

ABORIGINAL LITERATURE: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Australia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world. Postcolonial theorist Diana Brydon (1987) identifies Australia as one of the settler colonies where the English language and literature were transported whether by settlers, convicts or slave masters to a foreign territory. And from there it was much more difficult to eradicate an internalised Englishness that militated against developing an indigenous identity. It creates the backdrop for possibilities of postcolonial sociolinguistic and socio-cultural resourcefulness and creativity. There is no point in denying that Australian literary traditions have its genesis in Anglo- European colonialism. Australia is the home for immigrants from more countries than the United States.

Key Words: *Sociolinguists, European Colonialism, Socio-Cultural Resourcefulness, immigrants etc.*

The problem of assimilation and its counter openness continue to be fore-grounded in literary works of the Aboriginal Australian canon. Creative writing by Australian Aboriginals came to be recognised only in the second half of the 20th century. The growth of aboriginal literature is directed connected to the rise of Aboriginal political power. The issues of Aboriginal people and their ramifications become questionable points in the works of Aboriginal writers. The land issues, the executive policies implemented by the white advents, the most condemnable genocide culture, and claim on the traces of aboriginal existence (*Terra-nullius*), stolen attitude and soon find place in the fictional works of Aboriginal writers. The identity of the Aboriginals, the sense of belongingness, stolen loss of culture, misrepresentation and devaluing attitude of these people are highly interrogated and questioned the powerful phrases like 'First Peoples Literature', 'Literature of Native People', 'Aboriginal literature', 'Fourth World Literature' and so on. The act of writing often becomes more than something creative for some Aboriginal people who seek to use the process as a vehicle for analysing, processing, determining, understanding and asserting their identity. With the representation of Aboriginal issues through the fictional form has made the humanity to think broadly and act humanly. As a result, after the 1960s, Aboriginal people successfully gained Australian citizenship and voting rights. Land rights agitation such as the Yirrkala Bark Petition and the Gurindji Petition draw nationwide attention to the cause of the aborigines. Later followed by Larissa Behrendt (2003), *Jack Davis* (1970), *Lionel Fogarty* (1983), *Kevin Gilbert* (1971), *Jane Harrison* (1998), *Ruby Langford Ginibi* (1964), *Doris Pilkington Garimara* (1996), *Kim Scott* (1993), *Alex Wright* (1997), *Sam Watson* (1990), *Tara June Winch* (2006), *Big Bill Neidjie* (1985), *Bruce Pascoe* (1982) and so on.

I have taken up the selected works from aboriginal writers like *Kim Scott*, *Doris Pilkington Garimara* and *Alex Wright* to bring out major issues in Aboriginal Literature. The main literary texts which are focussed in this paper are *Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise* (1997), *Doris Pilkington's Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1931), *Kim Scott's True Country* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance*. Though these writers are varying considerably in style and subject matter, each of these texts not only express meanings of Aboriginality as a contemporary experience, but also as an experience of previous generations.

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* evokes missionary life in an unromantic portrayal of humanity that exposes the power relations operating between and within Aboriginal groups and the colonial overseas. Though the life trials of Ivy Koopundi, the central character, are harrowing and the reader is often confronted with challenging issues, Wright conjures up the notions of the spiritual, with hints of magical realism, that lend an esoteric quality to the text. When later in the novel the narrative shifts setting from life at St Dominic's Mission to a modern, urban context and focuses on the quest of Ivy's daughter, Mary Doolan, to discover her Aboriginal heritage. Wright maintains her exposition of the power relations and sexual politics that govern the lives of these Aboriginal women (Grossman 1998). She is also concerned with the themes of ostracism and stigmatisation that occur within communities and how this impact on the individual's sense of self. Throughout the novel *Plains of Promise*, Wright illustrates how Aboriginal identity and culture are inextricably connected to the land and how the process of colonisation has attempted to dismantle the very foundations of this culture. The text reinvents the past, and present, in original and imaginative ways while providing incisive reflections on the human condition and the dynamics of human relationships. Further, the researcher has paid attention on how *Plains of Promise* presents challenging issues in an imaginative context as we see in Melissa Lukashenka's *Steam Pigs* who confronts the reader through a realistic portrayal of a young Muni woman's life trials in contemporary outer-suburban Brisbane.

Doris Pilkington's *Fallow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1931), explained how women were sexually harassed and was used as domestics. They were denied the right to rear their children and they were forcibly removed and put in welfare homes or sent away to remote places where they were taught to think and behave in European ways. These children were never returned. They were Lost Generation or Stolen Generation. This had become the chief concern and central objective of Aboriginal writers, where they try to retrieve their identity, and to seek full participation and a sense of belonging to Aboriginal Australian society. They got success in their endeavours to some extent. An indispensable element of that endeavour is the acknowledgement of Aboriginal rights, and their translation into a modern system which provides full participation of the Aboriginal people in future. Further, the Australian Government has taken halting steps in that direction. It had declared a commitment to the settlement of 'land' claims and has extended that commitment to waters as well. Various cordial speeches have been made about the desirability of welcoming Aboriginal people into the mainstream of Australian life. Today, Aboriginal people are devoting tremendous creative energy to recover significant elements of their lost heritage. Varied Aboriginal communities are 'bringing back' their vanished ceremonies, such as the sun dance, activities such as whale hunting and boat making, and they are trying to repose the knowledge that was part of these practices. Kim Scott's award winning book *Benang* reveals the purpose of writing. The word 'Benang' is taken from Nooyngar community which means 'for better tomorrow'. Ultimately, Aboriginal people engage in the production of their own literatures, including historiography, in their own Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal writers committed fully to revive and use personal names, place names, and slang terms used by their forebearers giving a sense of satisfaction to existing Aboriginal communities and rich homage to lost identities. The process of colonization and forced removal of aboriginals from their roots and family affected aboriginals intensely. Both men and women were removed from their kin. Racial discrimination began with the advent of colonization. The policy of divide and rule was very essential for Europeans to establish new colonies. Critics were under the strong opinion that colonization is accompanied by exploitation, annexation and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior and so on. Non-aboriginal men and women played predominant role in destabilizing aboriginal life. The native-elites attempted to over-rule the aboriginal community and to assert their supremacy over the aboriginal community. The plight of aboriginal women was miserable when compared to aboriginal men. Aboriginal women were subjected to

double marginalization. Non-aboriginal women under the influence of patriarchy rendered a remarkable role in oppressing aboriginal women. Traces of this could be evidently seen in the novels *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* and *My Place*. The patriarchal misogynistic society of Australia has assigned gender roles or gender stereotypes. Non-aboriginal women, who were accustomed to these stereotypes, seconded it and brought in racial discrimination within this stereotype. And this, in turn contributed to the double or multiple marginalization's of aboriginal women. Aboriginal women received less support from non-aboriginal women. Moreover, they played an important role in heightening the traumatic effects on aboriginal women. Non-aboriginal women had a major role in the denial of aboriginal women's basic political, civil and legal rights. The feminist movement in Australia is widely criticized for excluding aboriginal women. Australian feminist movements couldn't help aboriginal women to elevate their status. It rather focused on non-aboriginal women and their problems. This situation in Australia could be equated to the criticism of Toril Moi, who levelled against Elaine Showalter, in her work *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Moi claims that, Showalter's view is limited and essentialist and also criticized Showalter for universalizing the concept of women hood in the female-phase.

Kim Scott's *True Country* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* presents similar kind experience. Having found his roots in Aboriginal community, he wishes to go back his true country. He spent some of his early earlier years in a variety of job positions. Yet it was only after working in a remote school in an Aboriginal community in north of Western Australia. He felt the voice within him rise and egg him on to research his own family history. While his experiences in Karnama provided him the material for his first novel *True Country*, his research of whatever he could lay his hand on, resulted in his magnumopus, *Benang* which traced his own and family's history and helped him deal with his problems of self-identity.

In *True Country*, Scott takes recourse to a very distinctive and typically Aboriginal method of narration. It is both an inclusive and collective narrative structure which helps him give power to both listeners and narrators. There is a plurality in the multiple voices who speak, polyphony of voices through which Billy's own story becomes relative. Thus, his own is the lead voice among a host of other Aboriginal voices in multi-voices narrative structure and such a technique helps Scott to bring out the diversity among various communities, while at the same time, he recognizes the shared heritage and ancestry as an Aboriginal community. Issues around the damage, protection, and evolution of culture, as well as the importance of language in acts of colonisation and resistance, form the foundation of *That Deadman Dance* were discussed as a focal issue. In the novel, Scott imagined a contact history between Noongar people and non-indigenous people (both British settlers and American whalers) in an imagined landscape closely inspired by his hometown, Albany, and the surrounding area on the south-east coast of Western Australia. As Scott notes, some historians have called this area 'the friendly frontier'. Scott takes this landscape, together with historical accounts and testimonies of indigenous and non-indigenous people as well as the work of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, to imagine a place in which the term 'the friendly frontier' makes sense but is also disquieting. The resultant story ran from 1826 to 1844, although not chronologically narrated. Jumps in time, forward and back, give the story a charged feel by showing how European settlement builds sturdy foundations, something that seems unlikely in the earliest uncertain moments of occupation.

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* presented the story of a mother and daughter -though they never meet. Ivy Koopundi is a child born into St Dominic's, a missionary for Aboriginals in the Northern Territory, and her life there is far from perfect. She is subjected to constant torture, because it is believed her presence in the camp is a curse. When her daughter, Mary, is born under unfortunate circumstances, the newborn is whisked away to be looked after properly. Years later, Mary returns to the camp, in the hope of finding out who she really is. The narrative part of the novel is of two halves. The first half of the novel concerned itself with the treatment of Ivy in her youth. She is tormented by the other Aboriginal tribes who

are in charge of the camp, because her people are unknown to them. Similarly, because she is a half-caste, she has caught the eye of the superintendent of the camp, and is being raped. After Mary is born, she snaps, and readers get a really good little section between the two main stories about her time in a mental institution. There's this feeling throughout the novel that no one really knows what to do with Ivy, and as such, she is bounced back and forth through so many different situations, none of them are any good for her. Clearly Alexis Wright has a point to make about the treatment of Aboriginals in the twentieth century - and she pulls it off surprisingly well. She doesn't have to resort to melodrama or trying to falsely pulling at our heartstrings - the facts are staring us right in the face, and they are pretty brutal by themselves. The second half of the novel, Mary Koopundi has grown up, and the parallels begin to cascade around us. She, too, has a daughter with a man who leaves her pretty quickly, and works for an organisation trying to organise some kind of pan-Aboriginal political action so their voice is recognised by the Australian public, and the government. This insight into the way they work, the blocks they constantly face, and the infighting that is such a huge part of the Aboriginal community were the most interesting facets of the novel. Wright herself is in Mary, as she seems to be a heartfelt character that one instantly feels for, and her daughter is lovely as well. And while Mary and Ivy meet, they do so in circumstances that means they never know. The Stolen Generation has been in the news quite a bit lately, and this look at how these people are treated by Aboriginal communities trying to forget the past is also a fascinating insight. *Plains of Promise* is not physically big, but thematically huge, and essentially gives us a history of the Aboriginal people in the twentieth century covering their suffering. A sample study of character Ivy showcases the Aboriginal women suffering. The character Ivy is living, along with a huge herd of feral goats, near the rubbish dump, sleeping in an old refrigerator box. Fear of infection from the goats, perhaps TB, spreads through the town, and an early morning raid is organised by the Council that has 'deployed every bulldozer in the vicinity into action, and marshalled every man with a Gun Licence into the Town Hall for instructions and bullets'.

The current proliferation of mining activities on Aboriginal land, for example, poses an immediate threat to Aboriginal survival. In very part of Australia, the conflict between the indigenous and the mining interests display in the starkest relief of the desperate struggle for survival and the inexorable mechanisms of dispossession. Aboriginal people are demanding rights in land, including full mineral rights and rights in renewable and non-renewable resources. They are also demanding full right of veto over mining and exploration proposals on their lands, protected by Commonwealth legislation. The National Aboriginal Conferences, Aboriginal Land Councils and other organisations are engaged in new strategies, particularly in the international arena, to prevent the further loss of Aboriginal lands and the destruction of Aboriginal societies at the hands of racist State Governments, mining companies and others. The Australian Aboriginal people at present are much concerned about the failure of the Australian Government and other countries in the Western world to take positive action to recognise the indigenous people's inalienable right to determine their future and continued existence in their own country. A growing international readership and viewership for indigenous storytelling, methodologies and cultural production is evident on many fronts. The expanding place of indigenous literature in the world is marked by indigenous presses, websites, academic courses and journals. Thus, by probing into the details of Aboriginal history, one understands the hierarchical 'binary oppositions' constructed by the dominant Western paradigm between Western and indigenous notions of power, legitimacy and authority. Aboriginal writings explore language and discourse as a source of indigenous oppression.

In conclusion, I would say that the Aboriginal writings are focussed on reconstituting their historical, racial, metaphysical identity fragmented by colonial intervention. They go in search of roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors. They seek to establish continuity with the past. To make the Aboriginal discourses legitimate and to realise their independent identity, writers concentrate on developing a vocabulary that is indigenous and which is intelligible within the global understanding. The

writers express the sorrow of broken cultural lineages to effect a cultural revival. They uncover the networks of racial and ancestral affiliation to mine the communal memory. Such an attempt is reflected in the writings of Doris Pilkington, Kim Scott, and Alexis Wright too. The urge to write the past grew particularly acute because the European settlers represented the pre-conquest period as *terra-nullius*, unmarked by any sort of significant action or achievement. The early native writers retorted to such imagination. Europe's colonial officers favoured scribal over cultures. But, for the Aboriginal authors, historical retrieval was primarily possible only through the reclamation of oral history. Writings in the form of fiction, poetry, literary epic or transcribed oral tales, and historical researches were produced subsequently to establish their rich and varied existence in their continent. The new wave of writings unsettled the world picture marginalising Aboriginal people who were portrayed as passive onlookers and victims falling into the hands of the colonisers became the chief subjects of their history, wherein incidents of fighting, plotting against the coloniser's encroachment, and tales of failure or success were all discussed. Writers like Kim Scot, Alexis Wright, Pilkington Sally Morgan, Mudrooroo and others are able to restore a connection to the world as historical actors, which the colonialist discourse had denied.

These writers not only took on the task of uncovering the past accompanied by the noise of conflicting memories, but also looked into the silenced past, which had been partially erased. Imaginary and actual homecoming to the sites of treachery, slavery and exploitation and recollection the rich ancestral memory feature become prominent in the works of these select writers. The narratives of these writers become part of the historical narrative, helping, in the process, in creating and framing symbols for a progressive nation. To fill in the spaces where Aboriginal discourse had been suppressed, indigenous writers attempted to bring their lost languages back to life as they felt doubly colonised or marginalised. To resist the dilution of Aboriginal cultures, they felt the need for authenticating their history. They wrote about their myths of origin, tales of their early life, culture and customs and about their bush life in the interior. They reclaimed their own cultural myths cultural identity and made their mythic past alive and present within the limits of another culture.