



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol 11 No.2 June, 2026

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.11/No.2 June, 2026

Tree of Life in a Lifeless State: A Bioregional Reading of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'Municipal Gum' and Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree"

J Edwin Moses

Assistant Professor & Research Scholar,
PG & Research Department of English,
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University).
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India.

&

Dr. Suresh Frederick

Associate Professor of English,
SASTRA University, Thanjavur - 613401
Former Professor & UG Head, Department of English,
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University).



Received- 11/06/2026, Revised-19/06/2026, Accepted-05/07/2026, Published-31/07/2026

Abstract: A bioregion is identified by its distinct flora, fauna, geographical features of a place along with sustainable human cultures, dynamic relationship and evolution in relation with the land. "A bioregion is a part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural rather than dictates, distinguishable from other areas by attributes of flora, fauna, climate, soils and landforms, and the human settlements human and cultures those attributes have given rise to"(Sale 78). Noonuccal was born on November 3, 1920, in Stradbroke Island, Queensland. Most Australians know her as Kath Walker, the name she was given by white people, but in 1988 she decided to change her name to identify more closely with her Aboriginal heritage. 'Municipal Gum' is a poem about a tree which is in a bad condition struggling to survive, surrounded by the hard bitumen. Gieve Patel, an Indian writer from the Green Movement describes the pain of a tree which is uprooted from its bioregion. The researcher attempts a bioregional reading of the poems which exposes the present state of the tree and the world. The loss of bioregions in Australia and India and the present condition of the Indigenous people is discussed with the need to reinhabit and protect the natural world.

Keywords: Bioregion, Australia, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Tree, Aborigines.

Introduction

Trees play a major role in providing habitats for many species, and also they have a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change. The life of a tree is more valuable than a human being. This may be an exaggerated statement, but the tree is beneficial to multiple species. Matsya Purana(Chapter 154, Verses 511-512) says "One Tree is Equal to Ten Sons"(Roy 119). Matsya Purana teaches that taking care of nature is the highest form of duty (*Dharma*). A single tree sustains hundreds

of life generation after generation even though the one who planted the tree may have died. A tree gives life to small species like the insects to elephants, the largest animal on land, including human beings. Many species are dependent on trees for food, shelter, oxygen and reproduction.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly known as Kath Walker, was one of Australia's foremost Indigenous poets and political activists. Oodgeroo was born on Stradbroke Island in Queensland on November 3, 1920. She was named as Kath Walker by white people, but she changed her name in 1988 to more closely reflect her Aboriginal roots. She is the first prominent Aboriginal author known for her writings on Aboriginal culture, racial injustices suffered by native people, and fostering interethnic harmony, among other topics. Some of her best-known works are "We are Going," which contrasts the dreamtime experiences with the suffering of the Aboriginal people today. Another children's collection of short stories, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, showcases the Aboriginal worldview, culture, indigenous knowledge and ecological wisdom. It also bemoans the present state of the Aborigines and their culture. Roberta Sykes opines "Oodgeroo's legacy, which she has left for future generation is vast" (Shoemaker 40). Her work consistently advocates for Aboriginal rights, the preservation of culture, and the environment. "Municipal Gum," a poem about a gum tree caught in a city space, reflects Noonuccal's broader concerns regarding the dislocation of Aboriginal identity and nature within colonial and urban spaces. This paper applies a bioregional lens to the poem, exploring how Noonuccal positions the gum tree as a symbol of both ecological and cultural displacement. By focusing on the gum tree's unnatural positioning in the artificial urban environment, Noonuccal critiques the violence of colonization, urbanization and its erasure of Indigenous relationships with the land.

Gieve Patel, an Indian writer but medical practitioner by profession became a part of the green movement which took efforts to protect the environment. Patel is a keen observer of nature and society. He is also a painter with paintings of nature, humans and various aspects of society. He explored contemporary life with its beauty and complexity in his writings and paintings. The title "Municipal Gum" refers to the *eucalyptus tree* (commonly known as the 'gum tree') that has been placed in an urban setting, specifically under the control or jurisdiction of the city municipality. In this context, the term "municipal" suggests the tree is no longer in its natural habitat but has been transplanted into an urban, man-made artificial environment. The gum tree, a native and symbolic part of the Australian landscape and culture, becomes a representation of nature being confined or constrained within the artificial structures of human urban civilization.

Eucalypts trees or gum trees are evergreen ancient trees with evolutionary roots dating back to the Gondwana land. There are more than 800 species of Eucalypts trees dominating the Australian bioregions. It has adapted itself to the complex climatic conditions of Australia and has become resilient over the years. Many Aboriginal tribes consider the tree as sacred and used it for healing and medicinal purposes. "For an Aborigine, every tree, stone and creek had a spiritual meaning as well as a cultural history attached to it as they identified their ancestral spirits with their environment" (Frederick 59). They are

mentioned in Aboriginal stories and settler diaries, becoming a pervasive presence in the Australian literary landscape and naturescape.

The title of the article highlights the central theme of displacement and the unnatural juxtaposition of a living, organic entity (the gum tree) in a rich bioregion against the lifeless, urban environment. The word "municipal" emphasizes that the tree is now part of the city's public space, no longer free in its natural bioregional ecosystem, but controlled and managed by humans. This serves as a metaphor for the border colonial experience in the history of Aboriginal Australians, who, like the gum tree, were displaced from their native lands and forced into unsuitable environments shaped by external forces. In Patel's "On Killing a Tree" the tree becomes lifeless as it is literally chopped and killed leading to the destruction of a bioregional feature. The title pithily encapsulates the poem's critique of urbanization and colonization, reflecting the tension between nature and culture, freedom and control.

Bioregionalism as an Ecological philosophy

Bioregionalism is more than a place or movement; rather it is an ecological philosophy that emphasizes the importance of bioregions in shaping human culture and identity. "A bioregion is a part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural rather than human dictates, distinguishable from other areas by attributes of flora, fauna, climate, soils and landforms, and the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to" (Sale 78). It advocates for living in harmony with local ecosystems and acknowledges the interdependence of human and non-human life forms in a particular region. "Bioregionalism is a multifaceted philosophy and social movement that emphasises the importance of living in harmony with the natural world by recognizing and respecting the unique ecological and cultural characteristics of specific geographic regions, known as bioregions" (12609). Bioregionalism resists the homogenizing forces of urbanization, globalization and industrialization, calling for a deeper recognition of bioregional landscapes, flora, and fauna as integral to indigenous environmental and cultural sustainability.

A bioregional perspective of "Municipal Gum," helps to understand the poem's thematic concerns clearly. The gum tree is a native species, deeply connected to the Australian bioregion, yet its relocation to the urban city space represents a disruption of its natural habitat. The Aborigines of Australia lived in the land for thousands of years, before the advent of the colonizers. J. Edwin Moses and Dr. Suresh Frederick opine, "The land is experienced in myriad ways by humans, both individually and as members of communities, clans, tribal groups, cultures and nations" (2326). Similarly, Noonuccal uses the tree as a metaphor for the dislocation of the Indigenous people of Australia under colonial rule, severed from their sacred ancestral lands and forced into artificial environments that disregard their deep connections to the bioregions. In the poem "On Killing a Tree" Gieve Patel exposes how the tree is uprooted from its local habitat because of deforestation and ecological exploitation. The anthropocentric activities of human beings has led to the commodification of a tree as a resource for human

greed and comfort. Noonuccal and Patel emphasize an ecocentric living with deep connection with nature which makes us sensitive to the sufferings of nature.

Bioregional Reading of "Municipal Gum" and "On Killing a Tree"

The poem begins with an image of the gum tree standing in a street, an unnatural and jarring juxtaposition of nature within an urban environment. The speaker addresses the tree directly:

"Gumtree in the city street,
Hard bitumen around your feet,
Rather you should be in the cool world
Of leafy forest halls and wild bird calls." (Oodgeroo 49)

The opening lines establish the tree as out of place, its roots constrained by the hard "bitumen," a substance associated with human construction and industrialization. The contrast between the "cool world" of the forest and the "city street" sets up a binary between nature and civilization, with the tree positioned as an unwilling participant in the latter. In the discussion on the relationship between nature and culture, Peter Barry in the essay titled "Ecocriticism" categorizes the overlapping complex relationship into four areas. This poem can be categorized under area four "the domestic picturesque"(e.g. parks, gardens, lanes)" (Barry 246). The gum tree is caught up in a domestic urban space, particularly on a lane. The reference to the "leafy forest halls and wild bird calls" evokes a bioregional space where the tree would naturally thrive, free from the constraints of urban life.

Noonuccal describes the condition of the tree by further comparing the tree to a "poor cart-horse". He states that the tree is 'castrated', 'broken' undergoing so much pain like how the horse feels the pain when driven by men who control it without regard to its well-being.

"Here you seems to me
Like that poor cart-horse
Castrated, broken, a thing wronged
Strapped, and buckled, its hell prolonged"

The suffering of the tree is prolonged as the tree is constrained in an artificial urban space. In a similar way the aborigines of Australia suffered due to cultural disruption and displacement.

The Tree as a Symbol of Displacement

The gum tree's displacement mirrors the experience of Indigenous Australians who, under colonialism, were forcibly removed from their sacred lands and subjected to the violence of colonization, urbanization and modernization. Just as the tree is uprooted from its natural habitat and placed in a lifeless state, Aboriginal people have been uprooted from their

bioregional space and forced into artificial environments that strip them of their sacred communion with the land. Noonuccal's use of the tree as a metaphor allows her to critique the colonisation of both the land and its people.

The following lines deepen this sense of lament and displacement:

"O fellow citizen,

What have they done to us?" (Oodgeroo 49)

By addressing the tree as a "fellow citizen," Noonuccal humanizes it, elevating it from a mere object in the city landscape to a being with intrinsic value and rights. Deep Ecology emphasizes "the intrinsic value of nature" (Barnhill 6). The use of "us" in the second line suggests a shared experience of suffering and displacement, aligning the speaker with both the tree and Indigenous Australians. The question "What have they done to us?" implicates colonial and urban forces in the destruction of both the natural environment and Indigenous cultures.

The poem's structure, with its simple rhyme scheme and directness, creates a sense of urgency to the readers. The tree, bound in the "city street" with "hard bitumen around [its] feet," becomes a powerful symbol of the colonized subject: trapped, confined, and out of place in an artificial alien environment. This bioregional perspective highlights the connection between ecological degradation and cultural dispossession leading to the loss of bioregions and bioregional cultural practices.

Patel also describes the way the tree is to be uprooted in order to kill the tree. He states

"The root is to be pulled out

Out of the anchoring earth"(Patel 111)

The tree is displaced from the deep earth. Trees are uprooted mindlessly for profit and comfort without considering the life of a tree and its usefulness to multiple species. The poet ironically described the process of cutting a tree in order to bring out the suffering and assault on trees.

The Lifelessness of Urban Space

The urban environment in "Municipal Gum" is depicted as lifeless, artificial, and hostile to both the natural world and Indigenous culture. The "hard bitumen" represents the destructive force of colonization, which paves over the land, replacing bioregions with artificial structures that prioritize economic value over ecological and cultural sustainability. The city, in this context, is a site of alienation and disconnection, where neither the tree nor Indigenous people can truly dwell. Noonuccal contrasts this lifeless state of urban city life with the vibrancy of the natural bioregion, which the tree should rightfully dwell in. The poem's bioregional critique is not only directed at the displacement of the tree and Indigenous people but also at the environmental consequences of colonization, urbanization and globalisation. The city represents a broader ecological imbalance, where human intervention disrupts the delicate interrelationship between the land and its people.

Gieve Patel describes the killing of a tree which is nourished over the years. He expresses how the tree has grown slowly in the richness of the bioregion with the nourishment of the native soil, absorbing sunlight, air, water etc. A tree takes several years to grow and reach its complete stage of development, but it is cut mindlessly.

“It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding
Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leperous hide
Sprouting leaves.” (Patel 110)

The poet attempts to create an awareness to the readers regarding the value of a tree by expressing the life and growth of a tree. The first few lines also show the resilient nature of the trees which is hard to kill with its enormous growth. It also reflects the power of nature in the contemporary world.

The process of killing a tree is described in these lines. The poet compares the act of killing a tree to the act of killing a human by humanizing the tree's pain and suffering. The poet shows words like 'bleeding', 'tied' etc which expresses the pain of the tree.

“So hack and chop
But this alone won't do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
The bleeding bark will heal” (Patel 110)

These lines are a powerful reminder of humans' insensitivity to the life of a tree. Deforestation is rapid due to the vicious cycle of the consumerist society which leads to indiscriminate cutting of trees for human comfort and excessive greed. The tree is viewed as an isolated object and a resource to be cleared leading to ecological imbalance and loss of bioregions.

Conclusion

Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "Municipal Gum" offers a profound awareness on the effects of colonization and urbanization on both the natural environment and Indigenous Australians. Through a bioregional reading, the poem can be understood as a critique of the artificiality of urban spaces and a call to recognize the deep connections between people and the land. The

gum tree, displaced from its natural habitat and trapped in a lifeless state, becomes a powerful symbol of the ongoing struggles faced by Aboriginal Australians in reclaiming their cultural and ecological heritage.

By aligning the fate of the gum tree with that of the Aboriginal people, Noonuccal underscores the importance of bioregional consciousness in resisting the homogenizing forces of colonization and globalization. The poem ultimately advocates for a return to bioregional values, where both human and non-human life forms can thrive in harmony with their bioregions. In a world increasingly dominated by urbanization, environmental degradation and climate change, "Municipal Gum" remains a powerful reminder of the need to reconnect with the land and acknowledge the wisdom of Indigenous cultures in sustaining ecological balance and preserving the bioregions.

In both these poems trees have become lifeless due to anthropocentric human actions. The pain and suffering of trees is brought out by the poets by humanizing it. The anthropocentric world's disregard for the tree, an important bioregional feature, leading to ecological imbalance and loss of bioregions. Trees play a major role in providing habitats to multiple species including humans. As we are facing a climate crisis, trees play a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Works Cited

- Barnhill, David and S.Roger Gottlieb. *Deep Ecology and World Religions*. SUNY, 2001.
- Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and cultural theory*, Manchester University Press, 2009.
- Frederick, Suresh. *Lost Land: A Poecocritical Study of Select Poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)*. Suresh Frederick. Ed. *Contemporary Contemplations on Ecoliterature*, Authorspress, 2012.
- Frederick, S., & Moses, J. E. (2024). Early Seeds of Bioregionalism: Place-Consciousness and Harmony in Andrew Marvell's "The Garden". *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 3(8), 12608 –12612.
<https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5954>.
- Frederick, S., & Moses, J. E. (2025). Dispossession and Resistance: Land and Identity in the Poetry of Harpur and Noonuccal, *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(2), 1-6
<https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i02.40238>
- Moses, J.E., Frederick, S., (2021). "Aboriginal Footprints In The Littoral Zone: A Study Of Bioregions In Select Short Stories Of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)", *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2326-2329; 2021. <https://jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/4840/1595>
- Patel, Gieve, *NCERT Book for Class-9 (English-Poem), On Killing a Tree*. NCERT, 2019.
- Sale, K., *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, Atenas y Londres: The University of Georgia Press, 2000 (original publicado: San Francisco, CA.: Sierra Club, 1985).



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.11/No.2 June, 2026

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People*, Wiley, 2021.

Roy, Sumana, *How I Became a Tree*. Aleph Book Company. 2017.

Shoemaker, Adam, *Oodgeroo: A Tribute*, University of Queensland, 1994.