

PATTERNS OF MYTHICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN OODGEROO NUNUKUL'S DREAMTIME

Oodgeroo Nunukul's *Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime* (1972) is a collection of aboriginal folklore 'which the author recalls hearing as a child, and of new stories written in traditional aboriginal forms'. In this sense this work is a recreation and a reconstruction. Nunukul's conception of Dreamtime finds interesting parallels in ancient Greek and Vedic Hindu cosmologies. However, my own interest in the text is kindled by Nunukul's fascinating use of reversal and parody.

It is well-known that Christian missionaries adapted local cultural and literary forms to spread the message of Christianity¹. The rationale behind this, as Ruthven points out, is the insistence of the Church "that a pagan, no matter how intelligent, is by definition denied the light of Christian revelation and so can never acquire those insights which are conferred only by divine grace" (Myth, 49). In a complete and post-colonial reversal of this method, Nunukul (Kath Walker) uses Biblical narrative patterns to reconstruct the aboriginal myths. Much like the female counterpart of Caliban, she uses the master's language to understand and articulate the aboriginal conception of the universe.

Alcheringa

The term, 'dreamtime' was coined by anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen as a translation of the word 'alcheringa' meaning 'to see and dream eternal things'. The term now refers to the description of the religious tenets of the aborigines. As Paul Raffaele explains, Dreamtime, which has no written legacy, is a description of 'gods and mortals, the origins of man and earth, and moral codes that regulate behaviour' (Dreamtime Journey 90). Much like the Hindu pantheon of Gods, Dreamtime presents several 'creator spirits' or *djangs* whose rules define 'strict code of behaviour' (Raffaele 90). These rules are collectively known as 'the Law'. The spirits themselves live forever as different forms of the land. Natural occurrences and calamities are explained in terms of punishments and rewards granted by the supreme spirit—Rainbow Serpent². The Dreamtime may be distinguished from other religious faiths in that it is based on a belief that land is sacred and immutable, and that everything affecting life and human

relationships sprang from it (Raffaele 90). Going by this perspective, religion is not merely about a moral code of conduct, but also establishes an ecological and ethical standard for human behaviour.

The Biblical echoes in the text operate at the formal level. The content is truly indigenous. The text consists of fourteen stories which are neatly divided into two sections entitled Old and New Dreamtime. This follows the 'double mirror' (Frye, 1982) pattern of the Bible which is divided into the Old and New Testaments. The two sections are also indicative of the distinction between pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian Eden. Each cluster of seven stories is also illustrative of the Genesis myth according to which God created the world in seven days. Further, the number seven represents the seven phases of 'what is traditionally called revelation: creation, exodus, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel and apocalypse' (The Great Code xxii).

Old Dreamtime

The opening story titled 'The Beginning of Life' is a retelling of the awakening of the Rainbow Serpent 'from her slumber' (59). The Mother of Life moves around the earth and leaves imprints which later become different geographical places. She also coaxes the sleeping creatures of the world awake locations and 'thus life [begins] on earth' (60). She makes laws. Punishments and rewards follow the good and evil deeds. The creation reaches its zenith with the birth of the 'the human form' (60).

This myth about creation bears a superficial resemblance to the Christian myth about the origin of man described in Chapter One of Genesis. What is strikingly different is the content. In Nunukul's text, the patriarchal God is replaced by 'the Mother of Life'. Also, God's creation of the world is replaced by Mother's awakening of her children. The creation of man who is 'in His own image' (Genesis 1:27), is replaced by the natural laws of evolution with unshakeable belief in the power of the land. Eco-ethnic belief is reinforced in the statement of faith: 'the land would always be theirs, and that no one should ever take it from them' (61). Thus, land and its resources are not granted as rewards for good behaviour but are givens.

The focus on land is reinforced in the moral conception of good and evil. 'Biami and Bunyip' is about the creation of Good and Evil spirits on earth. Once again, there are striking similarities between story and Christianity's Original Sin. However, sin here is not the result of moral disobedience but of transgression of the law of the land. The rule of the Rainbow Serpent is to abstain from eating one's own totem animal----an eco-based rule of preservation and balanced distribution of natural resources.

Bunyip, who transgresses this law, is banished from the tribe. Like Satan, he vows to 'use his evil influence to bring unhappiness to the tribes' (62). Biامي, the good and faithful spirit is given 'the power to protect the tribes from harm' (62). Mirrabooka, also a good man is transformed into a pole star as a reward for 'the way in which he looked after the welfare of his people' (64)³. Biامي and Mirrabooka correspond to the figures of Moses and Noah.

The complete trust in the natural order of things is revealed in the aboriginal view of death as an extension of life in the 'shadow land' (66). The story 'Curlew' describes death as a natural culmination of life. In fact, the Curlew tribe which is known for its watchfulness and loyalty is transformed into 'guardians of the departed ones' (66). This is done in order to allay people's fear of death. This idea is in direct contrast to the Biblical conception of death as an act of condemnation. Genesis 2:17 depicts death as punishment, a stance which is validated in Romans 5:12 – 'just as through man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.' Hence, death is not the end of natural life but a punishment for the sin of transgression.

An interesting feature of Nunukul's *Dreamtime* is that the formulation of moral/ethical codes is based on the benefits for the group rather than for the individual. Two stories exemplify this aspect. 'Burr-Nong' describes the rituals of initiation into adulthood when 'they are taught the tribal secrets, the art of manhood and womanhood, ... Patience and tolerance, and the art of pain-bearing' (68-9). Most of these rituals are lessons that teach a tribe 'how to live and find happiness in a harsh land' (69). Similarly, 'The Midden' focusses on social codes of conduct whereby the tribe undertakes the task of gathering food. No individual is allowed to hoard or to starve. Midden is the term used for the bones and shells of a meal 'gathered together carefully and placed on top of each other' (72). This ritual is believed to prevent 'the scattering of living animals and fish' (72). The message forwarded through these stories contrasts with the codification of morals in the Bible through the Covenants of Eden, Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses. The prescriptive nature of these covenants is replaced in *Dreamtime* by descriptive, nature-based rules.

New Dreamtime

In the Bible, the link between the Old and New Testaments is through prophecies and their realizations. In Nunukul's *Dreamtime*, the two sections follow the notion of *Alcheringa*. In the aboriginal worldview, time is a continuum representing the coexistence of past, present and future. In this sense, retrieving old myths enables creation and explanation of new ones.

The opening story ‘Oodgeroo’ tells of the quest of the woman writer ‘who longed for her lost tribe, The woman know that she must search for the old stories – and through them she might find her tribe again’ (78). In her search, she is helped by Biami who advises her to collect the bark of the paperbark tree and ‘the charred sticks [of] the dead fire of her tribe’ (79). The story ends in Oodgeroo successfully countering the ravages of time and returning to Old Dreamtime. Through this story Nunukul inscribes herself, her tribe and their old tales into the main text.

Oodgeroo’s position as the author of the text has some interesting connotations. In Biblical terms, the word *author* refers to ‘creator, originator and writer’ (*The Open Bible* 64). In Hebrew 12:2, Christ is described as ‘the author and finisher of our faith’. The important word here is faith, because the ultimate duty of the author is to create faith. By corollary, as the author of this fiction, Nunukul becomes the creator and originator of faith in aboriginal tradition and heritage.

The stories of *New Dreamtime* depict a post-lapsarian Eden. However, here there is no sin and redemption, only advice on human virtues and vices. The distinction is not between moral condemnation and appreciation—the idea is to protect the social fabric of the aborigines. The stories in this section revolve around themes of love (in its various aspects) and human relationships.

The theme of love is explored in stories such as ‘Tuggan-Tuggan’, ‘Pomera’ and ‘Talwalpin and Kowinka’. These stories examine acceptable and unacceptable forms of love. Lust, physical love, blissful union and immortal love are presented as stages in the man-woman relationship. Lust is condemned only when it threatens the institution of marriage, thereby placing the individual on a warpath with society. This standpoint contrasts starkly with the Biblical view of the original sin leading to the distinction between love and lust, which in turn introduce concepts like shame and fear. Genesis 3:7 and 10 describes Adam and Eve’s perception of their naked state after they have eaten the forbidden fruit. Further, God’s curse clearly establishes the distinction between lust and love. Witness Genesis 3:16:

*I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;
In pain you shall bring forth children;
Your desire shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you.*

Nunukul’s *Dreamtime* love is all encompassing. ‘Tuggan-Tuggan’ is the story of an immortal and moving love of a young hunter for ‘a slender and very beautiful tree’ (81). In an attempt to provide a cloak for the tree,

Tuggan-Tuggan neglects his duties and is banished from the tribe who also punish him by throwing away his favourite boomerang. Tuggan-Tuggan's travels in search of a suitable cloak prove useless and he comes back to his tree with a cloak of boomerang at the time of his death. Even though, his love is of the highest order, it is condemned because it is unnatural and unusual. 'Pomera' illustrates the idea of forbidden love. Pomera's sin is that of coveting another man's woman. He makes a treacherous plan to abduct the woman. The plan fails and the woman dies. Biامي punishes Pomera by turning him into a tree, which resembles the 'nulla-nulla' (84) that he made. The tree stands as a warning to the tribe, a reminder of 'Pomera's treachery and his love for a forbidden woman', and the fact that 'as a tree he must carry his shame forever' (84). Here again, the punishment given to Pomera is based on social, not moral ethics.

The story of 'Talwalpin and Kowinka' is based on the idea of immortal love. Kowinka, 'the greatest swimmer of the tribe' (85) falls in love with Talwalpin, 'a beautiful woman of the tribe' (85). The two are once caught in a storm and are set adrift in the river when their canoe overturns. They refuse to let go of each other and are drowned. Biامي takes pity on them and unites them in death. Their love is immortalised through the cotton tree and the red mangrove tree that always grow side by side (86).

The remaining stories of *New Dreamtime* focus on the social code of conduct, which protect the rights of the individual and the community. Thus, the vices are punished but the individual is not condemned on moral grounds. The last three stories of the collection enumerate the punishable vices. In 'Tia—Gam' a child figure⁴ is punished for his disobedience. Tia—Gam's practical jokes are patiently borne by the tribe until, one day, he wanders off into the dark rain forest. Bunyip casts a spell on him and makes him weave together the branches of tall trees so that light cannot enter the forest. Tia—Gam is caught in this region of darkness forever. 'Boonah' recreates the story of the conflict between Boonah's peaceful and artistic tribe and a lazy and quarrelsome banished tribe. Echoing the conflict between Abel and Cain, Esau and Jacob, Boonah's tribe is killed by the banished tribe when they roll down boulders from the mountain. Bunyip uses this enmity to destroy the banished tribe who disturb 'his rainforest home' (91). The story illustrates the destruction caused by hatred and anger, which leads to an imbalance in nature. This is in direct contrast to the Biblical idea of pre-ordained virtue and vice.

The concluding story 'Mai' portrays evil resulting from avarice and stealth. Mai's efforts to obtain seeds for making flour are frustrated by an old woman and her wily tribe. Mai steals the seeds and puts honey ants in their place.

The old woman bites the ants in two and the ants punish them by turning the old woman and her tribe into screeching birds. Mai and her tribe are turned into black bean trees whose flowers are ‘the same colours as the plumage of the mountain parrots’ (93). The story condemns greed and vengeance. What is of note in the last three stories is that good and evil find their culmination in nature. Conversely, it is the things natural that exemplify moral codes.

Conclusion

Nunukul’s text recreates the various shades and nuances of *Dreamtime* within a Biblical framework. Where the themes are parallel there is a neat reversal of implications. The attempt is to represent a lost heritage by means of a now widely accepted canon. More importantly, it problematises the whole question of canon itself.

In Nunukul’s conception of the world, the emphasis is not on a divine absolute but on the human construction of the world and the divine at logical, rational, emotional and intuitive levels. Further, in *Dreamtime* there is no *absolute given* but instead an attempt to shed light on the implications of human understanding of life and its relation to cosmology, theology, ethics, morality, ethnology, ecology etc. The only inconsistency in *Dreamtime* is in the conception of the creation of man. Unlike other aspects of the universe, which follow a natural order of evolution, man is created. Strong Biblical echoes are there. One possible explanation is that the aborigines did not originate in the great southern land but were island hoppers who moved to the Australian continent many millennia ago.

My framework-----that of setting the Biblical form against the aboriginal content-----emphasizes the stance taken by certain post-colonial critical views regarding the writing of history. Nunukul’s text re-writes indigenous history and problematises the colonial version of aboriginal history. It also implies the writing back to the centre from an *ex-centric* position (Linda Hutcheon’s coinage). In fact, this shadow region between the centre and the periphery provides the space to reevaluate and reassess the canonical representations of the natives. Moreover, by *mimicing* (Homi Bhabha’s term) the western framework, this version of *Dreamtime* locates the individual culture and makes sure that both the master and the centre understand it.

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Notes

1. Several post-colonial instances may be quoted to the simultaneous development of Christianity and Colonialism. Closer home, Veeramamunivar's works are handy illustrations for the representation of the spirit of Christianity in the Tamil literary tradition.

2. Nunukul describes rainbow Serpent as the Mother of Life. However, several tribes identify this figure with different spirits. For instance, the Kunwinjku tribe refers to the rainbow serpent as Ngalyod who is a male spirit. For detailed description, see Paul Raffaele, "Dreamtime Journey", *Reader's Digest*, December 98: 88-97.

3. The story has another point of interest. The western coloniser renames Mirrabooka as the Southern Cross—but it is really Mirrabooka there, stretched across the sky; he will be there forever, for Biami has made it so (65). This passage shows a classic use of the reversal mode by which Adam's and coloniser's namings are re-named. This idea of naming has been fully analysed in Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*.

4. Tia-Gam distinctly echoes *abiku*, the child spirit in African myths and Carl Jung's category of the trickster figure.

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