."

The existence of 'a lake within a lake' amuses the poet. She introduces the readers to this particular feature of the lake in the very beginning of the poem: "At West Lake there is a lake/ Within a lake" (1-2). Then she moves on to describing one of those three islands. The plenty of lotus plants and water lilies overwhelms her. West Lake has a treasure of floras and faunas. This facet of the lake delights the nature-lover poet. Various kinds of plants blossom alternatively in the lake and on the surrounding mountains

throughout the year. It enriches the visual effect of the landscape, improving the condition of the environment:

Oodgeroo is very excited at the idea behind the ‘Moon pagodas’ (Three Pools Mirroring the Moon¹) reflecting the full-moon. She imagines the three small stone pagodas rising from the water as eagerly waiting for the full moon to create that magic moment. The bridge ‘across the island’ (10) is ‘zig-zagged’ (the use of the verb here is remarkable) to ‘confuse demons.’ Popular beliefs say that the demons, the executer of each and every evil design, prefer straight path. So the ‘zig-zag’ path of the bridge is, as the poet thinks, designed to keep the demons away from the lake. Actually the poet intends to say that the lake and its surrounding are so beautiful that it can only be the abode of God. Demons have no room here. It is, as the report of UNESCO says, “an idealized fusion between human and nature” (Espanol). This aspect of the lake attracts the poet most as a propagator of the harmonious coexistence between human and nature. That is why her heart is heavy when she returns from the West Lake, the emblem of “peace,/ The harmony,/ The tranquility” (22-24).

The next place visited by Oodgeroo was the Lijiang River in Guilin city.² She also enjoyed the much famous cruise over the river. The Lijiang River with its poetic and picturesque beauty is the main attraction of Guilin. The 83 kilometers long travel from Guilin to Yangshuo on cruise is one of the most wonderful experiences that one can ever have. The path is filled with steep cliffs, rolling hills, fantastic caves, lined bamboo forests and leisurely boats. The Poem “Lijiang River Cruise” is the outcome of this trip. All the marvels of the place are brilliantly presented by Oodgeroo within the short space of the poem.

The next exciting trip was to the Camel Hill that looks like a huge camel. It lies behind Putuo Mountain. The natural formation of the hill charms the poet that she expresses in “Of Camel Hill..... Bonsai Gardens and Pandas.” She finds undisturbed peace and calm at the hillside. Her profound mind appreciates the somberness of the atmosphere.

Along with the Camel Hill Oodgeroo also visited the bonsai³ gardens, the zoo and the tea house around it. She enjoyed her ‘cha’ (tea) while watching the goldfish ‘darting through the waters’ (10) in the artificial lake nearby. In the zoo, she found the giant panda⁴ sick and unhappy. Any animal, when caged, cannot be happy and healthy. Caging the animal is removing him from his natural habitat and restricting his movements. The poet, an inheritor of the Aboriginal culture and traditions, could not tolerate such tortures on the animals. She felt the agony of the giant panda in captivity. She was really sympathetic to him. Moreover, the panda is an endangered species. The panda has a special significance as the WWF’s symbol for species conservation since its formation in 1961. So the poet’s worry about the troubles of the giant panda symbolizes her worry for the extinction of all the animals in general.

Oodgeroo liked the bonsai garden she visited near Camel Hill. She appreciates it as ‘pleasant company’ (6) and ‘a work of art’ (7). Now, Bonsai is the artificial way to shape up a natural tree and, hence, an act against nature. It may be a work of art. But then this art is created at the cost of the sufferings of the tree in concern. So what surprises the readers is Oodgeroo’s appreciation for such an anti-nature act. A poet who is so

sympathetic to the sufferings of the caged panda is found to be appreciating the art of Bonsai, an act against nature and causing sufferings to the plant concerned. How could a poet who is so sensitive to the animals be so insensitive towards the agony of the trees? Is it because the sufferings of the trees are not that much visible to the eyesight?

The next place the poet visited on the same day was the Returned Pearl Cave and kept the account of it in the poem of the same name. The cave is a part of the Fubo Hill or the “Wave-Subduing Hill.” Fubo Hill is famous for its picturesque shape. It is also home for the Thousand Buddha Cave and the Sword Testing Rock.⁵ It is situated to the west of Lijiang River. So the tourists sailing on ‘bamboo boats’ on the crystal clear water of the river are visible from the cave. From there, the poet watches the fishermen at work. For her, it becomes the source of the beauty of traditional job that is being done by them for ages. She is also moved to see the wonders of nature in the Sword Testing Rock. It looks like a huge stone pillar hanging down from the ceiling of the cave to the water surface. It hangs just a few inches above the water. It seems as if it has been cut with the sword by somebody. Its strange feature associates it with the legend of General Fubo. The legend (General Fubo used to cut the stone with his sword) has an undertone of the human attempts to dominate the natural.

The poet expresses her astonishment at the Thousand Buddha Cave.⁶ Her admiration for Lord Buddha is evident in the way she looks at the statues there. In this context, we can remember that Buddhism, along with some other Eastern religions, retained the ecological and environmental teachings. *Dhamma*⁷ is all about nature, natural truth and natural law, emphasizing ecological values. So the respect for Buddha on the part of the poet could be seen as an oblique reflection of her concern for the sustenance of the environment.

“The Returned Pearl Cave” is so named after a legend associated with the cave. The legend has got several versions. The version of the legend the poet provides in the notes says that it is about a fisherman’s boy. Once he found a large pearl in this cave and took it home. Their house was lit up with the glow of the pearl. When his father came home, he ordered the boy to return it to the cave. He did not want his son to have anything not earned by his labour. The boy did so. A dragon living in the cave took the pearl in his mouth and flew away. Another version of the legend suggests that once a peasant (in some versions a fisherman) went to the cave and picked up a great glittering pearl from there. This annoyed the dragon king to whom the pearl belonged. He raised ‘devil waves’ causing disaster to the common people. The peasant’s (or the fisherman’s) neighbours advised him to return the pearl. He did so and the Dragon King stopped the destructive activities. People’s life became peaceful once more.

Sitting in the cave the poet visualizes the whole story related to it:

We sit awhile,
To marvel at the past,
To enjoy the present,
To wish Guilin, peace in the future. (16-19)

She can understand the real significance of the legend. The pearl here symbolizes a thing of nature. Displacement of a natural object from its original place may sometimes cause great disasters. The annoyed Dragon King here is the representative of Nature himself.

The legend implicitly warns the human beings that they would have to suffer the consequences of annoying Nature. The 'devil waves' are the agents of nature who are sent to punish the humans for what they did. And the returning of the pearl (by the boy or the peasant or the fisherman) is emblematic of the restoration of nature in its own place and thus restoration of peace in the environment.

Unlike the poems of the earlier two collections, the poet did not have any political purpose in writing the poems of the present collection. These poems came spontaneously. And these poems, especially the ones from the first section of the collection, are rich in whole-hearted appreciation of the natural beauty. Moreover, the poems of this collection reveal the poet's anxiety about the rapid loss of biodiversity and her concern for the endangered animals like panda, and especially the animals like magpie, dugong, flying fox, and the carpet snake, those on whom she writes in the poems of the second section. In the poems included in the second section of the book, the readers come across detailed accounts of the species concerned. These animals are personified and referred to as 'tribes', not as animals. Sometimes the personification of those species is stretched to the extent of anthropomorphism which is often believed to be anthropocentric. But even so, anthropomorphism sometimes, especially in literature, facilitates in creating a kind of bonding between the human and the non-humans. It seems that the poet tries to create such a bonding between her readers and the species concerned through the use of the device of anthropomorphism which in turn may be proved to be favourable for saving the natural world.

Notes

1. Three Pools Mirroring the Moon: It is one of the must-sees in the West Lake. There are three miniature stone pagodas rising from the water. They are two meters in height. They are spherical in shape with a hollow inside. There are five holes on the surface of the bulb. In full moon nights, people light candles in the pagodas and seal the holes with thin papers. The candlelight is reflected through the holes on the water. The reflection creates the image of many little moons. The sight is magnificent.
2. The Lijiang River originates in the Mao'er Mountains and flows through Guilin, Yangshuo and Pingle in the southern direction. The river flows through rolling peaks, steep cliffs, green hills, and lines of bamboos on both the banks. All these things constitute a magnificent picture gallery of around hundred miles. The reflection of the river-side mountains and forests on the crystal clear water of the river enhances the beauty. The 83 kilometer long path on water from Guilin to Yangshuo is the chief attraction of the place. The main features of the scenic beauty of Lijiang River are the verdant mountains, fragrant water, mysterious grottes and exquisite rocks. The enchanting beauty of the river has been the subject for many famous poems of the country.
3. Bonsai is a Japanese art form of growing miniature trees in containers. It is the shaping of small trees to limit their growth. The cultivation techniques adopted for bonsai are pruning, root reduction, defoliation, grafting, clamping and so on.
4. The giant panda is one of the endangered species. Its existence has been threatened by continual habitat loss accompanied by a very low birth rate. In 1958, the PRC government set up Wolong National Nature Reserve to save the declining panda population. A wrong belief that the best way to save them is to protect them by putting under cages added to their sufferings. It caused to reduce the reproduction of the giant pandas. WWF has taken active initiation in giant panda conservation since 1980.
5. Sword Testing Rock: according to the legends, General Fubo tested the strength of his new swords on the stalactites in the cave. One day he tested the strength of his new sword on a stone pillar. The sword cut the pillar and left a crevice at the bottom of it. From then on, the stone has got its present shape.
6. Thousand Buddha Cave is located at the end of the Returned Pearl Cave connected to it. It has three levels. Over 200 statues of Lord Buddha are engraved into the walls of the cave. All the artworks bear exquisite carvings. Most of these are the creations of the Tang Dynasty.
7. *Dhamma*: Buddhism, particularly *Dhamma*, seems to offer a way to secure the participation in environmental affairs for both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Daniel H. Henning opines: “*Dhamma* is a spiritual, philosophic approach based on acceptance and compassion for all living things” (6). Buddhism is actually the lessons taught by the Enlightened one (*Buddha* means ‘a awakened one’). According to Henning, the teachings of Buddha also include “oneness”, egocentric, and spiritual orientations with loving and compassionate concern for all living beings. In Buddhist view, human is a part of nature. It believes in the interdependence of all lives. The teachings of *Dhamma* emphasize on our recognition of environmental values. According to *Dhamma*, the solution for the conflicts and problems associated with the natural environment lies in the sacrifice for the sake of others.

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