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THE REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINALS IN MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Australian Aboriginal literature has accorded a critical acclaim in contemporary culture and literature. Although the term 'Aboriginal literature' has a relatively recent currency, the indigenous people of Australia have been the practitioners of creative arts and storytelling since 'time immemorial' as they would call it. However, pathetically, the stereotypical images of the Aboriginals still figure predominantly in the works of the mainstream Australian writers. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the mainstream writers' understanding (or lack of it) of the Aboriginal culture and their representation or misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture and heritage. The paper also attempts to see how Aboriginal literature has emanated as a new branch within the ambit of Australian literature because of the mainstream writers' limited treatment of the Aboriginal themes. In this regard, the paper seeks to see how the mainstream writers like Xavier Herbert, Peter Carey and Patrick White have represented the Aboriginals in their literary writings.

Keywords : 'Aboriginals', 'mainstream writers', 'stereotypes', 'representation', 'tradition', 'history making'.

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"They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented"
(Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte).

Representation plays a pivotal role in comprehending and interpreting the complex world around us. According to Stuart Hall, "representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture (Hall *The Work of Representation* 1997). How adequately one represents one's own self or the world around them is a matter of prime concern for everyone ranging from critics to common man. However, no representation is neutral and it involves issues of power and control. Much postcolonial scholarships revolve around this issues of power and politics of representation with the deployment of what Foucault has popularly termed as "discourse". Employing the Foucaultian discursive approach, Edward Said's seminal book "Orientalism" has laid the foundation for a theory of representation, where he examines Orientalism as a discourse through which the European culture managed and even produced the Orient politically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period (*Orientalism*3). Said argues that the Orient is governed through the principal product of

'representation'. He reiterates that the Orient is made visible through various western techniques of representation. These representations "rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (*Orientalism* 22). Therefore, the Orient has hardly any role in the process of representation, and it becomes a displaced and excluded object. Said's theory of representation is widely applicable in any kind of discourse that seeks to analyze the Postcolonial condition. In this regard, the politics of *representing Aboriginality* has gained considerable significance in the current academic debates and discussions. Representations of the 'native' other have circulated in the white Anglo discourse beginning from the journals of the Captain Cook in Australia. As Mudrooroo observes,

"We are dealing with a hierarchical structure of order, of power, in which the master constructs his own text, one in which he positions himself and his subordinates; or, we might even say, himself as subject and others as objects. His is all-powerful gaze and consciousness. Thus, it is a difficult task in historical texts to find true representations of the other, the object which is defined and described by the all-seeing gaze of the master. The other becomes lost in the master text which continues to write on and about- what else? – how the Native, the Aboriginal, appears to him" (*Us Mob* 8-9).

Most often the native appears to the master as 'treacherous', 'lazy', 'drunken', 'unscrupulous', 'untrustworthy', 'childish', 'cunning', 'dirty', 'ignoble', 'noble', 'primitive', 'backward', 'savage' and so on. Interestingly, the White Anglo-Celtic mainstream culture is quite comfortable with these stereotypical representations of the natives. The depiction of the native as the 'noble savage' stereotype is what Graham Huggan has termed as 'exoticism'. The 'exotic' image of the native is reiterated through representations particularly for consumption by the White mainstream readership. As Huggan argues, "To keep the margins exotic- at once threateningly strange and reassuringly familiar- is the objective of the mainstream" (*The Postcolonial* 23). This exoticism is retained through the portrayal of the natives as the naked and 'standing on one leg with woomera and spear' picture as if they existed in the timeless cultural dreamtime.

According to Mudrooroo 'Anthropology' plays similar role in the construction of 'the Aboriginal' in regard to Indigenous people as 'Orientalism' played in the construction of the Orient- the 'Other'. Until recently, the western trained archaeologist and anthropologist constructed the identities and histories of the Aboriginal people. The western hegemony which still existed in the anthropological and archeological practice effectively silenced the indigenous voices. The identity of the Indigenous Australians does not rest in an imagined Australian Aborigine, but in the multiplicity of names and identities. However, Anthropology is instrumental in constructing the one Aboriginal identity through the operation of language. Therefore, the Aboriginal people, who became one in order to redefine their cultural identity, seek to re-appropriate their past from the colonialist anthropological and historical narratives. In order to see why it is indispensable for the Aboriginal people to reinvent their past, it is important to find out how the Aboriginal people were actually represented in the Anglo-white narratives. In order to view the white Australian's perception of the Aborigines from the period of contact till the present times it is necessary to examine some of the literary representations from the vast body of White representations. In 1843, Father Raymond Vaccari, a passionist missionary noted in his memoir, "Among the evil dispositions of the Aborigines, I may mention an extreme sloth and laziness in everything, a habit of fickleness and double dealing, so much so that they stop at nothing in the pursuit of revenge. They are deceitful and cunning and they are prone to lying. They are given to extreme gluttony and, if possible, will sleep both day and night (cited in Nelson , 31). In 1899, another historian, Richard Simon remarked that, "The Aborigines are nothing but nomadic huntsmen, and this very circumstance is the reason for their low intelligence level and scantily developed artistic sense... They are entirely devoid of imagination" (cited in Nelson 31). These nineteenth century remarks and observations on Aboriginals might stem out from the ideology of Social Darwinism which graded races from the so called high European civilisation to the low primitive and nomadic tribes. But strikingly these stereotypes are circulated even in the modern Australian discourses. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Frederick Macartney , an influential Australian historian, literary critic and a champion of Australian settler literature who in his essay titled "Literature and the Aborigine" (1957) denies "any heights of feeling" and mental ability to Aboriginal people. In his words any

Aboriginal philosophy is, "on a lower mental level than that of any ordinary thoughtful man amongst ourselves" (cited in Nelson 32). Macartney's attack on the Aborigines has dismissed the Aborigines as mere objects who don't have any role in analysing intellectual topics like philosophy. However, it is upsetting that such observations are made by distinguished person of Australian academic circle and that too as recently as 1957, just a decade before giving Australian citizenship to Indigenous people. While the early settler discourses are replete with blatant racism, the more insidious form of racism occurs when the Aborigines are completely wiped out of white histories. The Aborigines are rendered invisible and non-existent in the books of historian like P. R Stephenson, where he states that, "Australia is a whole continent, unique in its natural features, and unique in the fact of its continual uniformity of race and language. We are the only continent on earth inhabited by one race, under one government, speaking one language and sharing one culture (quoted in Nelson 31). It is quite shocking that a leading Australian historian can overshadow the presence of the heterogeneous Aboriginal community who settled in Australia thousands of years prior to their arrival. In this regard, Sally Morgan's attempt to reconstruct an alternate history which is different from the white version of history is a necessity. Her words significantly reflect the necessity to counter the dominant white histories:

Well, there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at,... I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story (*My Place* 161-62).

The task of 'history making' and reclamation of tradition seems imperative for Morgan because narratives of academicians and historians like Macartney and Stephenson seem unacknowledged the histories of the Aboriginal people. Many of their accounts, if somehow presented, are often misrepresented with their limited knowledge of the Aboriginal culture and tradition. Therefore, it is imperative for the Aboriginal writer like Morgan to dig out their 'hidden history' and reclaim their rich traditional heritage from the distorted version of white representations. However, as stated above, Aboriginal representations by both Aborigines and non-aboriginals have come a long way indeed. Beginning from the initial contact period to the contemporary period, the white perception of the Aboriginal has undergone some changes. But what is upsetting is the fact that even in contemporary times, the racial stereotypes predominately exist in the mainstream literature, particularly in the works of writers and activists who tend to sympathize with the plight of the Aboriginal people. This can be seen as an act of reconciliation where the mainstream writers, at least, seek to render the Aboriginal people visible, whereas, previously they never figured in the Australia mainstream narratives. However, it is significant to note that the Aboriginal people are portrayed as caricatures or stereotypes even in works of Contemporary writers like Xavier Herbert, Patrick White and Peter Carey. Before discussing the issues of authenticity, tradition, and the imperative need for alternate history making, it is important to examine the mainstream's understanding or lack of understanding of the Aboriginal culture, particularly in the present times.

Xavier Herbert is one of the writers, who have considerably dealt with Aboriginal issues in his novels. One significant change which must be addressed is that with writers like Herbert and Patrick White the hitherto unacknowledged voices of the Aboriginal people found expression in their works. However, one of the major allegations regarding such writings is that the Aboriginal people are always represented as stereotypes. Mudrooroo is critical of Herbert's representation of Aboriginal people in his novel *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) and *Capricornia* (1937). He states that although the author has tried to deal with the struggle for Indigenous empowerment through his text, the tone of sympathy recurs in his novel. As he puts it "If power and contestation of power is a subtext of these novels and is dealt with as a major theme or sub-theme, there is no attempt by the author to question their own Indigenous representations, and, at least in *Poor Fellow My Country*, Aboriginalism is structured into what may seem on the surface to be a very sympathetic text" (*Indigenous* 60). No doubt, Herbert's narrative is abundant with Aboriginal representations; often from a positive standpoint, but still he lacks the sensitivity of Aboriginal people while dealing with Aboriginal issues.

Apart from Xavier Herbert, Patrick White represented Aboriginal people in his novels like *Voss* (1959), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1971). Although the novels *Riders in the Chariot* and *A*

Fringe of Leaves are replete with Aboriginal representations, I would be particularly dealing with Voss. Apparently, *Voss* is a novel about the exploration of a new continent by the protagonist of the same name. However, there are multiple themes which are embedded within the narrative which is based on the expedition of the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt. Although the novel centers around the spiritual union of Laura and Voss, the exploration of the new continent led by Voss (metaphorically representing the quest for Australian identity) my focus would be on the Voss' perception of the Aboriginal people. Undoubtedly, White professes to be an Aboriginal activist, but is he able to adequately depict the Aboriginal way of life? How does White try to negotiate or so to say reconcile with the Aboriginal people through the voice of the protagonist Voss? What are the limitations even in the works of writers like White and Herbert, who have at least attempted to make the Aboriginal voice audible unlike Mackartney and other settler writers who have made them invisible. Such issues will be addressed and examined through a comparative analysis of *Voss* with *My Place*. So far as the novel *Voss* is concerned, along with the six white men the two Aboriginal men accompany Voss in his expedition. The two Aboriginal guides, Dugald and Jackie, are introduced to him by Brendan Boyle and eventually Voss is led to the Aboriginal surrounding of Jildra. However, on meeting them for the first time Voss seems to assert his supremacy and this is evident from the narrator's pejorative use of the term "creatures":

In other circumstances, Voss would have liked to talk to these creatures. Alone, he and the blacks would have communicated with one another by skin and silence, just as the dust is not impenetrable and the message of sticks can be interpreted after hours of intimacy. But, in the presence of Brendan Boyle, the German was the victim of his European, or even his 'human' inheritance" (*Voss* 164).

Even though Voss firmly believes that unlike other Europeans he can establish some communication with the natives through his amicable behaviour, he is not different from others like Brendan Boyle, who considers the blacks as fallible and unreliable. The fact that the narrator sees Voss' human or European inheritance as the only hindrance in establishing communication with the natives makes it clear that White perpetuates the theory of social Darwinism where the blacks were viewed as 'creatures' which is indicative of animals as opposed to 'human inheritance'. It must be acknowledged that White seeks to sympathize with the Aboriginal characters which are evident from Voss' act of offering presents to the natives. However, in doing so he seeks to assert his omnipotence over the natives by making them the helpless 'other' as opposed to his 'benevolent self'. The gift which he offered Dugald was a brass button "that he happened to have in his pocket" (164) and the other gift he offered Jackie was a clasp-knife which he happened to find in his pocket. What is interesting is the fact that in both the cases Voss happens to find some material thing from his pocket which he offered to natives as a token of friendship:

'This is for Dugald'

It was a brass button that he happened to have in his pocket, and which had come off a tunic, of military, though otherwise forgotten origin.... The youth, on the other hand, had been brought to animal life. Lights shone in his skin, and his throat was rippling with language. He was giggling and gulping. He could have eaten the brass button. On an afterthought, Voss again put his hand in his pocket and offered Jackie a clasp-knife that he was carrying (164).

His way of presenting material things to the two Aboriginals seems more like consoling a child who does not understand the worth of any material gifts, but grabs it just for the sake of pleasure. In this regard it must be stated that, through white's representation of the Aboriginals we get only White's perception of the Aboriginals, he might consider them a child or like animals that we need to show kindness. However, the representation of the Aboriginals is still symbolic and silent, and hardly are we able to hear their voice. When we interpret the Aboriginal characters from White's perception the stereotypical images of the Aboriginals as savage, animalistic still finds expression.

It is not until we read some novel like *My Place* that we can actually believe that Aboriginal people do have a voice and a sense of humour as good as or sometimes much more than the white. Like Jackie and Dugald, who are portrayed more as 'creatures' rather than humans, Sally Morgan introduces us to one of her relatives, Jack, on her return to her native place Corunna Down's station. Unlike White who has represented

Jildra, the Aboriginal village, as 'the slatternly settlement' (165) Morgan has depicted Corunna as 'a beautiful place' (229). Referring back to the character of Jack, it must be stated that although Jack is just a minor character who appears in just one of the chapters, his presence provides us a altogether different perception of Aboriginal culture and community. Jack is portrayed as a friendly and wise Aboriginal elder, who immediately provided Sally with all the information; she was seeking about her relatives. As Sally recalls, "As soon as we saw Jack, we liked him. He was very friendly. I explained who we were, why we'd come to see him and asked him if he could tell us anything about the Brockman or Corunna families. We were amazed when he told us that Albert Brockman had been his good friend and that they'd worked together for many years (Morgan 219)". Morgan's way of depicting the Aboriginal people beginning from characters like Arthur, Daisy to her relatives is enormously different from White or Herbert's depiction of Aboriginal people. Morgan's narrative itself is embedded with the voices of three other narrators, apart from herself. With a multitude of Aboriginal voices Morgan seeks to voice her once silenced heritage.

Peter Carey's *The True History of Kelly Gang* (2000) is another award winning novel which highlights the injustice and oppression meted out to the Irish immigrants in Australia. However, although the novel deals with the minority issues of the Irish, there has hardly been any reference to the Aboriginal culture and people. In an instant when Ned and Jem saw the blacks wearing boots, Jem remarked that, "We was raised to think the blacks the lowest of the low but they had boots not us and we damned and double damned them us as we run" (*The True History*16). Interestingly, in a novel which depicts the plight of a marginal community, the i.e the Irish community in Australia, the Aboriginals are even looked down upon by the Irish minorities. The Aboriginals are still depicted as 'effing niggers' and 'lowest of low'. This points to the fact that even in the contemporary times, as recently as 2000 when *The True History Of kelly Gang* the Aboriginals are represented as the stereotypical 'niggers' 'savage' 'enigmatic' and 'dangerous'. In this regard it is worth quoting Wheeler's argument who appropriates the necessity of Aboriginal literature "How many non-Indigenous Australian writers have used Aboriginal experience or culture in their work, in an often one-sided imaginative response? Aboriginal writing is the necessary" (*A Companion* 6). Indeed, works by Aboriginal writers and on Aboriginals is indispensable in order to break the stereotypes created by the white mainstream writers.

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