

THE ABORIGINAL FICTION MAKER AND THE WHITE FICTION MAKER: THE VARIANT PERCEPTUAL COGNITIONS

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The two kinds of fiction show a dialectic between a successful vibrant homogenising thought system and weak failing but struggling consciousness. There is something of 'The Last of the Mohicans' in the marginalised reservation — surviving Aboriginal society. In this sense it is not a new story and has been enacted earlier. There is no blame attached or sought to be attached to what is a fact of the matter. It is interesting to see the paradigm struggle once again with the White civilization seeking to construct a Western Christian identity for the country and the native brown Aboriginals making their own self rather than the country the object of their consciousness and seeking to maintain a dying identity and in that process constructing and looking for a wider Asian identity rather than white. The white fiction maker, on the other hand, in his structuring of an Australian nation/state in the Western mode is perhaps expressing an unrecognised fear of Asianisation which seems to be predicated by geo-cultural parameters. This paper looks at the fragmented consciousness of the Aboriginal fiction maker in this perspective. There are some who would like to be assimilated and there are others who refuse to be. We look at these variant perceptual cognitions by examining two novels — Mudrooroo's 'Wild Cat Falling' (1965) and Thomas Keneally's 'The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith' (1972).

The Aboriginal writer has to encounter what Mudrooroo calls 'cultural and genocidal imperialism' (Johnson: p.47). He 'historicises and internationalises the writing in frames which transcend that of the British empire' (Tapping, p.95). The important thing for him is to 'recapture our (Aboriginal) history and culture and a means of doing this is through literature'. They are, in fact, central to the study and theory of literature. As Mudrooroo claims in 'White Forms, Aboriginal content':

Australian Aboriginal literature is a literature of the Fourth World, that is, of the indigenous minorities submerged in a surrounding majority and governed by them. It must and does deal with the problems inherent in this position and it must be compared to similar literatures, for example, the American-Indian, for the correspondences and contradictions to be seen. It should not be compared to the majority literature. Perhaps the most that can be said for modern Australian literature, or rather current literature, is its utter complacency and the fact that it is becoming more and more irrelevant to the society with which it seeks to deal. Aboriginal literature is and can be more vital in that it is seeking to come to grips with and define a people, the roots of whose culture extend in an unbroken line far back into a past in which English is a recent intrusion (pp. 28-29).

Till the sixties, he claims, "Aborigines everywhere were on the outside looking in". Till in the sixties came the consciousness of their position in Australia and along with it "a profound disillusionment". This is termed as "a return from exile and

alienation into Aboriginality" (Johnson, p.29) to the extent that the Aboriginals unlike the white people do not identify themselves with or seek as a model the Western modes of life. Their response may be termed as one of Asianisation or localisation, that is, they have greater affinity with Asian modes of thinking and behaving — for example, their belief in fantasy, in souls, their worship of ancestors etc. and a certain fatalism of spirit. It is quite understandable that Mudrooroo, the writer found it possible to spend seven years in India as a Buddhist monk and is presently working on a novel based on Indian life and thought. His attraction to Buddhism and Indian philosophy is seen as a result of a possible equation between Eastern/Asian mysticism and the Aboriginal Dreaming.

On the other hand, in a perceptive white fiction maker such as Thomas Keneally the process of homogenising, of 'whitening' the Aboriginal is seen as a very tortuous process for the Aboriginal, one in which an enormous price is extracted and paid. The white civilization attempts the construction of a Western Christian identity. In 'Capricornia' this is expressed by Rev. Theodore Hollower who takes his duty of converting the "savages to Christianity very seriously". As the narrative says of his mission:

It was not Mr Hollower's wish to keep a prison. He wishes only to bring his victims into contact with Christianity and keep them there till they might grasp its significance, which was something in which he had such great faith himself that he was prepared to keep them in its neighbourhood till they died" (p. 246).

Christianity was one of the ideologies with which the conquerors used to browbeat the supposedly "heathen" coloured people — this falls under cultural imperialism. Thus we have the presumption that the master race should rule and the inferior races should only serve. Some narratives like "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith" may in fact be saying that interweaving of the Aboriginals and whites is not possible and what finally works is destruction of one in favour of the other. In human terms it is a tragedy and Keneally articulates this tragedy, displaying in his articulation a cleft consciousness.

We examine first Thomas Keneally's 'The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith' which has as its background a turbulent Australian history of colonial Australia—1878 to 1902. That colonial Australia is alive even today and we examine the text—as we also do Mudrooroo's 'Wild Cat Falling' later—as a verbal system generating its own identity and meaning. In the process we can identify the consciousness of the writer who may display a duality, that is, double consciousness.

The protagonist, Jimmie Blacksmith, is torn between his tribal past and his Methodist leanings. Apart from 'nigger' he says his other religion is 'Methodist'. His duality is the fact of his being a half-breed. He has an Aboriginal flippant mother, Dulcie, and a white father. Though he is a 'pale bastard' and has undergone the tribal rituals of initiation, symbolised through the breaking of a tooth at the age of 13 and circumcision and emerged "out of the monster's mouth,

sealed in manhood”, a Tullam from the tribal totem Emu-wren, he questions in the next three years the tribal values from his ‘own insight and under the Nevilles’ influence’. He protests “I ain’t a primitive” (p. 48) to the English cook and claims Neville “a minister of religion” (p.48) to be his father. Jimmie’s white father we are told was himself a man of a pensive nature who perhaps hated the vice of sleeping with black women yet could not master it. (p.3) The duality is central to Jimmie in that he questions the tribal values but his tribal connections do not let him fully emerge out of that situation. As Keneally comments:

Suspended between the loving tribal life and the European rapture from on high called falling in love (at which even Mr Neville had hinted), Jimmie Blacksmith held himself firm and soundly despised as many people as he could.

Jimmie is aided in his imitation of the superior culture of the whites by Rev. Mr Neville. Neville feels that there could be ‘decent ambitions’, too, in the flirtations of the whites with the blacks for he ‘himself had often felt the distinctive pull of some slant-grinned black face’ (p.3). Through ‘eager, sober, polite’ Jimmie, Neville wishes to prove his belief. His influence helps Jimmie’s questioning insight into tribal customs. The tribal elders who ‘knew where the soul-stones of each man were hidden and how the stones could be distinguished’ and attached importance to ‘initiations teeth’ which acted as ‘tribal safeguards against the unknown sortilege of a white women’s body’ (p.66), only needed ‘a suck from a brandy bottle’ (p.7) to lend their wives to white men. Tullam, Jimmie’s tribe, and Mungana, the tribe in which he ought to wed, do not symbolise any value for Jimmie. The ‘black core’ in Jimmie’s cleft consciousness gets eroded by Neville’s ceaseless European pride” (p.12). Besides, the Nevilles’ instruct him:

if you could ever find a nice girl off a farm to marry, your children would only be quarter-caste then, and your grandchildren one-eighth caste, scarcely black at all.

This makes such an impression on his young mind that he asks Wongee Tom Carstairs, aged about forty, a chance acquaintance:

“Would you like a white woman, Wongee?” Wongee’s simple answer is that if white women (wives) could make ‘the cow-cookies’ happy, they would not come after black girl.

In Jimmie’s case apart from love there are ambitions unknown to the tribal world to be fulfilled. His first fascination is for the eldest of the three daughters of a farmer who passes by him along with her mother and two sisters even without a glance at him while he is chatting with Wongee. His second act of fantasy is for Mrs Healy, his first employer’s wife. She is ‘a symbol, a state of blessedness, far more than a woman’, in fact ‘an archetype’ for Jimmie. But Jimmie has to settle for a wayward girl, ‘the thin frightened girl child’ Gilda Howie, who is the white cook’s reject (p.53) and he suppresses the suspicion that dawns on him after the ‘arrangement’ for marriage has been made that ‘if one reject married another, the

facts of their individual rejections might be added or even multiplied'. But the urge to 'have a white wife' coupled with the training to never leave a job/employment unfinished seem to him the promises to success in life. Both these are to be belied.

On the marriage front Jimmie's hope is in the belief that "a slowly descending white was wedded to a black in the ascendant" (p. 59). He further realises 'the folly of the white marriage', nay 'arrangement', when he discovers that the child conceived by Gilda before marriage is not his but the 'superior cook's'. He now feels 'unequal to making a strong expulsion of his maternal uncle', (p.68) Jackie Smolders, who arrives along with Jimmie's (p.68) brother, Mort, and cousin, Peter. His only sedative now is work because life has confronted him with 'a magic uncle bent on liquor, a lying wife, a bastard child; all within his walls". The child 'showed up the folly of his white marriage' (p.67). As a consequence Jimmie loses the resistance to tribal values and Keneally says 'he was in the lizard's gut once more' (p.78).

Jimmie cannot count on his only sedative 'work', too, because the white world would not let him be at peace in his compromised situation. They run out of groceries and Miss Graf, the lodger with his employers, the Knobbiest, wants Gilda to work as a maid for her when she gets married in the new year at Wallaladah. Jimmie can see that 'Newby intended to starve him off' (p.74) and 'was perhaps even gratifying Miss Graf's plan to pester the marriage, as poor a union as it was, apart'. Jimmie's plea for his due-payment for 900 yds. of fencing does not work and to get his due or even have the possibility of getting it, he now faces three conditions — one, get rid of his tribal folks; two, give up his white wife and child; and three, work 'well enough'. Jimmie has already experienced that each of his employers earlier — Healy (Irish), Claude Lewis (Scott), Constable Farrell — and now Hayes 'had each staked his soul on Jimmie's failure (p.52). There can never be any allowance for the intelligence of these "natives" if the whites are to stay firmly extended in the seat of power. Any such allowance would tilt the balance of power and seriously question the accepted prejudices.

Confronted with a 'hungry wife and child at home' (p. 79) Jimmie first pleads for groceries but his legitimate demand for what is already due to him only invites Newby's retort, 'don't come the bush-lawyer with me'. When Jimmie is no longer able to bear Knobbiest insults he places the muzzle of his rifle on his stomach and could have shot him but withdraws it away because Jimmie is only trying all possible means to get his hard earned share. However, though Newby does get scared he fails to foresee the impending threat that his injustice can bring about. The possible explanation for this is that the timid Aborigines could only think of magical revenges such as the one Jackie, his uncle suggests. It is Jackie's belief that if Jimmie took his initiation tooth and punched it into the trackmarks of Newby's beasts, women, sons all of them would become immobile. Jimmie, of course, is not the one to believe in all this. He is endowed with a 'sense of noblesse' (p.76) and, therefore, repeatedly appeals to the Knobbiest'.

Jimmie makes Jackie knock at the Knobbiest door and tell her that Mr

Newby wanted them to be given flour. Mrs Newby refuses to be taken in and obliged. Instead, she goes to fetch her rifle at her daughter's bidding but before she can turn and shoot, Jimmie attacks her with the axe he had hidden under his uncle's coat.

Jimmie now learns 'the ease of killing' and this is the beginning of 'an agenda of mayhem' (p.81). He realises that Gilda should, strictly going by the rules, be a kind of enemy but she too, like him, has suffered slavery and it frightens him to think that he wishes to forgive her. He parts with her and the child (p.86), then with Jackie and Peter (p.87) and he and Mort taking refuge in the forest are really 'at war with the entire human landscape'. He is at war also with all those who had wronged him and his next victims are the Healeys. Mr Healy had refused to even give Jimmie a ride into Merriwa and it is now his turn to punish all those who had been unfair to him even though he was trying to belong to the world of the whites and not the world of the Aborigines.

Jimmie has a hard time explaining to Mort that 'if he, Jimmie Blacksmith, went to those who had wronged him and asked them like a gentleman to give his due to him, they'd laugh' because 'all they wanted from a black was foreseeable failure'. Jimmie himself is really trapped into the situation and it is only Rev Neville who understands the 'sickness' that Jimmie is suffering from (p.109). He is prepared, as he tells his wife, to go after the Blacksmiths unarmed while the white world with their strong search parties, citizens committees (p.153) and a reward of £2,500.00 (p.176) cannot get at him.

Finally, Jimmie and Mort land at McCreadie, a school teacher's residence, where Jimmie is comforted by the admissions of McCreadie that while only four to five thousand whites might have got killed by "marauding blacks", the whites must have killed a quarter million Aborigines. Jimmie is finally found in a dignitary's bed in a country convent at Kaluah. He undergoes a fundamentalist conversion in jail and Australia becomes a fact to him when he tells in the dock how innocent Jackie and Mort and Gilda were. The history that Rev Neville wished to create remains individual to him. It is only Neville who can understand the 'sickness' that Jimmie is suffering from (p.109) and one wonders whether the sickness hints at Jimmie's rejection of the whites territory or space that he cannot make his own because his history would not allow him into their world.

In the commentary on the resolution (hanging) the novelist, Thomas Keneally, displays a characteristic ambivalence, what we called above a cleft-consciousness. Making Australia a fact could not be undesirable for him but in an almost deterministic manner two black men have to hang for it. It is difficult for Keneally to take sides. The 'chant' of Jimmie remains an expression of his desire.

The perceptions of the Aboriginal fiction maker — in our case Mudurooro — are different. The story of 'Wild Cat Falling' is in the stream of consciousness mode, mainly consisting of flashbacks. The protagonist — a young man — on his release from jail has two groups of people to turn to. These are, one, his former bodgie friends and, two, the white university set he newly encounters. His

fragmented consciousness can compare the two but is enamoured of none. The bodge element is viewed by him as a 'pack of morons'. Though he is attracted towards June, the white university student, he chooses not to go off with her. He later steals a car with a friend and shoots a policeman leading to his arrest and return to jail.

The prison provides him equanimity even though he is a prisoner in his own country. He says:

In here I can achieve a certain evenness of mind, but out there it will go like my prison suit (p.21).

He establishes himself a hero to his mates by being bold enough to refuse to carry and take round on his turn the bucket of tea. He tells the warden to do it his 'bloody self' and flings the tea bucket on the warden's face. Thus he expresses his resentment at the subordinate position of the Aborigines vis-a-vis the whites. He thus rejects what he has termed elsewhere the 'cultural and genocidal imperialism' colonisation. As he puts it himself the important thing for him is to "recapture our history and culture and a means of doing this is through literature". (White form, Abo.content, p.29). His rebellious act earns him solitary confinement of fourteen days but that gives him a sense of belonging:

After solitary the prison accepted me as I had never been accepted outside. I belonged (p.25).

His dilemma, in fact, is precisely this: the white society has not accepted him and he has lacked a sense of participation. This has led to his isolation. The prison, however, is meant for isolation and his isolation in a confinement cell has provided him with that and thus he achieves a sense of belonging.

In the so-called free world outside the prison he has experienced isolation through the assimilationist policy of the white. This policy leads to a dilemma for the Aborigines. His mother who accepts this policy and rejects the Aboriginal background has finally to fall back upon her own people for nursing her. Where then does the assimilationist policy take her? She denied her son the right to play with the 'dirty Noongar' kids even when the white kids could choose to play with them. His mother's explanation to him is:

That's different. They belong on the white side of the fence. You've got to prove you do, and don't you forget it (p.10).

Ironically and perhaps justifiably he, the black cat, does not wish to belong to the white side of the fence even though the white world (the university set) is fascinated by him. He needs no sympathy from this group. Consequently, he is not moved by the talk of the 'thin blue-stocking kind of girl with big specs and straight short hair' who intervenes in his conversation with the University group to say that the whites and not the natives need educating. He recognises this as a 'brave thought' but is mature enough to be carried away by it. The fact of the

matter is different. The Aboriginal has really to struggle with the self. As he tells June I'm one of the permanent unemployed unemployables. So he has to learn 'to survive the harshness of Christian charity'. He recalls how he was not even allowed to watch the sea, moon etc. from the window of his prison for if caught doing so the warder would call out. As he comments:

It was against regulations to forget my punishment among the stars.

And once outside jail he runs the risk of being 'picked up for loitering with intent'. In the free world he has to keep drifting to look for a place to himself.

He does converse with June, the student of Psychology at the university, with whom it is a chance meeting at the beach where people 'bake to achieve the despised colour I was born with'. He shares his perceptions with her:

They make the law so chaps like me can't help breaking it whatever we do, and the likes of you can hardly break it if you try.

He notices in her a 'glib white arrogance' which only gives him a feeling of 'concentrated hate'. He recalls his mother's sorrow and hurt at his ill-treatment at the hands of white kids. Then he had consoled his mother by saying he does not care and they are jealous because he gets top marks.

As he waits to meet June the next day in the university cafe he ruminates:

I have no hope and no ambition but I have trained myself to be self-sufficient, self-controlled, and I am in this way superior to the world of struggling, deluded fools of which all these people are a part (p.68).

He feels nice to be with the group. They appreciate his interpretation of Dorian's masterpiece painting: 'Man in Revolt of Exile'. His perceptive comments are a discovery to the white students including Dorian himself. He notices 'rage', 'anger', 'despair', 'frustration' — a mood of 'melancholy' "going off into utter black despair" (p.79). As they listen to him intently he says:

I'd say it was a sort of battle between light and dark. The dark nearly wins, but the fight goes on. Towards the centre there is this glow of hope, but very faint of course. Here and there it flares up into a rage, but that gets submerged in these sort of frustrated angles. I'd say the whole thing has a kind of jagged rhythm.

This and his comments on another painting on interference with the natural bush in King's Park:

Sport is a bore and the bush is a bore too, but at least nature is a natural bore so why not leave it alone?

Make him a success with the mob. The reason for his clicking with the university

'mob' is a shared consciousness, even though the parameters of this consciousness may differ. Hence, the psychological interpretation of "Man in Revolt of Exile" exhibits the identity between him and Dorian. He can see that Dorian seems pretty much his way in the 'rage, anger, despair, frustration' that he depicts in the painting but while it was 'a funny mood' in the case of Dorian that led him to do so, it is life's experience in the case of the protagonist.

This life experience with his placement against the laws of the country/state differentiates the Aboriginal fiction maker from the white fiction maker. Unlike Keneally, there is no cleft consciousness that Mudurooroos suffers from. Attempts at assimilation are of course there since the situation that the Aboriginals are in is bound to result in a fragmented consciousness but the perceptive struggling consciousness of the Aboriginal rejects the assimilationist policy of the whites. They have a place of their own by right but ironically this right now has to be granted to them by the whites. That the country is dear to them is not in doubt. They have worked 'shoulder to shoulder' with the whites against the Japanese 'liberators' and often saved their lives. Documentaries like 'Angels of War' and "Tidikawa and Friends", William Dargie's paintings and Damien Parer's photographs go to show a newfound Australian gratitude (See Alison Broinowski, p.25). But how much the struggling consciousness of the Aboriginal will be able to achieve is still not known. The search for roots is still on.

Thus, we see two searches and two identities — the Aboriginal and the Australian white. The complexity lies in these two seeking to reinforce themselves separately and at the same time trying to interact and forge a common identity though this effort is marked by a tendency to homogenise and a tendency to resist.