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CONTENTS

From the Editor	(i) – (iv)
Reading Entangled Environments: Regrounding. Listening. Releasing. Perpetuating. <i>Natasha Narain & Caroline Austin</i>	1-12
The Prodigal <i>Suneeta Peres da Costa</i>	13-14
Echoes of the Land: Indigenous Memory and Ecological Identity in Judith Wright and Mamang Dai <i>Neetu Kumari Gupta</i>	15-28
Symbolic Chaos and the Journey from Trauma to Renewal in Markus Zusak's <i>Bridge of Clay</i> <i>S.R. Karpagam</i>	29-36
Exile, Resistance and Longing for Acceptance in Behrouz Boochani's <i>No Friend but the Mountains</i> <i>Hem Raj Bansal & Swastik Sharma</i>	37-47
Family, Ideology and the State: Political Theatre and Moral Conflict in <i>Life After George</i> and <i>Two Brothers</i> <i>Subhash Verma</i>	48-59
The Ache of Departure, the Beauty of the In-Between, and Quiet Resilience: Shilpa Taneja's <i>What the Suitcase Still Holds</i> <i>Vinod K Chopra</i>	60-71
Culture as Power, Writing as Resistance: Reading Anita Heiss through Postcolonial Discourse <i>Aditya Singh Dulta</i>	72-93
The Humanization of the Heroic: Deconstruction of Fate and the Rise of Human Agency in David Malouf's <i>Ransom</i> <i>Harsh Bhardwaj</i>	94-104

From Silence to Self-Representation: A Cinematic Reading of <i>Sweet Country</i> (2017) <i>Kesang Yondon</i>	105-117
Narrating Journeys through Displacement, Forced Removal and Paths to Recovery <i>Veena Sharma</i>	118-129
Land, Identity and Cultural Survival in Australian Aboriginal Narratives: A Study of Sally Morgan's <i>My Place</i> and Kim Scott's <i>Benang</i> <i>Deepti Sharma</i>	130-141
Historical and Contemporary Realities/Issues of Aboriginal Australia: A Study of Winnie Larsen's Autobiography <i>The Dusty Road</i>. <i>Suneel Kumar</i>	142-151
Reimagining the Ageing Female Self: Feminism and Later-Life Subjectivity in Kate Grenville's <i>The Idea of Perfection</i> <i>Pratibha Mebra</i>	152-162
Contributors	163-168

From the Editor

It gives me immense pleasure to bring forth this issue of the *HPU Indian Journal of Australian Studies, IJAS*, which is being published after a significant gap. This is a general issue, therefore, the articles pan from Indigenous studies, race, cultural and gender studies, to cinema, art, and theatre, presenting an interdisciplinary palette of shared ethical beliefs and cultural practices in a multicultural environment and provide an informed understanding of the fast evolving Australian culture and society. This issue brings together dynamic scholarship that interrogates Australia's past, critiques its present, and offers new frameworks for analysing its place in the Indo-Pacific and broader global landscapes. It attempts to move beyond stereotypes and critically engage with other disciplines to create new meaning. The articles highlight research wherein scholars rethink traditional beliefs and practices and focus on issues at the intersection of environment, indigenous identity, trauma, displacement, resilience and material culture. Moving away from strictly continental or Anglo-centric frameworks, several contributors reorient Australia within the Indo-Pacific arena. These articles examine how Australian identity is curated and contested through literary texts related to the Indigenous in contemporary narratives.

In a collaborative effort, the article "Reading Entangled Environments: Regrounding. Listening. Releasing. Perpetuating." by Natasha Narain, an interdisciplinary artist, and Caroline Austin, a writer and filmmaker from Australia, takes the form of braided writing. It intertwines the Kantha stitch with the Neem tree and offers a unique blend of creative practice and critical reflection juxtaposed against the environs of Meanjin-Brisbane and New Delhi. In "Prodigal" a poem by Suneeta Peres da Costa, a poet and playwright from Australia and part of the Asialink Arts Creative Exchange to North India, pays a philosophical tribute to her odyssey in North India.

Neetu Kumari Gupta, explores the poetic engagements of Judith Wright and Mamang Dai vis-à-vis the indigenous identities of the two nations, India and Australia in "Echoes of the Land: Indigenous Memory and Ecological Identity in Judith Wright and Mamang Dai." "Culture as

Power, Writing as Resistance: Reading Anita Heiss through Postcolonial Discourse” by Aditya Singh Dulta analyses the historical influence of Eurocentric concepts on culture and the contestation of hegemonic frameworks through Aboriginal life writing, namely Anita Heiss’s seminal memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* “Narrating Journeys through Displacement, Forced Removal and Paths to Recovery” by Veena Sharma analyses *The Dusty Road* by Irene (Winnie) Larsen. It is a critical examination of how autobiographical recollection aids in reclaiming the role of Indigenous heritage in multicultural Australian identity. “Land, Identity and Cultural Survival in Australian Aboriginal Narratives: A Study of Sally Morgan’s *My Place* and Kim Scott’s *Benang*” by Deepti Sharma delves into the lasting scars of dispossession and forced assimilation faced by the Aboriginal people for centuries by putting together fractured narratives of land, culture, and memories. “Historical and Contemporary Realities/issues of Aboriginal Australia: A Study of Winnie Larsen’s Autobiography *The Dusty Road*” by Suneel Kumar also makes use of the autobiographical form of life writing to highlight the prejudices, exploitation, racism and discrimination faced by the Aboriginal people as opposed to the commitment made by the First Nations to its Aboriginal populace and original inhabitants of the land.

Harsh Bhardwaj explores Homeric fate in the article “The Humanization of the Heroic: Deconstruction of Fate and the Rise of Human Agency in David Malouf’s *Ransom*.” As Malouf deconstructs the rigid social and divine structures of the Bronze Age analysis it focuses on the characterization of Priam and Achilles and through the introduction of the commoner Somax. “Reimagining the Ageing Female Self: Feminism and Later-Life Subjectivity in Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection*” by Pratibha Mehra examines representations of ageing, gender, and female subjectivity in Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection* through a feminist critical framework informed by insights from gerontology and by reimagining middle-aged womanhood not as a narrative of decline, but as a space of introspection, emotional renewal, and quiet resistance to patriarchal and social expectations. “Symbolic Chaos and the Journey from Trauma to Renewal in Markus Zusak’s *Bridge of Clay*” by S. R. Karpagam

analyses the symbols in the story, the ones that have hidden meanings, and explains what symbols mean and how they help us understand things. It also looks at how symbols can be used in art and what they mean in the context of the story from trauma to renewal.

Vinod Kumar Chopra engages with Diasporic literature and how it has increasingly moved away from grand narratives of exile and assimilation towards quieter, interior explorations of memory, liminality, and emotional endurance in “The Ache of Departure, the Beauty of the In-Between, and Quiet Resilience: Shilpa Taneja’s *What the Suitcase Still Holds*.” The suitcase emerges as a central metaphorical archive that holds not only objects but emotional residues, inherited memories, and fractured identities. “Exile, Resistance and Longing for Acceptance in Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains*” by Hem Raj Bansal and Swastik Sharma closely examines the human rights violation in the Oceanic islands through the Kyriarchal system of oppression employed by the prison administration, the Australian off-shore policies. It critically examines Boochani’s memoir as a brave act of resistance against this inhumane exercise. “From Silence to Self-Representation: A Cinematic Reading of *Sweet Country* (2017)” by Kesang Youdon draws on postcolonial film theory to showcase the decisive shift from Indigenous silence to their self-representation in mainstream Australian cinema. It reveals a reimagining of the Indigenous country through a subversion of Western genre conventions.

Shifting to the world of theatre, Subhash Verma engages with the slogan “the personal is political” in the two plays in this article. “Family, Ideology and the State: Political Theatre and Moral Conflict in *Life After George* and *Two Brothers*.” Aboriginal theatre in Australia exemplifies this mode, as it foregrounds colonial history and the ongoing impact of discriminatory policies on Indigenous communities.

The *IJAS* is published with the view to promote critical understanding of the key issues that highlight Australian society, culture, polity and Indigenous history. The Editor would like to thank the Hon’ble Vice-Chancellor, Himachal Pradesh University, Prof. Mahavir Singh, for the administrative and financial support in bringing forth this issue of *IJAS*, and

Prof. B. K. Shivram, Dean of Studies, H.P.U. for his help in this endeavour. Gratitude to the previous Directors, Prof. Pankaj K. Singh and Prof. Neelima Kanwar, for their immense contribution to the Centre for Australian and New Zealand Studies (CANZ). To Dr. Sanyogita, Assistant Director of CANZ, and to Dr. Kesang Youdon, Project Associate at CANZ, for the efforts and help in bringing out this issue. Lastly, sincere thanks to all the contributors whose intellectual endeavours have opened a new dialogue in the furtherance of Australian Studies. The forthcoming issue of the *IJAS* will be a special issue on 'Indigenous Cultures'. Research papers are invited for submission by 31st December 2026.

Happy reading !

Deepali Dhaul

Reading Entangled Environments: Regrounding. Listening. Releasing. Perpetuating.

Natasha Narain & Caroline Austin

This two-part article emerges from a collaborative residency warmly hosted by the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA) in Lado Sarai, New Delhi, in 2026, between artists and writers Dr Natasha Narain and Caroline Austin. It takes the form of braided writing; where creative practice and critical reflection reflect and respond to one another.

The first reflection by Dr Natasha Narain is structured across four movements; Regrounding, Listening, Releasing, and Perpetuating; the article reads the residency as a site in which the ecological, the relational, the biographical, and the methodological are inseparable. Drawing on the Kantha as a model of metamorphosis and the intelligence of more-than-human ecologies, it proposes that to read entangled environments is not only an artistic act but an epistemological one; a way of knowing that the garden, if it could speak, might recognise as its own.

The second reflection takes photography as both its subject and its problem. Beginning with the Neem trees of Delhi; trees that grow over markets, through gardens, and across the walls of buildings constructed without any apparent consultation with them. It asks what happens when the photographic frame is no longer adequate to what it is trying to hold. Drawing on Timothy Morton's concept of the hyperobject, the article argues that image-making tools are built on separation and distance; on nature as spectacle, as backdrop. In response, it proposes a practice of rupture: introducing the domestic into the photographic image through pins, scissors, and objects of hand and habit, making visible the apparatus of the image and creating space for a different kind of attention. The residency at FICA becomes, in this account, not simply a site of making but

an argument; with photography, with the frame, and with the long aesthetic tradition that taught us to admire nature from the outside.



Natasha Narain. 2019-2022. And after a cuppa she Rose, Detail.
Kantha Painting, 120cm x 100cm.

Regrounding

The Reading Room at FICA is up three floors of a solid brick building with walls painted white. The wooden door at the entry is painted blue with a matt finish that reminds me of heavy handloom cotton, ground, air and time, all at once. Natural light comes through windows overlooking Neem (Margosa) trees, a cloudy sky, the patina and wrought iron of a neighbouring building. To arrive is to read, and to be read by this site that might already know me.

Reading entangled environments begins in my body's recognition of a space that holds time differently. The Reading Room at FICA, with its shelves of books on art, design, architecture and the humanities, dark wooden tables and red chairs holds a calming suspension from the city's relentless acceleration, becoming a site of reflecting, expanding and safely

regrounding. After years of creative practice and writing between Meanjin-Brisbane, Naarm-Melbourne, Logan, and Dandenong in Australia, this return to New Delhi sits betwixt homecoming and arrival. It has no name yet, but my body registers affect before my language does and an era feels emergent as new directions open in a future-facing but grounded manner.

I see books in the reading room as plants, co-creating a garden and a sanctuary. Expressing variations of colour, scale and heft, as much as the weight of their arguments. I saunter between titles, shelves, rooms, painted bricks, ideas, and people. The books hold memories of their writers, editors, artists, and readers, the staff at FICA, visiting artists, children, and me. Since 2015, many of these same books have been gifted to the library at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Meanjin-Brisbane. Some are in my family home in Delhi, and they trail across libraries between cities, conveying an imperceptible layer of interconnection.

My black and white pen and ink drawings of trees and buildings, birds and clouds from the mid-nineties, created soon after my arrival in Australia, are tacked to the painted brick walls of the Project Space. They have arrived in Delhi for the first time, accompanying this seminal residency in India. This intuitive carrying of vignettes from the past into a different environment is at once accidental and intentional and a method. Such placements: of drawings, of a wooden box filled with coloured threads and on my desk in Meanjin-Brisbane, a jar of herbs gathered on a twilight walk at Barrambin, under a three quarter moon, rosemary, kaffir lime, nimbu (Lime), tulsi (sacred basil) curry leaves; all exude a reassuring presence of the local, past and present, and of meanings not yet yielded. A homely warmth unfolds a grounding through this quiet insistence of things placed lovingly, at times, arbitrarily, in spaces I ephemerally occupy.

Listening

I am surrounded by cacophony. Disruptive yet polyphonous in Delhi, multiple horns from a range of vehicles speak. Some deep, others short, more urgent, at different decibels; in a flowing rhythm not unlike the constant flow of my drawings. Each morning and evening, Caroline and I navigate these on our journey to and from Lado Sarai, but at FICA, there is

stillness. The rhythmic moving between these states of being is both tension and flow and is becoming a bodily practice in assimilating with the unfamiliar. A way of reading the entangled environments of the city and the sanctuary as a single, breathing whole.

Breathing the air and the smoke. Reading books. Sewing, collaging, thinking and staying attentive despite feeling exhausted is calling forth a witnessing and a listening that is simultaneously active and sombre, analytical and quiet. Observing without concluding, parking emotions and scenes in the mind while moving to the rhythm of days swiftly passing.

Children from Lado Sarai are welcome to visit and to read books, paint and draw. Their spirited attention to works in progress, and to my paintings suspended on the walls, is becoming central to my time. Young Tarana (name changed for privacy) stands near a work by the blue door that holds a collaged image of a child who bears a resemblance that is startling; a recognition across time, that Tarana had already appeared to me years before, and I ponder whether these unexpected correspondences are premonitory.

Two dogs share space in the studio: gentle Julie rests beside bookshelves covered in a warm shawl. Malaria, with his chewed-off half ear and taut, poised alertness, stands next to me. I listen to his body for signs of fear, stroking his forehead gently, pondering on caring and co-being between the human and more-than-human.

In the evenings, travelling together in a three-wheel Auto, Caroline and I observe the Banyan: *Ficus Benghalensis* growing on a pavement adjacent to a busy road and a row of houses. With just enough breaks in the paving for the trunk to be and to survive, roots that would otherwise trail, cling to the trees, densely embedded, entangled, drawing close in protection and survival. Their intelligence, concentrated inwards rather than expanding outwards, compels me. In Meanjin-Brisbane, given space, those same trailing aerial roots expand out into airy compartments hosting ecologies of their own. The difference is not species but circumstance; what it means to grow inside constraint and respond with a different kind of becoming.

Correspondingly, in my drawings, dark forms condense amidst a morass of lines that flow. That are constitutive, ceaseless, becoming holders of pictures and coagulated emotions. Released in swooping abundance.

Caroline is here, working adjacently, and this too is a form of deep listening. We find books and set up space together; collegially conversing and supporting each other without dissolving the separateness of our practices. The heart is fulfilled by co-appreciation and sharing experiences of places we visit, people we meet, events we attend, nurturing each other's ways of seeing and being seen.

Releasing

Holes made intentionally in a kantha painting from 2019, suspended in the corridor become apertures as the sun streams through; airing and healing cellular memories and disruptions. It feels like a performative making of a kantha whereby fragments are joined towards a new coherence stronger than any of its parts. The stitches do not hide the mending but become the meaning; suturing scar and seam, demonstrating attention. The stitching grew from interactive placemaking with the Rafoogar community at Shaheen Bagh, where, as an introduction to myself, I brought the kantha painting and placed it on the floor, and participants of all ages sitting in a circle were invited to stitch without prior instruction. An act of shared vulnerability and conversation whereby haptic touch, trust and sharing have left a spectral presence that continues to heal me.

The constellation of places I carry; Meanjin-Brisbane, Naarm-Melbourne, Dandenong, Lorne, Logan, Simla, Delhi, Santiniketan and elsewhere across continents - arrive as placement, displacement and entanglement. Portable canvases touched by many across these cities hang alongside books simultaneously abiding in three libraries. The roots of trees and my mother's cotton threads - pink, orange, grey, parrot green, gamboge, vermillion, turquoise - not merely studio materials but inheritance, lineage, the tactile memory of careful hands are interrelating and reverberating as lines on my canvases, the woman who often travels in solitude, and the migrant who lives inside my mind.

Just as leaves gathered on a walk to Barrambin rest on my pondering desk exuding a homely warmth and sensory delight, I gather miniature decorative clothes for gods and goddesses, discarded on old M.B. Road after their festival has passed. Colourful but dusty, sequinned but broken, rehomed and affirmed, such collecting of the marginal forms a part of my life practice, at once sustaining and providing materials but also repairing and repurposing discards.

Perpetuating

Reading entangled environments is not applied but lived, occurring incrementally through sustained attention to the places, presences, and relations that constitute my practice. FICA is not merely a site of residency but of a becoming and a continuation, not an intervention. Across many returns since 2015, FICA has become a kind of home; not because it is unchanged, but because it holds, consistently, the conditions for thinking: the quiet of book-lined shelves, the warmth of staff, the stillness that holds its ground against the cacophony outside. A place from which to map. A site for composing. A sanctuary holding memories of previous visits, but also of books retaining memories of their authors, creatives, editors, and readers, known, unknown but imperceptibly interwoven.

Following on from the initial visit, a carrying across of plants from my family home to the terrace of the Rafoogar space contributes towards their aspiration to have direct contact with plants as a form of education, sustainability and community engagement. In the context of densely populated Delhi, rooftops open possibilities for green spaces safe from traffic and at Shaheen Bagh, opens out to a vista of the Yamuna River beyond which urbanisation looms. A range of plants; vegetables, fruits, flowers and decorative were carefully chosen by Harkajit Bhai and Sameena Didi who have transformed the terrace at home into a welcoming environment for birds and humans over many years, and who hold deep understanding of seasons, plantings, upcycling of containers, and relational ways of being.

This writing has unfolded as a reading of an entangled environment; a kantha of fragments: observation, memory, psycho-ecological attention,

critical reflection, stitched by a running line that does not conceal the joining. The braided form is not stylistic preference but epistemological commitment; a way of holding simultaneously the ecological and the personal, the methodological and the affective, the translocal and the intimately particular. A way of writing that the garden, if it could write, might recognise as its own, and perpetuate through my practice.

Caroline Austin¹



There is a photograph I keep returning to. It shows a *Neem* (Margosa) tree in New Delhi. The tree's roots spill over a wall like something that has forgotten it was ever supposed to stay in one place. People and dogs pass it going about their everyday activities. Colour, noise, conversation. And yet the tree is simply there, indifferent to the frame I have placed around it.

¹ A generous thank you to Vidya, Dev, Sohorpem, Suhasini, Mahenderji, Julie, and Malaria at the Foundation of Contemporary Art in New Delhi for hosting us during our residency in January/February 2026. And to Dr Natasha Narain, my long-time collaborator. Thank you for your thoughtful and wonderful company during our time together, which has made much of this reflection possible.

This is the problem with photographs of nature. The moment we take one, we create a fiction.

Image production using photography, video, or scanning is among the most dominant tools we have today for shaping how we make meaning and understand the world. But it is a tool built for separation. The lens we use draws a boundary. Inside the frame: “Nature.” Outside: everything else, including us. We have spent centuries curating this distance. Nature as backdrop. Nature as spectacle. Nature as a thing to be looked at, rather than something we are looking at from within.

The Neem trees of New Delhi resist this. During a collaborative residency in 2026 with Natasha Narain at the Foundation of Contemporary Art in New Delhi (FICA).² I photographed many of the more than human aspects of the landscapes surrounding the buildings of FICA in Lado Sarai, including trees, birds, bees and other animals. Neem trees grow over markets, through gardens, across the walls of buildings that were constructed without any apparent consultation with them. They are not decorative. They are not background. They are structural to the place. To the ecology, to the daily life of Delhi, to something older than the city itself. To photograph these trees is to immediately confront the inadequacy of the frame.

My interest therefore lies in what happens when that frame is ruptured. I came into this residency holding a phrase from philosopher Timothy Morton: a “hyper object”. Something so massively distributed in time and space that it transcends localisation. Global warming is a hyper object. The Styrofoam is a hyper object. You can never see it as a whole. You only ever encounter its effects fully, a flooded village, a statistic, a photograph of a coastline that used to be somewhere else. The problem with hyper objects is that our tools for seeing them are inadequate.

Photographs, for instance, appear to be neutral windows on the world. They are not. Every image is a framing device, a cultural inscription

²“Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art”, <https://ficart.org/>. Accessed. Monday, 2 March 2026.

by the taker of the image, an act of distance. Ansel Adams gave us the American West in epic black and white: free from human presence, drenched in romantic sublimity, environments “shimmering behind glass like an expensive painting”, as Morton puts it.³ Beautiful, and deeply alienating. That deep and long aesthetic tradition taught us to admire nature from the outside. It is one reason, I think, that we struggle to feel ourselves inside the ecological crisis, rather than observing it.

So the residency at FICA was, in part, an argument with photography.

Working with the images of the Neem trees, I began introducing the domestic into the images: pins, scissors, pestles, matches. Objects of hand and habit. Making shapes in the images that I drew from the books in FICA’s reading room and the architecture of Lado Sarai I was aiming to create a pause. A reflection. The image of a tree pierced by a pin is no longer a window on the world. It is an object, a made thing, as constructed as the story it was originally trying to tell. The rupture I believe creates a friction between the image we expect and the reality we are being asked to feel. Because this is ultimately a question about feeling, not just seeing. How do we move from perceiving nature as something separate, out there, beyond the glass, available for consumption or conservation, toward understanding ourselves as embedded and entangled within it, circular rather than extractive? Photomedia, for all its limitations, may contain within it the tools for its own undoing. When we make visible the apparatus of the image using its pins and scissors to pierce its constructed edges, we create space for a different kind of attention.

The Neem tree does not know it is being photographed. It is getting on with the business of existing across time, across walls, across the tidy categories we have built around it. Perhaps that is the most honest image of all: not the clean photograph, but the one interrupted, the one that admits its own making, the one that asks you to put your hand through the frame and see the sunlight of Delhi and feel what is on the other side.

³ Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

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Kantha is traditionally understood as a form of hand embroidery from Bengal in South Asia rendered on layers of ageing sari and dhoti cloth joined together to form a quilt with designs depicting patterns, sacred text, mythical lore, and everyday experiences of women. Kanthas of various sizes to suit multiple personal and domestic needs formed a significant part of the wedding trousseau and symbolised resilience, renewal, and nurture. Kanthas resemble Alponas or spontaneous mandalas drawn on the floor with women as repositories of knowledge on alpona and kantha (Kramrisch 169)...as “Bengali women move to inhabit spaces beyond those occupied by their mothers and grandmothers” (Ghosh 180; Narain 1).

Acknowledgements

The collaboration was nurtured via emails and Zoom meetings for a year prior to arrival in the space. The warmth with which we were received as artists, Mahenderji's assistance with moving tables, installing works, and locating books. Meaningful insights and conversations with Vidya Shivadas, and the audience during a public event. Documentation of the event, and writing and communication by Dev and Pem. New friendships with Suhasini, and children who visited adding laughter and curiosity. We hold in our hearts many memories and look forward to returning and to a longitudinal connection to FICA.

We are moved by the community at Rafoogar, and Meethi Baradari, and the work carried on by Pooja Dhingra and Yusra Khan. These experiences are inspiring to us to deeply consider what art, and humanities education needs to be across year levels in an intercultural context, transnationally; who is being served and who is absent from the discourse, and the role we may play in the future, and what we need to learn.

The selfless care and generosity with which Harkajit Bhai and Sameena Di care for plants and birds, and enthusiastically supported the perpetuation and sharing of plants, is deeply humbling and educative.

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Natasha Narain. 2019-2022. And after a cuppa she Rose, Kantha Painting, 120cm x 100cm.



Natasha Narain. Terrace garden nurtured by Harkajit Bhai and Sameena Di. Photograph by the author. January 2026.

The Prodigal

Suneeta Peres da Costa

Reeds stuck to her unwashed hair
and her cheek was bruised from sleeping
on the long string of tulasī beads she'd
bought at a temple stall in Tiruchirappalli.
Unbeknown to her they would tattoo
her skin in the night, writing their faint,
inscrutable calligraphy. No less than road
signs or stars or the compass of her GPS
(when the Airtel Towers gave signal),
she placed faith in the skein of these
wooden auguries. If they broke, she'd
weigh again the argument of freedom
over sanctuary, wild arithmetic that had
led her away from what was promised,
already hers. Her sandals – loose from
the monsoon – had been repaired at mochi
twice over; and the clothes she had taken
quickly, in the dead of night, slipping by
undetected while the watchman slept –
yellowed, grown threadbare. Legs sore
from wandering, she quenched her thirst on
salt lassis in random pure-veg restaurants,
counting her cash and days under the aegis
of goddesses with supernumerary arms.
Slick with yoga and āyurveda, their earthly
consorts flexed lissom torsos next door,
while a man whose legs belied all algebra
described exponential circles in the market –
his vāhana a makeshift skateboard. Stooping
to offer her leftover bhaji puri, she recalled

the rheumy eyes of the family dog Prabhu,
to whom she'd secretly feed breakfast rotis
under the table – later vomited in the yard.
In Rishikesh she entered the arms of a pilgrim
who, as he kissed her, whispered an Upaniṣad
of Isha: 'He who sees all beings in himself and
himself in all beings loses all fear' – but sensing
only her own anxiety, she soon took to the hills.
'Through the window of a toy train, workers'
children played a game, balancing on steel rods
of a building site; between them, a celestial drop;
then mountains, ranges – called Dhauladhar.
In that last town, monkeys kept her awake, running
across the tin roof of the guesthouse and stealing
apples the caretaker's wife, suspecting she was ill,
left out for her. One morning, instinct directed
her to a doctor on the town outskirts; a sign on the
grubby, scarred door thus qualified his credentials:
'Sex determination of foetus not performed here'...
Afterwards, she kept walking, now and again resting
on hay bales, until farmers chased her away.
As she entered the river to wash, she realised it
was the glacial cover she'd seen earlier forming
the current and in its swift stream caught sight
of the bright wings of birds. It hardly mattered
she could not identify them by name, for their
choruses swelled in her, soon grew unmistakable.

Echoes of the Land: Indigenous Memory and Ecological Identity in Judith Wright and Mamang Dai

Neetu Kumari Gupta

Across diverse continents and cultural landscapes, poets have long invoked the land as a profound site of memory, identity, and survival. This paper explores the poetic engagements of Judith Wright from Australia and Mamang Dai from Northeast India, two voices geographically distant yet thematically resonant. Both poets grapple with indigenous identity and the complex legacies of colonial and modern disruptions, emphasizing the sacred relationship between people and their natural environments.

Judith Wright's poetry, notably her poem "Bora Ring", mourns the systematic destruction and cultural erasure of Aboriginal Australians under European colonization. Through evocative imagery and symbolic landscapes, Wright reveals the land as a silent witness to loss and the enduring scars of historical violence. In contrast, Mamang Dai's work - particularly poems such as "Small Towns and the River" celebrate the living presence of tribal memory and ecological spirituality in Arunachal Pradesh.

This paper highlights how both poets treat land not merely as physical terrain but as a carrier of collective memory and identity, where history manifests as both a wound and a site of resilience. Through their poetic narratives, both Wright and Dai engage in a cross-cultural dialogue on indigenous survival, erasure, and the urgent need for ecological and cultural preservation. Such issues raised are best understood by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which provide a powerful critical framework for reading Indigenous and settler literature. By foregrounding land, memory, and Indigenous ways of knowing, Smith challenges colonial authority over knowledge production.

By bridging Australian and Northeast Indian contexts, this paper attempts to facilitate broader discussions on postcolonial ecopoetics and

indigenous literatures, demonstrating the universal significance of land as a site of memory, spirituality, and ongoing cultural negotiation.

Introduction

The questions of land, indigeneity, and ecology have gained considerable attention in the postcolonial period. Writers and critics from diverse continents and cultural landscapes, have long invoked the land as a profound site of memory, identity, and survival. This paper explores the poetic engagements of Judith Wright from Australia and Mamang Dai from Northeast India, two voices geographically distant yet thematically resonant. Both the poets grapple with indigenous identity and the complex legacies of colonial and modern disruptions, emphasizing the sacred relationship between people and their natural environments. In order to understand their poetic sentiments and issues, a brief history of both writers will assist in outlining their approach.

A Brief History of Judith Wright and Mamang Dai

Judith Wright (1915–2000) is a celebrated Australian poet, environmentalist, and activist whose work bridged modernist poetry with a deep ecological and social conscience. She was born in 1915 in New South Wales, who grew up close to the Australian bush. This early experience shaped her lifelong emotional and spiritual connection to the land. However, as she matured, she became increasingly aware that the land she loved carried a painful history, the displacement and suffering of Aboriginal people after European settlement.

Her early writings such as *The Moving Image* (1946) and *Woman to Man* (1949) established her reputation, focusing on Australian landscapes, personal relationships, and the experience of motherhood. Her poetry evolved from focusing on the Australian landscape and colonial history to urgent calls for conservation and Aboriginal land rights. Her later works *The Two Fires* (1955) reflected a growing concern with nuclear threats and environmental destruction, marking a shift toward more overtly political poetry. From writing to voicing such issues, she increasingly focused on activism, her poetry became more urgent, advocating for ecological

preservation and Indigenous rights. She also wrote critical works, including *The Generations of Men* (1959), which is a testament to environmental advocacy literature.

Her book called *Born of the Conquerors*, is a collection of essays first published in 1991 that grapple with the “uncomfortable” reality of Australia’s colonial past and the ongoing, unacknowledged dispossession of Indigenous Australians. In her dual role as an activist and a poet, she worked to draw attention to the diminished visibility of sacred sites and to advocate for a deeper ethical responsibility toward both land and Indigenous rights. Her poetic voice is marked by a tension between affection for place and guilt over dispossession, embodying the cross-cultural challenge of reconciliation, historical accountability, and poetic remembrance.

Mamang Dai (1957 -) is an Indian poet, novelist and journalist based in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh of Northeast India. She was born on 23 February, 1957 at Pasighat, East Siang district, to Matin Dai and Odi Dai. Her family belongs to the Adi tribe. She was selected for the IAS in 1979, but later she left the post to pursue her career in journalism. Later, she was appointed programme officer at Worldwide Fund for Nature, known as WWF, where she worked in the Eastern Himalayas Biodiversity Hotspots programme. Her association with such organization has facilitated the concern for her place, land, tradition, and more particularly with nature.

Like Judith Wright, she explored the intricate associations among nature, folklore, and community life. Her non-fictional works *The Hidden Land* (2003) and *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004) explore various aspects of nature, food and geography. *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* (2003) are illustrated folklore texts by her. She published her first novel, *Legends of Pensam* in 2006, which was followed by *Stupid Cupid* (2008) and *The Black Hill* (2014). *Escaping the Land* (2021). Some of her poetry collections included *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008), *Hambreelmai’s Loom* (2014), *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014).

Her early writings included romantic verse and stories. Later, she moved from the theme of the 'self' to focus on a larger reality. She reflects upon the sense of a close knit community living in remote towns and villages. She draws on history, folklore, and contemporary politics to craft narratives that capture the spirit of the Adi people and critique its colonisation, both historical and ongoing. *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003) was her first book. The book records the culture, folklore, and customs of the many communities that live in Arunachal Pradesh. In the introduction to the text, she speaks to her larger project of preservation as she writes:

"Today change has come like a steam roller. The transition from unknown frontier to modern state has been sharp and rapid and the question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching. On the one hand, in keeping with the national agenda, the state is forging ahead with goals for progress and development. On the other, the history of our people, our origins and routes of migration remain a matter of speculation, based purely on the few recorded documents left by the early explorers. There are also specialized niches in our tribal heritage that may be erased forever if change is not assessed and negotiated carefully."

Research Methodology

This study follows a comparative literary approach grounded in postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives. For this purpose, a textual analysis and close reading of selected poems by Judith Wright and Mamang Dai has been done. An understanding of these two poets within their historical and regional background will help in cultural contextualization. The comparison is focused on shared themes of indigenous loss, land-memory, ecological identity, and historical trauma. This method allows us to see how two distant traditions articulate similar anxieties and hopes through poetic language.

Reading of the poem “Bora Ring”

The poem entitled “Bora Ring” is a powerful voice of Judith Wright in favour of the aboriginal Australians and in this short poem she expresses her dislike and deep twinge for the colonial forces. Actually Bora rings are circles in the ground constructed from earth and stone, typically associated with religious ceremonies of the Aboriginal society. Since the colonisation of the British, the annihilation of Australia’s Bora Rings took place cosmically. Urbanisation coupled with a disrespect for indigenous values have been responsible for the demise of these cultural sites and values. The poetess’ first hand experiences of the dismal conditions since childhood aided to the intense graphic sincerity in her sympathies. The poem begins with the expression of deep anguish and agony at the extermination of the ethnicity of the native Australians which was destroyed by the Europeans. The persona pines for the lost dance of the aborigines-

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale. (Chaitali, 52)

“Bora Ring”: Poetic Structure as Cultural Geography

The term “Bora Ring” refers to sacred Aboriginal ceremonial sites used for initiation rites, which functioned as both physical places and spiritual centers for Indigenous communities. The poem uses this site as a symbol of cultural fragmentation and loss. The poem contrasts a once-vibrant Indigenous culture with the present silence and erasure caused by colonization, reflecting on how the land itself holds memories even as human traditions fade.

Loss of Culture and Narrative Erasure

The opening stanza of “Bora Ring” mourns the disappearance of Aboriginal songs and dances. It evokes a powerful sense of displacement and cultural loss. Wright’s use of stark language such as gone, lost, and alien underscores the replacement of Indigenous histories by colonial narratives

(Literary Sphere). The dancers, now “in the earth,” symbolize how Indigenous people and their traditions have become buried in the land’s forgotten past.

Nature as Witness and Memory

This poem is notable for portraying the natural world as a keeper of memory. The grass marking the dance ring and the apple-gum trees mimicking the corroboree highlight how the land preserves echoes of what once was. This ecological imagery emphasizes that although colonial forces have physically erased Indigenous culture, the land itself still remembers and testifies to its presence. This relationship between people and place is crucial to Indigenous worldviews, where land is sacred and inseparable from identity (Literary Sphere).

Indigenous Identity and Sacred Relationship to Land

Wright’s work reflects broader themes found in Indigenous literatures worldwide, where land is not merely a resource but a living repository of stories, laws, and spiritual connections. By portraying the land as a mourner and witness, “Bora Ring” affirms the persistence of Indigenous identity despite historical attempts at erasure. Her poem challenges readers to recognize the ongoing relationship between people and land that colonialism has sought to sever.

Mamang Dai: Rivers, Rituals, and Ecological Spirituality

Mamang Dai too similarly treats the landscape as living presence, deeply intertwined with tribal memory and spirituality. Her poem “Small Towns and the River” articulates this ecological consciousness with vivid imagery of home, river, and ancestral life. The poem opens in meditative reflection upon the river that “has a soul,” inviting readers to see natural features not as inert background but as repositories of memory, spiritual continuity, and cultural life.

In her poetic world, the river becomes a symbol of immortality and recollection. It carries not only water but also the collective memory of the community, traditions, rites, and the stories of life and death that shape tribal existence. While small towns may evoke human grief and mortality,

the river's perpetual flow and its spiritual presence underscore the enduring continuity of nature and memory.

It is significant to note that this ecological consciousness in her poetry, as in the poem, "Small Towns and the River" reflects indigenous knowledge systems where harmony with the environment is central. Her verse emphasizes interconnectedness over domination, granting rivers, forests, and mountains a spiritual agency that both shapes and witnesses human lives. This ecological ethic challenges dominant anthropocentric frameworks, foregrounding instead an understanding of nature as active, responsive, and sacred.

A shrine of happy pictures
marks the days of childhood.
Small towns grow with anxiety
for the future.
The dead are placed pointing west.
When the soul rises
it will walk into the golden east,
into the house of the sun. (Mamang, 29)

Moreover, the poem's emphasis on rites, communal rituals, and the embedding of spiritual beliefs, such as the belief that rivers and mountains possess spirits, demonstrates how indigenous cosmologies and oral traditions are preserved in lyrical form. Writers argue that her poetry thus works to secure tribal memory against the tides of modernisation, resisting the slow erosion of cultural identity.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Decolonizing Methodologies

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) is a foundational text to study Indigenous studies, postcolonial criticism, and decolonial research practices. Through the text, Smith critiques Western knowledge systems for their complicity in colonial domination and argues that the study itself has historically functioned as a tool of imperialism. Her theory encapsulates Indigenous distrust toward academic knowledge production shaped by colonial power.

In colonial contexts, the study of the indigenous people did not merely describe Indigenous people, rather it constructed them as objects, erasing Indigenous epistemologies, languages, land-based knowledge, and spiritual systems. A key principle in her theory is that decolonization is not a metaphor, but an active process of reclaiming Indigenous authority over knowledge. She writes, “Decolonization is about centering our concerns and worldviews.” (Smith, 2) This centering involves prioritizing Indigenous ways of knowing, oral traditions, land-based epistemologies, spirituality, memory, and collective history over Eurocentric frameworks that claim universality. She also emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and land, noting that colonialism separated Indigenous people from their territories not only physically but epistemologically. She rightfully argues, “Land is central to all Indigenous understandings of the world.” (Smith, 4) Thus, Indigenous literature that foregrounds land, ritual, memory, and ecology can be read as participating in a decolonial recovery of knowledge, even when written in or mediated through colonial languages such as English.

Decolonizing Knowledge and Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Linda Smith challenges the Western assumption that knowledge is neutral, objective, and detached. Instead, she presents Indigenous knowledge as relational, grounded in community, ancestry, and responsibility. She explains that Indigenous epistemologies emphasize, “Ways of knowing that are embedded in our languages, cultures, and histories.” (Smith, 6) This understanding reframes literature as a site of resistance. Indigenous poetry and storytelling are not merely aesthetic expressions but acts of survival, remembrance, and reclamation. When poets foreground ritual spaces, rivers, ancestral presence, and ecological memory, they resist colonial narratives that render Indigenous landscapes empty, primitive, or lost. This theoretical lens is especially productive when reading works like Judith Wright’s “Bora Ring” and Mamang Dai’s river poems, both of which engage with Indigenous presence, absence, and survival through land-centered imagery.

Reading Judith Wright's "Bora Ring" through the lens of Smith's Theory

The poem, "Bora Ring" mourns the disappearance of Aboriginal ceremonial life under colonial violence. The bora ring itself, is a sacred Indigenous ceremonial site that functions as a symbol of disrupted knowledge systems. The poem presents a landscape haunted by loss, silence, and erasure. From a Smithian perspective, the poem reflects what Smith describes as the colonial destruction of Indigenous knowledge. She notes, "Imperialism frames the Indigenous as 'Other' and their knowledge as inferior." (Smith, 8)

In "Bora Ring", the silence of the dancers and the absence of ceremony dramatize how colonialism has interrupted the transmission of Indigenous epistemologies. The poem acknowledges that the land still remembers what colonial history has attempted to erase. However, her position is complex. As a non-Indigenous poet, she writes from a settler consciousness, attempting to witness Indigenous loss rather than reclaim Indigenous voice. This aligns with Smith's caution that, "Indigenous peoples have often been the subjects of someone else's story." (Smith, 8)

While "Bora Ring" powerfully critiques colonial devastation, it does not fully restore Indigenous agency. Instead, it gestures toward absence. Through a decolonizing lens, the poem can be read as an ethical recognition of colonial harm, but not as a complete act of epistemic recovery. Nonetheless, by centering land, ceremony, and historical violence, her poem unsettles colonial narratives of progress and aligns partially with Smith's call to expose how colonialism reshaped both land and knowledge.

Mamang Dai's "Small Towns and the River" and Decolonizing Epistemology

Mamang Dai's "Small Towns and the River" offers a more direct embodiment of Smith's decolonizing framework. As an Indigenous writer from Arunachal Pradesh, she writes from within an Indigenous worldview rather than observing it from outside. Her rivers are not metaphors alone; they are living entities, carriers of memory, ancestors, and cultural

continuity. Smith emphasizes that Indigenous knowledge is often place-based and spiritual, stating, “Indigenous knowledge is deeply embedded in relationships with the natural world.” (Dai, 29)

This idea resonates strongly in her poetry, where rivers function as storytellers, witnesses to history, and symbols of endurance. The river becomes a decolonial archive, preserving memory outside written colonial history. Her work exemplifies what Smith calls self-determination in knowledge production.

Through her poetry, Dai reclaims narrative authority, presenting Indigenous identity as fluid, ecological, and resilient rather than static or vanishing. Unlike “Bora Ring”, which mourns cultural loss, Dai’s “Small Towns and the River” emphasize continuity and survival, showing Indigenous knowledge as adaptive and alive.

Comparative Perspective: Judith Wright and Mamang Dai Through Smith’s Lens

When read together through Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s theory, “Bora Ring” and Dai’s “Small Towns and the River” illustrate two different positions within decolonial discourse. Wright’s poem exposes the aftermath of epistemic violence, while Dai’s poetry enacts the ongoing practice of Indigenous knowing. Smith argues that decolonization involves both critique and creation. She notes, “Survival, recovery, and development are central themes in Indigenous projects.” (Dai, 30)

Wright’s poem aligns with survival through remembrance, while Dai’s poetry moves further toward recovery and development by actively reasserting Indigenous cosmology and ecological knowledge. Together, these texts demonstrate how literature can participate in decolonizing methodologies, either by bearing witness to colonial damage or by reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies rooted in land, water, and memory.

Comparison between Judith Wright and Mamang Dai

In poems such as “Bora Ring,” Wright expresses deep grief over the destruction of Aboriginal traditions while also recognizing the land as a keeper of memory and identity. Through her poetic vision, landscape becomes a powerful medium through which histories of belonging, survival, and loss are expressed. In a similar tone, Dai’s “Small Towns and the Rivers” moves further toward recovery and development by actively reasserting Indigenous cosmology and ecological knowledge.

Landscape as Carrier of Collective Memory and Identity

Both Judith Wright and Mamang Dai engage the landscape as a site of collective memory. For Wright, the Bora Ring is a ceremonial earthwork that functions as a testimony to a once-vibrant Aboriginal spiritual life now overshadowed by colonial disruption. Her reflective lyric probes how land holds traces of past human presence, remembering what official histories have suppressed or ignored. For Dai, the river and its surrounding terrains embody the native past and present. They bear witness to ancestral rituals, communal identity, and spiritual continuity in Arunachal Pradesh’s tribal cultures.

In both poetic traditions, then, the land is not neutral. Rather, it accumulates historical consciousness. Landscape becomes the very medium through which memory, myth, and identity are articulated, protected, and spoken into permanence. Rivers, mountains, and sacred sites carry not just ecological significance but cultural testimony that is integral to a people’s sense of self and continuity.

These poetic depictions align with broader theoretical frameworks in ecocriticism, which argue that literature situates human history within natural history and foregrounds environmental presence as active rather than passive. In “Small Towns and the River”, for example, the river’s persistence beyond human mortality becomes a metaphor for memory’s endurance across generations. Similarly, in Wright’s poetic reflections, the land’s memory challenges the erasures of dominant historical narratives, insisting on recognition and responsibility.

Indigenous Survival, Erasure, and the Call for Preservation

Both poets address themes of survival and erasure — not only cultural erasure but also ecological vulnerability. Wright mourns the loss of Aboriginal ceremonial landscapes, while Dai laments the fragile continuity of tribal rituals threatened by modernisation and socio-political change. Yet in both cases, the poets do not simply offer elegy; they affirm the persistence of indigenous presence. The land's active spiritual force in Dai's poetry, and its historical testimony in Wright's, both resist total oblivion.

Their works thus advocate for cultural and ecological preservation. The call is not merely nostalgic but urgent: to recognise and respect indigenous traditions, to protect sacred landscapes, and to reconfigure relationships between human communities and the environment. In doing so, Wright and Dai participate in a cross-cultural dialogue about how literature can enact forms of remembrance that honour both indigenous survival and the ecological foundations on which that survival depends.

Conclusion

In the poetry of Judith Wright and Mamang Dai, landscape transcends physical description to become a living archive of memory, identity, and spiritual relation. For both writers, the land resists erasure, even as human histories falter. The Bora Ring, the river, small towns and forests all become sites where loss is remembered and cultural endurance affirmed. Through their poetic narratives, they demonstrate how literature can recuperate indigenous histories and advocate for ecological and cultural preservation. In the face of colonial legacies and modern ecological crises, their work encourages readers to view the land as an active presence, a keeper of stories that continue to shape human and non-human worlds alike. Reading texts by these two writers

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Symbolic Chaos and the Journey from Trauma to Renewal in Markus Zusak's *Bridge of Clay*

S.R. Karpagam

When we read books symbols are a part of what makes the story special. Sometimes these symbols are not obvious and we need to really think about what they mean. The novel *Bridge of Clay* by Markus Zusak is an example of a book that is full of symbols. This book, which came out in 2018 tells the story of the Dunbar family and all the bad things that happen to them. *Bridge of Clay* is an exciting story that is full of feeling and energy. The story of the Dunbar family in *Bridge of Clay* is very sad. It really makes you think. *Bridge of Clay*, by Markus Zusak is a book to read if you like stories that make you feel things. The story of a question is told in a really weird way it is all mixed up and that makes it hard for people to understand. This article is going to look at the symbols in the story the ones and the ones that have hidden meanings to see how they help create a lot of confusion in the book. The symbols are a part of the book and they make people think. The book is like a puzzle. The symbols are the clues to figure it out. The story of a question is what this article is all, about and it is going to explore the symbols to understand what they mean. The thing that makes this study special is that it explains what symbols mean and how they help us understand things. It also looks at how symbols can be used in art and what they mean in the context of the story.

Bridge of Clay is an emotional story about brothers and it shows a different way that men can be men. It is about Clay, who's the most determined of the Dunbar sons and how he builds a bridge to go beyond what it means to be human. The *Bridge of Clay* story is, about brotherhood and Clay is the one who makes this bridge to transcend being human. The bridge is really important in the novel. It is like a connection, between what happened a time ago and what is going to happen later. The bridge is the symbol of the novel it is the thing that links the past and the future. The bridge is what helps us understand how the past and the future are related to each other.

Introduction

The thing about a symbol that makes it special is that it can mean more than what you can see. It can express something that's not obvious. This is what the author uses to get their ideas across. A symbol is something that's beautiful and it can be used in many different ways. You can see what a symbol means by comparing it to things like pictures, signs and stories that have hidden meanings. The symbol is a part of what makes art interesting because it can mean different things to different people. The author uses symbols to make you think about what they mean. Symbols are like signs and allegories. They are more, than that. They are a way for the author to say something without saying it. So a symbol is basically an image that means something. It is a sign that has the good and bad qualities of an image.

The symbol is like a picture that shows us the world and everything in it. When we see a symbol in a story it is usually a mix of things. The symbol in fiction is first and foremost a combination of things that come together to mean something. Symbols are like images that help us understand the world and the things that happen in it, like what Watson said in 2013 and what Hermans and Loon said in 1991. The physical world and its deeper meaning are connected. This is shown in things, which gives them a sense of something more a kind of perfect life. The symbol in literature takes the place of a sign or object. It shows what that thing really means. At the time the symbol becomes the main idea in a system of thoughts, about the world that people who use the symbol have. This is what the symbol is about and it is used to express the symbols hidden meaning, which is a big part of the symbol itself the symbol. The symbol is really about showing what something means by using something. It can be what something looks like its shape or what's, inside it. When we look at it in a simple way the symbol becomes a new thing that we can learn about. The symbol has layers of meaning and it is meant to make the people who read it think deeply. The meaning of the symbol is not fixed it is something that can change and grow.

The meaning of something is not always easy to understand by breaking it down into terms. Sometimes you have to look at the picture and see how it connects to other things. When we talk about symbols and what they mean the books by Markus Zusak are really interesting. Markus Zusak is a writer from Australia. His family is from Austria and Germany. He has written popular books, like *The Book Thief*, which came out in 2005 and *Bridge of Clay* which was published in 2018. Markus Zusak has written six novels that people, around the world have read and loved. While the former is considered Zusak's most famous book, the latter can be regarded as his magnum opus (Sebag-Montefiore, 2019). His novels have won the attention of critics as well as the affection of the readers all over the world. Zusak has the Margaret Edwards Award from the American Library Association, and his works have been translated into more than forty languages.

Markus Zusak was working on his book *Bridge of Clay* for a long time thirteen years to be exact. This new book is a story about a family. It is five brothers. Their mother. Their father left after that. The boys were all alone. They had to take care of themselves. They lived in a house with no rules all. People started to notice the way the boys were living. It got a lot of attention.

The book *Bridge of Clay* is really, about these five brothers. What happened to them. The five brothers make choices and act like boys all through the book. This is because people learn what it means to be a boy or a girl from the people around them. The author writes an interesting story about different generations of one family. The story is, like a storm that pulls the readers in and takes them on a journey through different places and times. The five brothers and their family go through a lot of things. The author tells their story in a way that is fun to read. The book is the five brothers and their family and how they deal with things that happen to them.

This novel is really confusing at first. It is like a mystery with lots of puzzles about what happens to the characters. We do not know about their past, which was very bad for them or what is happening to them now or

what will happen to them later. The readers are totally lost. As we keep reading we start to see a very sad and emotional story. This story is a lot of bad things happening all at once which is what the author means by the phrase perfect chaos. The novel is actually called chaos, which is a great way to describe what the story is about. Perfect chaos is the idea of the novel and it is even written on the first page of the book. The novel is, about perfect chaos and how it affects the characters. When Michael Dunbar, the father comes back into the lives of his sons he needs their help with something. He wants them to help him build a bridge.

This bridge is not something you can walk on it is also a way for Michael Dunbar, the father to make things right with his sons. Only one of his sons says yes and that is Clay. The title *Bridge of Clay* is very important to the story. It is about the clay they use to build the bridge. It is also the name of one of the brothers, Clay, who is one of the five brothers that the book is, about. The book is dedicated to the five brothers and *Bridge of Clay* is a part of it. The review by Hickling from 2018 says that Clay is a horse. He comes out of the shadows. Clay is the most mysterious person in the family.

The title of the novel is really open to interpretation. This is a story with a lot of different parts. It talks about how things can be made from wet stuff but they need to be heated up to keep their shape like when objects are set on fire to harden them this is what happens with Clay, the dark horse, in this epic story, about Clay and his family. The story in the book *Bridge of Clay* is changeable. The readers find out why the father left his sons how he had a time, in the past and why he could not deal with the death of his wife. The book *Bridge of Clay* goes back and forth between two stories that happen at the same time and are connected to some smaller stories that might seem not so important at first but they are all part of the big story.

The book *Bridge of Clay* has themes. On the one hand, it is the book about a family, love, hate, and forgiveness, and on the other, it explores the challenges of growing up, fate, and the nature of human relationships.

The Story of a Perfect Chaos is really about something. It is about what happened in the past and what will happen in the future. The main

thing in this story is the *Bridge of Clay*. You can call it Clays Bridge. The *Bridge of Clay* is an important idea in the book. It is like a picture that shows what the author Markus Zusak is trying to say. Some bridges get. Some get built. These bridges connect people and also the past and the present.

There are two stories in the book. One story is about the family and what they did before. The other story is, about the father who comes home after his wife dies. The story gets more interesting little by little. This means we get to know more about the characters and what they do every day. The father and Clay want to make something big and nice, like the bridge Le Pont du Gard. This bridge is very special because it is also a way to bring water to places. The Romans built it a time ago. Some people even think the devil built it. That is not true. The book says "Great was not an enough word to explain that bridge" and that is so right (BC, p. 193). Markus Zusak says the word a lot with the word enough and he does this to make sure the readers are paying attention to the main person the story is about, at the start of the book. He breaks up the sentence in a way to make the reader feel something and to really make them notice the Romans and the devil. Clay looks at the title of his father's project. It says "THE NEW PLAN". It was made up of six pages altogether which his father put together the night before. The first page of that small stack of paper said only one thing, several times. PONT DU GARD" (BC, p. 204). The capitalised representation of THE NEW PLAN and PONT DU GARD seems to mark the beginning and end of the thought which is concentrated on the phrases and which contributes to the emotional motivation of the message. What makes the man want to do things. What makes the boy say yes to building the bridge? It is not just because they like art. The man, Clay wants to be friends with his father but he does not know it. Michael Dunbar builds the bridge to remember his wife who died. She told him something before she died. She said "So just don't ever paint me... Do things instead..." (BC, p. 224). The man and the boy build the bridge for these reasons. They build the bridge because of the mans father and because of Michael Dunbars wife.

The bridge is, like a memory of her. The father and son are really passionate about art and the bridge. They want to build something. They think about the Pont du Gard, which's a very old bridge in France. This bridge is special because it was built without mortar the pieces just fit together perfectly. The father and son want their bridge to be like that they want it to be beautiful and strong. When they finish building it the bridge looks amazing it shines like a church in the open. The author Markus Zusak compares the bridge to a church, which's a place where people go to worship. He does this to show how important the bridge is to the father and son and to everyone.

The bridge is like a place, a place that people can look up to and admire, just, like a church. Clay puts a lot of work into building the bridge. Someone says that the bridge is a part of him. A boy who is 16 years old does something that is really hard for him to do. Michael Dunbar saw Clay working on the bridge for one hundred and twenty days in a row. Clay did not sleep much. He did not eat much. He just kept working using the pulley and lifting stones that he should not have been able to carry. Clay himself becomes the bridge: "He thought of Carey and thought of arches, and again his voice surprised him: 'The bridge will be made of you'" (BC, p.196). Later, seeing a photo of Clay building the bridge, his girlfriend, Carey, says: "'You,' she whispered, and 'the bridge'" (BC, p.378).

When we look at symbols in a story we can see that they help people understand the story better. These symbols are like words or pictures that carry a lot of meaning. They show us what the person who wrote the story and the person reading the story are thinking and feeling. Symbols are very important in a novel because they help us understand the emotions in the story.

The symbols in a story are like tools that help us figure out what the story means. They are a part of what makes a story beautiful and meaningful. By looking at these symbols we can see how the story uses them to convey its message and make us feel emotions. This is what makes symbols so powerful, in a novel. When we look at what a symbol means in a text we see that the symbol is a part of the text that helps us understand it.

Symbols are, like signs that point to things depending on the situation. The people reading the text should not just see these symbols. Move on. They need to think about what the symbols mean and figure out what they are trying to say.

The symbol is important because it helps us understand the text better. We need to understand the symbol and think about what it means in the text. The symbols in *Bridge of Clay* are really something. They pull the readers into a world that's totally crazy. *Bridge of Clay* has a way of using these symbols to get the point across. The meaning of these symbols is different for each person because of their culture. Clay, one of the Dunbar sons is very determined. He builds the bridge. It becomes a big symbol for his family. The bridge is like a connection to all the things that happened to them in the past.. It is also a sign that things can get better in the future.

Building the bridge is an amazing thing. It is like a miracle. The bridge, in *Bridge of Clay* is a deal. This thing is like a bridge made of clay. At the start the clay is really soft. It breaks easily but as time goes on it gets harder and becomes stronger. It is about Clay, a boy who has been hurt by something he has kept hidden for a time who says yes to a strange request, from his father. A perfect chaos is built in the novel, in particular, through a space-time perspective, which creates the effect of a broken narration when the readers do not completely understand where and in what period of the characters' lives they will be in a moment. The symbols, invented by Zusak, are included in this story as unconditional elements of the realization of an artistic idea and dynamic schemes for the interpretation of the text. This provides a systematic understanding of the implicit symbolic narratives of the text, expressed symbolically.

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Exile, Resistance and Longing for Acceptance in Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*

Hem Raj Bansal & Swastik Sharma

No Friend but the Mountains, the 2018 memoir of the Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani (b. 1983), documents the torment that he and his fellow asylum-seekers had to undergo while being incarcerated in the detention centers of Manus Island of Papua New Guinea (PNG). His captivity on the island happens as a result of the discriminatory refugee policies of Australia, known as the Pacific Solution. Boochani's memoir also delineates the harrowing journey that he has to undertake after his escape from his homeland in western Iran in order to save his life, and a subsequent expedition from Indonesia to the Oceanic nation of Australia in search of safety, acceptance and home. A substantial part of the book revolves around a critique of the policies of the countries like Indonesia, PNG and Australia, which dehumanize and wrongfully criminalize their asylum-seekers and subject them to miserable conduct. Originally written in the form of numerous typed text messages on a contraband phone inside the prison, the account reveals a horrific picture from the inside of the Manus Island detention center. This article closely examines the human rights violation in the Oceanic islands based on the writer's narration which carefully takes the reader through the Kyriarchal system of oppression employed by the prison administration, the barbaric living condition of the inmates, and the denial of and the secrecy around the illegal detention of the refugees by the government. It also analyzes the Australian off-shore policies, their inhumane exercise, and Boochani's memoir as a brave act of resistance against them. An attempt is also made to view exile as a never-ending excruciating experience for Boochani and his longing for being recognized as a permanent citizen.

Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers has been a contentious topic for years. The country's offshore detention centers, where people seeking refuge are held in limbo, have faced widespread criticism and human rights concerns. Many of these individuals have fled war, persecution, or natural disasters, only to face a lengthy and arduous process to seek asylum. The Australian government's policies have been held accountable for prioritizing border security over human lives, leading to a surge in criticism from human rights organizations and the international community. The plight of refugees and asylum-seekers in Australia highlights the complexities and challenges of balancing national security with humanitarian obligations. Many writers have responded to these refugee concerns through varied genres. Nam Le's (b. 1978-) short story collection *The Boat* (2008), includes the title story about Vietnamese boat people. Zana Fraillon's (b. 1981-) novel *The Bone Sparrow* (2016) is set in an Australian detention centre. The ABC and Netflix drama series *Stateless* (2020) is inspired by Australia's detention history. Hanie Rayson's (b. 1957-) play *Two Brothers* (2005) is yet another powerful exploration as well as critique of Australia's treatment of Muslim asylum-seekers post 9/11. However, Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* is the first-person narrative which exposes the insensitivity and inhumanity of refugees in detention centers especially Manus Island. Michael Grewcock terms this memoir as "a terrible and poetic account of the degradation and brutality of Australia's immigration detention system" (108).

Manus Prison Theory is an intellectual project which circles around the eponymous prisons or the detention centers of Manus Island in PNG, which have been used by Australian government for dumping refugees since 2001. Even before 2001, the Oceanic nation had parsimonious immigration laws and had set up various detention centers outside of the country in order to keep the immigration of refugees in check. In an interview Boochan says, "In 2001 the conservative Howard government set up off shore detention centers on former colonies Nauru (for women, unaccompanied minors and families) and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (men travelling alone) – this iteration of immigration detention was called the 'Pacific Solution'" (9). This immigration policy, or the Pacific Solution,

was revoked by the succeeding labor government, but unfortunately was re-established as phase-two of the Pacific Solution by the government under Prime Minister Gillard. Hundreds of exiled asylum-seekers have suffered the plight of being detained indefinitely in these prisons. Behrouz Boochani, the narrator, is one such refugee victim of the Australian off-shore immigration laws. Boochani, a raging journalist and Kurdish activist, had to flee his nation as he was deemed a traitor by the government for supporting the ancient Kurdish culture. Hence, he travelled to Indonesia but had to remain incognito there for three months, owing to the Indonesian policy of deporting the refugees, and had plans of escaping to Australia and finally settling there.

Boochani's memoir brings to the light the deep anguish that the disillusioned refugees had to undergo. It methodically paints a picture of the detention centers and explains in meticulous detail the system of oppression that was implemented in the Manus prison, which he refers to as 'Kyriarchy.' The term 'Kyriarchy' was coined by Elisabeth Fiorenza (b. 1938), a feminist theologian, and refers to a social system established for the purpose of the oppression of and domination over a particular group of people. According to Boochani, the primary purpose of this system is "to turn the prisoners against each other and to ingrain even deeper hatred between people" (124). The wily system, hell-bent upon fragmenting and breaking the spirit of unity among the prisoners, seems to be aware that in order to prevent any chance of fraternity among the prisoners, their individual identities need to be distorted and undermined. This would ensure that the inmates become and remain meek and submissive pushovers without agency. Firstly, the inmates are stripped off their identities and are transformed into numbered individuals devoid of their humanity. The narrator recounts this incident and portrays how he tried to reason with it in order to make his new identity relatable: "And then they call out my number: MEG45. Slowly but surely, I must get used to that number. From their perspective, we are nothing more than numbers. I try to use my imagination to attribute some new meaning to this meaningless number. For instance: Mr MEG" (96). Secondly, this intrusive system called

Kyriarchy and its exercisers make sure that the prisoners do not get any privacy and are kept under a panoptic surveillance at all times. The surveillance is so much intrusive that even the toilets are put under CCTV coverage. The surveillance of even the toilets is something which perturbs the narrator. He mockingly comments, “It’s really hard to relieve yourself when there’s a camera staring down at you” (84).

Furthermore, the jail officials make sure that the inmates do not steer away from the despondency and solitude that they are subjected to under the structural scrutiny of Kyriarchy. It is made sure that any mode of entertainment for the inmates is banned. Since this callous system “is set up to produce suffering” (136), the prisoners are not even allowed to play cards, games, have music, read any books, get a notebook and a pen to write, etc. in order to pass their time.

In Corridor L, a few people were able to get hold of a permanent marker and draw a backgammon board onto a white plastic table. They began to play, using the lids from water bottles as counters. Almost instantly, a group of officers and plain-clothed guards entered Corridor L and crossed out the game. They wrote over it in bold letters, ‘Games Prohibited.’ (126)

The narrator also recounts the episodes where the inmates dance and sing jovially in an almost make-believe celebration. He looks at these celebratory activities as acts of resistance against the purely spiteful rules made up by the Kyriarchal system. “The Australians’ perspective is a mixture of abhorrence, envy and barbarism – the crowd is aware of that. At times this even encourages the audience to cheer louder” (136). Besides this, the abominable living conditions in the prisons that the refugees are forced to reside in are none of the heedless prison authorities’ concerns. Due to the excessive heat, lack of proper food, sanitation and humidity, several prisoners keep falling sick on a regular basis. In a later article by him, Boochani deliberates, “When the power is cut off, the water in the toilets is also automatically cut off. This means the toilets have become even filthier. They stink to high heaven. It is so humiliating. I have witnessed with my own eyes how a human being can degrade another human being, using

toilets as a technology of torture” (“This is Hell”). In another one, he talks about the struggle for basic meals that the detainees have to face: “We were cursed at and insulted all the time, forced to stand in the tropical summer for hours to get food” (“A Prison Island”). Additionally, in order to get even the smallest bit of medical help for a sick inmate, his fellow prisoners have to put up a violent protest. Without a display like that, the jail officials do not bother to provide any medical assistance to the ailing. “If anyone is ill they or their friends must kick down the metal gate, swear out loud, bash their heads against the fences, until they’re transferred to the clinic.’ The Kyriarchal System of the prison has an appetite for spawning violence” (305). The medical care provided to the detainees is also inhumanely appalling. In an episode where the narrator’s tooth hurts, and he wants a dental check-up for it, the Papu officials take the matter in their own hands. In place of getting the required medicines or a dentist for the patient, they clutch his hands forcefully and insert a hot red wire into the tooth cavity, in the name of treatment. Boochani describes his experience with a stark sarcasm as such, “These Papus are extremely kind... It blows my mind. It tears my gum. My eyes well with tears. I stop breathing, but it is good. The black cavity in my tooth is punished good and proper” (307-08). The narrator goes on to discuss how there are only two treatments in the detention center for the inmates for virtually all kinds of ailments. Either the medical staff would make the patient drink water or force him to swallow the paracetamol pills. “When someone falls ill, the doctors and nurses have the perfect opportunity to unleash their power complexes. A prisoner is reduced to a useless piece of meat to be destroyed” (303). In his unconventional narrative style, Boochani talks in detail about the vanity of these medical clinics and the protocols which are followed in order to cater to the health of the inmates. “A futile act / a futile process / a pointless approach for meeting with the smiling nurses / Nurses with futile smiles” (311).

A recurrent motif in the memoir which comes to the fore through many characters is of exile. Each and every refugee who ended up being in the Manus Prison had left their homelands behind in the hope of creating a

new life in exile. These people have a distorted idea of belongingness, home, nationhood, and stability. Edward Said (1935-2003) in his essay "Reflections on Exile" (2000) draws a contrast between nationalism and exile, as he believes that both cannot be discussed without a reference to each other. "Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs... exile is a solitude experienced outside the group... exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being" (176-77). The people in diaspora, according to Said, have a broken identity and there is a constant need to reassemble this identity out of "the refractions and discontinuities of exile" (179). This notion of exile is reaffirmed in Boochani's narrative, where he and his fellow asylum-seekers can be seen struggling with their broken identities. Besides, Boochani's exile is not a singular one. The first exile removes him from his homeland of Kurdistan, the subsequent second one removes him from the hopeful potential asylum in Australia and the Christmas Island. Although the former is the exile from his motherland, his home, and his Kurdish roots, it is the latter one which deeply shatters the spirits of the narrator. "I can't believe what is happening to me /All that hardship /All that wandering from place to place /All that starvation I had to endure /All of it... /So that I could arrive on Australian soil /I cannot believe I am now being exiled to Manus" (emphasis in original 88).

Concerning his first exile, Boochani had a long scuffle with the Iranian government and what he viewed as the endangered Kurdish identity. Boochani was a Kurdish activist who had fought in every way possible to re-establish the Kurdish culture, and identity under the tyrannical domination of cultural identity of the Iranian invaders.

For years I had dwelt on the war involving occupiers of the Kurdish homelands/

A war against those who had divided Kurdistan between themselves/
An occupation that has devastated an ancient culture/

An invasion that has decimated what was of cultural value to the Kurds/

Destroyed what was cherished by the Kurds/

What was necessary for the preservation of Kurdish identity.
(emphasis in original 70-71)

Boochani discusses how he first wanted to fight in this war against the outsiders in his homeland, in a violent and revolutionary manner but then he decided against it, and became determined to fight with the help of his words and his writings as an activist and a journalist. He wanted to free his nation from the authoritarian clutches of the invaders and preserve his valuable ancient culture from the outsiders' influence. Unfortunately, he had to flee from Iran in 2013. According to an article written on Boochani's activism, "Boochani left Ilam province in Kurdish Iran, where he was born in 1983, after he was threatened with imprisonment in 2013 because of his political activities as a Kurdish activist" (MC). Besides using the terms such as 'dictatorship' and 'theocracy' for his homeland, Boochani further describes it as, "My past was hell. I escaped from that living hell" (75).

Nevertheless, Boochani's real anguish emanates from his second exile to the Manus Island. He has to suffer a great amount of emotional and physical turmoil during his incarceration and like his fellow prisoners, is constantly waiting in the hope of getting his citizenship in Australia. The narrator had planned to come to Australia because he was not aware of the new immigration laws that the country had implemented merely four days before his arrival on the Christmas Island. Among the many innocent prisoners that the narrator empathizes with, is a little girl named Parnya, who, he contends, is too young to understand the meaning of exile, prison and affliction life of deprivation that she is made to live. "... she has no idea... why a child with no bad intentions has to be held there... Why does the Australian government have to exile little girls of six or seven years old?" (116-17).

Boochani remarks that the prison officials would regularly frisk the inmates and check their belongings, and would confiscate any smuggled materials. He tells about a contraband phone that he used to write on inside the prison about his daily life, and narrates how those writings in the form of WhatsApp messages, and trying to communicate with the world outside,

was his way of capturing as well as fighting against the injustices that he and other asylum-seekers were subjected to. He talks about how his writing was the only thing that kept his spirits high during those arduous years of his life. In an article titled, “A Prison Island. A Smuggled Phone. Behrouz Boochani on the Writing that Saved Him”, he writes:

I saved all my cigarettes for months and bribed one of the guards to bring a cell phone into the camp. That phone became our sole means of communication with the outside world... Over the first years, following my journalistic instincts, I took notes all the time... Most of the time I wrote at night. I was sharing a cell, which had a small window, with three other refugees. We had covered this window with a blanket but still, when I turned on the phone at night, the guards would notice a slight brightness in our room that seeped out through the fibers of the cloth... I lost my phone twice in those years, after the guards kicked the door open for a surprise search... and I had to wait a long time to find a new one... I wrote the book as a series of long WhatsApp messages, which I sent to my friends and my translator. (73)

Boochani wrote painstakingly about the human rights violation that he witnessed on a large scale over a period of four years. This was not the first time that he used writing as a form of resistance against injustice. Additionally, Boochani talks about a literal violent resistance in the form of a riot that took place in the four prisons of the Manus Island. He describes the riot in great detail which originates in the Mike Prison. When the news of mutiny and violent killings in one of the prisons spreads, a fresh wave of rebellious spirit could be seen among the inmates in the other jails. The narrator hears loud slogans such as “Freedom! Freedom” (333) and “What is my crime? / ‘Why must I be in prison?’... ‘Trial me in court’” (334), and feels that these slogans are an “Orchestration of a fabulous form of symphony” (336). He calls the protest as the “Mutiny against reduction to numbers” (336). Out of the unified identity of the prisoners where they are mere refugee inmates who live the same life, wear the same clothes and share the same fate, the narrator observes the rise of a spectrum of voices and characters. Boochani sees their snoozing individuality suddenly waking

up and coming alive. The revolution, however, dies with the same momentum that it had risen in. The unconquerable Kyriarchal System, after killing and injuring so many of the rebellious prisoners, does not fail to crush the whole demonstration. For one of the rebellious refugees who can see the revolution dying, and probably also for himself, Boochani writes: "His eyes contain a quashed uprising" (354).

According to an article published in *The Guardian* in 2020, after being released from the PNG detention center, Boochani was given a visa citizenship in New Zealand. His enduring struggle for recognition, justice and asylum is one filled with agony and trauma at each step. Exiled to the Manus Island prison in 2013, he was released only in 2017, owing entirely to his brave act of writing and reporting about the atrocious prison life with the help of WhatsApp messages. This struggle has, evidently, also helped in the shutting down of the Manus detention center in 2017. However, according to the reports of the *Refugee Action Coalition* –

There are still around 70 asylum seekers left in PNG, more than ten years after they were first detained on Manus Island. The refugees were dumped in Port Moresby in 2019 after the closure of the Manus Island detention centre... There are also around 1200 refugees who were detained on Manus and Nauru now in Australia, after arriving for medical treatment... They have been refused permanent resettlement, and told "Australia is not an option for you" even though some have been here as long as nine years, and have children in school and made lives here. (Refugee Action Coalition)

Markedly, the tussle for a home and recognition for these asylum-seekers has been long-drawn-out. The Oceanic nation of Australia still does not accept these refugees as its citizens. A report released by Amnesty states, "The Australian government is trying to walk away from the human rights crisis it created on Manus Island, winding back health services while refugees and asylum seekers are still in its care" (Davidson). The lack of concern that Australia has shown its refugee population and the medical

neglect has become quite infamous, but the nation refuses any accountability.

To conclude, *No Friend but the Mountains* is a living testimony of double exile and the pain of being uprooted from one's homeland. More so, it is also a critique of heartless treatment meted out to asylum-seeking people in Australian detention centers. It is because of his unwavering spirit to fight unfair policies that the writer ultimately got citizenship but in a different country. When Boochani was announced as winner of the Victorian Premier's Prize, he was not allowed to receive it in person by the Australian government. However he wrote a formal speech wherein he says, "It is a victory not only for us but for literature and art and above all, it is a victory for humanity... A victory against a system that has never recognised us as human beings" (qtd. in Cherian 251). His writing, therefore, emerges as a "formidable act of survival and resistance" (Grewcock 108). Telling stories is very crucial for multiple reasons and Boochani's story is one of empowerment and humaneness. Hence, it is not out of place to conclude this paper with this pertinent and strong aspect of story-telling as enumerated by Adichie in "The Danger of a Single Story": "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also *repair that broken dignity*" (emphasis added). Boochani's narration of his experiences thus does not only become interrogatory in nature but also repairing, empowering and healing.

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Family, Ideology and the State: Political Theatre and Moral Conflict in *Life After George* and *Two Brothers*

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Political theatre resists a single, fixed definition because, as many critics argue, all theatre is political to some extent. Every play presents a particular perspective and attempts to persuade its audience, making both writing and reading inherently political acts. The slogan “the personal is political” captures this idea by asserting that individual lives, relationships, and choices are shaped by wider social and political structures. Power operates not only at the level of the state but also within personal relationships, meaning that there are no truly apolitical texts or neutral interpretations. Despite this broad understanding, certain plays are overtly political. Such works directly engage with state policies, political institutions, and their effects on individuals. Aboriginal theatre in Australia exemplifies this mode, as it foregrounds colonial history and the ongoing impact of discriminatory policies on Indigenous communities. Political theatre, in this explicit sense, is distinguished by its conscious engagement with political developments and its willingness to take sides. As Terry Eagleton suggests, a social practice becomes political when it addresses the legitimization or contestation of power. Theatre has often been perceived as powerful enough to warrant censorship, which itself testifies to its political influence.

Historically, theatre has served as a forum for debating urgent social and political issues. From ancient Greek drama—where tragedians and comedians alike explored the politics of democratic Athens—to modern global theatre traditions, playwrights have consistently used the stage to raise awareness and provoke change. In the twentieth century, figures such as Bertolt Brecht redefined theatre as a tool for inquiry and critical engagement, while playwrights in Britain, Canada, and Australia continued this legacy by embedding national political concerns into their work. In Australia, political theatre developed through movements such as the Pioneer Players, the New Theatre, and later the Australian Performing

Group. These initiatives responded to economic depression, war, class struggle, and ideological conflict, often attracting government suspicion and suppression. Over time, feminist, Aboriginal, and community theatre emerged as vital political forms, each addressing specific audiences and injustices related to gender, race, class, and labour.

Hannie Rayson stands as a prominent contemporary Australian political playwright. Her work exemplifies the belief that the personal and political are inseparable. Rayson argues that everyday choices—how people live, work, and relate to one another—are expressions of political values, even while certain human experiences transcend ideology. Her plays are grounded in rigorous research and aim to stimulate public debate by exposing the consequences of political decisions on private lives. Her plays such as *Life After George*, *Two Brothers*, and *Competitive Tenderness* explore how political ideologies shape family dynamics, employment, identity, and social values. Rayson is particularly interested in how shifts in government alter society's moral narratives and sense of normalcy. *Life After George*, in particular, looks back to the political idealism of the 1960s, advocating a revival of compassion, collective responsibility, and class-based resistance. Through such works, political theatre fulfills its central purpose: to provoke thought, challenge power structures, and inspire audiences to critically engage with the world they inhabit.

The present research paper examines how Hannie Rayson uses political theatre to expose the intersection of family, ideology, and state power in *Life After George* and *Two Brothers*. It analyses how personal relationships become sites of moral and political conflict shaped by broader social and governmental forces. By comparing the two plays, the paper highlights Rayson's critique of conservatism, managerialism, and inhuman state policies. Ultimately, it argues that Rayson presents theatre as a vital space for ethical debate, accountability, and political resistance.

Idealism Versus Conservatism in *Life After George*

Hannie Rayson's *Life After George* stands as one of the most successful and influential Australian plays of the early twenty-first century. Premiered by

the Melbourne Theatre Company on 1 January 2000, the play broke box-office records and received repeated standing ovations. As one reviewer noted, “On opening night, the audience gave it a standing ovation, a rare occurrence in Melbourne for a non-musical play” (Radic 268). The production won major awards, including the AWGIE Award and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Drama, and became the first Australian play nominated for the Miles Franklin Award. Its critical and popular success points to its resonance with contemporary Australian audiences. Critics consistently praised the play’s intellectual depth and emotional power. Colin Rose described it as “spiky social commentary on the outside” combined with “a witty and compassionate take on love’s complications” (13). Bryce Hallett highlighted its relevance, arguing that the play “prizes a free and liberal education, and rails against the corporatization of universities” while capturing “the fluorescent glow of idealism” in conflict with burnout and loss (15). Kate Cherry, the director, emphasized Rayson’s balanced approach, noting that despite her strong opinions, “her intellect and compassion have allowed all viewpoints to be expressed,” inspiring debate across political lines (xiv). Rayson herself interpreted the response as evidence of “an appetite to hear a call for moral courage” (Coslovich 4).

Set in the present, *Life After George* unfolds across multiple locations—from the University of Melbourne to Paris, Tuscany, and Flinders Island—using fluid stage transitions and flashbacks. The play opens with the sudden death of Professor Peter George, a fifty-eight-year-old Marxist academic killed in a plane crash. Through the memories of his friend Alan Duffy, his three wives, and his daughter, the audience reconstructs George’s life over three decades, gaining insight into both his political idealism and his personal contradictions. George is portrayed as a charismatic, passionate, and deeply flawed intellectual. A committed Marxist inspired by the Paris student uprising of 1968, he opposed capitalism and devoted his career to political action and critical education. As Peter Craven observes, the character draws inspiration from real Melbourne academics whose lives embodied similar contradictions—men of great intellect, moral courage, and personal excess (x–xi). George’s life is marked by enthusiasm,

generosity, and intellectual brilliance, but also by emotional neglect and cruelty in his private relationships.

The women in George's life structure the play's exploration of history and ideology. His three wives—Beatrix, Lindsay, and Poppy—each represent a different era and response to the changing political climate. As Cherry notes, they sit “united in their grief but divided by their generational differences,” each isolated by her own losses (xiii). Through them, Rayson maps the transition from the idealism of the 1960s and 1970s to the managerial pragmatism and cynicism of the 1990s. Beatrix, George's first wife, is a painter from a privileged English background. Their relationship reflects a fundamental ideological clash between Marxism and capitalism. While George is shaped by his working-class origins and revolutionary education in Paris, Beatrix is skeptical of radical change and inclined toward stability and pragmatism. During the May 1968 uprising, George is energized by collective action and imagines a transformed society, whereas Beatrix “gained nothing” from the movement during her art studies. Their marriage ultimately collapses under the weight of these incompatible worldviews.

George's second wife, Lindsay, embodies the play's most pointed critique of contemporary higher education. Initially inspired by George's lectures on liberal education—particularly Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*—Lindsay begins as a committed radical. As a young student, she believes in revolution and admires figures such as Che Guevara, whom George calls “the most complete human being of our age.” However, as her career advances, Lindsay becomes increasingly absorbed into the university's managerial structure. By the time of George's death, she is Dean of Arts and a vocal supporter of privatization and full-fee-paying places. Through the arguments between George and Lindsay, Rayson dramatizes the corporatization of universities. Lindsay defends “income generating activities” and treats students as “clients,” while George insists that universities exist to produce “educated citizens,” not “corporate fodder.” He accuses her of turning the university into “a shopping mall” driven by marketing logic rather than intellectual values. Rayson avoids

simplistic binaries, showing how former radicals, motivated by ambition and institutional pressure, come to uphold the very systems they once opposed.

George's relationship with his third wife, Poppy, gestures toward an uncertain future. A postgraduate student researching "social nostalgia," Poppy belongs to a generation disconnected from historical struggle. She admires George precisely because he possesses what her generation lacks: the ability to imagine a better world. Although deeply committed to his ideals, Poppy is unsure how to enact them in a society dominated by economic rationalism. As Cherry notes, she is "left with a determination to honour the ideals George has taught her to live by, but with an uncertainty as to how to do that" (xiv).

The personal and political intersect most powerfully through the play's central revelation: the woman who died with George in the plane crash was not a lover but his unknown daughter, Rachel, born to Lindsay and adopted out to protect her career. This discovery forces the women—and especially George's estranged daughter Ana—to reassess their judgments. As John McCallum observes, the knowledge that George showed kindness to this hidden daughter "provides comfort for the rest of them," allowing Ana finally to forgive her father and assert her own creative voice (337).

Beyond individual relationships, *Life After George* reflects broader shifts in Australian theatre and politics. The play revisits the radical optimism of the New Wave drama of the 1960s and 1970s, when playwrights such as Jack Hibberd, David Williamson, and Dorothy Hewett challenged social conformity, capitalism, and institutional power. By contrast, the 1980s and early 1990s saw growing pessimism and the ascendancy of economic rationalism, with some dramatists endorsing market-driven values. Rayson aligns herself with those who resisted this trend, using theatre to critique privatization and revive debates about social justice. Rayson's concern with education is deeply personal. In her author's notes, she recalls studying at Melbourne University in the 1970s, a place committed to liberal education, curiosity, and critical thought. She contrasts

this with the present reality of reduced government funding, managerial control, and vocationalism, lamenting that “managerialism has triumphed.” For Rayson, the university becomes a microcosm of broader social change, reflecting the erosion of humanistic values under corporate pressure.

Technically, the play is innovative and demanding. It employs fluid lighting, minimal sets, and rapid shifts in time and place, requiring actors to move seamlessly between different ages, emotions, and perspectives. As Cherry explains, characters must “completely readjust” in seconds to inhabit memories spanning thirty years (xv). This theatrical fluidity mirrors the play’s thematic concern with history, memory, and loss. Ultimately, *Life After George* is both a critique and a lament. It interrogates the collapse of idealism without dismissing it as naïve or obsolete. George’s Marxism is shown to be flawed, especially in its failure to translate compassion into personal responsibility, yet it remains a powerful counterpoint to the cynicism of the present. The play suggests that while the ideals of the 1960s cannot simply be revived, they should not be abandoned either.

As a political and personal drama, *Life After George* demonstrates that ideology is inseparable from lived experience. Through George’s relationships with his wives and children, Rayson explores class conflict, feminism, generational tension, and the future of liberal education. In doing so, she places higher education “firmly at the centre of the debate about Australia’s future” (Cherry xvi). The enduring success of the play confirms its central insight: that the struggle between idealism and conservatism remains unresolved—and urgently relevant.

Political Debate and Personal Space in *Two Brothers*

Hannie Rayson’s *Two Brothers*, first produced by the Sydney Theatre Company and Melbourne Theatre Company on 13 April 2005, stands as one of the most controversial and politically charged Australian plays of the early twenty-first century. Its immediate and sustained impact was extraordinary. As Rayson herself observed, the play generated an intense media storm, provoking discussion in newspapers for nearly two weeks through opinion pieces, editorials, and letters to the editor. Eighteen

months after its premiere, Rayson noted that references to *Two Brothers* continued to surface in public discourse, confirming its unusual capacity to sustain national debate. The sharply divided response to the play reflected not only its overt political content but also the broader cultural anxieties surrounding immigration, border protection, and asylum seekers in Australia during the early 2000s.

Inspired by a real-life boat tragedy, *Two Brothers* dramatizes the drowning of hundreds of refugees at sea and explores how such a catastrophe fractures a family that had previously managed to coexist despite deep political differences. As its title suggests, the play centres on two brothers positioned on opposing sides of Australia's ideological divide. James "Eggs" Benedict is the Minister for Home Security in a conservative government and a Prime Minister-in-waiting, while his brother Tom Benedict is a human rights lawyer and CEO of the Lawson Foundation, an organisation advocating for refugees. Eggs is a high-profile right-wing politician driven by ambition and loyalty to state power, whereas Tom is a committed left-wing activist who believes moral conscience must guide political action. Their conflict, played out within the intimate space of family, becomes a vehicle through which Rayson interrogates national politics.

The play is openly political. It stages a direct confrontation between two worldviews: one that justifies cruelty in the name of security and ambition, and another that insists compassion and human rights are non-negotiable. Eggs is portrayed consistently as an anti-hero, even a villain, whose personal ambition overrides ethical responsibility. His marriage to Fiona is marked by grief over the death of their elder son from drug addiction, while their surviving son, Lachlan, serves in the Australian Navy enforcing border protection policies. Tom, by contrast, is married to Ange, a schoolteacher, and their son Harry is an unemployed architect, emblematic of a different social reality. These contrasting family dynamics underscore the ideological gulf between the brothers.

Two Brothers draws heavily on contemporary political life, particularly the public visibility of the Costello brothers—Peter, Deputy Prime Minister

in the Howard Government, and Tim, a Baptist minister and CEO of World Vision. Rayson acknowledged that the media quickly interpreted the play as a portrait of these figures, contributing significantly to its controversy. While Peter Costello was associated with hardline asylum policies and leadership ambitions, Tim Costello was publicly identified with social justice and humanitarian advocacy. Rayson insisted, however, that the play was fiction, signalling this clearly by opening with a dramatic act of violence involving a cabinet minister. Nevertheless, the parallels were unmistakable and fuelled public debate. At the centre of the play is the sinking of a refugee boat, the *Kelepasan*, an event closely modelled on the real-life SIEV-X tragedy of 2001. In the play, Eggs orders an Australian naval vessel to take “no action” when the boat is in distress. Tom later becomes the lawyer and protector of Hazem Al-Ayad, the sole survivor. As critic Katharine Brisbane describes, *Two Brothers* functions as a political thriller that asks fundamental moral questions: how far ideology and ambition can drive those in power, and whether any political end can justify immoral means. Rayson herself drew on her relationship with her own brother, whose political views differed from hers, highlighting her long-standing interest in ideological divisions within families.

The play provoked fierce criticism. Some commentators labelled it left-wing propaganda, accusing Rayson of stereotyping conservatives and preaching to the converted. Andrew Bolt famously denounced the play as “a vomit of smug hate,” while others argued that it simplified complex moral issues. Rayson responded forcefully, defending theatre as a legitimate space for interrogating government policy and rejecting the notion that audiences were ideologically uniform. She argued that the sheer scale and intensity of audience engagement demonstrated the play’s relevance and necessity. For Rayson, the controversy itself signalled a troubling climate in which dissent was increasingly discouraged.

The political context of *Two Brothers* is crucial. Rayson compresses and reworks several defining events from 2001, including the SIEV-X disaster, the Tampa Incident, the Children Overboard affair, and the post-September 11 climate of fear. These events form the cultural and political

backdrop of the play. In the aftermath of the SIEV-X tragedy, in which 353 asylum seekers drowned after their boat sank between Indonesia and Australia, serious questions arose about government knowledge and inaction. Evidence suggested that Australian authorities may have been aware of the boat's movements but failed to intervene. Survivors reported seeing large ships and aircraft nearby, claims that were never fully investigated. Rayson's outrage at this lack of transparency and accountability became a driving force behind the play. In *Two Brothers*, Hazem's story embodies the human cost of these policies. His wife and children drown after being denied legal avenues for family reunion under Australia's temporary protection visa system. Through Hazem, Rayson foregrounds the lived experience of refugees and exposes the cruelty of policies that separate families and deny basic dignity. Tom's engagement with Hazem contrasts sharply with Eggs's dismissal of him as a threat. The play repeatedly challenges the language used to dehumanise asylum seekers, such as bureaucratic labels like "Suspected Unlawful Non-Citizens," revealing how such terms normalise indifference.

The collision between public policy and private life reaches its most devastating point when Eggs kills Hazem, mistaking him for an intruder in the family beach house. This act symbolically links state-sanctioned violence with personal brutality. Eggs's subsequent efforts to cover up the killing, aided by his advisor Jamie, mirror the government's denial and manipulation surrounding refugee tragedies. Jamie's readiness to label Hazem a terrorist reflects the post-9/11 climate in which Muslim asylum seekers were easily framed as security threats. As Hilary Glow observes, the play traces how those in power rationalise cruelty by invoking national security. Tom's moral crisis intensifies when he realises that his brother's ambition has cost innocent lives. He becomes the play's ethical centre, articulating the demand for truth and accountability. Yet Tom is also compromised by his familial ties. Although he publicly calls for an independent inquiry into the refugee deaths, he stops short of naming Eggs, revealing the painful limits of personal loyalty. This tension underscores one of the play's central questions: how personal relationships can obstruct public responsibility.

Lachlan, Eggs's son, embodies this conflict acutely. As a naval officer, he follows orders that contradict his conscience. Though disturbed by his father's actions, he cannot bring himself to expose him publicly. Fiona, Eggs's wife, is similarly trapped. Emotionally broken and aware of her husband's moral corruption, she initially seeks escape but is ultimately manipulated into silence. These characters illustrate how the exercise of power corrodes not only public ethics but also private lives. Eggs's final victory—his ascent to the Prime Ministership—gives the play its bleak conclusion. His triumphant speech, filled with rhetoric about honesty, security, and national values, rings hollow in light of what the audience knows. Rayson forces viewers to confront an unsettling reality: that political systems often reward ruthlessness rather than integrity. The question the play leaves hanging is stark—if this is what power does to families, how can such leaders be trusted to govern a nation?

At its core, *Two Brothers* is an exploration of the intersection between the public and the private. By staging national political debates within the domestic sphere, Rayson reveals how ideological divisions infiltrate families and relationships. Eggs represents the aggressive capitalism and securitisation of the 1990s and early 2000s, while Tom embodies the idealism and humanitarianism associated with earlier progressive movements. Rayson herself noted her fascination with how siblings raised in the same environment can develop radically different political loyalties. The play also exposes the destructive force of unchecked ambition. Eggs's pursuit of power justifies, in his mind, deliberate inaction, deception, and even murder. He treats human lives as expendable obstacles to political success. Tom, by contrast, believes that power must be constrained by conscience, yet his refusal to fully expose his brother reveals the tragic cost of moral compromise. In this sense, neither brother emerges unscathed.

Ultimately, *Two Brothers* is a courageous and confrontational work that brings a national trauma into sharp dramatic focus. It condemns Australia's treatment of asylum seekers while interrogating the political culture that enabled such cruelty. As critics have noted, Rayson succeeds in transforming a complex political narrative into an emotionally compelling

family drama, making the political intensely personal. The play does not offer easy solutions, but it insists on the necessity of debate, accountability, and moral courage. Rayson hoped that *Two Brothers* would energise audiences to question government actions and resist indifference. Whether or not it translated directly into policy change, the play undeniably succeeded in thrusting refugee issues into the mainstream cultural conversation. In doing so, it reaffirmed the power of theatre as a space for political engagement and ethical reflection. *Two Brothers* remains a powerful reminder that silence in the face of injustice is itself a form of complicity, and that the cost of power, when divorced from humanity, is devastating both privately and nationally.

In *Life After George* and *Two Brothers*, Hannie Rayson demonstrates with remarkable clarity that political power is never abstract, but is lived and contested within the most intimate human spaces. By situating ideological conflict inside families, marriages, and sibling relationships, Rayson exposes how state policies and moral choices reverberate through private lives, shaping identity, loyalty, and conscience. *Life After George* mourns the erosion of idealism under managerial conservatism while refusing to relinquish the ethical urgency of collective responsibility. *Two Brothers*, more confrontational in tone, indicts a political culture that legitimises cruelty and rewards ambition over humanity. Together, the plays reveal a consistent dramatic vision: that the personal is inseparable from the political, and that silence, compromise, or indifference sustain unjust power. Rayson's theatre thus becomes an arena of ethical reckoning, insisting that citizens confront the human consequences of ideology and reclaim moral courage as a political act.

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The Ache of Departure, the Beauty of the In-Between, and Quiet Resilience: Shilpa Taneja's *What the Suitcase Still Holds*

Vinod K Chopra

Diasporic literature has increasingly moved away from grand narratives of exile and assimilation toward quieter, interior explorations of memory, liminality, and emotional endurance. Shilpa Taneja Wason's *What the Suitcase Still Holds* demonstrates this shift by presenting migration as an ongoing emotional condition rather than a linear journey from loss to belonging. This paper examines three interrelated themes in the text—the ache of departure, the beauty of the in-between, and quiet resilience—through the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Marianne Hirsch, and Salman Rushdie. Drawing upon concepts of hybridity, cultural identity, post memory, and imagined homelands, the study argues that Wason reframes diasporic identity as a continuum shaped by memory, liminality, and everyday endurance. The suitcase emerges as a central metaphorical archive that holds not only objects but emotional residues, inherited memories, and fractured identities. By foregrounding silence, restraint, and emotional persistence, *What the Suitcase Still Holds* contributes significantly to contemporary diaspora writing and offers a nuanced rethinking of migration as a lived, unresolved, and quietly resilient experience.

It is owing to the emergence of multinational organizations and technological progresses that have helped the world shrink so much so that the boundaries have liquefied in a way that people can simply shuffle from one nation to another. Migration accounts have long engaged a central position in postcolonial and diasporic literature, focusing on dislocation, homesickness, cultural conflict, and the search for belonging. Migration was represented in dramatic terms—as rupture, exile, or heroic transformation—in initial diasporic writings. However, present-day diaspora writing increasingly centres around the subtler emotional landscapes of migration: protracted uncertainty, fragmented belonging, inherited memory, and everyday survival. *What the Suitcase Still Holds* is a debut collection of poems

by Melbourne-based poet, Shilpa Taneja Wason. She belongs to this later tradition, offering a close and thoughtful representation of migrant experience that privileges emotional continuity over narrative firmness. *What the Suitcase Still Holds* is an emotional investigation of migration, memory, and the emotive residue that quietly marks every departure. The poems, though deeply personal, speak a collective truth—that leaving one life behind to begin another comes at a cost not always perceptible.

Wason does not seem anywhere, in her poems, to sensationalise departure or arrival. She, rather, centres her narrative on what persists—what is carried forward despite movement across borders. The *suitcase* becomes a dominant metaphor for diasporic subjectivity, functioning as an emotional archive that stores memories, attachments, and unresolved longings. This paper argues that the text enunciates three interwoven themes: the ache of departure, the beauty of the in-between, and a form of quiet resilience that struggles both nostalgia and triumphal assimilation.

By positioning *What the Suitcase Still Holds* within key diaspora theories articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Marianne Hirsch, and Salman Rushdie, this study demonstrates how Wason's work engages with concepts of liminality, hybridity, cultural identity, post memory, and imagined homelands. The paper deals with how Taneja reimagines migration as an emotional continuum—one that does not culminate in resolution but persists as a condition of being.

A Theoretical Framework of Diaspora, Identity, and Memory

Before exploring what the poet expresses feelingly, it is pertinent to go through the theoretical framework of diaspora, identity, and memory. Diaspora studies, so far, have constantly underscored the unpredictability of identity under conditions of displacement. Stuart Hall's influential construction of cultural identity rejects essentialist notions of origin and instead conceptualises identity as a process shaped by history, difference, and representation. Diasporic identities, for Hall, are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew" through memory and narrative (Hall 225). This understanding is central to Wason's portrayal of migrant

subjectivity, where identity remains fluid and unresolved. One of her poems cuts to the heart of fractured identity with stark precision:

I used to think
 One could belong
 To more than one place.
 But belonging,
 It turns out,
 Is all-consuming.
 It wants all of you—
 Your accent, your loyalty,
 Your memories,
 Your God. (“RIP wholesome” 33)

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” further confuses binary understandings of home and exile. Bhabha argues that cultural meaning emerges in liminal spaces where hybridity disrupts fixed identities and produces new forms of agency (Bhabha 37). Bhabha’s third space assumes the negotiation of cultures in ambivalent and contradictory spaces in which cultural identities are contested and evolved. It is not an actual space that can be represented, it is rather produced by fluidity and openness of cultural signs and symbols. It is a hybrid transcultural space of cultural differences in which the cultural identity evolves negating the purity and hierarchy of cultures (Bhandari,173). Wason’s text inhabits this interstitial space, resisting definitive claims of belonging while foregrounding the creative and reflective possibilities of liminality.

Memory serves as the reservoir where our experiences are stored, enabling the past, learn from it, and project into the future (Sofi, Mohammad 77). Memory plays a decisive role in sustaining diasporic identity. Marianne Hirsch’s notion of post memory, though developed in the context of Holocaust studies, has been prolifically applied to diaspora literature. Hirsch defines post memory as the powerful, affective relationship that later generations have to experience they did not directly live through but inherit via narratives, images, and behaviours (Hirsch 22).

In Wason's work, memory activates not only as personal recollection but also as an inherited emotional structure shaping identity.

Salman Rushdie's reflections on migration and memory, particularly his concept of "imaginary homelands," further illuminate Wason's narrative strategy. Rushdie argues that migrants restructure their homelands through fragments of memory, producing versions that are necessarily partial and subjective (Rushdie 10). This disintegration, he suggests, is not a weakness but a creative condition.

The Ache of Departure: No Closure in sight

Departure, in *What the Suitcase Still Holds*, is not presented as a decisive rupture that enables transformation or renewal. Instead, it is marked by emotional ambiguity and unresolved loss. The ache of departure persists long after physical movement has occurred, suggesting that migration does not sever emotional ties to the homeland but reconfigures them. In "I Am every immigrant" Wason pours down her pain:

I am the victim
of my own choice.
am the emergency traveller.
I am the late arrival
to funerals.
I am the pain
of loss.
I am both-
the accent
and the lack of.
I am
every immigrant. (Wason 3-4)

The pain of departure and separation from her mother tears the poet apart:

I never tell her
That I'm lonely.

Not always.

But enough. (“Ma does not know” 22)

In the first poem— “What the suitcase still holds”— the suitcase functions as a symbolic container of this ache. It carries not only belongings but memories, silences, and emotional residues. The act of packing becomes emblematic of selective remembrance—what is chosen, what is left behind, and what continues to haunt the migrant consciousness. This portrayal resonates strongly with Hall’s assertion that identity is shaped by what has been lost as much as by what is gained (Hall 226). Her ache of leaving her home is reflective when she says in the poem, “What the suitcase still holds”:

I’d open it one day—
 when I felt more at home,
 when I felt less homesick,
 when I felt fully settled.
 But seasons passed,
 and the zippers stiffened from waiting.
 I am still not ready.
 Because unpacking it
 would mean feeling it all.
 And I don’t feel strong enough- (1)

Unlike nostalgic narratives that idealise the homeland, Wason’s text presents memory as ambivalent. The ache of departure arises not from longing alone but from the recognition that return—if possible, at all—cannot restore the past, and its pain becomes unbearable:

But with every visit,
 things look different.
 “Use Google Maps,” they tell me.
 “Tell the driver your coordinates,”
 But what do you do
 when the disorientation
 isn’t in the streets—
 but in your chest? (“I need directions in my own city” 5)

This aligns with Rushdie's argument that the homeland, once left behind, survives only in fragmented and imagined forms (Rushdie 12). Wason is very much clear of this situation in "Homeless":

I feel homeless
everywhere I go.
Too foreign here,
too foreign there. (19)

Departure in Wason's work is thus neither heroic nor liberatory. It is an emotional wound that remains open, shaping everyday experience. The ache becomes a defining feature of migrant identity—quiet, persistent, and deeply personal. In "The alien", the poet's ache of being an alien is noticeable:

The kind I carry
in my extra-eager smile,
as a soft apology
for being different.
I always was—
and still am—
an alien. (28)

In "When the plane takes off", the poet expresses excruciating pain of departure:

Not weeping.
Just that silent, familiar ache.
My heart fractures
In a new place. (9)

Memory as Emotional Archive

Memory in *What the Suitcase Still Holds* functions as an emotional archive that constructs identity and belonging. The metaphor of suitcase accentuates this archival function, signifying that memory is transportable, selective, and fraught with affect. Wason's narrative exposes how memories

are not merely evoked but carried forward, shaping insight and response in new surroundings.

Hirsch's concept of post memory provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Although Wason's work chiefly engrosses with first-generation migration, the emotional textures of inherited memory are evident. Cultural practices, familial expectations, and unspoken histories are transmitted across generations, becoming part of the migrant's emotional inheritance (Hirsch 22).

Memory in the text is neither static nor purely personal. It is mediated by relationships, objects, and rituals, reinforcing Hall's view that identity is constructed through representation and narrative. The suitcase, as an object that travels across borders, personifies this process of memory transmission. Suitcase, here, is not a mere object. It is a store house of memories of the home left behind. To open it means to face the memories and it is conformed that those memories will hurt the psyche of the poet. As she admits:

So I leave it closed,
an altar
to the girl who left
and never truly arrived.
I look at it
each time I open the closet
It looks back.
And I think
it understands. ("What the Suitcase Still Holds" 2)

Significantly, memory is represented as both sustaining and burdensome. It offers continuity and grounding, yet it strengthens the ache of departure by constantly recalling what cannot be recovered. Memories of the death of the poet's father-in-law, in "I did not get to say goodbye", torments her as she could not attend the funeral, and the memories of his being a caring person make her sick:

I did not get to say goodbye
I watched
from a world away—
on a screen—
....
Not every father-in-law
becomes a father to the girl
his son marries.
But you did.
And I wasn't there.
I couldn't hold your hand.
I couldn't whisper thank you.
I couldn't say goodbye. (6-7)

The Indian national anthem sung in the cricket stadium in Australia— “in my adopted country” (31) triggers her memories that make her gloomy, and bring to her mind memories of her country:

my country's national anthem,
something tightens in my chest.
The lump in my throat gets bigger,
And as the chorus rises—
....
Suddenly,
I'm weeping.
Quietly.
Unexpectedly. All my history,
My childhood,
My identity—
Rushing back uninvitedly. (“National anthem at the MCG” 31-32)

The above lines authenticates that diaspora is not just about physical movement but it also entails cultural movement. It is also the “socio-cultural baggage.” (Jayaram 16)

However, Wason does not seek to resolve this tension; instead, she presents it as an inherent facet of diasporic life. The closing lines of the book resist sentimentality. In “What I Know Now”, Wason offers perhaps the gentlest truth of all:

And peace—
 peace doesn't look like joy. It looks like
 getting through the day
 without an apology. (39)

The Beauty of the In-Between

One of the most typical features of *What the Suitcase Still Holds* is its sensitive portrayal of the in-between as a lived and meaningful space. Wason resists representing liminality solely as alienation or loss. Instead, she foregrounds its quiet beauty—found in moments of reflection, adaptation, and self-awareness.

Bhabha's concept of the *Third Space* is particularly appropriate here. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is produced in interstitial spaces where hybridity enables new forms of meaning and agency (Bhabha 37). Wason's narrative inhabits this space, presenting the migrant as neither fully rooted nor entirely displaced.

The beauty of the in-between arises through small, ordinary moments rather than dramatic events. Acts such as unpacking a suitcase, recalling a familiar smell, or navigating linguistic shifts acquire symbolic significance. These moments reveal the migrant's capacity to inhabit uncertainty with grace.

By representing liminality as a space of becoming rather than loss, Wason challenges dominant narratives that equate belonging with stability. The in-between becomes a site of creative negotiation, where identity remains open and adaptive.

Endurance without Heroics: Quiet Resilience

As of 2012, The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as: “*the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging*

life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."

Resilience in *What the Suitcase Still Holds* is understated and deeply internal. Wason avoids narratives of spectacular success or overt resistance. Instead, resilience is rooted in everyday acts of survival—remembering, adapting, and continuing despite emotional strain.

This form of quiet resilience aligns with Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a negotiation rather than a recovery of origins. The migrant does not seek to reclaim an authentic self but learns to live with multiplicity and fragmentation (Hall 226). "In What I Know Now", Wason declares:

No one belongs completely.
Everyone misses something.
....
Grief doesn't end.
it learns to sit beside you,
Quietly,
Like an old friend (38)

Rushdie's reflections on fragmentation further illuminate this aspect of the text. He argues that migrant identities are inherently fragmented, yet this fragmentation enables new forms of creativity and expression (Rushdie 12). Wason's work illustrates this idea by presenting resilience as the capacity to hold contradictory emotions without resolution. In "No one prepares you", she feels:

You travel
You arrive.
You smile.
You survive.
What happens as a project
Becomes potential.
Then,
becomes the promise

of a better life. (23)

The suitcase “still holds” because resilience does not require forgetting. Carrying memory becomes an act of strength rather than stagnation or inactivity. The migrant survives not by erasing the past but by integrating it into everyday life. The resilience has entrusted the poet with acceptability:

Hoping sleep might visit.
 You don't know yet—
 This silence
 Will become
 Your forever friend. (“The silence of the night” 25)

Migration as Emotional Continuum

Taken together, the ache of departure, the beauty of the in-between, and quiet resilience reframe migration as an emotional continuum rather than a linear journey. Wason's work affirms that displacement does not end with arrival, and belonging is not a destination but a practice.

It is through the metaphor of the suitcase that the text captures the perseverance of memory and emotion across time and space. The *suitcase* turns out to be a symbol of diasporic subjectivity—holding ache, beauty, and endurance simultaneously.

To conclude Shilpa Taneja Wason's *What the Suitcase Still Holds* offers a nuanced and meditative contribution to contemporary diaspora literature. By foregrounding emotional continuity, liminality, and quiet resilience, the text challenges dominant narratives of migration that privilege rupture or resolution.

Having read through the theoretical frameworks of Bhabha, Hall, Hirsch, and Rushdie, the work emerges as a meditation on identity as process, memory as archive, and resilience as strength. The suitcase, as a central metaphor, summarises the intricacies of diasporic life—what is carried forward, what cannot be discarded, and what enables survival.

In highlighting the ordinary, the quiet, and the unresolved, Wason's work honours the lived realities of migration and affirms the migrant's capacity to inhabit uncertainty with dignity and strength.

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Culture as Power, Writing as Resistance: Reading Anita Heiss through Postcolonial Discourse

Aditya Singh Dulta

The paper analyses the historical influence of Eurocentric concepts of culture, canon, and universality on literary discourse and identity formation, and how these hegemonic frameworks are contested through Aboriginal life writing. Utilising postcolonial and cultural framework, the study emphasises the interplay between language, power, representation, and identity. It contends that culture is not neutral or universal; rather, it is constructed and perpetuated through discursive practices that elevate the dominant white European perspective while marginalising indigenous voices. This paper is a reading of Anita Heiss's memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?* as a means of Aboriginal self-representation and counter-discourse. Heiss's narrative is examined as a potent intervention that deconstructs stereotypes linked to Aboriginal identity and challenges the colonial notion of cultural 'authenticity.' Heiss reclaims Aboriginal identity as dynamic, modern, plural, and self-defined through her reflections on kinship, spirituality, connection to country, biculturalism, education, and community solidarity, rather than as static and essentialised. The memoir illustrates how literacy and autobiographical writing serve as instruments for reclaiming agency and countering the distortions propagated by dominant institutions, media, and literature.

The paper further highlights how Heiss negotiates the intersections of race, gender, spirituality and modernity while addressing issues such as the Stolen Generations, cultural appropriation, tokenism, and the politics of reconciliation. Her lived experiences and reflections demonstrate that Aboriginal worldviews provide alternative paradigms of community, belonging, and spirituality, in contrast to the materialistic and individualistic inclinations of colonial modernity. In the end, the study says that Aboriginal life writing like Heiss's not only changes the way we think about cultural

identity, but also shows how Eurocentric cultural theory is limited, calling for a new look at canon, discourse, and even the meaning of culture itself.

Matthew Arnold, in 1869, defined culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (6). Those were the times, when the ‘lesser mortals’, mainly non-Europeans, were considered anything but cultured. It was the domain of the privileged few, those purportedly created by God in His own likeness. Corroborating this, George Lamming points out that culture “in the form of words, came from outside: Dickens, Jane Austen, Kipling and that sacred gang” (15). This race asserted that it was divinely chosen by the Almighty to rescue and civilise the ‘dark-devils’ suffering outside of Europe. This ‘burdensome’ task evolved as the ‘white man’s burden’ and has had extensive repercussions for humanity. Abdul R. Janmohamed argues, “By allowing the European to denigrate the native in a variety of ways, by permitting an obsessive, fetishistic representation of the native’s moral inferiority, the allegory also enables the European to increase, by contrast, the store of his own moral superiority.” (23)

During the 1950s and 1960s, when the concept of ‘culture’ expanded to encompass the customs and traditions of the underprivileged, an additional artificial divide between ‘high culture’ and ‘mass culture’ was established to preserve the dominance of the affluent white population over others globally. Frantz Fanon’s remark in this context is profoundly ironic: “Europe is literally the creation of the third world” (qtd. in Dirks 67). Even a democratic space such as literature, could not escape the effect and that is evident in its idea of ‘canon.’ The veneration of authors such as Shakespeare is attributed to their ‘universality’ (Ashcroft et al 71). The concept of ‘universalism’ undermines the heterogeneity of the postcolonial globe, as despite their common experiences of colonisation and violence, the values and customs they hold differ markedly. The universal characteristics of mankind are asserted to be embodied in the armour of first-world inhabitants, who already occupy a dominant political and economic position. These preeminent European elites exerted control over

history, politics, and culture. They instituted the standards, and others were slated to comply. In the words of Chinua Achebe, “In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it” (75).

The impoverished, black working class and the majority of women were consistently marginalised. All domains of human evolution and advancement were subject to hegemonic influence. The values, beliefs, habits, and even physical attributes of the white race became emblematic of the ideal in human development. Consequently, people from the eastern and western hemispheres were designated with contrasting words such as ‘oriental’ and ‘occidental.’ Edward Said characterises this anthropogenic catastrophe in the following manner:

... Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.... The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. (25-6)

Pramod K. Nayar aptly asserts that culture is constructed, promoted, and consumed, as it is associated with power, identity, representation, and economy (6). Modernisation, capitalism, industrialisation, and to a degree democratisation serve as veneers for neo-colonialism. Consequently, theories examining culture engage in the analysis of societal systems that contribute to the development of meaning. These fundamental structures encompass notions such as power, control, identity, race, knowledge, economy, religion, and ideology, among others. Language is fundamental to this process, as it facilitates representation and constructs discourse and canon. That is precisely why Aijaz Ahmad advocates for the examination of literature from several global contexts and particularly those of former colonies as “an antidote to the general ethnocentricity and cultural myopia of the Humanities as they are presently constituted in these United States” (84). The attributes of the predominant community regarding ethnicity,

colour, language, and worldview are prioritised. The narrative of patriarchy normalises the perceived weakness of the female gender, much as the discourse of colonialism normalises the perceived inferiority of other races. Therefore, “cultural studies see culture as a text made of signs generating meaning” (Nayar 21).

Most religions globally postulate the equality of the human race. Nonetheless, driven by avarice, insecurity, power, domination, and expansionism, a segment of humanity constructed a story of their own supremacy. Given that all existence is portrayed as existing in binaries and meanings relational, it gets more relevant for the so-called ‘superior’ races to depict the remainder of humanity as intrinsically inferior and perpetually in need of direction and care. To assert the superiority of one, it is necessary to disparage the other, as meanings are interlinked. The theories of post-structuralism and postmodernism affirm this practice. Therefore, quoting from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, Serequeberhan says:

Postmodern is ‘incredulity towards metanarratives,’ the discarding of the lived and world-historical ‘grand narratives’ through which modernity constituted itself...by violently inseminating itself globally, after having properly tilled, turned over and reduced to compost the once lived actualities of the historicity of the non-European world. (89-90)

Identity originates from the intricate interaction of race, geography, religion, family, education, economics, beliefs, practices and freedom. Self-respect, self-worth, and self-confidence are integral to the development of identity. Discourses by the powerful and their portrayal of individuals and objects confer an undue influence in shaping the identities of the less privileged. The fixed identity of the pre-modern age has diminished. It has become increasingly dynamic, adaptable, and hybrid in today’s intensely industrialised and digitised society. The migration of individuals, whether compelled or in pursuit of better opportunities, aided by modern modes of transport and technology, has cultivated an ethnic and multi-cultural civilisation. That is why Helen Tiffin is of the opinion that “pre-colonial cultural purity can never be fully recovered” (99). That is precisely

why some contemporary imperialists employ the “trap of essentialism” to undermine the voices advocating for a reasonable social order. They intentionally overlook the relocation, dispossession, humiliation, brutality, and genocide of marginalised groups in the past while requiring evidence of racial purity for reparations and justice many decades later. Moreover, as Ashcroft et al observe, “all cultures and societies change and adapt, and it is in a dynamic and shifting environment of adaptation that the political claims of indigenous people are situated” (163). Consequently, categorising the indigenous populations, particularly in settler colonies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as either authentic or inauthentic is profoundly harmful to their interests.

The predominant European powers persist in establishing a foundational agenda across all domains—social, economic, and cultural—to safeguard and enhance their standing. Dominance over international economic, political, judicial institutions, as well as the press and pervasive social media, facilitates the portrayal of oneself as exemplary and worthy of imitation. Reclaiming individual and communal sovereignty, as well as self-determination and equitable power over agencies and organisations, both domestic and global, is essential. This power is instrumental in identity formation, self-representation and human advancement. Power is rarely granted; it must be acquired and asserted. One of the most effective means of obtaining power is through the effective use of language. Language comprises perspectives, text and narratives which subsequently generate meanings and identities.

Recognising the influence of language in shaping identity, Australian Aboriginal authors, particularly female activist writers, assume the duty to advocate for themselves and their community. The Aboriginal community of Australia constitutes merely 3.8% of the nation’s total population. Historically, the diverse Aboriginal tribes held absolute sovereignty over the Australian continent. Nonetheless, this autonomy was appropriated by the colonising force of the British Empire, which raised its national flag on Australian territory on 26 January 1788. Thus commenced the narrative of the horrific annihilation of the indigenous population through state-sponsored mechanisms, including genocide, relocation, dispossession, and

assimilation. The dark-skinned Aborigines were regarded as vestiges of a bygone era, deemed fit for gradual extinction, while the light-skinned indigenous individuals, descendants of the exploitation of native women, were forcibly removed from their mothers at a young age and placed in state-run institutions to be moulded into domestic servants and agricultural labourers for the ruling elites. The present paper is a reading of a life-writing by the descendant of one such victim.

Am I Black Enough for You? is a memoir authored by Anita Heiss. From the outset, Anita explicitly states that she does not conform to the conventional image of an Aboriginal that society typically expects as she is well educated and cosmopolitan. Moreover, she is an academic, author, activist and a proud Wiradjuri woman, who embodies strength and resilience. The narrative commences with a provocative piece by Andrew Bolt in the mainstream media, wherein he challenges the author's Aboriginal heritage due to her fair complexion and accuses individuals like her of attaining professional and financial benefits by falsely asserting Aboriginal identity. Anita's mother was also identified as part-Aboriginal in the report. Anita's grandmother was part of the 'Stolen Generations', and her mother was born in a mission. From here arises Anita's aim to leverage her position for the advancement of Aboriginals through self-expression and self-representation, aiming to dismantle the stereotype of Aboriginals as solely primitive, ignorant, unsanitary, and barbaric. The prevailing assumption was that they could never attain professionalism, technological proficiency, or intelligence. Throughout her educational experience, racial profiling and derogatory name-calling were prevalent, and only a curated version of Australian history was presented, with the more unsavoury aspects conveniently overlooked. She transitions from the individual to the collective and from the local to the universal while discussing and comparing Australian Aboriginals with the indigenous populations of Canada, New Zealand, and America, highlighting their shared challenges of oppression, segregation, racism, dispossession of ancestral land, and an unrecorded history of 'people of colour'. Based on her personal experience dealing with children in various schools, she concludes that with

appropriate nurturing from childhood, black children will also develop into responsible and productive adults akin to their white peers. As a woman, she challenges numerous preconceptions linked to black women, including notions of being rustic, physically robust, pastoral, submissive, abrasive, impoverished, illiterate, and with lots of kids. She also discusses copyright concerns, the ownership of data gathered from Aboriginals, and challenges words such as 'artistic license', which permit authors to write indiscriminately on sensitive issues under the guise of creativity and freedom of expression.

Upon acquiring literacy through the European education system, which was imposed upon them, the Aboriginals are now able to articulate their culture, commemorate it in their creations, and challenge the misconceptions propagated by Europeans regarding the supposed inferiority of Aboriginal culture. Therefore, education is very important as Ashcroft et al. observe:

Education becomes a technology of colonialist subjectification in two important and intrinsically interwoven ways: it establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to 'universality'... and it represents the colonized to themselves as inherently inferior beings – 'wild', 'barbarous', 'uncivilized'. (371)

Anita Heiss advocates for the recognition of the pre-1788 history and existence of the Indigenous peoples. She asserts that if many races and ethnicities from abroad may enhance Australia's cultural tapestry, as Australia is known as a 'multi-cultural' nation, then the exclusion of the 'First Nations' is profoundly unjust. She says, "But because Aboriginal people did not use western agriculture or 'farm the land' like Europeans, they were deemed invisible, hence in part the assumption that they had no rights to the land under *Terra Nullius*" (149).

Moving on from history to the domain of spirituality, Anita Heiss says that the Aboriginals possess a strong belief in spirituality. Nevertheless, from a non-Aboriginal perspective, there exists a distinct sense of mysticism linked to it. The Aborigines have the belief that the spirits of their deceased ancestors perpetually oversee them. They possess the ability to cure ailing

tribesmen and can also summon rain to promote flourishing flora. Theories that challenged the existence of God and advocated for agnosticism, such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, emerged in the West concurrently with other scientific and industrial revolutions and philosophies concerning 'atheism'. Numerous social observers and literary authors attribute these changes to the spiritual desolation of the modern generation. Nevertheless, the indigenous people maintained a steadfast belief in the Omnipotent and the Omnipresent.

Anita Heiss is acutely aware of the strength of spirituality that has served as her dependable support during challenging periods. For example, her father's cancer diagnosis in November 2004 and his subsequent death within a year was a devastating event for her; nonetheless, she derived strength from an 'inherent sense of spirituality', characteristic of black people. Heiss' sanctuary for calm, sustenance, and spirituality is Maroubra. In her own words, she calls this place "where I earth myself often....my rock-of-reflection to bring me home properly" (44). From her position and lived experience, she conveys to the contemporary generation that each individual must cultivate and uncover their own spirituality; it cannot be inherited merely through the practices of one's ancestors, regardless of whether those practices are organised or pagan. She says:

Maroubra Beach is as much a place of peace for me as a place of thanks and 'prayer'. I'm always amused that some whitefellas think we Blackfellas have some inherent sense of spirituality, as if it is unique to us and only us; that there is a certain brand of spirituality only available to Aboriginal people. In fact, all people can find a sense of spirituality, but the truth is we can't give you ours and we can't help you find yours. (45)

Heiss delineates a significant distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives of spirituality. She laments that the majority community has transformed into contemporary nomads, estranged from their natal locales, ancestral heritage, and cultural identity. They persist in advancing towards more prosperous opportunities, motivated by an

unquenchable desire for material wealth and positions of authority and influence. Consequently, during their lowest points, whether emotionally or professionally, they lack a robust support structure, including ancestral roots, family, home, or culture. They find themselves in a void and begin to lose their sense of purpose in life. The subsequent phase unfolds an existential quandary. Heiss asserts that Aboriginals have deliberately nurtured and maintained their sense of place, roots, and identity to derive daily strength and solace throughout crises. Heiss says:

I've had to tell whitefellas that they too can in fact have a sense of place. My experience has been that for many whitefellas it is not feeling a spiritual connection to the land or place itself, but more a connection to the human/manmade aspects: their homes, their friends, their local footy club and so on. Quite often that connection changes when they move from Victoria, for example, to Queensland, and they often then become Queenslanders. To me that ability to shift geographical allegiances is what sets Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal apart when talking about connection to country. (45)

Am I Black Enough for You? demonstrates that, akin to several other Aboriginals, Anita Heiss has her bond of reverence for her ancestral land intact. Despite considering herself a sophisticated, educated, and modern individual, she vows that her remains would be interred in the ancestral soil of her forebears in Wiradjuri country. Heiss recounts a story that demonstrates the flexibility of indigenous peoples in any natural environment. In 1946, Heiss's grandparents resolved to move out from the mission and relocate to Griffith with their entire family. After they arrived at the station, they were spoken to in very condescending terms by the stationmaster who growled, "Who owns all this?" (19). Even after being constantly pushed around, Heiss' grandfather responded very peacefully and said, "But don't worry, just point us to the nearest waterhole and we shall be gone" (19). He was confident that despite several difficulties and upheavals endured, they still possessed the fortitude to begin over. His faith was well-founded as they established themselves along the river and promptly secured positions as fruit-pickers. Any daily-use item that could not be purchased owing to a lack of funds was ingeniously crafted at home

using locally sourced raw materials, including scrap. For example, their dwelling was constructed with materials dumped by the affluent. Her granny crafted drapes and partitions from chaff bags.

Anita Heiss says that another notable aspect of Aboriginal culture is their belief in the significance of 'family and kinship'. An Aboriginal family functions as a strong unit and an organic entity, like to a human body. Even if a single portion is removed, the entire body convulses in agony as its integrity is disrupted and distorted. Colin Bourke and Bill Edwards explain this:

Aboriginal kinship and family structures are still cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people together in all parts of Australia. They provide psychological and emotional support... even though they create concern among non-Aboriginal people who would prefer Aborigines to follow European social preferences for nuclear families with few kinship responsibilities. (100)

As a youngster, Anita Heiss visited Aboriginal prisoners in jails. She frequently transported foodstuff for them. Initially, her father was hesitant but later acquiesced when he discovered that the young convicts experienced isolation and appeared before the courts without familial support. This anecdote highlights that community cooperation is fundamental to Aboriginal lifestyles. Qualities such as love, nurturing, respect and optimism manifest their effects over time. It is seen when Heiss was contacted by a former convict at the Covent Garden Hotel in Sydney. The young man courteously extended his wishes to her and proposed to purchase a drink with the proceeds from the sale of his art. Heiss candidly acknowledges that though such occurrences are infrequent; yet what gives her happiness is that she did contribute to the well-being of a fellow Aboriginal.

Aboriginals consistently felt pride and joy witnessing the ascendance and flourishing of the marginalised and underprivileged. This sentiment of solidarity and camaraderie for the aggrieved transcends national boundaries. One notable event was the inauguration of Barack

Obama as the first African American President of the United States. Anita Heiss was elated to intentionally align her academic trip to the USA with this inauguration. Observing numerous black children on the streets screaming Mr. Obama's name ignited feelings of hope and pride within her. Heiss expresses this feeling of oneness with the community thus:

It's hard to find the words to explain adequately the emotion that the day evoked in me, an outsider to the community that saw enormous hope and a sense of justice in seeing a brother as President of their country. I saw a strong, capable, articulate, educated Black man become head of a nation that has an incredible influence over the world, especially Australia. (300)

Recalling her student days, Anita Heiss shares an anecdote when she failed in a paper on Chaucer in English Literature, realising it was not her cup of tea. A pivotal moment in her life occurred when she enrolled in a course on 'Australian History' at the university, sharing the same environment with white students. This course extensively featured Aboriginal peoples, and her classmates appeared empathetic towards their plight. This event was essential in fostering the conviction that incorporating progressive and empathic white individuals into their movement would enhance their cause and contribute to the establishment of a genuinely equal society in Australia. She says, "These classes gave me hope, gave me strength, and gave me some sense of solidarity for the first time" (96). Heiss submitted a thesis on the 1967 Referendum and citizenship rights for Aboriginals for her Honours degree.

Anita Heiss's father, Joe, epitomised what many, weary of their circumstances, aspire to be. As a carpenter, he appreciated and venerated all his works. He cherished his profession since he was his own authority. He consistently urged his daughter to find happiness and contentment in all interests she chose to pursue in her life. Anita fondly remembers her father saying, "Anita, you should do what makes you happy. Lots of people get up around the world every day and go to a job that they hate...If you can afford to do what you really want, what your heart wants you to do, then you should do that" (72). Joe was a content, fulfilled, and pragmatic individual. Heiss asserts that she has observed Aboriginal individuals being

disparaged since her educational years. She reminisces of an occasion in school when she confidently counted to 100 in the presence of her sister's friend. The senior white girl expressed her amazement thus: "You're a good counter for an 'abo'" (85). The young girl Heiss recognised that the term 'abo' was a derogatory label aimed towards her community. However, her parents prohibited her from retaliating and advised her to amicably resolve the matter with the parents of the misbehaving youngster.

'Plurality' is the widely acclaimed virtue of contemporary democracy. Ironically, it has always been present in the pre-colonial Aboriginal culture. Anita Heiss asserts that Aboriginals were never a monolithic group. She warns against conflating 'Murri' with 'Koori,' as the former pertains to Indigenous people from Queensland, while the latter serves as a general identifier for Indigenous individuals across much of New South Wales. Aboriginal houses have often served as venues of multiculturalism. Whether due to the coexistence of several tribes prior to invasion or the unfortunate and coerced unions enforced by colonisers, Aboriginal families resemble a diverse salad bowl, consisting of individuals of differing colours and origins. Anita Heiss' father was an Austrian immigrant, while her mother was of partial Aboriginal descent. She says, "I used to joke as a child that being in Mum and Dad's bed on Sunday morning when we'd all climb in was like a pedestrian crossing- black, white, black, white bodies all lined up" (10). Heiss states that her maternal grandpa, James Andrew Williams, while a practising Catholic, maintained his Aboriginal heritage through his adoption and observation of holy rites and spirituality. He bequeathed this knowledge and identity to his daughter, Elsie, the mother of Anita Heiss.

Despite the gruesome atrocities perpetrated against their ancestors, numerous indigenous people, such as Anita Heiss, exhibit greater sensitivity, tolerance, and pluralism in their perspectives than certain compatriots. The indigenous people genuinely embody the principles advocated by the Western concept of democracy and its associated ideals. Upon Professor Michael McDaniel's observation that designating indigenous individuals as 'First Nations' or 'First Peoples' implies that the

rest of the Australian populace are ‘Second Peoples,’ Heiss exhibited receptiveness and resolved to exercise greater prudence in her terminology, considering the context, time, and circumstances.

Due to their lived experiences throughout the years, it was natural for the indigenous population to be wary of the dominant group, its members, and their intentions. Interactions between Aboriginal girls and white individuals were disapproved of and discouraged. Nevertheless, several progressive figures, such as Anita Heiss’ mother, Elsie, defied preconceptions and transcended boundaries as genuine advocates of multiculturalism, perceiving everyone as His children, irrespective of race, colour, or ethnicity. Elsie engaged in a romantic relationship with and subsequently tied the knot with a white Austrian immigrant. At first, not all family members were supportive. Some others abstained from attending the wedding, perceiving it as a slight against black males. In a brief period, everyone embraced the new family member, the son-in-law, Joe, affectionately named Seppi. Looking at the pictures of her parents’ wedding, Anita Heiss correctly points out:

The images symbolize for me the absolute truth of unconditional love and that real love knows no boundaries, least of all race. My father ignored the ridicule of local Blacks and his own white friends to be with the woman he loved, while my mother risked the wrath of her family. (25)

This incident highlights the fundamental truth that race and colour are inconsequential. Anita Heiss’s parents were a diligent couple. Heiss’s father laboured as a carpenter seven days a week. Her mother, Elsie, also worked extensive hours, encompassing both day and night shifts. Throughout the day, she operated a school tuck-shop for around twenty-five years. She worked night shifts at the Matraville Skyline Drive-Inn for sixteen years. Both endeavoured to contribute to their nation and the well-being of their kids. They maintained their house in an orderly and clean manner voluntarily though Heiss does not forget to add that “a legacy of a life living in fear of the Welfare Board removing children from so-called unfit homes” must have haunted them perpetually (26).

Heiss reveals that prior to her university education, she identified as an Aboriginal Christian, having had baptism, communion, and, though infrequently, attended masses and engaged in confessions. It was only until a student mentioned Heiss's dual identity as both Aboriginal and Catholic when signing her slam book that she contemplated the apparent tension of her dual identity. This seemingly innocuous remark adversely affected Heiss. She recognised that had the colonisers and missionaries not foisted their religion on her ancestors, she would have been practicing her own language, culture, and spirituality. Heiss says, "I've never really acknowledged being a Catholic since or practiced Catholicism, although I appreciate the moral codes I grew up with in the Catholic education system" (40). However, Heiss does accept that her mother "has managed to marry both her Aboriginal spirituality and history with her Catholic faith" and hence is emblematic of composite multi-culturalism (40). Although Heiss was not a practicing Christian, she occasionally attended Sunday masses for the sake of her devout mother's delight. She emphasises her resemblance to her father, a Roman Catholic, in her lack of formal religiosity. It is noteworthy that none of these Aboriginal family members imposed their religious beliefs or atheism upon one another. It is markedly dissimilar to the colonisers who imposed their Christian beliefs upon the indigenous population, showing little mercy even to young children. It is noteworthy to remark that Joe, Heiss' father, although being a white Austrian immigrant, never opposed his daughter's expression of her Aboriginal identity, so demonstrating both his open-mindedness and liberation from a domineering patriarchal perspective.

The notion that the world constitutes a global family and that all individuals are God's offspring resonated within the Heiss home. Anita's father, an Austrian immigrant, ceremoniously hoisted the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian National flag on Australia Day. It is evident that he acted out of regard for his wife and children. This may have fostered his empathy for the indigenous group, which was marginalised in various aspects, particularly politically. Anita Heiss, along with her siblings and mother, raised the Austrian flag annually on 26 October, designated as

Austrian National Day. This reverence for one another's culture, nationality, and identity starkly contrasted with the perspective of the colonisers.

If Elsie, Heiss' mother, had permitted herself to be influenced by regionalism and racial exclusivity in selecting her life companion, she would not have married Joe. Upon discovering his cancer diagnosis, Joe dedicated his remaining days to repairing nearly everything in his home that might have malfunctioned and inconvenienced his family in his absence. He passed away in 2005. Heiss' life exemplifies that both marital unions and cross-cultural friendships play a significant role in dismantling prejudices and promoting trust, camaraderie, and the celebration of mankind. Following her father's demise, Anita Heiss, in a contemplative state, understood that ethnicity, culture, religion, and language are merely aspects of existence rather than ultimate truths. Happiness, contentment, tranquilly, spirituality, and the pursuit of virtuous endeavours are among the cherished objectives of life. To attain these admirable attributes, her parents established a solid foundation through a nurturing and joyful family environment.

Anita Heiss asserts that the acceptance of monetarily and professionally successful Aboriginal individuals remains a contentious issue in contemporary Australian race relations. The success of blacks, however limited in population size, is difficult for the dominant race to admit. Discontented citizens, due to their own arrogance, neglect the undeniable reality that if a segment of society is permanently oppressed and afflicted, for the gratification and sadistic enjoyment of a few, it will hinder the overall advancement of the nation. Heiss puts this truth of assimilation thus:

That in order to be 'authentically Aboriginal', we must not evolve as a community, even after being moved from homelands...So myself and other people mentioned in the Bolt article must therefore be whites taking Black jobs. Our reality, though, is that we are all educated Blackfellas wanting to give back to our communities by working in roles that allow us to do just that. (81)

Anita Heiss examines the living situations of Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada, transitioning from a local to a global perspective. She observes that the United States and Canada accord their 'First Nations' peoples significantly greater fairness and dignity. Both the countries have defined them "in official documentation as 'First Peoples' as opposed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous in Australian documentation" (159). The Parliament of New Zealand assigns seats for its indigenous population and natives. The Māori language is extensively spoken in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Additionally, the 'Treaty of Waitangi' is a formal accord documented between imperial Britain and the leaders of Maori Iwi and Hapu. Heiss emphasises that New Zealand's foundational text is composed in both Māori and English. Heiss desires this form of concrete symbolism for her community rather than mere superficial tokenism. It gives immense pain to Heiss to say that Aboriginals and their pathetic state-of-being has mostly been "invisible on the Australian identity radar" (148). Sadly, some governments have exploited Aboriginal identity to enhance the tourism industry, thereby indirectly reinforcing the caricature of Aboriginals as primitive, desert-dwelling boomerang throwers, rather than aiding the indigenous population in achieving a balanced integration of tradition and modernisation.

Anita Heiss admits that criticism from fellow Aboriginals is painful, even if it originates from only a few discontented individuals. Building on this sensation of anguish, she asserts that terms such as 'coconut' serve as derogatory epithets for the few individuals like herself who succeed in ascending the social and economic hierarchy. It is acknowledged that a coconut possesses a brown exterior and a white interior, suggesting that individuals like Heiss are white at heart and brown externally due to genetic factors. Heiss says, "Coconuts are considered to be sell-outs working for the white man or working mostly for themselves instead of the community" (165). This animosity, regardless of its insignificance, is a worldwide occurrence. Heiss references individuals within the Native American community who have transcended poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, thereby enhancing their living conditions. Regrettably, some inside their

ranks disparagingly refer to them as ‘apple.’ An apple is externally red and internally white, analogous to a ‘coconut’. Anita Heiss sought to eliminate cultural misunderstandings by teaching Australian and Aboriginal history at multiple platforms offered by her University, with a focus on plurality and inclusivity. The experience instilled in her a strong conviction that the instruction of Aboriginal history in Australia will serve as a significant milestone in reconciling the divide between Aboriginal and other people. She endeavoured to establish a course on Indigenous Australia as a mandatory component of the undergraduate curriculum across all fields; however, she could not be successful. In Heiss’ own words, “Such an introduction would ensure that misrepresentation and misinformation about Aboriginal people and identity would not appear in mainstream forums” (118). Heiss lamented that this void and distortion of knowledge regarding indigenous populations was a global problem. Regardless of whether it is the United States, New Zealand, or any other nation, individuals remain mostly unaware of the history of their indigenous populations and have archaic perceptions towards these cultures. Pointing to the stereotyping of the Aboriginals thus, Heiss says, “Many expected me to know how to throw a boomerang, cook bush tucker and dance on cue....” (120).

Anita Heiss has embraced the commemoration of racial and cultural diversity as the optimal outcome. She strives to instil her sense of pride in her identity among other Aboriginals, particularly the younger generation, through her literary works. She is the author of two children’s novels, co-written with students from Years 3 to 6 at La Perouse Public School in Sydney. Heiss articulates her motives as twofold: firstly, to “de-marginalize” (200) young indigenes by emphasising their similarities with white peers; secondly, to impart the gift of education to young children, thereby empowering them to confront future challenges. A notable novel is titled *Yirra and Her Deadly Dog, Demon*, released by ABC Books in 2007. The principles of sharing and caring have consistently characterised Aboriginal culture and are actively upheld and promoted by Heiss and her indigenous peers. Heiss says, “Being literate means they can participate in social activities, in the education system and the employment market. It means

they have more chances of enjoying equity and improvement in health and lifestyle” (206).

If modern humans can gain from the treasured values of indigenous peoples, then the latter likewise have the freedom to adopt beliefs and elements from the current era. Aboriginal peoples also merit modernisation, advancement, and development in all aspects of life, whether spiritual or material. Anita Heiss says:

Why would you think that Blackfellas would want to get somewhere any slower than a whitefella...I don't tell time by using the sun; rather, I tell time by *Dolce and Gabbana*...I don't collect berries either, but I am collecting something from every *Tiffany's store* around the world. What? We like pretty things too? Why shouldn't we like things. (120-21)

Anita Heiss cites Prof McDaniel concerning this dilemma of preserving cultural heritage while pursuing advancement as he says:

When western societies evolve, they call it 'modernization'. When we evolve, we're told we have 'cultural loss'. Western societies have 'development' but when we develop, we're told we're experiencing 'cultural disintegration'. Western societies are allowed to 'progress' but when we do, we're told we're 'trapped between two worlds'. Western societies become 'cosmopolitan', but we're told we're being 'urbanized and losing touch with our roots'. Western societies become 'multicultural' but we're apparently becoming 'culturally contaminated'. Western societies are allowed to 'adapt' a culture, but when we do, we're told we're actually 'becoming the other culture'. (124-5)

Anita Heiss admits that she was not an avid supporter of the government's 'reconciliation policy.' Why should the Aboriginal victims seek it? Why would the white population comply with government mandates? Jackie Huggins, a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), influenced her to alter her perspective. Jackie sent an invitation for a Women's Reconciliation Dinner in Brisbane, which Heiss referred to as her

“epiphany” (135). Here, she found many non-Aboriginal individuals, including numerous whites, who affirmed their commitment to equality and pledged to include others under the same canopy. Heiss decided to take part in such meetings as she personally observed the favourable results. Heiss emphasises the significance of minor symbolic acts that greatly heal the sentiments of the indigenous population, such as the practice of displaying the Aboriginal flag alongside the National flag at schools, municipal buildings and town halls at key events. Heiss asserts that such symbolic gestures demonstrate that these symbols of national success and growth are situated on the ancestral territories of several minority Aboriginal communities.

Friendships are not subordinate to ethnicity or nationality. Diverse nationalities at the friendship table resemble a bowl of salad, where greater variance enhances the overall amalgamation and richness. Anita Heiss’ friendship with Michelle Wong, a non-Aboriginal individual she befriended at the photocopier, exemplifies this situation. Michelle assisted Heiss with her documentation, resulting in the establishment of the bond. They maintained communication and developed a connection through cuisine, wine, humour, professional endeavours, travel, and cinema. Heiss says:

What friendships like mine and Michelle’s highlight is that all relationships are richer for their cultural differences, and that sameness is also possible. Neither of us is confined or censored in our friendship by our different heritages, and our identities aren’t challenged by the other’s identity either. (154)

Anita Heiss asserts that she is a Black woman, raised within a predominantly white system. Furthermore, when she has been educated alongside whites in the same environment, consistently collaborates as a professional with them, and engages socially, there is no drawback in embracing ‘biculturalism,’ all while preserving the core of Aboriginal identity. She quotes one of her own poems, “I am who I am/ I am a bicultural Blackfella/ And I apologize to no-one” (191).

Therefore, narratives such as *Am I Black Enough For You?* demonstrate that despite experiencing defeat, dispossession, enslavement,

subjugation, oppression, rape, exploitation, and humiliation, Aboriginals retained their humanity, kinship, sharing, spirituality, and, consequently, their sense of the divine. These narratives offer unique insights into the rich and remarkable culture of the Aboriginals, which the world would have remained ignorant of without such documentation. The distinction between Aboriginal and colonial cultures and its impact, as portrayed in such life writings, is aptly encapsulated in a poem by Dianna Rose Yoka, “Who is Stone-Age?”:

I was talking to a friend
The other fine day
I commented on many things
And then she had her say.

‘Aboriginal people
Are coming out of stone age’
She finally said to me.
‘Why is it that
White man’s view is always
Taken as truth!
Who are they to label?’

Two hundred years ago
We had an affluent society
We knew our place
In the scheme of things.
And then ‘they’ came to this fair land
To rape, pillage and plunder.
They tore the sacred land apart
and made the stock exchange instead
Their sacred site and wonder.

They used only the intellect
And in their rapacious greed

They pitted science against religion.
 They change the laws every year
 For some new fancy, whim.

So who is stone age now, my friend.
 Is it white man who is prehistoric?
 He cannot find the answers yet
 Because he only lives in
 Rhetoric. (191)

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The Humanization of the Heroic: Deconstruction of Fate and the Rise of Human Agency in David Malouf's *Ransom*

Harsh Bhardwaj

David Malouf's 2009 novel, *Ransom*, serves as a contemporary “re-visioning” of Book 24 of Homer's *The Iliad*. This paper explores how Malouf appropriates the epic tradition to shift the focus from the “heroic” to the “human.” By introducing the concept of chance as a counterpoint to the Homeric fate, Malouf deconstructs the rigid social and divine structures of the Bronze Age. The analysis focuses on the characterization of Priam and Achilles, the introduction of the commoner Somax, and the linguistic shift from epic distance to intimate interiority.

Literary appropriation is far more than simple imitation; it's an active conversation between an original source and its modern reimagining. By pulling characters, settings, or themes into a fresh context, authors can completely shift a story's focus. In his novel *Ransom*, David Malouf practices this by deconstructing Homer's *The Iliad*. This paper explores how Malouf appropriates the epic tradition to shift the focus from the “heroic” to the “human.” By introducing the concept of chance as a counterpoint to the Homeric fate, Malouf deconstructs the rigid social and divine structures of the Bronze Age. The analysis focuses on the characterization of Priam and Achilles, the introduction of the commoner Somax, and the linguistic shift from epic distance to intimate interiority.

While the ancient epic centers on the pursuit of *kleos* (immortal glory) and the grand scale of divine fate, Malouf narrows his lens on the human and the mundane. He strips away the heavy influence of the gods to highlight “un-heroic” moments – trading the battlefield for the sensory reality of the physical world, like the taste of food or the texture of dust. Through this domestic lens, Malouf transforms a narrative of warrior rage into a study of profound human vulnerability.

Ransom, set against the backdrop of the Trojan War, explores the profound connection between two grieving adversaries: the fierce warrior Achilles and King Priam of Troy. Following the death of his beloved Patroclus at the hands of Hector—and his own subsequent, brutal revenge—Achilles is locked in a cycle of rage that mirrors Priam's immense sorrow for his fallen son. To find peace, both men must look beyond the rigid demands of wartime duty and confront one another's shared humanity, seeking a resolution that transcends the violence of the siege. In words of Katie Forsyth, when the aged father and the murderer of his son meet, "the past and present blend, enemies exchange places, hatred turns to understanding, youth pities age mourning youth."

In *Ransom*, David Malouf reimagines the traditional Homeric epic by shifting the lens toward King Priam, an elderly father forced to endure the brutal defilement of his son's remains. By prioritizing Priam's internal experience, Malouf facilitates a powerful encounter between two contrasting expressions of loss: the King's quiet sorrow and Achilles' explosive, unstable rage. When these two figures meet, the story moves beyond the raw violence of the Trojan War to find a rare moment of empathy and grace. Malouf posits that human speech holds the unique capacity to bridge divides, allowing for the "conceivable" to emerge and introducing fresh, life-altering possibilities into a landscape otherwise paralyzed by endless war.

While the Homeric epics often frame human existence as a predetermined path woven by *moira* (fate) and manipulated by the capricious whims of the Olympians, David Malouf's *Ransom* seeks to deconstruct this sense of divine puppetry. In the *Iliad*, the heroes often appear as mere instruments of a celestial script, their triumphs and tragedies dictated by gods who treat the mortal battlefield like a game of chess. Malouf, however, intervenes in this traditional fatalism by introducing the transformative power of "chance"—a radical idea that an individual can step outside their prescribed social and religious roles to act with genuine agency. By portraying Priam's journey not as a divine command, but as a personal, unprecedented choice to approach Achilles informally, Malouf

suggests that human dignity is found in the “freewill” to break from the patterns of the past, thereby reclaiming the human spirit from the rigid grip of destiny. This is a revision from Priam’s visit to Achilles’s tent under the command of god Hermes in the *Iliad*.

Tom Holland’s appraisal of *Ransom* highlights Malouf’s remarkable ability to navigate the treacherous path of modernizing ancient myth without descending into the sentimental or the absurd. By blending a poetic, radiant writing style with a sophisticated exploration of inner life, Malouf avoids the anti-climax—the awkward stumble from the profound into the absurd—which often undermines modern attempts to rework classical epics. Rather than simply imitating Homeric splendour, Malouf anchors iconic figures like Achilles and Priam within a believable psychological framework, ensuring their mourning and eventual reach for connection feel authentic rather than theatrical. This refined aesthetic allows the narrative to shift seamlessly from the epic realm of divine intervention to the humble, grit-strewn reality of Priam’s journey. Ultimately, Malouf upholds the nobility of the original myth while infusing it with a contemporary emotional depth that speaks directly to the universal human experience.

In his narrative, Malouf orchestrates a significant philosophical transition, presenting Priam’s journey as a victory for individual human will over the rigid constraints of divine fate. Unlike the Priam of the *Iliad*, who functions largely as a tool for the gods after receiving Iris’s commands, Malouf’s version undergoes a fundamental psychological breakthrough. He begins to imagine the idea that existence is not a predetermined path. By shedding his kingly trappings and abandoning the protection of celestial guidance, Priam evolves from a mere symbolic figurehead into a man defined by the raw, fragile reality of fatherhood. Contrary to what one might expect from a classical epic, the climactic encounter between the King and Achilles is not the sole focus; rather, *Ransom* serves as an in-depth examination of Priam’s internal transformation. Malouf dismantles the “regal mask” to reveal the private individual hidden behind it, portraying a leader who realizes that his lifelong power was largely theatrical—a persona constructed through ritualistic isolation rather than genuine personal choice.

By focusing on Priam's journey toward the "provisional," Malouf highlights the king's realization that his true worth is not found in the static perfection of a crown, but in the radical act of shedding his public persona to embrace a private, unscripted humanity. This shift moves the heart of the story away from the battlefield into the psyche of characters, suggesting that the most significant ransom paid is not the gold for Hector's body, but Priam's own abandonment of the safe, sterile comforts of his royal status. This is evident in these words of Priam:

To others I am what I have always been – great Priam. But only because they have never really looked at me. And when they do look, what they see is what they are meant to see. The *fixed* mark to which everything else in my kingdom refers. A ceremonial figurehead that might just as well be of stone or wood. (54)

This transition signifies a departure from a world governed by *moira* and celestial intervention toward one defined by "chance," where the individual possesses the freewill to break historical cycles through personal initiative. Ultimately, Malouf suggests that true heroism lies not in fulfilling a destiny dictated from above, but in the terrifying, solitary act of imagining a different way of being, thereby elevating the human experience to the primary source of meaning.

The writer introduces a transformative backstory for Priam that is absent from the Homeric epic, grounding the King's grand mission in a deeply personal, traumatic memory. As a young boy named Podarces, he witnessed the fall of Troy to Heracles and was nearly lost to the anonymity of slavery, only to be "bought" back and renamed Priam by his sister, Hesione. This formative experience of being a commodity—of having a price placed upon his life—serves as the psychological blueprint for his current quest. Because he has felt the cold reality of being "sold," he possesses a unique, pragmatic belief that his son Hector can also be reclaimed through a commercial transaction. By stripping away his royal ornaments and approaching Achilles as a man with a wagon of treasure, he is not just performing a ritual, but revisiting his own origins. Ultimately,

Malouf uses this history to turn a divine mission into a human gamble, fuelled by the logic that what was once lost to violence can be recovered through a ransom.

In *Ransom*, the reimagining of “chance” functions as a modern existentialist catalyst that disrupts the suffocating inertia of fate, empowering the individual to actively dismantle the architectural constraints of a predetermined life. By shedding the ceremonial shell of kingship, Priam undergoes a radical metamorphosis, discovering that genuine human agency is forged only when one abandons the scripted safety of the throne for the raw, unmapped vulnerability of the “unpredictable unknown.” This shift posits that a meaningful identity is not a static inheritance preserved through tradition, but a dynamic creation born from the daring rejection of social rituals that prioritize symbolic stability over personal essence. Consequently, Malouf argues that by venturing into the “provisional” and breaking from the rigid performance of a royal role, an individual transcends mere iconography to reclaim a grounded, visceral humanity—proving that the most profound act of self-definition lies in the courage to be merely a “man” in a world of looming gods and ghosts.

While the *Iliad* cements Achilles’ legacy as the ultimate “swift-footed” weapon, a character driven almost entirely by the supernatural power of his *menis* (wrath), Malouf’s *Ransom* refashions him as an individual painfully at odds with his own nature. This interpretation moves away from external combat to examine the psychological tension between his divine heritage and his inescapable human end. As the child of the goddess Thetis and the mortal King Peleus, he exists as a hybrid being, constantly burdened by the earthly weight of a physical form that belongs to the soil. Malouf utilizes this duality to argue that Achilles’ savagery is not just the instinct of a soldier, but a fractured, frantic response to the loss of Patroclus and the looming shadow of his own death. By highlighting the contrast between his physical presence on the Trojan coast and his internal yearning for the oceanic depths of his mother, Malouf evolves Achilles from a rigid epic trope into a complex modern portrait of a man caught between the ethereal promise of eternal fame and the agonizing, concrete truth of human mourning.

Malouf reframes the death of Patroclus as more than a mere narrative pivot for military escalation; he treats it as a profound psychological rupture that destabilizes Achilles' sense of self. The relentless, daily desecration of Hector's corpse—a grim “clogged” ritual of dragging the body around the walls of Troy—is depicted not as a triumph, but as a repetitive cycle of futility that fails to offer the promised catharsis or quiet the “smoky poison” of his grief. This stagnation reveals a man trapped in a mechanical performance of vengeance that provides no spiritual release, highlighting Malouf's central thesis: Achilles is not merely seeking a material exchange for a fallen foe, but is a soul waiting for a “ransom” from his own psychological imprisonment. By shifting the focus from the physical restitution of a body to the existential need for emotional liberation, Malouf suggests that the true ransom Priam offers is the opportunity for Achilles to break the cycle of violence and reconnect with the restorative power of his own humanity.

The writer employs Priam's journey as a profound “un-kinging,” a method of systematic de-mythologization in which the monarch is divested of his ritualistic protection to directly engage with the unvarnished energy of existence. This transition is steered not by a deity, but by the commoner Somax, whose presence replaces the divine intervention of Hermes with a grounded, earthy wisdom. Through Somax's lens, Priam is forced to descend from the abstract height of “the King” into a visceral sensory reality; the tactile pleasure of a stream's current or the humble reliability of a “good mule” become the building blocks of a new, authentic consciousness. Tony Messner observes that Priam's radical decision to personally plead for Hector's body is “surprising and disturbing” precisely because it defies the rigid, ceremonial expectations of kingship. By blindsiding his council and rejecting their pleas to maintain traditional royal decorum, Priam recognizes that the only way to move Achilles is to abandon the safety of his established role; he must step outside of “what kings do” and venture into the unprecedented to achieve an outcome that tradition alone cannot secure.

Most significantly, Somax serves as a bridge between the heroic and the human by articulating a vernacular of sorrow, illustrating that grief is not merely a grand, epic performance for the gods, but a quiet, universal burden carried by the common man through the small tragedies of ordinary life. By learning that his own bereavement is mirrored in the domestic losses of a carter, Priam's quest for Hector's body evolves into a larger reclamation of the human spirit, suggesting that true nobility is found in the shared vulnerability of the mortal condition rather than the solitary coldness of a crown.

In *Ransom*, the writer redefines fatherhood by stripping away the royal decorum of the *Iliad* and replacing it with the visceral, "common" grief embodied by Somax. While Priam's identity has long been defined by the public loss of fifty sons—a sacrifice framed as a noble obligation to the state—it is Somax's story of losing a child to a mundane cart accident that serves as the true catalyst for Priam's transformation. This raw, un-stylized sorrow acts as a great equalizer, teaching the king that Hector's death is not merely a loss of dynastic succession or political stability, but the shattering of a private, human bond. Ultimately, Priam learns to approach Achilles not as a king seeking a strategic recovery, but as a father vulnerable to the universal agony of bereavement, grounding the epic in the intimate reality of the "ordinary."

While the Homeric legacy relies on the distant gaze of the "epic simile" and the radiant, external splendor of precious metals to sanctify its warriors, David Malouf's *Ransom* intentionally breaks down this mythic facade by pivoting toward poetic introspection and gritty, physical realism. By discarding the polished symbolism of the *Iliad* in favor of the raw, tangible textures of silt, stream, and wounded skin, Malouf anchors the legendary conflict in a sensory reality that feels urgently present rather than historically remote. This stylistic "de-glossing" serves a deeper purpose than simple character development; it reimagines the concept of "ransom" not as a mere exchange of gold, but as a spiritual offering—the steep cost of discarding the stiff shell of royalty to rediscover one's own humanity. In the end, Malouf argues that genuine atonement and inner growth are discovered not in the cold reaches of divine fate, but through a modest

immersion in the chaotic, fragile world of ordinary people, where the direct contact with the soil offers more profound change than the glimmer of a throne.

It can be observed that Malouf also uses his linguistic prowess to showcase the humanization of grand characters from the epic. He makes every effort to make these larger than life characters relatable and credible. Even Michael Dirda considers that David Malouf possesses a versatile linguistic range that allows him to seamlessly bridge the gap between the mundane and the monumental. He praises the writer's deployment of a "low" register to give voice to the commoner Somax, Malouf grounds the narrative in a tactile human reality, while his "Wordsworthian attentiveness" to nature imbues the landscape with a vibrant, spiritual resonance. This mastery of the pastoral and the domestic does not detract from his ability to sustain the "grave diction" of the epic tradition; rather, it enhances it. Malouf's prose effortlessly shifts between the gritty details of the everyday and the high-stakes solemnity of Homeric legend, proving that he is as comfortable in the dusty cart of a peasant as he is in the high councils of kings. This stylistic fluidity is what allows the novel to feel both ancient and startlingly immediate, honoring the weight of the original myth while breathing into it the intimate life of the individual.

To affect human touch, David Malouf employs a prose style that is as unadorned as it is evocative, weaving together sensory descriptions and profound emotional resonance to depict a protagonist standing on the precipice of his own demise. By shunning linguistic excess, Malouf allows the weight of impending death to settle naturally over the narrative, transforming a simple character study into a quiet, meditative exploration of what it means to face the inevitable. This economy of language serves a dual purpose: it grounds the reader in the immediate, tactile reality of the character's final days while simultaneously opening up a vast philosophical space for musing on the fragility of human existence and the enduring nature of the spirit. The result is a poignant portrait of a man who, in recognizing that his time is finite, finds a heightened, almost transcendental clarity in the world around him. This is evident in following lines of Priam:

Only we humans can know, endowed as we are with mortality, but also with consciousness, what it is to be aware each day of the fading in us of freshness and youth; the falling away, as the muscles grow slack in our arms, the thigh grows hollow and the sight dims, of whatever manly vigour we were once endowed with. Well, all that *happens*. It is what it means to be a man and mortal, and as men we accept it. Less easy to accept is what follows from it. (88)

While the meeting between Priam and Achilles serves as the emotional nexus in both narratives, the shift from Homeric epic to Malouf's modern reimagining fundamentally redefines the nature of their encounter. In *The Iliad*, the climax is governed by the rigid concept of *aidos*, a formal sense of reverence and shame that maintains a respectful distance even in grief; the two men stand as archetypes, marvelling at one another's god-like stature and kingly grace. Conversely, *Ransom* dissolves this heroic insulation, stripping away the armour of status to reveal the raw, "common" humanity beneath. By imploring Achilles to "be the son you were to your father," Priam bypasses the traditional heroic code—which views the opponent only as a trophy or a threat—and instead invokes a "brotherhood of the vulnerable." This transition from the ceremonial respect of a king to the visceral empathy of a father replaces the static grandeur of the epic with a fragile, transformative intimacy, suggesting that true grace is found not in our titles, but in our shared capacity for suffering.

Edmund White remarks that David Malouf recalibrates the epic architecture of Homer's *The Iliad* into a visceral, intimate exploration of human vulnerability and the transformative power of grief. The narrative's engine is ignited by the inconsolable rage of Achilles, who, shattered by the death of his bosom friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector, descends into a cycle of brutal retribution—not only slaying Hector but daily defiling his corpse in a futile, animalistic attempt to purge his sorrow. White further states that the heart of Malouf's reimagining, however, lies in the radical humility of King Priam; driven by a divine vision of "something new," the aging monarch abdicates his royal distance to journey across the blood-soaked plains in a simple, unadorned mule-drawn cart. Accompanied only by a common carter and a hoard of Troy's finest treasure, Priam's quest is a

profound gamble on the shared experience of loss. When these two icons of antiquity finally meet, the novel transcends its legendary origins, focusing on the moment two “towering instances of grief” intersect. In this quiet dusty tent, the cycle of violence is momentarily suspended by a father’s plea, illustrating Malouf’s central thesis: that the truest act of heroism is not found in martial prowess, but in the courage to strip away one’s identity and appeal to another simply as a fellow mortal.

Therefore, one can assert that David Malouf’s appropriation of *The Iliad* does not diminish the original; rather, it “rescues” the characters from the stasis of myth. By inserting the “common” into the “epic,” *Ransom* suggests that the truest form of heroism is the willingness to change, to be “transformed” by an encounter with the “other.” In the modern context, this appropriation speaks to the necessity of empathy over ideology. Priam’s journey is a movement from the public figurehead to the private soul, proving that even within the most rigid of traditions, there is room for the extraordinary power of the human heart.

Malouf’s *Ransom* concludes with a poignant meta-commentary that shifts the focus from the grandiosity of epic tradition to the fragility of human memory. While the *Iliad* closes on the public, communal funeral of Hector, Malouf chooses a simple ending centered on the aging Somax, whose first-hand account of the journey is eventually dismissed as the ramblings of a “doddering old man.” The novel subverts the historical narrative of the Trojan War by asserting that the true pulse of existence lies in fleeting, sensory moments rather than the sterile permanence of stone-carved myth. By prioritizing the subjective experience of the individual over the rigid structures of epic tradition, *Ransom* reframes the death of Achilles not as a grand orchestration of tragic fate, but as a grounded, inevitable return to the “earth-weight” of the physical world. This shift suggests that the heroic identity is a burden—a performance that masks the vulnerability of the flesh. Once Achilles sheds his destructive rage through the shared intimacy of the ransom, his impending death ceases to be a cinematic defeat; instead, it becomes a quiet, dignified reconciliation with his own mortality. In Malouf’s hands, the hero’s end is stripped of its mythological

thunder and replaced with the profound peace of a man who has finally traded the cold immortality of a legend for the warm, transient reality of a human being.

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From Silence to Self-Representation: A Cinematic Reading of *Sweet Country* (2017)

Kesang Youdon

Film studies has long established that cinema is not merely a form of entertainment but a powerful ideological apparatus through which histories, identities, and power relations are constructed and contested. Laura Mulvey's theory of the cinematic gaze argues that dominant cinema structures representation in ways that privilege certain subjects while marginalizing others, determining "who has the right to look and who is rendered an object of the look" (Mulvey, 18). Within colonial and settler cinemas, this gaze has historically centered white subjectivity, positioning Indigenous peoples as silent, peripheral, or symbolic figures rather than narrative agents. Australian cinema, shaped by colonial history, has repeatedly reproduced this imbalance.

For much of the twentieth century, Aboriginal Australians were either absent from the screen or represented through reductive stereotypes that served colonial ideologies of land ownership, law, and national identity. When Indigenous characters did appear, they were frequently spoken for, explained, or moralized through white protagonists. Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said argue that this form of representation functions as a mode of power, allowing dominant cultures to control not only territory but narrative authority itself (Said, 7).

Warwick Thornton's film *Sweet Country* (2017) intervenes forcefully in this cinematic tradition. Directed by an Indigenous filmmaker and rooted in Aboriginal historical memory, the film reclaims narrative authority through form as well as content. Set in the Northern Territory during the 1920s, *Sweet Country* follows Sam Kelly, an Aboriginal stockman who kills a white settler, Harry March, in self-defence after sustained abuse and sexual violence against his wife, Lizzie. The killing provokes a manhunt that exposes the racial injustice embedded within colonial law and frontier myth.

Drawing on postcolonial film theory, sound theory, spatial theory, and genre studies, this paper argues that *Sweet Country* represents a decisive shift from Indigenous silence to self-representation in Australian cinema. Through its strategic use of silence, its reimagining of landscape as Indigenous Country, and its subversion of Western genre conventions, the film dismantles colonial cinematic structures and foregrounds Aboriginal subjectivity. Silence, rather than signifying absence, becomes a powerful mode of resistance and ethical expression.

Historical Silencing and Colonial Representation in Australian Cinema

Australian cinema developed alongside colonial narratives that naturalized settler dominance and erased Indigenous sovereignty. Early frontier films often depicted the land as empty and available, reinforcing the doctrine of *terra nullius* while marginalizing Aboriginal presence. As Felicity Collins and Therese Davis observe, national cinema frequently constructed Australian identity through myths of endurance, masculinity, and conquest, leaving Indigenous histories unacknowledged or distorted (Collins and Davis 12).

Even films that addressed Indigenous issues often did so through paternalistic frameworks. Aboriginal suffering was mediated through white characters who functioned as moral interpreters, reinforcing what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as the tendency of dominant cultures to “speak nearby” rather than allow marginalized subjects to speak for themselves (Minh-ha 83). Silence in these films was imposed, signifying exclusion rather than choice. *Sweet Country* responds directly to this history. Rather than offering explanatory dialogue or didactic framing, Thornton constructs a film that refuses narrative comfort. The audience is not guided toward easy identification or resolution; instead, viewers are placed in a position of ethical unease. This refusal marks a departure from colonial cinematic traditions that sought to resolve Indigenous presence into manageable narratives.

Indigenous Authorship and the Reversal of the Colonial Gaze

Postcolonial film theory emphasizes that representation cannot be separated from authorship. Who tells the story fundamentally shapes how that story is told. Edward Said's critique of cultural imperialism underscores that colonial power operates through narrative control, determining which voices are legitimate and which are silenced (Said 7). *Sweet Country* challenges this dynamic through Indigenous authorship.

As an Indigenous filmmaker, Warwick Thornton brings cultural knowledge and historical memory to the film's construction. His approach resists what Laura Mulvey terms the "controlling gaze" of dominant cinema (Mulvey, 18). Aboriginal characters are not framed as objects of spectacle or moral instruction; they exist with interiority and restraint.

Sam Kelly, portrayed by Hamilton Morris, embodies this shift. Sam is a man of few words, but his silence is deliberate and dignified. In the courtroom scene, when asked about the killing, Sam states plainly, "I killed him" (*Sweet Country*). The line is stark and unembellished. Sam offers no justification within a legal system that has already criminalized him. His refusal to narrate his own trauma for colonial validation exemplifies what Minh-ha describes as a "refusal of translation" into dominant discourse (Minh-ha, 83). Sergeant Fletcher, the white lawman tasked with capturing Sam, acknowledges this humanity when he tells him, "I know you're not a bad man" (*Sweet Country*). Yet Fletcher continues the pursuit, revealing the contradiction at the heart of colonial justice: individual recognition does not dismantle institutional power. This tension reflects Michel Foucault's argument that power operates through systems rather than personal morality (Foucault, 27).

Silence, Sound, and Ethical Resistance

Sound theory in film studies recognizes silence as an expressive and political element. Michel Chion argues that silence can function as a form of resistance, directing attention and withholding emotional manipulation (Chion 57). *Sweet Country* uses silence not as emptiness but as a narrative force aligned with Indigenous experience. Dialogue is sparse throughout the

film, particularly among Aboriginal characters. This restraint contrasts sharply with the verbal and physical aggression of Harry March, whose drunken outbursts dominate early scenes. His violence is loud, intrusive, and chaotic, reinforcing the association between colonial power and noise.

After Harry assaults Lizzie, she later articulates the motivation behind Sam's actions by stating simply, "He hurt me" (*Sweet Country*). This brief line reframes the killing as an act of protection rather than criminality. The film does not dramatize the moment with emotional excess; instead, it trusts silence to convey trauma. Thornton further reinforces this aesthetic by largely excluding non-diegetic music. Without a guiding score, viewers are denied conventional emotional cues. Ambient sounds — wind, footsteps, insects — dominate the soundscape, grounding the film in physical reality. This aligns with Mulvey's critique of cinema's tendency to control spectator response and instead opens space for ethical engagement (Mulvey, 18). Silence thus becomes a form of Indigenous self-representation: a refusal to perform pain for settler consumption.

Landscape, Country, and Indigenous Spatial Politics

Spatial theory in film studies emphasizes that cinematic space is ideologically constructed. In settler cinema, landscape has often been portrayed as hostile, empty, or sublime, reinforcing colonial myths of conquest. *Sweet Country* subverts this tradition by presenting land as Indigenous Country — a lived, relational space imbued with memory and law.

Marcia Langton explains that Indigenous relationships to Country encompass identity, spirituality, and responsibility rather than ownership (Langton 25). Thornton's cinematography visually communicates this worldview. Long, static shots allow the land to exist independently of narrative action. Sam and Lizzie move through the landscape with quiet familiarity, while white settlers appear disoriented and threatened. When Sam pauses during his escape and looks across the land, the moment is unaccompanied by dialogue or music. This silence situates the viewer within Indigenous temporality, aligning with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "time-image," where cinema disrupts linear progression to allow memory

and contemplation to surface (Deleuze 17). The landscape also bears witness to colonial violence. Brutal acts occur in open spaces, refusing the myth that frontier violence was hidden or exceptional. By restoring Indigenous presence to the land, *Sweet Country* challenges cinematic traditions that erased Aboriginal belonging.

Genre Theory and the Deconstruction of the Western

Genre theory holds that genres carry ideological assumptions. The Western, in particular, has historically legitimized frontier violence and colonial expansion. *Sweet Country* appropriates the structure of the Western — pursuit, lawlessness, moral confrontation — only to dismantle its myths.

The manhunt positions Sam as the hunted “outlaw,” yet the film consistently aligns moral authority with him rather than the law. Sergeant Fletcher’s pursuit, though framed as lawful, exposes the racial bias embedded within colonial justice. As Will Higbee argues, postcolonial cinema often uses dominant genres “against themselves” to critique imperial histories (Higbee 112).

The film’s fragmented chronology further disrupts genre expectations. Flash-forwards reveal consequences before causes, challenging linear historical narratives. This structure reflects Indigenous conceptions of time, where past and present coexist, reinforcing the idea that colonial violence is ongoing rather than resolved.

Law, Justice, and Moral Authority

A central tension in *Sweet Country* lies between colonial law and moral justice. The legal system depicted in the film is rigid and racially biased, incapable of recognizing Indigenous humanity. Although Sam is eventually acquitted, the verdict does not signify justice but exposes the system’s inadequacy. Courtroom scenes emphasize the performative nature of colonial law. Indigenous voices are marginalized, while white authority figures dominate proceedings. This dynamic reflects Foucault’s assertion that institutions determine truth through power rather than ethics (Foucault 27). Thornton refuses narrative closure. The film ends without triumph, underscoring the persistence of injustice beyond the frame. This refusal

challenges national myths of reconciliation and progress, positioning cinema as a site of ethical reckoning rather than resolution.

Indigenous Memory, Historical Trauma, and Decolonial Aesthetics

Beyond its critique of colonial law and representation, *Sweet Country* also functions as an act of historical remembrance. The film refuses to present colonial violence as an isolated event confined to Australia's frontier past; instead, it depicts colonialism as an ongoing structure whose effects continue to shape Indigenous lives and collective memory. In doing so, Warwick Thornton aligns the film with what Linda Tuhiwai Smith identifies as decolonizing methodologies, which seek to reclaim Indigenous histories from colonial archives and restore them through Indigenous perspectives (Smith 28). Rather than reproducing official historical narratives that privilege settler expansion, *Sweet Country* reconstructs history from the viewpoint of those who experienced dispossession and violence.

The film's fragmented narrative structure contributes significantly to this process of historical recovery. Flash-forwards interrupt chronological storytelling, revealing future events before their causes become fully apparent. These temporal disruptions challenge the linear conception of history associated with colonial historiography, suggesting instead that the past continually inhabits the present. Gilles Deleuze argues that the cinematic "time-image" allows memory and lived experience to coexist beyond conventional chronology (Deleuze 17). Thornton employs this cinematic strategy to demonstrate that colonial violence cannot be relegated to history because its consequences remain embedded within contemporary Indigenous existence.

Historical trauma is communicated not only through narrative but also through visual restraint. Many scenes linger on landscapes long after human action has ceased, allowing the land itself to become a repository of memory. Country is presented not merely as geographical space but as a living archive that bears witness to generations of dispossession, survival, and cultural continuity. This understanding resonates with Indigenous epistemologies that conceive land as inseparable from identity, ancestry, and spirituality (Langton 25). The Australian outback therefore becomes an

active participant in the narrative rather than a passive backdrop, silently preserving histories omitted from official records.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial violence further illuminates Thornton's approach. Fanon argues that colonialism produces psychological as well as physical domination by denying the humanity of colonized peoples and erasing their histories (Fanon 36). Throughout *Sweet Country*, Aboriginal characters are repeatedly denied legal recognition, social equality, and narrative authority. Yet the film simultaneously resists this erasure by restoring Indigenous experience to the centre of historical representation. Sam Kelly's story is not presented as an exceptional incident but as one manifestation of a broader colonial system that criminalizes Indigenous existence while legitimizing settler violence. The film's restrained aesthetic also reflects what Marianne Hirsch describes as "postmemory," whereby later generations inherit and reconstruct traumatic histories through acts of cultural remembrance rather than direct experience (Hirsch 5). Although *Sweet Country* is set in the 1920s, its themes resonate strongly with contemporary debates surrounding Indigenous sovereignty, reconciliation, and historical accountability in Australia. Thornton's reconstruction of frontier violence therefore bridges historical distance, inviting audiences to recognize the continuity between colonial injustice and present-day inequalities.

Decolonial aesthetics in *Sweet Country* emerge through this rejection of dominant historical narratives. Rather than providing heroic resolutions or nationalist myths, the film embraces ambiguity, silence, and ethical reflection. The absence of triumphant closure resists the colonial impulse to contain violence within a completed past. Instead, Thornton presents history as unfinished, requiring continual acts of witnessing and remembrance. In this sense, *Sweet Country* exemplifies decolonial cinema by transforming film into a space where Indigenous memory challenges colonial historical authority and reclaims the right to narrate Australia's past on Indigenous terms.

Gender, Indigenous Womanhood, and Colonial Violence

While *Sweet Country* primarily follows Sam Kelly's journey, the experiences of Lizzie reveal that colonial violence is profoundly gendered. Indigenous women occupy a particularly vulnerable position within settler-colonial societies because they experience oppression through the intersecting structures of race, gender, and colonial domination. Thornton avoids reducing Lizzie to a passive victim, instead presenting her as an essential moral and emotional presence whose experiences expose the intimate violence underpinning colonial power.

Harry March's assault on Lizzie is not merely an individual act of brutality but an expression of colonial authority exercised over Indigenous bodies. Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that sexual violence has historically functioned as a mechanism through which colonial regimes asserted racial superiority and social control. The abuse of Indigenous women symbolically reinforces settler possession of both land and people. Thornton depicts this violence without sensationalism, refusing to transform Indigenous suffering into cinematic spectacle. Instead, the assault remains largely understated, emphasizing its devastating emotional consequences rather than exploiting it for dramatic effect.

Lizzie's statement, "He hurt me," becomes one of the film's most significant moments because its simplicity conveys profound emotional and moral weight. The line explains Sam's actions without elaborate justification or melodrama. Silence surrounding the assault reflects trauma itself, acknowledging that some experiences exceed verbal representation. Sara Ahmed observes that pain often resists language while nevertheless shaping individual and collective identities (Ahmed 30). Thornton's restrained depiction therefore respects Indigenous experiences rather than appropriating them for audience consumption. Intersectionality further illuminates Lizzie's position within the colonial social order. Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that multiple forms of oppression interact rather than operate independently (Crenshaw 140). Lizzie's vulnerability cannot be understood solely through gender or race; instead, colonialism produces a condition in which Indigenous women become disproportionately exposed

to violence while simultaneously denied legal protection. The colonial justice system represented in the film largely ignores her suffering, demonstrating how institutional power privileges white masculinity over Indigenous womanhood.

Nevertheless, Lizzie possesses considerable agency within the narrative. Her endurance, resilience, and emotional strength contribute significantly to Sam's moral integrity. Rather than functioning merely as the motivation for male action, she embodies survival under colonial oppression. Thornton's refusal to reduce her to stereotypical representations of victimhood reflects broader developments within Indigenous feminist discourse, which emphasizes resilience alongside historical suffering.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that Indigenous women occupy a unique position within settler societies because their identities remain inseparable from relationships to Country, kinship, and community (Moreton-Robinson 94). Lizzie's connection to land and family reflects this worldview. Even amid displacement and persecution, her presence affirms cultural continuity that colonial violence cannot completely destroy. Her silence often communicates dignity rather than submission, challenging dominant cinematic assumptions that agency must always be expressed through speech.

Furthermore, Thornton avoids reproducing the gendered conventions of classical cinema identified by Laura Mulvey. Lizzie is never eroticized through voyeuristic framing or presented as an object of visual pleasure. Instead, the camera consistently emphasizes her humanity, vulnerability, and emotional complexity. By rejecting the male gaze, *Sweet Country* extends its critique of colonial representation to gender representation, demonstrating that Indigenous self-representation requires new cinematic ethics regarding both race and gender.

Ethical Spectatorship and the Future of Indigenous Australian Cinema

One of the most significant achievements of *Sweet Country* lies in its transformation of the relationship between film and audience. Rather than encouraging passive emotional consumption, Thornton constructs an experience that demands ethical engagement. The viewer is not invited simply to sympathize with Indigenous suffering but to confront the historical structures that produced it. In this respect, the film redefines spectatorship as an ethical responsibility rather than an act of detached observation. Vivian Sobchack argues that spectatorship involves embodied ethical participation in cinematic experience rather than passive visual reception (Sobchack 63). Thornton's filmmaking reflects this principle through long takes, minimal editing, sparse dialogue, and the absence of manipulative musical cues. Without conventional cinematic guidance, audiences must actively interpret silence, landscape, and character interactions. This participatory mode of viewing encourages reflection rather than immediate emotional gratification.

Jacques Ranciere similarly argues that emancipated spectators become active interpreters who construct meaning independently instead of merely receiving ideological messages (Ranciere 13). *Sweet Country* consistently resists providing clear moral resolutions or sentimental closure. Although Sam is acquitted, the audience recognizes that justice remains incomplete because the colonial system itself remains fundamentally unequal. The film therefore denies viewers the comfort of believing historical injustice has been fully resolved.

Thornton's approach also represents a significant development within contemporary Indigenous Australian cinema. Earlier films such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) exposed the violence of colonialism, but *Sweet Country* moves further by centring Indigenous authorship and cinematic form as acts of decolonization. Thornton's earlier film *Samson and Delilah* (2009) similarly foregrounded Indigenous perspectives through silence and visual storytelling, establishing an aesthetic that privileges lived experience over explanatory dialogue.

Together these films demonstrate the emergence of an Indigenous cinema that challenges both historical representation and cinematic convention.

The film's contribution extends beyond Australia. Across Indigenous cinemas in Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, filmmakers increasingly employ visual storytelling to reclaim histories marginalized by colonial narratives. *Sweet Country* participates in this broader international movement by demonstrating how Indigenous filmmakers can appropriate cinematic language while transforming its ideological foundations. Rather than rejecting cinema itself, Thornton reimagines its possibilities through Indigenous epistemologies, ethical storytelling, and cultural memory. Importantly, the film also challenges non-Indigenous audiences to reconsider their own position within colonial histories. Instead of presenting reconciliation as an accomplished fact, Thornton insists that genuine reconciliation requires historical recognition, ethical listening, and sustained engagement with Indigenous perspectives. The spectator becomes accountable not only for interpreting the film but also for reflecting upon the social and historical conditions that continue to shape contemporary Australia.

Ultimately, *Sweet Country* demonstrates that cinema possesses the capacity to participate actively in processes of decolonization. Through Indigenous authorship, ethical spectatorship, and historical accountability, Thornton transforms film from an instrument that once reinforced colonial ideology into one capable of challenging it. The film therefore represents not only a landmark in Australian cinema but also an important contribution to global Indigenous filmmaking, illustrating how cinematic form itself can become a site of resistance, remembrance, and cultural renewal.

Conclusion

Sweet Country represents a transformative moment in Australian cinema, marking a shift from Indigenous silence to self-representation. Through Indigenous authorship, strategic silence, spatial reclamation, and genre subversion, Warwick Thornton dismantles colonial cinematic conventions and restores Aboriginal narrative authority.

Drawing on film studies theory, the film demonstrates how cinematic form itself can function as political resistance. Silence becomes voice; landscape becomes memory; genre becomes critique. Rather than seeking comfort or closure, *Sweet Country* demands that audiences confront historical truth and ongoing injustice. In reclaiming the right to tell Indigenous stories on Indigenous terms, *Sweet Country* not only reshapes Australian cinema but also contributes to broader conversations about decolonization, memory, and ethical spectatorship. The film insists that listening even to silence is a necessary step toward justice.

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Narrating Journeys through Displacement, Forced Removal and Paths to Recovery

Veena Sharma

The Australian Aboriginal writers resort to autobiographical writing as a means of self-expression and socio-cultural reflection. The writing and the reading of such autobiographies are seen as therapeutic, as a process whereby the autobiographer and the reader are brought to a confrontation with Australian social history and its legacies in the individual life. This leads to a deeper self-knowledge and a greater recognition of shared humanity.

The present paper is the study of *The Dusty Road* (2005), an autobiography by the Aboriginal-Australian, Irene (Winnie) Larsen, which allows her to interrogate the painful and harsh memories of her *Noongar* childhood. It strongly relates to racism as is evident in the debates about the dispossession of indigenous peoples as a result of settler colonialism and unjust policies of the government. Larsen's life story is an interesting one, and obviously of importance in thinking about contemporary multi-cultural Australian society. The paper aims at analyzing how Larsen's autobiography plays an important role in recovering the indigenous heritage for Australia's national self-definition. It also analyses how it arguably works towards an assimilative conception of white reconciliation with an unacknowledged past of indigenous genocide.

The Indigenous autobiography is a distinct literary genre of the Australian life-writing that has generated from a certain stage in post-colonial Australian history. Such writing forms part of a larger process by which Indigenous peoples work through post-colonial trauma to reclaim their identity in political and therapeutic contexts. Since it evolves from the trauma of separation and removal, it reflects on and describes an acute sense of physical, spiritual and emotional displacement. It has become an important means of articulating the silenced Aboriginal life experience of the 'Stolen Generations,' and voices its ongoing struggle against assimilative

policies of the government. As Michelle Grossman also believes, the Indigenous life-writing has attained:

the cultural status as a genre more willing to engage with representational *métissage* across cultural and language traditions and communities than conventional literary Western paradigms, it has offered new opportunities for adapting the published text to the concerns and contributions of those whom such paradigms formerly excluded or marginalised, particularly at the levels of ‘speaking’ and ‘writing.’ (26)

Since the late 1970s, the genre of Indigenous life-writing has strongly been embraced even by Indigenous women so as to “offer their testimony of race oppression in Australia” (Elder 16). Likewise, a poignant example of indigenous life-writing is provided by Winnie Larsen, who was born to a quadroon (1/8 Aboriginal) father and a half-caste mother in Gnowangerup in 1933 during the high-flown period of the process of absorption and assimilation. In simple language she gives an account of her life in her autobiography, *The Dusty Road*, first published in 2005. She overcame an almost total lack of formal education and a serious childhood injury to attend the Great Southern Regional College of TAFE in Albany in her 50s, to learn all the skills she had missed. Her determined ambition, over an extended period, to learn and to write sufficiently made her capable to write her life story impressively. Because of a lack of transport she walked to TAFE every day for a number of years, in all types of weather, despite her disability. Her dedication was recognised by the college when she was nominated for, and won, a major award ‘The Endeavour Award’ for her persistence and dedication.

Larsen’s family circumstances were structurally embedded in the White Australian policies and a policy of assimilation for the Aboriginal people. Her autobiographical search for her Aboriginal (*Noongar*) past became at the very moment of publication part of a wider discussion of Australianness that often presses upon the pulse of national consciousness. *The Dusty Road* cleverly appeals not only to her people but also to the mainstream readership with an acceptable message that glosses over present

injustices while projecting its anger towards the past. In her introduction to the book, Winnie writes:

We kids had a bush life, camping in different places as dad moved around. In those days there were lots of bush flowers, wild fruit, birds and fresh water soaks. We were Noongar people and we believed in these things in a spiritual way. I have many memories of this life and that is why I am writing these stories. These stories show the way things were for us. I am hoping that both Noongar and Wadjila people will read them and know what Noongar life was like many years ago. (6)

This autobiography is an overt narrative of the ways in which Australian settler society has dealt with the Aboriginal population in its colonising thrust, and what strategies it has employed to affect Aboriginal cultural and physical displacement from their tribal lands in its aim to control vital resources. White frontier violence, the dispossession of ancestral country, the relocation to missions and reserves, child removal and institutionalisation have all played their role in a process of displacement often considered a mechanism of genocide.

The process of institutionalisation by state policies of dispossession and removal inspired by late-Victorian eugenics foresaw no viable future for 'primitive' man in the face of Europe's civilisation and racial superiority. Euphemistically known as 'protection,' these official policies have had a two-fold structure of biological segregation and absorption. Aboriginal relocation and institutionalisation on missions and reserves aimed to separate the Aboriginal communities from the mainstream and make the way to their physical and cultural disappearance. Deemed unable to develop 'civilised' standards of behaviour, the Aborigine was considered expendable and doomed to extinction. As Stewart Murray of the Victoria Aboriginal Land Council denounced in Kevin Gilbert's 1978 volume of interviews, *Living Black*:

Our people have had a vicious hard battle to survive in such a small state with three and a half million other people. In 1940 we were down to about five or six hundred people. They almost wiped out

with their protection policies. Herding them into reserves and herding them back out again. (77)

Similarly *The Dusty Road* focuses on the plight and testimony of the ‘Stolen Generations,’ a large group of mixed-descent children forcibly removed at great distances from their Aboriginal families and raised to fit into white society. Larsen’s three paternal aunties were taken away in their childhood by the white government people and their grandmother kept wailing. It is such children that became the main focus of assimilative government action; it is in their defencelessness that the breach of basic human rights is salient; it is also in their current recovery as indigenous rather than white Australians that the resilience and ongoing presence of the Aboriginal communities and cultures are manifest. Larsen admonishingly says, “No white person heard the cry or felt the pain of what they made our people feel. The strain these people put on our Noongar community” (56).

Justified in Aboriginal parents’ inability to raise their children in acceptable mainstream ways, absorption into the white race through removal, fostering, adoption and inter-racial marriage revealed itself as a breeding-out policy; such “smoothing the dying pillow” of the ‘race’ (Haebich 134) would restrict the Aboriginal population on reserves and missions to ‘authentic full-bloods’ and automatically work towards falling numbers and their forecasted extinction under the guise and guidance of ‘humane’ mainstream intervention.

The policies of segregation have been a powerful discursive tool with which the mainstream has written Aboriginality into marginality and off the Australian map; there is no place for their ‘primitivism’ in contemporary Australian society. Larsen remembers that the government sorted their colour out. Her father was a quadroon, classed as white and therefore was not judged as a native under the ‘Native Welfare Act’ and therefore her mother had to apply to the government for an exemption card — the ‘Citizenship Rights Card’ so that she could live with him. This recognition meant total adherence to the white standards and complete snapping off the bonds with her people. And often surprise visits were made by the white government officials to check if there was any breach of the laws. “My poor

mum, she felt such shame being torn away from her people because of white man's laws.... Some Noongar said that mum thought she was too good. There was a lot of jealousy about this and there's still some today," she says (43). However this could not change her blood and her real identity and she taught her children about their people and culture.

Larsen also remembers how she was not allowed to get a room in hotel because she was married to a white man. She had to face several other problems which finally forced her to get 'Citizens Rights Card' that prevented her from doing anything non-white and following anything native. Even to get her daughter back from the reserve she had to make the permit first. However, all this did not deter her from mixing with her own people in secret which often led to interrogation by the police. It was just because some of her own people had complained against her out of jealousy. After years of separation from her people when she visited doctor because of prolonged illness, she recalls, he said, "you're pining away. It was something that I can't explain but I know that other Noongars would understand what I mean (82).

The Aboriginals and the half-castes have had always been treated no less than animals and dirty brutes. Larsen tells that when her family had to be shifted to different places as part of her father's farm work, they were often treated like animals. She remembers:

Often Noongar people were carted around in trucks. They would never put you in the front seat no matter how clean you were, or fair. I can understand why we walked. This was much better than all sitting in the back of a truck. It reminded me of a lot of sheep. (15)

She also recalls how her people were treated as aliens in their own country. Any function or entertainment that was often organized for the whites had no entry for the natives. She tells:

I remember there was a small hall in Ongerup. They held dances in the hall. They were for white people. But because dad played the accordion and he was well-liked, we went to the dances as well.....

I never saw any other Noongar kids at the dances even though there were a lot of Noongars living in the area. (12)

She remembers another horrifying incident when she was too ill to walk to the hospital in Ongerup. Her mother and siblings were struggling to push the cart on which she was writhing in pain on the dusty road and not even a single car that was passing by them stopped. She tells: “Whenever a car drove by my mum used to say *kaanya*— ‘shame’” (32).

The Aborigines resisted the destruction of traditional means of sustenance in the bush by their integration into the pastoral industry on the basis of underpaid, unsteady seasonal work, and thus to some extent managed to elude mainstream control and interference. Yet droughts, economic slumps and other adverse circumstances compounded the already existing poverty amongst the indigenes and increasingly forced them to gather and wither on mission or reserve land, where they were subject to strict state control; or to move to more urban settings, giving up part of their culture and often living with restricted freedom, as Larsen records in her autobiography. These dire conditions remain unaltered despite the boasting of new egalitarian engineering in the present multicultural society. Kevin Gilbert writes:

White people’s devaluation of Aboriginal life, religion, culture and personality caused the thinking about self and race that I believe is the key to modern Aboriginal thinking Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the mind of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else that causes the conditions that we see on reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations. (2-3)

Removal would entail severing the emotional, physical, cultural and geographical bonds with the child’s Aboriginal progenitors and heritage in a process of displacement, silencing and denial of ethnic origins, in which mission reserves, children’s homes and well-meaning white families all played their role. These part-white children, taken from their Aboriginal families and placed in institutions and white adoptive or foster families, preferably at enormous distances from their indigenous kin suffered so

many trials and tribulations. The magnitude of this traumatic exercise of enforced separation and oblivion has been explicitly described by the historian Peter Read:

In Australia today there may be one hundred thousand people of Aboriginal descent who do not know their families or communities. They are the people, or the descendants of people, who were removed from their families by a variety of white people for a variety of reasons. They do not know where they come from; some do not even know they are of Aboriginal descent ... As they grew up, they were expected to think white, to act white, and in the end to be white. (ix)

Multiculturalism should be understood as a project of neither assimilation nor dissimilation, but as one of inter-culturality or trans-culturality. But it was never so. The bush people engaged as farm hands had to travel to different places. And every time they camped at a new place, they had to reinvent themselves according to the prejudices and rules set by the whites living there. As people with a different colour, they were not allowed to enjoy the same privileges of the whites. Larsen remembers that when her family moved to Gnowangerup, “the town had “Natives Not Allowed” signs on lots of different public places. We lived with this”(50). She says that they enjoyed their walk in the bush as there was no entertainment and no freedom to go to the picture hall or to go to the swimming pool or to eat in the tearoom after 6 pm. ‘Natives Not Allowed’ policy was strictly followed there. Only those with the ‘Citizen’s Rights’ or ‘Exemption Cards’ could avail such freedom. She remembers the painful journey by train when her mother and she were not allowed to use the sleeper because they did not have the citizen’s rights card:

I remember the pain caused by the shunting of the engine. As I lay on the wooden seat, the shunting nearly threw me to the floor. The train left in the evening and arrived about 7am in Perth. At every station on the way the shunting continued. It was very painful trip for me. Mum and I were the only passengers in this carriage so I was able to lie on the seat. (61)

Once Aboriginal people gained the certificate they in effect had to lose their indigenous identity and culture, their family and their homelands, in exchange for living in the wider community. It is now recognised that the removal system created by different acts delivered a trans-generational impact on the lives of Aboriginal people that is still felt today. Many researchers and writers have noted that the process of removal resulted in the demise of Aboriginal societies, with the loss of homelands, kin, culture, language and identity. The 'protectionist' system can be characterised by an ongoing multi-faceted and systematic attempt to transform Aboriginal societies and culture. With many removals fragmenting families and kinship groups, numerous Aboriginal languages and sub-cultures were transformed to the point of extinction.

When ill, the Aboriginals and the half-castes were kept in quarantine in the isolated wards of the hospitals. Either nobody from the family was allowed to see them or their visits were restricted to few and far between. This often led to further deterioration of the condition of the patients. Larsen remembers how she used to pine for her family in the Native Ward of the Gnowangerup hospital, the ward built away from the main hospital and in dark. Later she was shifted to yet another secluded place, the Princess Margaret Hospital for children in Perth where again she missed her family. She painfully remembers, "I was about eight and a half years old. Mum and dad could not visit. I started to forget what they looked like..... I was very sick and fretted for my family. I would not speak to anyone and would sit by myself" (49). Even in the St. Joseph's Orphanage she missed her family a lot.

To drive the coloured people away, the whites used to do certain scary things like pursuing them in the dark, barging in their houses at night, pelting stones at their roofs or opening fire in the air to frighten them. Larsen remembers one horrendous incident:

Then one night, a scary thing happened to us. We saw a man walking in the distance. It was just getting dark. He was walking over to our place so we locked all the doors and windows. We did this just in time because the man was trying to break in. We had two little dogs,

all they did was bark, and, every now and then, he would boot one of the dogs. He wouldn't go away, and then it was nearly four in the morning. So we went to our brother Victor's room and got his rifle. We put a ballet in it and stuck it out the window and fired it. He took off down the road; the dogs took off after him in spite of him trying to boot them all night. We could see the tracks he left in the sand the next day. (66)

Even children of the whites raised as racist chauvinists hurled insult on others different from them. Larsen's sister Una who was a good horse rider was once pulled off her horse and was called names by a group of white boys. Larsen bitterly remarks, "As soon as people found out that you had coloured blood in you and were native then you were in for a hard time" (55).

Significantly, Larsen's time at different places is the text's main focus, as it addresses her process of personal growth in adverse circumstances imposed by racist mainstream society. Nevertheless, the text shows her slow process of recovery towards a fuller self-awareness and more assertive attitude. She finds ways to circumvent the exploitative nature of the imposed chores and to enjoy herself, and her friendship with some well-meaning white people and some fellow Noongar girls working for other local families provide the emotional bonding and security she needs to develop as a person.

The text is a true account of cross-generational displacement and trauma told from the perspective of an indigenous daughter. After spending her childhood at different places coping with unfamiliar people, unhealthy environment, unfortunate loneliness and pursuing police officers and being confronted with the subaltern role laid out for her by a deeply racist society, Larsen undertakes a healing journey into traditional land to recover her lost indigenous heritage. This prompts her to locate some of her people after so many years and recover her roots. She re-establishes contact with her kin and culture and recovers her sense of home.

Thus Larsen's autobiography finishes on an optimistic note when she recovers the link with some of her long-alienated people. Despite this

account of indigenous resilience, there is an arguable element of accommodation in her autobiography in that it speaks out for understanding and reconciliation with the mainstream, thus projecting a 'nonthreatening' image of Aboriginality. Her stories trace a critical path back into a past that should never be forgotten and needs to be addressed even today if Australia is to come to terms with itself as the democratic nation of the 'fair go.' Thus, the autobiography also becomes a chant towards a hopeful future of cultural resilience and recovery.

She puts her plea for acceptance in the form of a verse entitled 'You':

You did not give me time to learn why
And your ways.
A Noongar lass so small and fearful
Yet you did not stop to think.
You took me from my coloured people.

A teardrop down my cheek I hide
Something you will never share.
A secret inside me
Of dreaming.
A secret I dare not share.

You pressed on me your way of living
And not a care for mine.
You would not know my laughter
Around a campfire
Eyes so bright.

You forced upon me loud noises
Bright lights, grey walls.
Not a soul to hold me at night
No one to care.

You seemed not to care
To give me a smile.

But you, I'll forgive
For not knowing my ways
For not living or laughing

I'll forgive you if only you let me free
To wander through the passages of time
To once again capture
My Noongar Dreamtime. (54)

Here she means to say her people's fight is not for a separate nation state but for freedom to preserve their own history, culture and identity. As is rightly said by Robyn Friend, "One's life story is one's spiritual backbone" balancing the assertion of 'self' and recognition by 'other' (24). Likewise through her life-writing, Larsen tries to build a sense of community among several disparate and scattered families. She tries to make a real sense of Australianness in terms of longing and belonging as well as memory and experience.

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Land, Identity and Cultural Survival in Australian Aboriginal Narratives: A Study of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kim Scott's *Benang*

Deepthi Sharma

Colonial rule hit Australian Aboriginal communities hard by taking away their land, shattering their traditions, and trying, repeatedly, to erase the Indigenous identity. Those wounds are still open. They shape how people see themselves, how they remember, and how they hold onto where they belong. For Aboriginal people, land is not just soil and rocks, it is a living entity. It is their mother, a keeper of stories, ancestry, and everything that keeps culture going. Aboriginal stories push back against this history. They are about taking back voices that were silenced and repairing the ties colonial policies tried to break.

This paper dives into Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kim Scott's *Benang* as powerful books that push back against the lasting scars of dispossession and forced assimilation across generations. By digging into personal stories and piecing together fractured narratives, both works show that land, culture, traditions, and memories are the keys to rebuilding Aboriginal identity. Morgan traces her family roots to turn individual recollections into a shared awakening, while Scott's wild, chopped-up style lays bare the brutal reality of racial labelling and twisted history. These stories clearly reclaim that land, lineage, and one's own voice is what keeps a culture alive. By analysing how land functions as a site of memory, resistance, and renewal, this paper argues that Aboriginal storytelling operates as both a historical corrective and a healing practice. The narratives move beyond documentation of suffering to assert Indigenous presence, resilience, and continuity. Ultimately, the paper also establishes that *My Place* and *Benang* reimagine literature as a cultural space where identity is reclaimed, colonial histories are challenged, and enduring connections between land and Aboriginal survival are reaffirmed.

Introduction

The association between land, memory and cultural survival forms the fundamental of Aboriginal writing. For Indigenous communities in Australia, land is not simply a physical space but a living presence that shapes identity and anchors cultural practice as stated by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (*The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* 16). This connection has been repeatedly threatened by the violence of colonisation, which sought to fragment Aboriginal identity by severing people from their Country, language, and kinship systems. The scars of the past continue to ripple the Aboriginal writings even today where the writers articulate the questions of their belonging and cultural continuity.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) emerge as notable works that confront the traumatic history of dispossession while affirming the endurance of Aboriginal identity. Morgan's autobiographical narrative retraces her family's suppressed history that reveals how silence and erasure became strategies of survival. In recollecting her mother's and grandmother's tales, Morgan reclaims personal memory as an act of collective remembrance. In her expedition of discovery, she mirrors that "the truth was quietly waiting, buried under years of fear and forgetting" (*My Place* 45). Her quest for identity is inseparable from a desire to understand the complex ways in which land and family history shape a sense of belonging.

Scott's *Benang*, approaches the similar questions by contrast, through a layered, often unsettling fictional form. The protagonist, Harley, challenges the archive of colonial assimilation policies that attempted to create the "first white man born" (*Benang* 7). Scott exposes the administrative vehemence that sought to wipe out the Aboriginal identity, yet he also discloses the resilience that continues in cultural memory and community ties. Harley observes, "I was made to rise above my history, yet it pulled at me from every direction" (*Benang* 112). His struggle is a symbolic

and personal attempt to reclaim identity from the distortions of colonial history.

Studying these two narratives together highlights how Aboriginal literature turns to storytelling as a means of curing and resistance. Both writers show that reconnecting with land restores more than physical belonging; it renews cultural memory and reaffirms Aboriginal presence in a national story that has often attempted to silence it. While Sally Morgan uses evidence to recuperate the hidden histories, Kim Scott researches with the narrative form to contest the archival logic of colonial power. Though different, both works validate the survival of Aboriginal identity that depends on memory, kinship, and country.

Land, Memory, and Indigenous Identity

Indigenous scholars have long recognised that land is central to the Aboriginal identity. Country is not just limited to land or territory but a connected system where the human beings, the spirits and the ecology are inseparable. Deborah Bird Rose explains that for Aboriginal communities, Country is “a nourishing terrain,” a place that “gives life and receives life” (*Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* 7). The western notions of land as property is opposed, rather positioned as a source of identity, ethics, and continuity but when colonisation forcibly removed Aboriginal peoples from their own country, it disrupted not only the physical settlement but also the cultural systems that sustained meaning, kinship, and spiritual belonging.

Memory becomes central in this context because the loss of land often went hand in hand with attempts to erase Aboriginal history. Colonisation relied on what Patrick Wolfe describes in “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” as the “logic of elimination” (*Journal of Genocide Research* 388) that sought to remove Indigenous presence from both land and national consciousness. The recovery of memory, be it personal, familial, and communal, acts as a political effort to oppose the erasures caused by colonial records. Indigenous memory-work, therefore, becomes a means of reasserting presence and reclaiming cultural authority. Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasises that Indigenous storytelling method serves as “a

form of resistance and a way to protect and regenerate knowledge” (*Decolonizing Methodologies*36).

Identity is shaped and articulated within Aboriginal narratives through the interplay of land and memory. It is not seen as an individual entity but a part of shared continuity tied to land, family, and ancestral presence. When these bonds are broken, as occurred under assimilation policies and forced removal, the search for identity becomes deeply intertwined with the memories of their land. The Aboriginal writers often approach storytelling as a process to heal the fractures created by historical trauma.

Both novels *My Place* and *Benang* rely on this theoretical grounding. Sally Morgan’s story focuses on the recovery of her silenced family histories, while Kim Scott exposes how colonial records tried to classify, assimilate, and erase Indigenous identity. Storytelling helps to restore and strengthen cultural presence in both texts. Their writings echo Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s argument that Indigenous narratives “restore a sense of balance and reaffirm connections that colonisation tried to rupture” (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 42). By putting personal stories alongside communal histories, these works show that the survival of Aboriginal identity depends on reclaiming the cultural, historical, and spiritual ties that link aboriginal community to their motherland.

Reclaiming Family History and Cultural Memory in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*

Sally Morgan’s *My Place* stands as one of the most influential Aboriginal autobiographical narratives of the late twentieth century. Published in 1987, the work arbitrates the Aboriginal voices that had long been driven to the margins. Using memoir, oral testimony and family history, *My Place* uncovers the hidden Aboriginal identity of Morgan’s maternal line, showcasing how silence became a survival strategy under oppressive policies in Western Australia. The story is powerful as it reclaims memory that had been buried under generations of fear, shame and enforced forgetting.

Sally Morgan admits, at the beginning of her search, that “there were things about our family that didn’t make sense” (*My Place*3). Those Aboriginal Australians, whose identities were broken by assimilation policies, this awareness of gaps in family history reflects their broader experience. The government coerced Aboriginal families to hide their identity, avoiding the removal of their children. Historian Anna Haebich describes this period as marked by “deep silences, broken genealogies and the effort to pass as white in order to survive” (*For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia* 112). Out of this historical rupture and attempts to restore continuity, Morgan’s narrative bloomed.

A significant moment comes when Sally Morgan begins speaking with her grandmother, Daisy, who reveals her living under a system that curbed Aboriginal identity. After years of silence Daisy confesses, “I was too frightened to tell you. All my life I’ve been frightened” (*My Place*136). Her submission of lifetime was shaped by colonial control and racism. Daisy’s fear reflects the pressure that was put on the Aboriginal people by government policies to hide their heritage. Her narrative shows how recovering personal memory links to recovering cultural identity.

My Place reinforces this process of oral storytelling. Morgan inclusion of extended monologues from her mother, Gladys, and grandmother Daisy, allows their voices to reshape the narrative. Literary critic Kay Schaffer notes that Morgan “reinscribes Aboriginal women’s voices into Australian history by placing their spoken memories at the heart of the text” (*Women and the Bush* 182). Individual experiences are not only retrieved but also the silencing mechanisms of colonial record-keeping are challenged in *My Place*.

Land, too, remains a subtle but persistent presence. Although the family lived in urban Perth, their removal from Country meant the loss of a deeper cultural anchor. When Daisy briefly recalls her childhood on Corunna Downs Station, her memories are tied to the land she was forced to leave. She tells Morgan, “It was beautiful country... I never stopped missing it” (*My Place* 207). This longing underscores how Country functions

as a spiritual home that shapes identity even across distance and time. The text suggests that without memory of land, identity becomes precarious.

Sally Morgan's story is not just about her own life. It is political, too. By piecing together her family's Aboriginal identity, she pushes back against the erasure that came with assimilation policies. She is reclaiming what was almost lost. The text becomes what critic Adam Shoemaker describes as "a literary act of reclamation in which the past is retrieved to empower the present" (*Black Words, White Page* 252). Morgan insists on writing down her family's stories, pushing memories shaped by fear into the open.

By the end, writing turns into a kind of medicine for her. She admits that digging into her family's past helped her "find a place for [herself] in the world" (*My Place* 334). It is a simple statement, but it hits hard as remembering gives her back some control. Through her own voice and conversations with relatives, *My Place* shows how sharing stories ties Aboriginal people back to their roots, their families, and their culture.

Reconstructing Fragmented Lineage and Cultural Memory in Kim Scott's *Benang*

Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) is a powerful reworking of Aboriginal family history that confronts the violence of colonial record-keeping and racial science in Australia. Drawing on archival documents, family testimonies, and experimental narrative strategies, *Benang* exposes how Aboriginal identity was systematically fractured through policies of biological absorption and cultural erasure. Unlike Sally Morgan's recovery of silenced memory through oral testimony, Scott's narrative stages a confrontation between living Aboriginal memory and the written colonial archive that sought to control, classify, and ultimately erase it.

The novel centres on Harley Scat, who describes himself as the "first white man born" (*Benang* 10) in his family. This ironic claim immediately signals the novel's engagement with assimilation ideology, particularly the policy of "breeding out the colour" (*Benang* 26). Harley's grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, is obsessed with documenting genealogies, measuring skin colour, and proving Aboriginal advancement toward whiteness. These

obsessive records reflect a historical reality in which Aboriginal families were subjected to surveillance under the guise of scientific progress. Patrick Wolfe identifies such practices as part of a settler-colonial logic that seeks not merely to dominate Indigenous peoples but to eliminate them as distinct cultural entities, arguing that settler colonialism operates through a “logic of elimination” (*Journal of Genocide* 388), rather than simple exploitation.

As Harley pieces together his family history, he discovers that the documents meant to define and elevate him are instruments of profound violence. Files, charts, and reports reduce lived lives to racial data, stripping individuals of agency and emotional presence. Harley observes bitterly that his ancestors were “measured, weighed, written down, and filed away” (*Benang* 74). This reduction of human experience to administrative language demonstrates how colonial power operated through paperwork as much as through physical force. Scott’s narrative reveals that cultural memory survives not because of these records, but in spite of them.

Crucially, *Benang* refuses a linear reconstruction of history. The story jumps around, never neat or straight, echoing the chaos forced on Aboriginal families. Their stories got scattered, sent off to missions, folded into government files, lost at stations. Harley’s journey is not just about finding facts. It is about bringing back the voices that official history tried to silence, especially the women, Fanny Benang and Topsy, who lived through both strength and hardship. Their stories emerge in moments of narrative resistance, interrupting the authority of official documents. Literary critic Anne Brewster notes that Scott’s writing “reclaims Indigenous subjectivity by exposing the emotional and ethical emptiness of colonial archives” (*Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography* 146).

Land functions as an essential but contested presence throughout *Benang*. Unlike romanticized depictions of Country, Scott presents land as a site of dispossession layered with memory and trauma. Harley’s ancestral lands are mapped, renamed, and administratively controlled, yet they remain central to Aboriginal belonging. The narrative suggests that cultural identity cannot be fully erased because it is embedded in place, even when access to

land is denied. When Harley imagines his ancestors walking "Country before fences and files" (*Benang* 212), the text momentarily restores an Indigenous relationship to land that precedes colonial interruption.

The title, *Benang*, means "tomorrow" in Nyoongar, and it is loaded with meaning. It points to a future that does not have to follow colonial rules about what is valuable or pure. By using a language almost wiped out by assimilation, Scott insists that Aboriginal culture survives not because people are stuck in the past, but because they keep moving forward. Adam Shoemaker argues that *Benang* "reorients Aboriginal history away from victimhood and toward an ethical reimagining of survival" (*Black Words, White Page* 273). Harley's storytelling becomes an act of refusal, rejecting the narrative of disappearance that colonial discourse attempted to impose.

By the end of the novel, Harley does not get some tidy ending or a perfectly restored family tree. He stands in a space of resistance, he knows what is been lost, but he refuses to forget or accept the story on anyone else's terms. Telling the story becomes its own act of survival. *Benang* shows that reclaiming family history is not about finding some untouched past. It is about taking back the right to say who you are, using Aboriginal ways of remembering. The novel pushes back against official records and insists on Indigenous memory. Kim Scott makes it clear: survival comes from telling stories that face up to colonial power, not stories that smooth things over.

Comparative Analysis

Reading of *My Place* and *Benang* side by side, shows a sharper sense of how Aboriginal writers today deal with the long shadow of dispossession and broken culture in Australia. The books are not the same, one is an accessible autobiography, the other is more experimental, but both put storytelling at the centre. That is how they reclaim identity and rebuild ties to land. Both books show that Aboriginal survival relies not just on remembering, but on challenging the forces that once tried to wipe those memories out.

Both Sally Morgan and Kim Scott expose how colonial authorities shaped Aboriginal identity through silence and distortion. In *My Place*, the erasure operates at an intimate level. Sally uncovers how her family concealed its Aboriginal heritage to avoid removal and discrimination. When her grandmother Daisy admits that throughout her life she had been “frightened,” (*My Place* 136) it reveals the personal cost of institutional intimidation. *Benang*, by contrast, reveals the machinery behind such fear through its dense archive of measurement, classification, and racial ideology. Harley’s claim, “I was assembled from papers” (*Benang*15), shows how colonial documentation sought to construct Aboriginal identity from the outside. While Morgan recovers suppressed family memory, Scott exposes the systems that produced those silences in the first place.

Even with all their differences, both stories make one thing clear: Aboriginal identity and land go hand in hand. Morgan’s family history is full of this deep, stubborn longing for Country, even after years of being forced away. Daisy’s recollection of Corunna Downs, “It was beautiful country... I never stopped missing it” (*My Place* 207), affirms land as an emotional and spiritual anchor. Scott presents land as a force that continues to assert itself despite administrative denial. Harley’s sense of something rising “through the soles of [his] feet” (*Benang* 112) suggests that Country continues to speak despite the violence of assimilation. Both texts affirm the Indigenous understanding that identity is sustained through land, memory, and kinship.

Storytelling becomes the bridge that reconnects these elements. *My Place* relies on oral histories to restore voices pushed into silence. As Kay Schaffer notes, Sally Morgan “reinscribes Aboriginal women’s experiences into national history” (*Women and the Bush* 182). Scott’s approach is more fragmented but equally effective. By weaving archival records, personal memory, and communal storytelling, he exposes the gaps and contradictions within colonial documentation. Mudrooroo observes that Kim Scott “reveals how Aboriginal identity survives by speaking through and beyond the records that attempted to contain it” (*Indigenous Literature of Australia* 94). In both texts, storytelling functions not simply as narrative technique but as an act of cultural preservation.

A key point of convergence is the refusal to present identity restoration as simple or complete. Morgan arrives at a sense of belonging, but only after confronting painful truths. Scott offers a more unsettled outcome. Harley's cultural recovery remains ongoing, fractured, and unresolved. Yet both writers suggest that reclaiming memory, whether personal or political, is necessary for healing. Morgan says that she is "found a place for [herself] in the world" (*My Place* 334), and that lines up with Harley's realization that he is "made of many stories, not one" (*Benang* 394).

These moments show that identity is not some fixed thing but is built from connections, layers, and change. When *My Place* and *Benang* are read simultaneously, storytelling keeps culture alive. It stitches back together what colonisation tried to break apart the links between land, memory, and identity. Sally Morgan joins her family's history together by sharing her own story. Kim Scott pushes back against the colonial record, making space for Aboriginal voices. Both writers prove that even after being uprooted and interrupted by history, Aboriginal identity survives, as long as people remember and speak.

Conclusion

Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kim Scott's *Benang* tackle the long, painful story of Aboriginal dispossession and forced assimilation in Australia, but they do it in their own ways. Both writers dig into how losing land and having memories pushed aside broke apart families and communities. Still, these breaks are not the end of the story. Through their books, Sally Morgan and Kim Scott use storytelling to stitch those connections back together, the connections colonisation tried to erase, and point toward healing and a renewed sense of culture. Morgan's style is personal and close to home. She uncovers family histories that had been hidden for years, bringing women's voices out from the silence and fear that shaped their lives. These stories are not just about keeping memories alive rather they also give back dignity to people who lost it. By following the thread of her family's Aboriginal heritage, Morgan shows that reclaiming identity starts with facing the truth

and making space for stories that were buried. When she says learning the truth helped her “find a place” (*My Place* 334) in the world, one can feel how powerful personal storytelling can be in healing old wounds that stretched across generations.

Kim Scott’s work, by contrast, confronts the structural forces behind those very silences. *Benang* interrogates the colonial archive that attempted to define, measure, and ultimately erase Aboriginal people through bureaucratic control. Harley’s struggle to separate himself from the racial ideologies embedded in his grandfather’s papers highlights how deeply these systems shaped Aboriginal identity. Yet Scott opens a way forward by allowing land, memory, and ancestral voices to interrupt the archive. Harley’s recognition that he is formed from “many stories” (*Benang* 394) counters the narrow categories imposed upon him and affirms an Indigenous sense of self that is relational and evolving.

Read together, the two texts emphasise that cultural survival depends on the revitalisation of memory, both personal and collective, and on the continual reaffirmation of ties to the country, their motherland. Storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming space within national history, resisting imposed identities and renewing cultural presence. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, Indigenous narratives “restore what colonialism damaged but could not erase” (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 42). Both Morgan and Scott show that, even after generations of being pushed aside, Aboriginal identity keeps going as long as people tell, listen, and remember. They make it clear that reconnection is not a one-time thing, rather it is a lifelong process. Every time someone speaks a hidden history, remembers a piece of land, or lets an Indigenous voice ring out in literature or history, that thread of culture gets stronger. *My Place* and *Benang* do more than adding to Aboriginal literature as they push Australia to face its own story, past and present, and prove that storytelling still matters as it heals, resists, and brings cultures back to life.

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Historical and Contemporary Realities/Issues of Aboriginal Australia: A Study of Winnie Larsen's Autobiography *The Dusty Road*

Suneel Kumar

Autobiography is one of the frequently employed genres in Aboriginal literature. The genre of autobiography, especially in indigenous writing, offers propinquity between life narratives and history that provides immediate opportunity and possibility of retelling the truth of colonial era and to reconnect with the past. It is substantially significant to record that nearly all indigenous life narratives are infused with history and all aspects of their lives. Interestingly, the terms “oral history” and “life history” are used to designate Aboriginal life narratives. Aboriginal writing is profoundly “concerned with history, with precise knowledge of the history of Aboriginal existence” (Huggins, “Towards a Biography” 10). Robyn Friend asserts, “For me the history is the people and the way in which they tell it” (“Making Connections” 45). Ruby Langford Ginibi, the prolific author mentions in a personal interview with Hoog that autobiographies talk about our lives but they are historical accounts of colonial Black Australia too. Her statement articulates the historical value of autobiographies. Broadly speaking, the term “history” is used in Aboriginal literature, especially in historical research where Aboriginal autobiographies are treated as forms of indigenous oral history. David Malouf asserts, “History is not what happens but what is told” (qtd. in Dahiya 22).

Contemporary, Aboriginal women autobiographies have a significant place in Australian literary canon, “There is an abundance of literature by women writers in Australia” (Khurana 82). The first generation of Aboriginal women author's writing in 1970s and early 1980s, produced indigenous literature in autobiographical form. Their autobiographies are the authentic voices and they play an important role to break the historical silence. The life stories of older Aboriginal women “illuminate much about what it was like to live in earlier days and how people experienced the world

they knew” (Huggins, “Towards a Biography” 10). Lawson in *The Drover's Wife* states that women have different history and one should not neglect women's individuality. Recently, Aboriginal women authors are dealing with many alarming issues such as connection to land and Country, identity and self-representation, social injustice and inequality, domestic violence, community healing, intergenerational trauma and mental health of Aboriginal people etc.

In November 2021, in a landmark case, two thousand one hundred and eighty eight square kilometre of land was handed over to Kuuku Ya'u and Uutaanlame people of Australia by Supreme court, “Traditional owner Beatrice Hobson, eighty years old said she was very happy but it had been a long fight to regain her father's traditional lands ... That soil is the colour of our skin and I am happy to get the land back for my people ... Justice Mortimer informed that we are still a long way of setting that right ... Europeans law and European government has brought great suffering and oppression to Aboriginals” (Web. 26 Nov. 2021). The issue of land and ownership have been brought forth by many women writer in autobiographies like *The Dusty Road* by Winnie Larsen, *My Place* by Sally Morgan, *Kick the Tin* by Doris Kartinyeri, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* by Ruby Langford Ginibi. Today many land rights cases are in favour of Aboriginal people who lost their land to the colonizers.

In May 2020, “Mining giant Rio Tinto blasted two 46,000 year old rock shelters in Western Australia Pibara Region ... recognized as one of Australia's oldest known Aboriginal heritage sites ... Rio Tinto has apologized for causing this distress” (Web. 3 Dec. 2021). In fact, recently mining company Rio Tinto is also seeking to train Aboriginal people and working to develop local Aboriginal entrepreneurs to afford goods and services. Despite such advances the contemporary native structure is not rising up. Most of the income is still derived from the digging of native lands. According to Edward Said colonization was about the quest for the land and the resources. In the same manner white people were utilizing and disposing everything without consulting the original habitants. Any protest

to such settlement resulted in vicious deaths, thus they disrupted the way of living of native communities.

The natural beauty of the bush which used to endow spiritual strength to the natives has no subsistence in contemporary Australia. For the Aborigines this earth did not evolve out of a void but rather the creation of earth is attributed to the Dreamtime, “We kids had a bush life, camping in different places as dad moved. In those days there were lots of bush flowers, wild flowers, wild fruit, birds and fresh water soaks. We were Noongar people and we believed in these things in a spiritual way” (*The Dusty Road* 6).

In 2021, it was reported that the “Butterfly Cave,” which has a major cultural significance and traditionally used by First Nations women during birthing practices is under possession of Roche Group of Australia, “Currently the women must seek permission to cross the site ... painstaking and very humiliating to find [that] women have to get permission to [assess the site] ... including the path which the women use to reach at the site ... in West Walls end outside of New Castel” (Web. 30 Nov. 2021). For over a decade, native women have been fighting to protect the Awabakal Butterfly Cave. The New South Wales government acquired the land around the butterfly cave in 2024. This acquisition ensures the area will be protected permanently as part of the National Parks and Wildlife estate and managed in consultation with the local Aboriginal community.

Nature has been a mother to the natives and the natural objects have always yielded food and livelihood to the Aborigines. The Aborigines consider the creation of rocks, rivers, trees etc. since the Dream Time, a phenomenon that took place some forty thousand years ago. Interestingly, the names of rocks, rivers, trees and plains are identical to the names of the Aboriginal children which reinforce their attachment to these natural objects. Larsen’s mother describes the importance of water holes, trees, flora and fauna and the eco-friendly nature of the natives, “A fair way out from the Borden there was a place called Night Well (water hole). Alongside the river are some rocks that formed a round basin. This shallow water hole filled up every night and emptied at ten in the morning. There

were some farmers carting water from the well for their sheep and cattle and a lot of wild life would come there to drink" (*The Dusty Road* 39). The inner grief of the protagonist is generated by her consciousness about the continuity of colonial violence. She depicts the picture of Night Well, which was a source of living for all wild life and indigenous population, as well as a source of childhood memory to Larsen, after the First World War, "this most beautiful place... was blown up and the beauty was brought to an end" (39). Later she visits the Night Well and paints the picture. "Many years later I returned to Night Well, the water hole of my memories. I was devastated to see the water hole shattered with pieces of rocks everywhere. I sat in silence. I felt the sadness of my mother earth" (40).

The current racial environment of Australia is a momentous fact. In May 2019, "One 14 year old native girl wrote on Facebook on the day before her death ... Once I'm gone the bullying and the racism will stop ... it seems increasingly clear that there is a link between cyber bullying, anti-indigenous racism ... Indigenous voices are speaking loudly on social media but racism endures" (Web. 21 May 2019). A national registry report 2024-2025 highlighted a rise in racial incidents targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, with about 26 % of reported cases – many from social media, including racial taunts and exclusion from services.

Race, which brings the notion of superiority of white people, is widely conversed by Larsen. For years a racial privilege was given to the Europeans on the basis of colour. Larsen demonstrates that the colour of the skin was used for racial representation in colonized areas of Australian land. Larsen discards the idea of racial superiority of European people, she even rejects inter racial marriage and considers it dangerous to Aboriginal race. In the chapter, "Swimming Pond," Aboriginal children faced racial discrimination when Larsen, her sisters and cousin wanted to swim in the pool, the caretaker prevented and warned them that the "natives were not allowed" (52) near the area of swimming pool. The town which feeds on racism is like a parasite which subsumes the concerns of the Aborigines. All these children "felt embarrassed and hurt," (52) she adds "because we were

a different colour we were not allowed the same privileges of the white people” (52). They do not want to live in a world where racism dominates humanism, and they often remember the life of bush at Onegin.

Presently, the prevalence of racism is widely acknowledged by 76% of Australians. There are many personal experiences of racism based on ethnicity which takes subtle forms of racial slurs and unfair treatment. Today, emphasis is on the role and importance of education to understand ethnic relations and intersectionality of racial issues in contemporary Australia.

In 2024, Australian government’s ‘Rapid Review Report’ states that First Nations Women are thirty three times more likely to be hospitalized for violence related injuries and six times more likely to die in comparison to non-Indigenous women. Larsen also raises the issues of violence, harassment, molestation and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal girls and women in colonial Australia. Alexis Wrights’ work, *Plains of Promise* (1997) reveals similar experiences of four generations of indigenous women in Central North West Queensland. The first woman does not have a name, only a number at the white mission. She commits suicide when her seven years old daughter Ivy is taken away from her by white people. Ivy is repeatedly raped by the white people. The first woman’s suicide in *Plains of Promise* is an act of protest at the removal and sexual exploitation of her child.

In her autobiography, Larsen depicts how a white man in the lust of sex does not give any consideration to moral values. Lack of such values among white men is chiefly responsible for the rise of violence against Aboriginal women. Jackie Huggins states, “Around the age of thirteen to fourteen years girls went to serve their apprenticeship as ‘worthy housekeepers.’ It was routine for girls to be placed in servitude as domestic servants by certain persons in authority” (*The Dusty Road* 15). Similarly, Larsen’s three aunts experienced ill-treatment by the whites who forcibly took them away from home. The evil deeds of the white administration figure in the chapter “Sister Marjory,” where Larsen illustrates, “The things that had been done to our people were terrible” (56), aunty tells about three

other young aunties who were taken away by the white government people. Their grandmother, “ran into the sea crying and calling for the ship to stop,” but “the ship disappeared with her three daughters on board” (56). Larsen here points out that children were taken against their will and white officials turn deaf ears to the pleadings of Aboriginal mother.

In contemporary era, according to ‘Australian government’s Rapid Review Report of 2024, families of murdered women and missing women are sharing their trauma of separation to police, magistrates and journalists, but countless cases are still unresolved. They are urging for change in control laws, police responses, judicial decisions, property and tenancy laws and to appoint an ‘Indigenous Family Violence Commission’ along with a national plan to prevent violence.

Health equity is an essential universal human right. Sacha Kendall Jamieson’s interview with Aboriginal mothers, in May 2019, exposes the current situation of their health, “Our research team interviewed 43 Aboriginal mothers in six prisons across NSW about their physical and mental health and well-being. We found they were overwhelmingly unable to access culturally appropriate treatment for their mental health, well-being and substance use issues” (Web. 21 May 2019). The colonizer brought different diseases to infect and eliminate the Aboriginals which deliberately infected the local communities. On the other hand, they ignore the natives at hospitals. In the chapter “Hospital Experiences,” Larsen depicts the hospital as a place of torture which is beyond the reach of poor natives. During her illness she was left alone in the dark ward of the hospital, especially constructed for the natives. She was hospitalized for a long time, without any serious attention or proper treatment by the staff. She had several unpleasant experiences before reaching the hospital for no transport facility was provided to the native patients. There were sleeper carriages with seats and beds but those were “for the white people only” (60). Only indigenous people “with a Citizen’s Rights or exemption cards could use the sleepers” (60). She reminisces, “I was admitted to the Natives ward of the Gnowangerup hospital. This ward was built away from the main Hospital. The treatment at this hospital was just a continuation of apron

and keeping me warm. I remember being very frightened at night as I was for about two weeks in the native war ... I was given aspro everyday but I had osteomyelitis ... I didn't improve" (48).

The white children's hospital in Perth was different, with facilities and medical care, and she was taken to this hospital when her father persuaded the doctor for special treatment. She experienced a different environment in white's hospital, "There I was well received and cared for because I was treated alongside white children and we were all the same" (48). Her parents and relatives were not allowed to meet her in white's hospital. She lived in isolation for so many months without her brother, sisters and parents.

Indigenous suicides rates hit record highs in 2024, with 306 deaths recorded, especially native men in remote communities are underscoring a serious mental health crisis. A 2025 report from the Australian Human Rights Commission confirms that systemic and interpersonal racism in healthcare is a critical driver of poor health outcomes, chronic illness, and premature death.

Emotional bonding is an important characteristic of the Aboriginal world. It is not only during times of adversity but on festive occasions too, and sense of association and belongingness with each other gets reflected, "They [natives] show greater love for all than for themselves; they give valuable things or trifles, being satisfied even with a very small return, or nothing" (Columbus 20). Larsen drives home this point by contrasting it with the aloofness that the whites feel. The joint family provides sustenance to the Aborigines; the nuclear family remains the only option for the whites. In *The Dusty Road* children enjoy flicking fire with their parents; they eagerly wait for their father to share the day time incidents and memories. Her father was a good artist who not only enjoyed with family but with white people as well, "I remember there was a small hall in Omegerup. They had dances in the hall. They were for white people. But because dad played the accordion and he was well liked" (12). It is a sign of amiable relationships in their sharing of social values and things positively. The protagonist maintains that the natives shared their sufferings in times of oppression.

She stresses that the family bond among Aborigines enables them to undergo all sorts of pains and sufferings. The autobiography emphasizes that the natives have survived because of the great affinity with each other. Thus Larsen in her narratives shed light on ambivalent handling of colonial violence. She also unfolds the crumbling of the dreams of Aboriginal's liberation and emphasizes the importance of liberty that is essential for every creature in this world, "I'll forgive you if you let me free" (54). Aboriginal's liberty had been curtailed on the British reserves. Reminiscences of the protagonist project that past means different things to different people which often involve a monolithic reconstitution under brutal hegemony of the powerful neocolonial state. Thus, recollection of colonial past is the cause of both acrimony and solidarity for Larsen. Her autobiography is a positive mark of resistance and heroism in an attempt at decolonization. She illuminates the fact that the natives have been very strong and tough in the face of suffering, "The pain and humiliation you have endured have prompted me ... to struggle for survival in time of hardships and pain" (3). Larsen who crosses the dusty road with her mum in a very grim condition is not ready to forgive any white colonizer, "My feet got very sore from walking on the dusty road, but mum was too worried to think about our feet" (32) and the lines, "You pressed upon me Your way ... not care of me ... You forced upon me ... You I'll forgive you if you let me free ... To wander through the passage of time to once again capture" (54), reflect her anger and predicament. On the other hand, the appearance of a white man and white girl, who help them in different situations respectively indicates a ray of hope for the reconciliation between colonizers and colonized, "A kind white man appeared and asked if he could help us. Mum explained the situation so he drove us to the hospital ... mum was so grateful for this Good Samaritan [White Man] ... who just disappeared after helping us" (66), and there was "a girl in the class that helped me ... her name was Mary, Mary Gallagher ... a wonderful white girl ... help me by reading a book" (62-63).

Presently, the condition of the Aborigines in Australia forces many people to believe that "a nation exists within a nation" (Pal 42). In recent

decades, the indigenous people are trying to establish a strong National Identity of their own. In 2020, Laura Thompson, launched a fight to free Aboriginal flag from Australian government. He is an Aboriginal artist and actual designer of the flag, who designed the flag in 1971 for his people's civil rights movement, "Originally a protest flag, it's now recognized as dominant symbol of Australia's Aboriginal people and is an official flag of the country ... when it emerged last year that some Aboriginal people had been ordered to stop using it, many were confused ... Amid increasing pressure Australia's government is now reported to be considering taking over the copyright, but it faces complex legal and cultural issues" (Web. 4 Sept. 2020). Aboriginal flag represents the history, culture and sacrifices made by the people for the land. It is a sign of pride and patriotism for indigenous population. The flag was first flown on National Aboriginal Day in Victoria Square in Adelaide on July 1971 during 2000 Summer Olympics and during march for reconciliation of 2000 and Australian Day. "On 4 Feb. 2022 the New South Wales government announced that the flag would be flown from the Harbour Bridge permanently" (Web. 26 July 2022). Resultantly Aboriginal flag has special legal and political status along with the national flag.

In 2022, there were eleven "First Nations" members in 47 Parliament of Australia wherein Senator Jacinta Prince hopes, "they can work together to bring change for their constituents and communities ... I will be working with people who want to make the lives of particular marginalized Indigenous Australians better that is one of my main focus" (Web. 26 July 2022). All 'First Nations' members of Australian Parliament are working together for upliftment of Aboriginal people.

Larsen's autobiography *The Dusty Road* inspires the natives to survive with dignity by embracing their native culture and to build a new Aboriginal world – a word free from exploitation and egotism, phobias and prejudices, racism and discrimination. Her autobiography exposes many historical and contemporary realities/issues which are still prevailing in Australia. The collective action of communities, individuals and governments is needed to understand the barriers that are holding present society back from making

steady gains towards social equality, gender equality and ascertaining economic progress in future.

Contemporary indigenous women are actively working towards the emancipation of their own communities through aboriginal activists, church groups, aboriginal advancement associations and political activism, media involvement and academic interpretations. Emphatically they are demanding civil and political rights from the Australian government.

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Reimagining the Ageing Female Self: Feminism and Later-Life Subjectivity in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*

Pratibha Mebra

This paper examines representations of ageing, gender, and female subjectivity in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* through a feminist critical framework informed by insights from gerontology. While Grenville's fiction has been widely studied in relation to history, gender relations, and social marginality, comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of ageing in shaping women's emotional lives and sense of self. This study argues that *The Idea of Perfection* reimagines middle-aged womanhood not as a narrative of decline, but as a space of introspection, emotional renewal, and quiet resistance to patriarchal and social expectations.

Focusing on Grenville's portrayal of women negotiating loneliness, invisibility, and disrupted personal trajectories, the paper explores how ageing intersects with gendered norms to shape female subjectivity within an Australian social context. Drawing on feminist theories of identity and embodiment, alongside gerontological perspectives on later-life experience, the analysis highlights how emotional ageing, memory, and the desire for connection emerge as central elements of women's lived realities in the novel. Rather than positioning ageing women as passive or marginal figures, Grenville presents them as complex subjects capable of redefining intimacy, belonging, and self-worth beyond socially prescribed timelines.

By situating *The Idea of Perfection* within Australian women's writing, this paper contributes to feminist literary criticism by foregrounding ageing as a crucial yet underexplored dimension of female experience. It further demonstrates how literary narratives can offer valuable cultural insights into ageing, gender, and subjectivity in contemporary Australian society, aligning literary analysis with broader interdisciplinary conversations in feminist and ageing studies.

Introduction

Australian women's fiction has consistently foregrounded questions of gender, identity, and social marginalisation, offering nuanced representations of women negotiating personal and cultural constraints. Within this literary tradition, women's experiences are often shaped not only by patriarchal structures but also by age, time, and changing social expectations. Despite the growing body of feminist criticism on Australian literature, the intersection of gender and ageing remains a relatively underexplored area, particularly in literary representations of middle-aged and older women. Ageing women are frequently rendered invisible within cultural narratives that privilege youth, productivity, and normative life trajectories, reinforcing restrictive understandings of female identity.

Kate Grenville occupies a significant place in Australian literature for her sensitive portrayal of marginalised subjectivities and emotional interiority. Her fiction frequently centres on individuals who exist on the edges of social visibility, grappling with loneliness, memory, and unfulfilled desire. While much critical attention has focused on Grenville's engagement with history, power, and gender relations, less emphasis has been placed on how her work addresses ageing as a formative dimension of women's selfhood. *The Idea of Perfection* (1999), in particular, offers a compelling exploration of middle-aged subjectivity, presenting ageing not as a condition of decline but as a period of emotional reckoning and potential renewal.

Feminist literary criticism has long challenged patriarchal constructions of womanhood that confine female value to youth, beauty, and reproductive capacity (Beauvoir 540). In recent decades, scholars of ageing have further demonstrated how ageism intersects with sexism to marginalise women in later life, rendering them socially invisible and emotionally silenced (Gullette 12). Bringing feminist and gerontological perspectives together allows for a more nuanced understanding of how literary texts represent ageing women as complex subjects negotiating identity, desire, and belonging over time. Such an approach is particularly

relevant in analysing Australian women's writing, where narratives of selfhood are often shaped by isolation, spatial marginality, and social restraint.

This paper argues that *The Idea of Perfection* reimagines middle-aged womanhood through a feminist lens that foregrounds later-life subjectivity, emotional ageing, and the quiet redefinition of self. By focusing on Grenville's representation of women navigating loneliness, invisibility, and stalled personal histories, the study examines how ageing intersects with gendered expectations within an Australian social context. Through close textual analysis informed by feminist theory and insights from gerontology, the paper seeks to demonstrate how Grenville's novel challenges dominant cultural narratives that associate ageing with loss, instead presenting later life as a space of introspection, resilience, and renewed agency.

Theoretical Framework: Feminism and Ageing

Feminist literary criticism provides a crucial framework for understanding how women's identities are shaped by gendered power relations, social expectations, and cultural norms. Feminist theorists have long argued that patriarchal societies define women primarily through youth, beauty, and reproductive capacity, thereby marginalising women whose bodies and identities fall outside these norms. Simone de Beauvoir famously observes that womanhood is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, a process that becomes particularly visible in later life when ageing women are increasingly rendered invisible or devalued within cultural narratives (Beauvoir 540). Feminist criticism thus seeks to recover women's voices and subjectivities that have been silenced or marginalised by dominant ideological frameworks.

While feminism has productively interrogated gendered oppression, early feminist discourse often paid limited attention to ageing as a critical category of analysis. More recent scholarship has addressed this gap through the emergence of feminist gerontology, which examines how age intersects with gender to shape women's lived experiences. Scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette argue that ageing is not merely a biological process but a cultural narrative structured by decline-oriented assumptions

that disproportionately affect women (Gullette 12). These narratives construct ageing women as socially irrelevant, emotionally stagnant, or asexual, reinforcing forms of exclusion that parallel earlier gender-based marginalisation.

Feminist gerontology challenges such decline narratives by foregrounding ageing as a dynamic and socially mediated experience. Kathleen Woodward emphasises that later life can be a period of reflection, emotional growth, and reconfiguration of identity, rather than inevitable loss (Woodward 4). From this perspective, ageing women are understood not as passive subjects but as individuals negotiating time, memory, and selfhood within changing social conditions. This theoretical approach is particularly valuable for literary analysis, as fiction offers nuanced representations of interiority, emotional ageing, and subjective experience that may be overlooked in sociological or biomedical accounts.

Applying feminist and gerontological perspectives together enables a more layered reading of women's narratives, particularly in literary contexts where silence, restraint, and emotional complexity are central themes. Ageing women in fiction often occupy liminal positions—neither fully visible nor entirely absent—allowing writers to explore how identity is reshaped across time. Such representations invite readers to reconsider dominant cultural assumptions that equate ageing with decline and instead recognise later life as a site of negotiation, resilience, and potential transformation.

In the context of Australian women's writing, feminist gerontology offers an especially productive lens. Australian literature frequently engages with themes of isolation, marginality, and emotional restraint, shaped by both social and spatial conditions. Reading these narratives through a feminist gerontological framework allows for a deeper understanding of how ageing women navigate gendered expectations while seeking connection, belonging, and self-definition. This combined theoretical approach therefore provides a critical foundation for analysing Kate

Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, where later-life subjectivity emerges as a key dimension of female experience within an Australian cultural landscape.

Textual Analysis of *The Idea of Perfection*: Ageing, Invisibility, and Social Marginality in *The Idea of Perfection*

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* presents ageing as a subtle yet powerful condition shaping women's social visibility and sense of belonging. Set in a small Australian town, the novel foregrounds characters who exist on the margins of social life, particularly those whose age places them outside dominant narratives of productivity and desirability. Middle-aged women in the novel are neither central to public attention nor entirely absent; instead, they occupy liminal spaces marked by routine, emotional restraint, and social neglect. Grenville uses this marginal positioning to reflect how ageing women are often rendered invisible within everyday social structures.

The female characters' marginality is closely tied to cultural assumptions surrounding age and usefulness. As feminist gerontologists have noted, ageing women are frequently judged according to decline-oriented narratives that equate worth with youth, vitality, and visible achievement (Gullette 12). In *The Idea of Perfection*, this cultural logic manifests through the quiet isolation of women whose lives appear uneventful or stagnant from an external perspective. Their routines and silences, however, signal not emptiness but a complex negotiation with social exclusion and internalised expectations. Grenville's narrative attention to these seemingly ordinary lives challenges the assumption that ageing necessarily entails loss of meaning or relevance.

Spatial marginality further reinforces the invisibility of ageing women in the novel. The small-town setting functions as a confined social environment in which difference and deviation are easily noticed, yet emotional needs remain largely unacknowledged. Women who do not conform to expected roles—whether as youthful subjects, ideal partners, or socially active figures—are subtly sidelined. This spatial and social containment mirrors broader Australian cultural narratives in which isolation and emotional restraint shape individual identities. Through this setting, Grenville highlights how ageing women are positioned at the edges

of social recognition while continuing to sustain inner lives rich with memory and unarticulated desire.

Importantly, Grenville does not depict this invisibility as passive resignation. Instead, the narrative suggests that marginality can also create spaces for reflection and self-awareness. By focusing on ageing women whose lives unfold away from public scrutiny, *The Idea of Perfection* exposes the limitations of social frameworks that privilege visibility and outward success. The novel thus invites a feminist re-evaluation of ageing as a socially constructed condition, revealing how invisibility itself becomes a site through which female subjectivity is reshaped rather than erased.

Emotional Ageing, Silence, and Female Interior Life

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* places significant emphasis on emotional ageing, portraying silence not as absence but as a deeply expressive condition shaping women's interior lives. Ageing women in the novel often communicate through restraint, pauses, and inward reflection rather than overt speech. This narrative strategy aligns with feminist literary critiques that recognise silence as a gendered response to social marginalisation rather than a sign of passivity. For Grenville's women, silence becomes a mode through which emotional complexity and self-awareness are negotiated over time.

Emotional ageing in the novel is closely linked to experiences of loneliness and deferred desire. Middle-aged female characters are shown grappling with unfulfilled expectations—romantic, social, and personal—yet these disappointments are rarely articulated openly. Instead, Grenville foregrounds moments of introspection, habitual routines, and fleeting emotional recognitions that reveal how ageing reshapes women's relationships with themselves. Such representations resonate with gerontological perspectives that emphasise later life as a period marked by reflection and emotional recalibration rather than simple decline (Woodward 4).

Silence in *The Idea of Perfection* also functions as a protective strategy. Within a social environment that offers little space for vulnerability or

emotional disclosure, ageing women learn to contain their feelings, negotiating dignity and self-preservation through restraint. Feminist critics have observed that women's emotional labour is often expected to remain invisible, particularly as they age and lose social validation (Beauvoir 540). Grenville's narrative captures this dynamic by presenting silence as both imposed and chosen—an outcome of social neglect, but also a means of maintaining autonomy within constrained circumstances.

Importantly, Grenville does not romanticise silence as mere endurance. Instead, the novel suggests that emotional ageing involves a gradual recognition of one's own needs and limits. Moments of quiet awareness—rather than dramatic transformation—signal shifts in female subjectivity. Through attention to interior life, *The Idea of Perfection* challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate emotional vitality with youth and expressiveness. Ageing women are depicted as emotionally alert, perceptive, and capable of nuanced self-understanding, even when their voices remain socially muted.

By foregrounding emotional ageing and interiority, Grenville expands feminist literary representations of womanhood beyond youth-centred frameworks. The novel reveals how silence can function as a complex emotional language through which ageing women process memory, disappointment, and the possibility of connection. In doing so, *The Idea of Perfection* reframes later life not as emotional depletion but as a stage marked by depth, attentiveness, and evolving selfhood.

Later-Life Subjectivity and Quiet Renewal

In *The Idea of Perfection*, Kate Grenville ultimately moves beyond representations of invisibility and emotional restraint to explore the possibility of renewal in later life. Rather than framing change through dramatic transformation or overt rebellion, the novel foregrounds subtle shifts in perception and self-understanding that mark the emergence of later-life subjectivity. Ageing women are shown arriving at moments of recognition in which they reassess their emotional needs, past compromises, and future possibilities. These moments signal not a reversal of ageing, but a reorientation of the self shaped by time and experience.

Grenville's portrayal of later-life subjectivity aligns with feminist gerontological perspectives that emphasise ageing as a process of ongoing negotiation rather than closure. As scholars argue, later life can provide opportunities for re-evaluating identity and relationships, particularly for women whose earlier lives were shaped by social conformity and emotional restraint (Gullette 14). In the novel, renewal does not emerge from external validation or social success but from an internal recalibration of self-worth. Ageing becomes a condition through which characters gain emotional clarity, allowing them to acknowledge desire, companionship, and vulnerability without the pressure of youthful ideals.

Quiet renewal in *The Idea of Perfection* is also closely tied to the rejection of rigid social timelines. The novel resists cultural narratives that position fulfilment as something to be achieved within narrowly defined stages of life. By depicting emotional connection and self-acceptance as possible in middle age, Grenville challenges ageist assumptions that equate later life with stagnation or irrelevance. This disruption of linear life narratives is particularly significant for women, whose identities are often evaluated according to socially prescribed milestones related to marriage, productivity, and visibility.

Importantly, Grenville does not present renewal as complete resolution. Later-life subjectivity in the novel remains marked by uncertainty, hesitation, and emotional risk. However, these qualities are framed as integral to selfhood rather than signs of failure. Through this representation, *The Idea of Perfection* affirms that ageing women retain the capacity for growth, connection, and agency, even within constrained social environments. The novel thus reimagines later life as a meaningful stage of becoming, where emotional awareness and self-recognition offer forms of empowerment distinct from youthful ideals of success.

By foregrounding quiet renewal and later-life subjectivity, Grenville's novel contributes to feminist literary reconfigurations of ageing. It invites readers to reconsider dominant cultural narratives that marginalise ageing

women and instead recognise later life as a space of emotional possibility, resilience, and redefined selfhood within contemporary Australian society.

Ageing, Feminism, and the Australian Context

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* gains particular significance when situated within the broader social and cultural context of Australia, where narratives of individualism, self-reliance, and emotional restraint have long shaped representations of identity. Australian literature frequently engages with themes of isolation, marginality, and understated emotional expression, reflecting both geographical and cultural conditions. Within this context, Grenville's depiction of ageing women resonates as a culturally grounded exploration of how later-life subjectivity unfolds in environments marked by quietness rather than overt conflict.

Ageing in Australian society has often been discussed in relation to productivity, independence, and social participation, values that can marginalise those who do not conform to idealised life trajectories. Middle-aged and ageing women, in particular, may experience a dual form of exclusion shaped by both gendered expectations and age-based assumptions. Grenville's novel reflects this reality by presenting female characters whose lives do not align with dominant cultural markers of success, yet whose inner lives reveal depth, sensitivity, and emotional awareness. By foregrounding these experiences, *The Idea of Perfection* challenges cultural narratives that equate fulfilment solely with visibility or achievement.

From a feminist perspective, Grenville's work contributes to Australian women's writing by expanding representations of womanhood beyond youth-centred frameworks. The novel resists the tendency to render ageing women invisible within national and cultural imaginaries, instead positioning them as subjects capable of emotional growth and relational renewal. This intervention aligns with feminist critiques that seek to expose how gender norms intersect with age to shape women's social value and sense of self. In doing so, Grenville's fiction opens space for alternative understandings of female identity that acknowledge ageing as a meaningful dimension of experience.

The novel's emphasis on quiet transformation also reflects a distinctly Australian narrative sensibility. Rather than dramatic confrontation or radical rebellion, change occurs through subtle shifts in perception, routine, and emotional openness. This understated mode of renewal underscores how ageing women negotiate agency within culturally restrained environments. By situating later-life subjectivity within everyday Australian settings, Grenville demonstrates how feminist concerns with identity and selfhood can be articulated through ordinary lives and muted emotional registers.

Through its engagement with ageing, gender, and emotional interiority, *The Idea of Perfection* thus contributes to broader discussions within Australian literary and cultural studies. It reveals how literature can function as a critical site for examining the intersections of feminism and ageing, offering insights into women's lived experiences that challenge reductive or decline-oriented narratives. Grenville's novel ultimately affirms the importance of recognising later life as an integral and meaningful stage within Australian cultural imagination.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* through a feminist critical framework informed by insights from ageing studies, with particular attention to later-life subjectivity, emotional ageing, and female selfhood. By focusing on representations of middle-aged women negotiating invisibility, silence, and emotional restraint, the study has argued that Grenville's novel challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate ageing with decline or loss of value. Instead, *The Idea of Perfection* presents later life as a meaningful stage marked by introspection, emotional awareness, and the possibility of quiet renewal.

Through close textual analysis, the paper has demonstrated how ageing women in the novel occupy liminal social positions shaped by both gendered expectations and age-based marginalisation. Yet these positions are not portrayed as spaces of passivity. Rather, Grenville foregrounds the interior lives of her female characters, revealing how silence, routine, and

emotional restraint function as complex responses to social neglect. Such representations resonate with feminist gerontological perspectives that emphasise ageing as a culturally mediated experience rather than a purely biological process.

Situating Grenville's work within the broader context of Australian women's writing further underscores the significance of this analysis. The novel reflects distinctly Australian cultural sensibilities characterised by emotional understatement, social isolation, and quiet endurance, while simultaneously offering a feminist reconfiguration of womanhood beyond youth-centred ideals. By portraying later-life subjectivity through subtle emotional shifts rather than dramatic transformation, *The Idea of Perfection* expands the literary imagination of ageing women in Australian fiction.

This paper, thus contributes to feminist literary criticism and Australian Studies by foregrounding ageing as a critical dimension of female experience that warrants greater scholarly attention. Grenville's novel invites readers to reconsider assumptions surrounding age, gender, and selfhood, affirming that later life can be a period of emotional depth, resilience, and renewed agency. Recognising such representations is essential for developing more inclusive literary and cultural narratives that value women's lives across the full span of ageing.

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