



NARRATIVES OF ESTRANGEMENT AND BELONGING

INDO-AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES

With a Foreword by
Prof. David Carter

Edited by **Neelima Kanwar**



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Manifestations of Landscape, Language and Ethnicity in Post-War Australian Literature

DEEPAKUMAR J. TRIVEDI

Introduction

The post-war Australian literature offers multitude in terms of ethnicity. The talk of the Aborigines, the stories of the whites, the psychological state of a migrant mind, the idea of home, the civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, rationality and sensuality, these all share the pages of Australian literature. Autobiographical elements, the life of the urban elites, the post-hippie urban world, industrial pollution and confrontation of the European and Australian cultures are also common findings. Australia's convict history and its encounter with the native Aboriginal cultural traditions have given rise to a rather distinctive identity to Australian literature. Though the recent trends have a more global hue, there are still some identifiable links with this specialized past. The phases of development are seen to be initially crudely imitative. An attempt to establish an identity and, finally, the creation of what is called 'modern culture' can be witnessed. In other words, from "colonial to commonwealth" and from "commonwealth to cosmopolitan" is the shifting and development. To understand the same further, we take up some texts as possible source—*Remembering Babylon* (novel), *Kullark* (drama) and *Joan Makes History* (novel) which

offer exciting reading on the landscape, language and ethnicity in Australian literature.

Remembering Babylon (1993)

Remembering Babylon can be viewed through the elements of post-cultural identity where we do find a strong sense of cultural disparity. A post-colonial perspective has become a pessimistic assessment of the colonial project. It is a lament for the missed opportunities which is a meeting of disparate cultures that could provide for humanity. David Malouf has made power a theme within *Remembering Babylon* by using characters and characterization. Three main characters used in the idea of power are Gemmy, Lachlan and George Abbot. Gemmy is the one who has the power of intelligence. To all who see Gemmy he has a childlike nature, he seems to be under-educated and overall unintelligent. Yet as we see within the mind of Gemmy we find that he is extremely smart and is slowly manipulating those in power, gaining their affection or swaying their judgment as to his desire of uniting the Blacks and White.

Lachlan is a main character whose sole drive is the quest for power. He believes that he who is with power has the best life, and thus he fights to be acknowledged, the best, and the leader. A good example is within the opening scene, where Lachlan is leading the girls on a hunt for a wolf. Not only does the hunt for the wolf itself instill a sense of his drive for power, but the fact that the boy of the group is the leader, is also an idea of power of the genders.

Finally, George Abbot is not looking to be a leader or a great man, but is looking for the ability to be of a higher class and thus have power through superiority. He drives himself on being the noble and the higher citizen than the rest of the

people he is surrounded by, and thus within his mind he is of a higher social rank, consequently gaining the respect of his fellow townspeople through social power.

Gemmy's double personality can make a cultural harmony between the aborigines and the whites. But neither the aborigines nor the whites accept Gemmy's identity. Therefore, it leads to a breakdown of cultural serenity.

The Belonging in a Foreign Landscape

Remembering Babylon also suggests new conceptions of belonging in a foreign landscape, by addressing changing relationships between settlers and the environment. As we have seen, the Queensland settlers struggle to find harmony and spiritual ties with the settled territory. David Malouf is seemingly exemplifying the perception that people are too conditioned by the material world. Therefore, Jock's character is the embodiment of change and revolution. The larger question, however, is whether individually, people have the capacity to be alone in their own state of mind and being. The fear of standing alone has pressurized Jock into perceiving life in a linear way. Similarly, Malouf portrays Jock's character as observably doubting the validity of his friends that have surrounded him, whereby establishing his independency. Janet McIvor appears throughout the novel to be the character that is the most at home in Australia; she connects with no other country like her parents or Lachlan do with Scotland, and she does not seem to acknowledge the fear of the unknown outside the settlement like many other residents do. This separation from the other characters is important in the novel as it provides an alternate representation of the way Malouf depicts Australians' response to identity, a response which is still shared by the country's inhabitants today. Janet is developed throughout *Remembering*

Babylon to be an alternate representation of Australia's initial response to identity. Unlike other characters, Janet feels comfortable in the Australian environment, roaming around the bush outside the settlement "bored" in the beginning of the novel, where most adults would be weary of the "Absolute Dark" "beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp". The fact that Janet is not phased walking around the bush indicates that she is acclimatized to the Australian outback, and especially, the land. Jock McIvor and Janet enter into individual conversations with the landscape and reveal how new ecological connections can be made to create a new sense of belonging for some of the settlers. The presence of Gemmy triggers their transformation. They begin to imagine ways they can immerse themselves in the Australian landscape. In this way Malouf's anti-pastoral explores both the alienation and the new possibilities that emerge from the frontier landscape.

At first, Jock is portrayed as failing to spiritually connect with the landscape and recognise its significance in terms of change and transformation; he can only find peace and harmony when recalling images of his homeland in Scotland: "If only he could wake one day and find it, just for a day under a blanket of snow! What he missed where the marks of change" (RB 76). Yet, his encounter with Gemmy enables Jock to undergo a process of transformation. In the following passage in *Remembering Babylon* he becomes immersed in the Australian landscape: "Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of" (107). In this way he comes to recognise the growth and transformation of nature that he had overlooked before:

When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his fingernail, metallic, iridescent, and the discovery of them,

the new light they brought to the scene, was lightness in him [...] like a form of knowledge he had broken through. It [...] was also exhilarating (107)

History as a grand narrative is something that is subverted in this novel. Malouf's characterization of Sir George has obvious satiric elements and he does not hesitate to have George Abbot make some minor alteration of fact in the story being dictated to him by Mr Frazer so that "In this way he appropriated a little of the occasion to himself, stepped in and concealed himself, a sceptical shade, at this and that point of the minister's Colonial fairytale" (Greer, 19). It is this fundamental distrust of the claims of historical discourse to objective accuracy which are the novel's strongest defence against accusations that it translates "matters of history and politics into questions of creativity and aesthetics" (Otto 545-546) and in so doing downplays what some critics regard as the most important features of Australia's colonial history. Greer bluntly says that "The story that Malouf does not want to tell is how the white man tried to exploit the blacks as labour" (Greer, 11). More subtly, Perera sees the novel as supportive of a colonial mind-set because "Instead of refiguring the opposition between 'savagism and civilization', between settler and indigene, coloniser and colonised, Malouf's text reinscribes these oppositions even as it appears to develop a redemptive narrative of hybridity" (Greer, 21). Otto ironically titles his article on *Remembering Babylon* "Forgetting Colonialism".

What all of the arguments of these critics are based on is a conventionally historicist understanding of the past. For all of them the salient feature of nineteenth century Australia is the dispossession of the Aborigines. Greer is most obviously committed to this position, castigating Malouf for ignoring historical detail and displaying "no interest in, and probably very

little idea of, what the Scottish settlers thought they were doing on small holdings 20 kilometers from Bowen' (Greer,11). She characteristically concedes nothing in her attack and claims that the novel displays "not simply a reticence where Aborigines are concerned, a tact that avoids commandeering their alien reality, but a genuine ignorance by incuriosity" (Greer, 11).

Malouf wants to assert the fact that the settlers in mid-19th century North Queensland had to re-orient their mental geography and make the Australian landscape their own.

Aboriginal Drama: The Language and the Theme

The main aim of the majority of Indigenous Australian writers was and still is to reflect on White Australia's violent history by giving Indigenous peoples have a say as well as reason to celebrate Aboriginal survival, pride and heritage. Above all, however, Indigenous Australian drama is concerned with the search for a personal and shared Aboriginal identity—"that complex of attitudes, beliefs and mores which constitute Aboriginality" (Shoemaker, *Black Words* 265). Hence, these writers have contributed immensely to raise awareness of Aboriginal issues among White Australians and the rest of the world.

Despite borrowing from the rich and ancient tradition of Western-style theater, Aboriginal drama, or described by Maufort as "Native appropriations of Western dramatic forms" (*Listen to Them* 56), differs from the Euro-American dramatic tradition in many ways, most prominently of course in its incorporation of Indigenous myth, storytelling and dance into the play. The frequent employment of sign language, which used to be an important part of traditional tribal communication and is still being used in today's urban Indigenous Australian

communities, is strikingly different from European theatrical non-verbal articulation.

According to Carroll, Indigenous Australian drama is special in "structure, form, and style" (Carroll 100-110). One aspect which audiences largely unfamiliar with Black Australian Theater, notice first is the repetitive structure of key events, leading to a feeling of circularity. Closely linked to this concept of circularity, and in parts provoked by it, is the employment of two recurrent images with regard to place: on the one hand, the home of the typical urban Aboriginal family with its cluttered, run-down, impoverished and depressive atmosphere often serves as the primary location throughout the whole play. On the other hand, the second recurrent place image is that of open space and nature, which always emphasizes the connection between man and nature. After the 'home scenes', the parts of the play which are set outdoors have a liberating effect.

A second feature of Aboriginal drama is the extensive use of symbolism and myth. Due to the Aboriginal "propensity to think in symbolic ways" (Carroll 100-110), it seems to be generally accepted by a large majority of Aboriginal people that the Dreaming shapes their present lives, which is subsequently mirrored in the works of Indigenous playwrights. An "abrupt juxtaposition of scenes and episodes in different theatrical styles" of often "surreal quality" (Carroll 100-110), meaning the alternating use of realist and mythical elements, is the result. These layovers are not only a means of underlining the Aboriginality of the texts, but they are also a device "to indicate narrative shifts" (Carroll 100-110).

The role of humor certainly is an essential part of Aboriginal drama and crucial for the tone and message sent out to the audience. According to Katherine Brisbane, publisher of

Currency Press, the special quality of Aboriginal drama has always been and still is the life-affirming quality, "the irrepressible humour [and] the capacity to survi" (Katherine, 66-67): "There is violence in some of the plays, and anger, and despair; but the drive is to reenact the past in order to come to terms with it. Which makes it a political act but also an artistic one." (Katherine, 66-67)

Kullark (1979)

Jack Davis was without doubt the forerunner of today's Aboriginal Australian dramatists. In his plays *Kullark* (1979), *The Dreamers* (1982), *No Sugar* (1985) and *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* (1988), he paved the way for a distinctive new subgenre of drama—that of Australian Aboriginal drama. His thematic focus lay on the portrayal of Indigenous (family) life and the struggle of finding an Aboriginal identity in present-day White Australia with its violent history of colonialism—something in line with the ideas of Western poetic realism of that time. His formal focus, however, differed considerably from the model of the European realist conventions: While in many scenes naturalistically inspired, Davis's plays are deeply "steeped in myth" (Maufort, *Unsettling Narratives* 105-110), incorporating stories from the Dreaming and thus "fusing Western realism and Aboriginal myth" (105-110). Hence, Davis's plays should not merely be viewed as examples of twentieth century naturalistic European drama.

In *Kullark*, according to Katherine Brisbane, Davis was said to seek a way of reconciling between the white Australian population and the Aboriginal people. Thus, with his plays, Davis reflected the tense relations between Australia's white population and Indigenous people; and additionally, he sought to reconcile these two groups (qtd. in van Straten, par. 1).

"While writing on this play, Davis drew on his six decades of life experiences [and] also marked the evolution of Indigenous oral story-telling tradition into a new, written form" (van Straten, par. 2). In *Kullark*, Jack Davis discusses the lives of three generations of his people, the Noongar people of Western Australia, in three storylines which are intertwined and connected to each other. *Kullark*, thus, acts as an historical account of the Noongar people, encompassing Aboriginal history from the earliest time of colonization to the seventies of the twentieth century. Aspects of colonization, oppression, segregation, assimilation and aboriginality are introduced when Davis discusses the clash of generations amongst the Aboriginal people and the difficulties they encounter while living in a white community and dealing with acts of discrimination and segregation. The play knows three storylines which all take place in a different period of time between 1829 and 1979 and are in many ways connected to each other. The first account takes places between 1829 and 1833. This story discusses the Moore native settlement and the first encounter of Aboriginal Noongar people with European settlers. The protagonist of this story is Yagan, a Noongar warrior who is eventually killed by European settlers. The second account takes places in the thirties of the twentieth century and discusses the lives of an Aboriginal Noongar family on the reserve during the assimilation policy. The contemporary story which takes places in the seventies of the twentieth century discusses the life of the descendants from the previous Noongar family storyline while focusing on the Aboriginal situation at that time and portraying the generation clash which exists between father Alec and his son Jamie.

It presents a time when many Aborigines were forced to live in reserves and settlements which were specifically designed to keep half-blood Aboriginal people from the full blood

Aborigines. Though *Kullark* functions as a historical play, "apart from Yagan, the other families portrayed in *Kullark* are fictional versions of people and experiences with which Davis was familiar; his stories were from the Aboriginal past as told to him by his family" (Casey 136). Throughout the play, Davis switches from one story to another. He first discusses the aspects of Noongar history represented in the story about Yagan. Then he swiftly moves on to the setting of the more contemporary story of Alec and Rosie and their son Jamie after which Davis goes back in time to present the story of Alec's youth in the Moore Native settlement with his parents and his years in the army.

Though there is much to discuss about this play, I will confine myself to the discussion of issues of Aboriginality and stylistics in relation to Alec's youth story. What is interesting about this text is that it consists of an opposing construction between a song and a monologue which is told by a black actor. In this manner, there is a form of interaction between the singers of the song and the black actor who responds and informs the audience of the contents of the song. From a stylistic point of view, this construction contains many characteristic features. First of all, the song contains forms of end-rhyme and repetition. This end-rhyme seems to make the song catchier and more interesting for the audience to listen to. Because the text is a play which is meant to be acted out, the idea of end-rhyme and monologues make the dialogues more interesting for an audience to listen to. There are also cases of repetition of sentences and lexical items which contribute to the coherence and harmonization of the song. "Wirilo, wirilo" and "my brown skinned baby they take him away" is repeated several times in the text and with this repetition lexical coherence is formed by the relation of the words in the sentences. Additionally, Davis incorporates lexical items in the Noongar

language and makes use of Aboriginal-English, which seems to be one of the characteristics of this play. The features of Noongar language occur at the beginning of the singing, where the actors exclaim, "Wirilo, wirilo," in lines three, thirteen, twenty-two and twenty-eight. "My brown-skinned baby, they take him away" is mentioned in lines four, fourteen, twenty-three and twenty-nine to thirty-two. Also the name of the play *Kullark* is a feature of the Noongar language and the black actor calls the word "Manatj" in line ten.

In addition, there is also an apparent feature of Aboriginal-English to be seen in line eleven: "white fella boss of baby of mine," in which the black actor seems to recall the words spoken by an Aboriginal mother who has lost her baby to the Australian authorities. From a stylistic point of view, this text does not show many features of figurative language; however, it does show interesting lexical items written in the Nyoongah language from the Aboriginal language of the Noongar people. According to Davis, throughout the play "the Aboriginal language used in *Kullark* is Nyoongah, the major language of the South West of Western Australia and the name *Kullark* means the place where we make our fire, home." This idea strongly seems to refer to the connection of the Noongar people with their land and traditions (Act one: 6).

According to Brisbane and the Literature Board of Australia Council, the playwright "Jack Davis was brought up in Yarloop and the Moore River Native Settlement, he spent several years living on the Brookton Aboriginal Reserve where he first began to learn the language and culture of his people, the [Noongar] (knows different spellings, i.e., Noongar or Nyoongah) of the South West of Western Australia" (85). Therefore, with his plays, Davis is inspired by the culture, traditions and language of his people, the Noongar people of

Western Australia (qtd. in Davis, Intro). With his writing; Davis addresses the situation of the Aboriginal people in relation to the present happenings, and therefore discusses aspects of Aboriginal identity, generational gaps and Aboriginal heritage. Berndt notes that as many Noongar people were killed or forced to live in settlements in the past, in *Kullark*, Davis draws on the historical account of the past to present the current situation of the [Noongar] people through the eyes of the younger Noongar generations (qtd. in Davis, Intro: xiv).

According to Berndt, "the difference between the Aborigines of the South-West [the Noongar in this case] and the non-Aborigines is sometimes expressed through language contrasts. This is neo-Nyungar, made up of a combination of elements drawn from original dialects and English; and this is better called Aboriginal-English" (qtd. in Davis, Intro: xx). This differentiation from the white people is expressed by the stylistic implementation of Noongar lexical items. "Wirilo, wirilo" which is sung by the actors in the beginning of their song, clearly indicates that attention should be paid to what is to be said in the following. Though I have not been able to find the meaning of this word, I think it might well be an exclamation which indicates that the audience will have to listen to the following story. "Manatj" in line ten represents the Australian authority (the white man) that came and took the mother's baby away. Furthermore, Davis also pays much attention to Aboriginal forms of English which is to be seen in the implementation of certain syntactical structures and the use of lexical items which belong to the Aboriginal-English variety. Linguist Diana Eades notes that though the number of speakers of Aboriginal languages and dialects have declined, Aboriginal languages and dialects have started to mix with English standard varieties, which resulted in different varieties of Aboriginal English.

There are particular aspects such as grammar and social features of these [Aboriginal-English] dialects which distinguish them from Standard English. Aboriginal English reflects grammatically the structure of traditional Aboriginal languages, and this is also the case with the plural 's' marking on nouns which is frequently absent in Aboriginal English. (qtd. in Director of National Parks 15-16).

An example of this is also to be seen in line ten: "White fella boss of baby of mine," in which Standard English *fellows* is spelled as *fella* with a clear omission of the plural 's' inflectional ending. Eades continues by saying that "the equitation sentence structure in Aboriginal English also differs from Standard English equivalents by the absence of a verb *to be*," as we can see in "White fella boss of baby of mine," in which the third person singular of the verb to be is omitted (qtd. in Director of National Parks 15-18). Narogin expresses that partly from this text, "he feels invited to accept the play as a product of an Aboriginal writer who is committed to his people and who writes with a purpose. [Davis] is a writer of Aboriginality using Aboriginal speech forms, though he has as yet not structured his plays on Aboriginal forms but rather on European audiences and settings" (121). Thus, it is striking that while in the historical account Yagan and his people mostly speak Noongar to each other and to the Irish settler family and simultaneously they are also taught some English words and sentences by the Irish settler family whom they have befriended. The other two generations show much more to be at a stage in which they have not only culturally been influenced by the British colonizers but also linguistically, which is shown by their intelligible command of the Standard English language. This clearly indicates that Davis has tried to show the impact of the past on the present situation of the Aboriginal people by applying idiomatic

language of the Noongar people and showing the constantly present and gradually increasing influence of the English language on his people's lives.

Joan Makes History (1988)

The incorporation of post-colonial and feminist elements allows Kate Grenville to provide a unique and contemporary perspective on the Australian cultural landscape in her novels. *Joan Makes History* is an example of historiographic metafiction, wherein Grenville combines actual historical events with fictional renderings, with an ultimate goal of including previously excluded voices in history's narrative. In effect, Grenville is creating another cultural memory, one based on fact and fiction and including disparate points-of-view.

Joan Makes History tries to redefine the Australian Bicentenary. The Bicentenary of European settlement in Australia in 1988 is a significant historical period in which different political forces rush to claim their place, and voices from diverse interest groups vie for influence. In *Joan Makes History*, women not only become "present" in all the important historic moments, but also gain the subjective status in the world of today and tomorrow. The novel itself is a metaphor of women's "presence" in the Bicentennial discursive field. In addition, the layout, the naming of female characters and the strategic way of dealing with the indigenous issue, all reflect the writer's meditation on how to represent the "true" female subject. This novel also tries to change some traditional views about history, rectify the traditional way of historiography, so as to come up with a new way of compiling history from women's perspective.

History texts are woefully deficient in women's stories. In fact, it becomes clear that history is indeed "his tory, the

recording of male accomplishments and perspectives. Few records attest to the presence of women through the ages: "Early feminist work in this area set about rewriting this history; it centred on recovering the history of women within the British empire, portraying them in a positive light, uninvolved with the oppression of colonialism, and in many cases trying to resist colonial rule" (Mills 105). This is one of Grenville's most important accomplishments in *Joan Makes History*, wherein she gives women a positive voice in historical moments.

While seeming to relegate Joan to a contented life as wife, mother and grandmother at the end of the day—which can be viewed as a very anti-feminist conclusion—Grenville celebrates the ability of women to *choose* such a life: "The person who 'just' brings up the kids and washes the socks is as necessary to the whole picture as the kings and explorers. She, or he, is also making history in the sense that they are creating the climate in which humanity lives" (Turcotte, "The Story-teller's Revenge" 152). In the past, feminist theory has extolled the virtues of competing head-to-head with men while encouraging women to forge careers outside the supposedly limiting and unfulfilling domestic realm.

In 1795, Grenville appropriates the Aboriginal voice, with Joan determined to make her mark on history, whether it be with the coloured mud drawings on the roofs of caves or in her encounter with the first Europeans mapping the coastline of the new colony. Grenville's inclusion of the Aboriginal, especially in *Joan Makes History*, has resulted in accusations by her critics of appropriating the native voice. Being a white Australian, such "appropriation" by Grenville may be viewed as an example of the white race exhibiting colonial superiority yet again. Grenville herself, upon reflection, has stated of her inclusion of the Aboriginal voice in *Joan Makes History*. Grenville envisions Aboriginals calmly showing strangers to use a sharp object—and

a potential weapon—on their faces and heads, which is indicative of their acquiescence in the face of the overwhelming presence of the colonizer. The colonizers have already begun to transform the natives into something more closely resembling the accepted British standard: “The men sat gravely along the dune awaiting their turn, and were becoming huge of eye, seeing their familiar friends transforming before their eyes into bald strangers” (Grenville, *Joan Makes History* 56).

Grenville challenges the preconceived stereotypes based on class and gender; she emboldens her heroines with intelligence and determination not to fall into gender-based roles. Even in Joan, who finally comes to value the roles of wife, mother and grandmother, Grenville illustrates the value of the feminine. *Choice* is the ultimate freedom and the ultimate balance.

Conclusion

While reading texts discussed I conclude that: firstly, the literature of Australia characteristically expresses collective values. Even when the literature deals with the experiences of an individual, these experiences are very likely to be estimated in terms of the ordinary, the typical, the representative. Secondly, the chief subject of Aboriginal narratives is the land. As Aboriginals travel from place to place, they (either informally or ceremonially) name each place, telling of its creation and of its relation to the journeys of the Ancestors. This practice serves at least three significant purposes: it reinforces their knowledge of local geography—that is, the food routes, location of water holes, places of safety, places of danger, the region's terrain, and so on—and it also serves a social function (sometimes bringing large clans together) and a religious or ritual function. Thirdly, the Australian writing is characterized by unusual colloquialisms and figures of speech, ironic understatement, and laconic

rhythms; it concentrated on representing—even asserting—a nationalist sentiment.

Modern critical theories, stylistic and linguistic innovations, the vernacular debate, spiritual/religious questions, the vastness of the geographical landscape and its impact on the interior landscape of the human being living, travelling and writing in this land of ancient oral, camp-fire story-telling tradition, the diverse disciplines of knowledge impinging on the human consciousness, the universal human dimension combined with the cultural specificity of the long Aboriginal creative past, and a predilection for self-reflexiveness are some of the concepts that may have gone into the making of contemporary writing in Australia. In the present Australian context, the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is perhaps the most politically charged and ethically complex question as also addressed in the works discussed above.

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