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EXPLORING COLONIALISM AND ORIENTALISM IN PETER CAREY'S
OSCAR AND LUCINDA

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ABSTRACT

Peter Carey (1943-) is one of the most renowned Australian writers. His Booker Prize-winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) gained immense popularity. This novel explores various themes such as passion, providence, love, religion, and gambling. Carey uses black humour in his writing and *Oscar and Lucinda* is one of the best examples of black humour. This novel portrays the story of two eccentric star-crossed passionate lovers. But in the background of the novel, there are layers of many issues. Carey emphasizes on the condition of Aboriginal peoples and their treatment by the White society. He deals with racism and colonial tension in Australia. Carey presents the glass church as a spiritual and moral justification of colonial domination and as a major symbol in this novel. Spreading Christianity and civilizing the indigenous are always depicted as a holy mission of the colonizers. The glass church is presented as European aestheticism and a mission of imposition of European culture in the exotic land of Australia, and the missionaries in the novel played a significant role in cultural transplantation. Carey displays the marginalization of Australian Aboriginal peoples by the colonizers who often considered them as mysterious, exotic, and wild. The novel depicts the journey of the protagonist, Oscar who decides to serve as a missionary in Australia and becomes part of chaos against Aboriginal peoples. The present paper attempts to analyse Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda* from the lens of colonialism, racism, and orientalism. The novel depicts how the Aboriginal the original inhabitant of Australia have been exploited and how the Western philosophy treated the Aboriginal as black, inferior, and mysterious.

Keywords: Colonialism, Racism, Orientalism, Aboriginal, Migration, Imperialism.

Peter Carey (1943-) is a widely acclaimed and celebrated Australian contemporary novelist. He is among the five authors to get the Booker Prize twice and also the next contender for the Nobel Prize in Australian literature. Carey received Australia's most prestigious award, the Miles Franklin Award thrice. He often used black humour in his novel to show the helpless victims of fate and character. His prominent works include *Bliss* (1981), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), and *True History of Kelly Gang* (2000). Parallel to this, he also published short story collections and non-fiction. Carey has established himself as a prolific and versatile writer. His works deal with varied subject matter, themes, and genres. Complex architecture, fascinating character profiles, and sophisticated narratives are hallmarks of Carey's novels.

The present paper attempts to analyse Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda* from the lens of Colonialism, Racism, and Orientalism. The paper delineates the effect of colonialism on the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and its repercussions on their culture, religion, tradition, language, values, individual identity, and power dynamics.

The history and identity of Australia is still undecided. Aboriginal peoples were the original inhabitants of Australia. The colonial past of Australia is deeply ingrained in the nation's history and continues to influence its social, political, and economic environments. The colonial practice of Australia not only denied the existence of the indigenous population but also sought to demolish their languages, cultures, and way of life, in a concerted effort to assimilate them into the dominant colonial society. The novel offers the multifaceted dimensions of the colonial and post-colonial history of Australia, the complex interplay of indigenous identity, migration, and the ongoing challenges of reconciling a diverse and multifaceted national identity.

In this novel, Carey vividly portrays Australia as an orphaned country of the convicts. Australia got full sovereignty from the United Kingdom on 1st January 1901. Colonialism has successfully rooted out the approximately forty thousand-year-old culture of Aboriginal peoples to institutionalize Christianity. Even after getting independence, Australia still has a hangover of colonialism.

The term colonialism has been a fascinating topic for colonized countries, scholars, and theorists. Colonialism is a politically charged term that has risen from European countries' demands for power and resources. Colonialism is the domination and exploitation of minorities by the people in power through territorial invasion and claims of their authority in that territory.

The objective of this theory is to disseminate their unheard voices by the writer of the colonized country. The colonial study has emerged as a critical theory to examine the complex relationship between colonizers and colonized. Carey critically demonstrates the relationship between the colonizers and the indigenous. The characters in Carey's novel depict imperial and Eurocentric attitudes towards the inhabitants, one of the characters Mr. Jeffris, who is the representative of imperialism and wants to expand the power of his country. He justifies the murder of indigenous by saying "Churches are not carried by choirboys, neither has the Empire been built by angels" (Carey 484). Colonialism deals with nature and the collision of power dynamics. The colonizers' objective of colonization was to expand their power, exploit the colonized, and spread Western culture, religion, and language in colonies, and ignore and distort the culture, religion, language, and history of the colonized. British imperialism produced many colonies in the world and Australia was one among them. Their justification for the domination and exploitation of the colonized is that they civilized them for their benefit.

Another subject matter that the paper takes into account is Orientalism. Orientalism is the representation of the East or the Orient's culture, religion, society, and language by the West. Edward Said one of the prominent Palestine writers talks about Eurocentrism and the Orient and Occident relationship in his renowned book *Orientalism* (1978). Said discusses the mental colonization of the East by the West. He is also concerned with the systematic knowledge of the Orient and analyses the

dichotomy of us versus them, which is established by the people in power and their Eurocentric attitude for the sake of gaining benefit from the Orient. Said argues that they have the power to produce knowledge and disseminate it; thus, they were in a position to act as a knowledge producer, which M. Foucault termed 'discourse'. In this novel, the knowledge producer is Mr. Jeffris who wants to map the unmapped country and handle the indigenous as subject race. The West treated the orient as a subject race and the knowledge of the subject race or the Orient makes their management easy and profitable. According to the West, knowledge gives power and more power requires more knowledge. Britishers control their colonies through hegemony, an indirect way of domination. They treat Orient as a subject race that needs to be governed.

Australia is a country rich in minerals and resources. Carey reveals how White hegemony exploits the Aboriginal land for the sake of resources, "This money did not belong to them, or to her either. The money was stolen from the land. The land was stolen from the blacks" (128). Edward Said explains this exploitation in his book *Orientalism* (1978) as "Projects". Said discussed how Whites or the West considered the East as unconscious, untouchable, demonic, odious, sensual, and mysterious. The White viewed the Black or the Orient's society, culture, language, and religion from a vantage point as inferior. Orientalism was the rationalisation of colonial rule to justify their unjust rules.

In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey underscores that Whites regarded themselves as rational, normal, mature, and virtuous which echoes Said's notion as presented in *Orientalism*. In this novel, Carey presents two characters Oscar and Reverend Hasset as Christian missionaries in Australia or the so-called messenger of God and discard the religion and culture of the indigenous without even knowing it. Although this novel is the story of two eccentric star-crossed lovers, but in the background of the novel Carey, talked about the ill mindset of Whites and how they address the Aboriginal as black, alien, nigger, "murderous kumbaingiri" (484), and "treacherous knaves" (484), which shows their Orientalist and Racist beliefs. Carey demonstrates how Whites think of indigenous as, "these blacks, he said were the most murderous of all, having been dispossessed of their lands and driven into the dense, tumbled country of the 'Fall'. They had their backs against the wall." (173). He also unfolds their frames of mind and thought of themselves as civilized, angel, and superior and it is their right to civilize, dominate, and murder them.

In the beginning of the novel, Carey displays an incident of marginalizing the indigenous tribe; "they are arguing about who controls this shire - pushed an entire tribe of aboriginal men and women and children off the edge" (3). Carey himself is an atheist but depicts a floating glass church as a cultural, spiritual, religious, and European aesthetic symbol. In this novel, Carey explores the major theme, which is proselytization, in such a casual way that it seems as the duty of Whites to convert them to Christianity. Whites think of Blacks as alien, uncivilized, eccentric, savage, and barbaric people. They believed that they owed it to these savage Australian aboriginal people to civilize and convert them to Christianity.

The novel *Oscar and Lucinda* is famous for its subtle and minute detailing. Carey surprises his readers with an unconventional and unpredictable ending. He portrays his characters overloaded with intense emotion. The protagonists of the novel are two heterogeneous gamblers named Oscar and Lucinda. One is obsessive while the other is compulsive. The novel is about two lovers who are die-hard gamblers. The whole story revolves around both these characters. Carey also renders strong, independent women characters- Lucinda and her mother Elizabeth. On the other hand, he beautifully pictures the landscape of Australia. The novel is set in nineteenth-century-England- and Australia. Oscar, the protagonist of the novel was the son of a strict Plymouth Brethren father named Theophilus Hopkin. Oscar was a kind of fragile creature, who left his father and became an Anglican clergy.

There is a need for clergy in New South Wales, so Oscar has been sent there. He is a holy ghost but because of his habit of gambling, he was sent to Australia to serve as a missionary and to educate the inhabitant and make them civilized. Because of his Orientalist beliefs and to repent for his guilt of gambling he thought of converting indigenous and wanted to teach them about Christianity and the piousness of their religion. Having a Eurocentric attitude he completely ignores the culture and religion of the Aboriginal peoples and considers his religion as superior. But he himself is caught between gambling and religion, he is disillusioned in life but wants to direct and preach the indigenous on the right path of life and make them religious. They think that the people there grew up uncivilized and demonic.

Another character, Mr. Borrodaile says "The Australian black believed in nothing, but a devil-devil which they thought would eat them" (Carey 238). He believes that people there grew godless, uncivilized, and illiterate. And if Oscar thought of converting them he is wasting his time. Oscar is a poor chap but because of the preconceived notion and Orientalist belief about Aboriginal peoples made him serve as a missionary, he has full sympathy with Aboriginal tribes.

On his way to Australia, Oscar meets Lucinda, a young heiress, a passionate gambler, and the owner of a glass factory. Her parents were immigrants, but she was born in Australia. Her parents bought land in Australia at a much cheaper price but Lucinda knows the land belongs to indigenous and they were exploiting them. Lucinda often feels an identity crisis regarding her roots and after the death of her mother, she goes back to England but soon feels alienated. She struggles to survive in the Neo-Victorian society. She initially falls for Reverend Dennis Hasset, who guides her in glasswork. But later, she realizes that she finds comfort with Oscar and is in love with him. Their passion for gambling brings them together. Oscar also loves her, but their fate and misunderstanding separate them. Lucinda bets Oscar to transport the glass church to Boat Harbour which serves as a metaphor for the exploitation of resources and the imposition of European value on Australian soil. However, that last bet serves as a tragic and torturous ending to Oscar's life. Lucinda sent Mr. Jeffris to Boat Harbour with Oscar to protect him and deliver the floating church safely. After Oscar, Lucinda is the only character who has sympathy with the indigenous.

All the other characters of the novel think the Aboriginal tribe, is a threat to them and their society. Mr. Jeffris has a dream to become an explorer, he is a cynical character and wants to write the history of the Aboriginal tribe and for that, he made a team like Napoleon did when he marched over Egypt, he took the whole army of scholars to get knowledge of Orients and record everything about Oriental culture, language and land and Mr. Jeffris do the same.

To fulfil his dream he destroys the beautiful landscape, flora, and fauna that comes his way, and he murders many indigenous during his expedition. He is not an explorer but a mere clerk. He keeps a journal in which he records his experiences like Napoleon did. He thinks black has no right to live. He records the landscapes of the new-found world "he had put names to several largish creeks. He had set the heights of many mountains which had previously been wildly misdescribed" (Carey 484). To record and learn about Orients he learns Latin so that he can read what he is supposed to know he also learns watercolour techniques to draw landscapes of oriental land. "He recorded all this in a neat and flowing hand which gave no indication of the peculiarities of his personality. His sketches of the countryside, the long ridges of mountains, etc., were as good as anything in Mitchell's journals" (484). He can go to any extent to fulfil his dream of becoming an explorer. He believed in gaining power like an imperialist and to support his views he could quote scriptures like the colonizer does to justify their unjust.

Mr Jeffris thinks that he saved his party by murdering the Kumbangiri tribe; the local black inhabitants. He shared his opinion in his journal that "given better than we took from the spitting tribe" (Carey 484). That was his justification for the brutality and exploitation of the indigenous. The characters in the novel had a kind of unjustifiable hatred towards the Aboriginal. They were of the view

that they were superior and these inferior Black inhabitants were a threat to their society. Among them, is one of the characters, Mrs. Burrows from the entourage of Mr. d'Abbs, a friend of Lucinda. Mrs. Burrows is a widow but she has no sympathy with Aboriginal. She is too critical of Aboriginal peoples and always address to them as Blacks. She is also the love interest of Mr. Jeffris. According to her, "blacks should straight away be poisoned" (Carey 173). She wants to call out the army for a final all-out, against the Aboriginal peoples.

Thus, the novel showcases the colonial experience in Australia and the displacement of native culture and religion. Carey artistically critiques the colonial and Orientalist views in this work. The novel shows the Aboriginal population and foisting of Christian beliefs through proselytization. Oscar unintentionally becomes a part of this because of his Orientalist beliefs. Carey demonstrates the imperialistic attitude and biases of characters towards the indigenous and their exploitation. The novel is a historical narrative, unveiling the harsh reality of Australian history, and pointing out the complex, political, religious, and cultural reality. Carey also demonstrates the relationship between the inhabitants and Whites and how the inhabitants have been marginalized in their own land. The author elucidates the socioeconomic inequality and geographical displacement of indigenous.

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