Rewriting the Early Indigenous Struggle: *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Remembering Babylon*

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Abstract:

Remembering Babylon and Oscar and Lucinda, are the result of the Aboriginals' movements, resistance and literature that appear after 1950s. Peter Carey's Oscar and Lucinda and David Malouf's Remembering Babylon, reflect the historically left issues of the early Aboriginals' struggle when they came into contact with the European civilization. Both the texts, transcribe the images of early European's settlement in Australia and their colonial blue print of dealing with native geography, nature and humans.

The analysis of the texts concludes that among British's well planned reasons of the colonization of Australia the economic factors were most dominating. The other dominating factors were the transplantation of the European settlers to the continent so that Australian land could be dominated by the white race which again had economic basis for the British. All these factors appear devastating for the Aboriginals' centuries' old existence in the continent.

Keywords: History, aboriginals, settlement, colonial acts, policies

Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon,* reflect the historically left issues of the early Aboriginals' struggle when they came into contact with the European civilization. Both the texts, transcribe the images of early European's settlement in Australia and their colonial blue print of dealing with native geography, nature and humans. The novelists expose the colonial policies of the white and their futuristic impact on the ecology and the socio-cultural set up of the Aboriginals. Readers find Aboriginal characters most peaceful, innocent and non-materialistic people of the world whose natural resources, culture, kinship system appears trespassed and replaced by colonial acts and Christianity respectively. In this respect, the novels divulge hidden

aspects of the colonial history of Australia where Aboriginal characters appear marginalized and uprooted struggling for survival in the colonial acts and laws. It categorically appears from the texts that the British colonizers used ample of ways to colonize the continent that led to the systematic removal of the Aboriginals from their culture as well as land resources. The texts also realise the fact that Aboriginal struggle for survival began immediately after the arrival of the British and still continued in the twenty first century. The analysis of the texts concludes that among British's well planed reasons of the colonization of Australia the economic factors were most dominating. The other dominating factors were the transplantation of the European settlers to the continent so that Australian land could be dominated by the white race which again had economic basis for the British. All these factors appear devastating for the Aboriginals' centuries' old existence in the continent.

Oscar and Lucinda and *Remembering Babylon* cover the colonial history of European settlement in Australia. Both the texts have been set in 1850s and portray the consequences of the early contacts between the colonizers and the colonized. The novelists re-imagine the mid-nineteenth century Australia where Indigenous land resources, culture, spirituality and population appear weaker and deteriorated before the well armed police and strategically managed administration of the British government. In *Oscar and Lucinda* the action takes place in Australia and England, mostly during the 1860s, that is to say, during the Victorian era. Victorian methods of imperialism and spread of Christianity in the Aboriginals' land are the chief concerns of the narrative. *Remembering Babylon* on the other hand re-imagines the mid-nineteenth century eviction of the Aboriginals from their land and the colonizers' intrusion into native cultural and ecological structure of living. Though, Peter Carey and David Malouf represent Aboriginals with their early issues of mid-nineteenth century to present time, there are no direct references of mass massacre of the indigenous happens to be occurred in the same era. However, both the novels are presented as the critique of the colonial myth of peaceful history, imperial expansion of racial culture in the continent and mid nineteenth century missionary objectives of converting the Aboriginals into Christianity by establishing 'Anglican Church'. The narratives revive those early days of imperial explorations of new places, systematic encroachment of Aboriginals land resources, their conspired assassinations and

imposition of white culture on the world's one of the oldest Indigenous cultures.

Narrating the life story of an English cast off boy, Gemmy Fairley, in Australia *Remembering Babylon* records the untold events of the colonization of Australia where Aboriginal culture and spirituality appear dominated by the British colonizers. Gemmy Fairley strands on an island and saved by the natives where readers, through his character, directly interact with the Aboriginals and their culture. *Remembering Babylon* gives multiple perspectives of historical confrontation or clash between Western materialistic culture and Indigenous ways of living. The narrative covers the themes of isolation from community, cultural imperialism, colonial strategies of encroaching native land resources and the early relations of the settlers and the natives. Gemmy Fairley spends more than fifteen years among the Aboriginals and his return to white culture and society appears unaccepted and intolerable because of his closeness to the natives.

The novel opens with the early environment where the newly settled white Europeans appear prejudiced and discriminatory against the native people and culture. The novel starts with three children playing on the outskirts of a mid-nineteenth century settlement in Queensland (*RB*, 1). The narrator explains that the children come across "something extraordinary" (*RB* 1). They think that it must be a black man, the boy Lachlan can see only a "thing" that "was not even, maybe, human" (*RB* 2) and says "we're being raided by blacks" (*RB* 2). These early references of the novel depict the images of the Aboriginals created by the settlers in the minds of their children. The children's minds have been trained against Aboriginality and for them natives are, not human being, rather half humans and savages who are one of the big dangers for the properties and land resources for the new settlers. It also appears in the beginning of the novel that the settlers have separated their farms and properties with strong fence. These fences stand for, "ownership,...otherness and alienness" (Ashcroft, 55). These physical separations of settlers from the natives reflect how the seeds of abhorrence and hostility were sown by the colonizers that proved catastrophic for the future of Aboriginals' forthcoming generation.

Since, early Aboriginals and settlers relationships, along with cultural confrontations is a hotly contested domain in Peter Carey's fiction, *Oscar and Lucinda*, published in 1988, on the bicentenary of Australia, re-imagines the advent of 'Christian heritage' in Australia which proves

destructive for the culture and kinship system of the indigenous. In fact, the novel chiefly portrays the tragic love affair of Oscar and Lucinda, in the same time it visualizes Australia of 1850s and 60s as a part of a group of new, transplanted, predominantly 'Anglo Saxon' emigrant societies. It largely discusses about the family history of the two families in Australia that remind the European settlement of mid nineteenth century in Australia as "the Anglo Celtic race" which was supposed to be "a new product of the multiplying British stock, the race which in the heyday of British imperialism, saw itself as superior of all other races and therefore 'as possessing the duty and destiny to populate and civilize the rest of the world" (Stratton and Ang, 148).The plot of the novel centres on the fateful meeting of Oscar and Lucinda on the ship 'Leviathan' which sailed from Portsmouth Port to Sydney in the nineteenth century. Though the entire narrative covers the different aspects and consequences of their love affair, the Aboriginals' land resources, culture and life appear eclipsed under the dominating laws of the settlers and the spread of Christianity by and large. Lucinda, an Australian English girl, is the heiress of her European parent's property which she strongly feels belongs to the Aboriginals. Oscar is a son of a famous clergyman born and brought up in England. On the 'Leviathan', the two characters fatefully meet and debate on the topic whether or not gambling is a sin. The two characters, who are absolutely different individuals at first sight, appear with many commonalities, both are pure and at the same time corrupt personalities, both of them are social misfits and lone and become gamblers. They are both isolated outsiders struggling for their own place in a society which does not understand them. And the first thing that brings them closer together are cards. In Sydney they meet again and often gamble. Oscar loses his job and money in gambling. Lucinda provides him shelter and both fall in love. In Sydney he plans to build a Church at Bellingen which is a territory of the Aboriginals, and wants to dedicate it to Lucinda. Their love story ends in a break up and Lucinda disappears from the story. But the chapter primarily focuses on the fundamental concerns of the narrative with the early cultural and religious confrontations between the Aboriginals and the settlers, since the novel portrays, "the mid –century evolution of Australia, with its greedy exploitation of the land, its brutal dispossession of the Aborigines and its erasure of their mythologies" (Hassall, 124).

Victorian England and Australia are two different worlds where England symbolizes the

Empire, the power, the culture, the political and religious centre of Anglican Church and Australia, on the other hand, presents a wild and unknown territory inhabited by the uncivilized and half-humans. In this respect, the story equally deals with the eviction and annihilation of the Aboriginals from their culture and land rights. It also describes colonizers' relations with the Aboriginals and exposes their historical position through the narration of the native character, Kumbaingiri. The novel has 110 chapters that thoroughly bring out the history of the transplantation of European culture in Australia. In the entire narrative Victorian culture in form of religion, 'Church', industrialization, technology, property disputes, 'gambling 'and exploration of new places etc. appears taking the place of centuries of Aboriginals' culture in Australia. Ray Willbanks has remarked that the book dramatizes "the four great Victorian interests: science religion, technology, exploitation" (quoted by Hassall, 123). The text depicts how British culture and identity was implanted in Australian soil hiding the fact that the adopted land had belonged to the Aboriginals. This harsh reality was in fact was manipulatively hidden by the so called writers of the 'official history' of Australian settlement. According to Richard White, "there was no strong evidence of a distinctively Australian identity: Australian saw themselves, and were seen by others as part of a group of new, transplanted, predominantly Anglo-Saxon emigrant society" (43).

Remembering Babylon and *Oscar and Lucinda*, both strongly endorse the fact of Aboriginals' prolonged existence on the island continent. "The Aboriginals people have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. They were a hunter-gatherer people who had adapted to be lived in the environment. There were between 300,000 to 950,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788" (ABS, 2011 n. Pag.). At that time there were approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects. Aboriginal people lived in small family groups and were semi-nomadic, with each family group living in a defined territory. Each groups had its own distinct history and culture. The family groups used to meet on certain period for social, ceremonial and trade purposes. Many people, from 500 to 1000, would gather on a certain place and time. The entry of each family or language group was based on birthright, shared language, kinship system, cultural obligations and responsibilities. Relationships within groups predetermined the responsibilities and obligations of each person to the community, group, family and the individual. Their semi-nomadic life and kinship

system was relatively non-materialistic and the fundamental base of their culture was their social, religious and spiritual activities. They had developed spiritual relations with the environment and never adopted the European ways of destroying forests and vegetation for their selfish motives. Their belief system had strong environmental connections which permeated the idea that the physicality of each local area was created and shaped by the actions of spiritual ancestors. According to their belief system all the living and non-living things existed as a consequence of the actions of the Dreaming ancestors.

Both the texts bring out the detailed highlights of the Aboriginal culture, its various characteristics and ultimately the beginning of its deterioration when came across the western culture and society. "In *Remembering Babylon* the readers are invited into the borderland between the Aborigines and the Europeans, the colonized and the colonizers, the perceived primitive and civilized through a half and half, European/ Aboriginal boy" (Askeland, no. pag.). The European/ Aboriginal boy, Gemmy Fairley, not only confronts with Aboriginals but lives in their culture. In this sense his character is paramount medium for the readers to understand the Aboriginal world. Through the character of Gemmy it is revealed that Aboriginals' are one of the most nature loving, non-violent and peaceful tribes of the world. The way they treat Gemmy Fairley for sixteen years and teach him the skills of surviving in the wild overshadow the material based philosophy of the western world. In the text they seem very receptive as they accept a foreigner Gemmy Fairley.

In *Oscar and Lucinda* portrays the similar situation of the early interaction between the colonizers and the natives. In the entire story the issues of land and the spread of Christianity in Aboriginals' country are discussed, however, Peter Carey has dedicated a full chapter to the Aboriginals' issues where colonial process of the annihilation of the natives have been brought to the fore. As Gemmy Fairley in *Remembering Babylon* is considered a spirit of their ancestors similarly in *Oscar and Lucinda*, the early intrusion of the colonizers in the land of the Narcoo tribe is considered as the arrival of sacred spirit on their mountain, "The white men came out of the clouds of Mount Darlin" (468).

Later theses spirits captured the entire continent and very shrewdly spread a notion across the world that Australia was settled on the theory of terra-nullius that means the continent was completely empty hence could settled by the outsiders. Later when the long existence of the Aboriginals was exposed the colonizers developed a colonial

modal of declaring them savages and uncivilized. They took several measures to keep up the racial superiority of the British in Australia. They also assumed that there was no "viable future for the 'primitive' in the face of Europe's civilization and 'racial superiority,'" and no ability "to develop 'civilized' standards of behaviour, the 'full-blood' Aborigine was considered expendable and doomed to extinction" (Renes, 32).

The narratives of both texts help readers deduce the white settlers on the one hand afraid and feel insecure of the native blacks while on the other they strategically adopt the methods of making Australia a complete Anglo Saxon territory. *Remembering Babylon* the entire community of new settlers is insecure of losing their newly acquired land and other resources to the Aboriginals. The white settlers also afraid of the fact, that after interacting with the native blacks they would start to be savage and uncivilized. In the same time the story reveals that the whites have already captured the native resources and appear desperate to kill, annihilate or remove the native for ever. Similarly in *Oscar and Lucinda* the many characters appear allergic of the natives and seem very conscious for protecting their properties from the natives. In the narrative the colonizers directly come to remove the natives and their culture with the endorsement of Christianity and industry.

In *Remembering Babylon*, the encounter between the civilized and the savage appear when Gemmy decides to re-enter the world of the settlers. The children's minds have already been saturated with the possible attack or raids of the blacks. "The fear of reverting back to primitivism is also linked to the Judaeo-Christian" states Bernheimer, "idea that man has been created by God in his own image. The wild man therefore is an aberration, a civilised being who have descended into savagery" (Bernheimer 8). It is Gemmy's strong identity with the Aboriginal world that disrupts the cohesion of the white community. In this respect Gemmy's character can be seen as danger as well as guide for the Europeans in futuristic Australia.

Oscar and Lucinda on the other hand reveals the colonial methods of silencing the Aboriginals' voice. The novel categorically mentions the modes through which the colonizers systematically try to decimate from the historical records. The narrator himself confesses how his father great Revered Oscar misuse the Christianity to break the centuries old cultural set up of the natives. These propagators of Christianity spread the notion through the historical discourses and religious conferences that Australia was a

'lucky country' where Christianity entered to 'save' the 'heathen Blacks'. Thy forcefully spread the notion that the British 'opened up' the country for settlement and 'civilization'. The narrator confesses that how his generation was mentally trained to accept colonial discourses of history: "I learned long ago to distrust local history" (2). In order to keep away Aboriginals from their rights they never want them to be the part of Australian settlement. In the same chapter he reveals the politics of changing the names of local places giving them English ones like' Barkiest Point' and 'Darkwood' pushing "an entire tribe of Aboriginal men and women and children off the edge" (2). Louise Chappell, John Chesterman and Lisa Hill in *Politics of Human Rights in Australia* (2009) mention that the Aboriginals were completely denied from rights till their struggle in 1960s, "each colony – and after federation, each state – had its own Aboriginal affairs regime and each had its own way of restricting the rights of Indigenous people" (119). Shahram S. Sistani describes the narrative style of the novel in his book Peter Carey's *Fiction: A Critical Study: "The narrative mode of Oscar and Lucinda* is basically the mode of a realistic Victorian novel, but in its resistance to cultural imperialism it subtly but consistently subverts this imperial narrative mode" (40). In the beginning of the novel the narrator, Oscar Hopkins's great-grandson, informs the readers that the colonial version of Australian history is based on lie.

This narration exposes that the British colonizers adopted several ways to decimate the Aboriginals from the continent. Their claim of peaceful settlement is exposed in the novel and the mass massacre of the natives with superior weapons and European diseases is brought to the fore. The Darkwood story unearths the hidden layers of the colonially endorsed mass murder of many Aboriginal families. They originally name the murderous point as Darkie' point but later cleverly replaced it by Darkwood, which means darkness of the wood. Later in the story Mr. Jeffries name the places (which were already named) of uncharted territory, which shows the parallel between colonization and 'Christianization' of the native culture and land resources. Moreover, the transportation of glass in the form of Church's material also realizes the entry of technological industrialization, in the disguise of Christianity, in Australia. This absolute material based western concept of culture, in form of Christianity and industry, "had replaced 40,000 years of Aboriginal culture in order to take its place and now its turn had come to be wiped out. This made him feel

nostalgic (Carey's Interview Quoted by Fazilleau 18).

In the novel the Aboriginals' properties are captured by the European settlers. The new settlers make several plans and strategies to make Australia an Anglo Saxon country. There are many instances where racial dominance of the whites appear rapidly expanding and the natives are seen obstacles on the path of their colonial progress. They can't digest Gemmy's staying with Mclvors'. Gemmy cannot break his previous relations with the Aboriginals and he keeps meeting with them. There is an episode when Gemmy meets the Aboriginals when he working on a shed. They sit with Gemmy and talk for several minutes. However, their conversation is not heard by the neighbours it great suspicion for them. Both these characters, Barney and Andy, have colonial mindsets that suspect and hate anyone else who is not the part of white race. They have no place for humanity that can erase their suspicion of Gemmy's peaceful meeting with the native blacks, "Jesus, Barney', he said, 'didn't you hear what I said? They come to him. Bold as brass. Why? Why did they come? What did they bring him? He may be harmless, but they aren't fucken harmless" (90). In fact, the Aboriginals visit Gemmy not to create hostilities or establish boundaries, but in order to restore his spirit and reconnect him with the land. "They had come to reclaim him; but lightly, bringing what would feed his spirit' (RB 118). Similarly, in *Oscar and Lucinda* the characters like Mrs. Burrows and Mr. Jeffris who claim that the Blacks should be hanged and disposed of the land. The female protagonist of the novel Lucinda keeps humanistic attitude for the Aboriginals which is strongly opposed by Mrs. Burrows. She criticizes Lucinda when she favors the Blacks: "She talked of calling out the army, of a final all-out war against the blacks" (172).

Oscar and Lucinda addresses the direct conflict between the settlers and the natives. Carey brings out all the tools and techniques used by the colonizers to colonize the continent. One of the paramount issues that Carey brings out to the fore is the use of Christianity to colonize Australia. Oscar and Lucinda's constant addiction of gambling and Oscar's idea of 'Glass Church' at Bellingen River, for winning Lucinda's love, appears as the colonial misuse of Christianity. The Christianity doesn't allow 'gambling' because it comprises evil desires but in the novel the entire process of the imperial settlement of Australia symbolizes a historical account of gambling. The imperial use of Christianity and idea of 'civilization' portrayed in the novel goes other way round when it is interpreted with respect to In the

'Glass Cuts' chapter Peter Carey shifts narration to the Aboriginal character Kumbaingiri Billy who narrates the story of the arrival of Christianity in Mount Darling, a prolonged habitation of Narcoo tribe. Billy narrates the events of imposing Christianity on the people of Narcoo tribe. He also reminds how Mr. Reverend Hopkins, grandfather of Oscar, visits his tribe and chronicles stories of Jesus Christ. "It was in these camps the young fellows learned about Jesus. They were told the story of Jesus nailed to the cross" (469).

Remembering Babylon and *Oscar and Lucinda,* are the result of the Aboriginals' movements, resistance and literature that appear after 1950s. Aboriginal writings in form of biography autobiography, novels and poetry etc. have consistently resisted the government policies viz. policy of assimilation and multiculturalism etc. Both the texts highlight the injustice and oppression meted out to the Aboriginals in Australia. In this sense the texts represent the significant and hitherto ignored aspects of Australian settlement. The publication of *Oscar and Lucinda,* in 1988, was seen by many readers and critics as Carey's response to Australia's bicentenary. *Remembering Babylon* came after four years of the publication of *Oscar and Lucinda* and both writers provide perspectives about the Aboriginal life and their early confrontations with the white settlers. Sally Morgan's prominent autobiographical novel *My Place*, Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* and Ruby Langford's *Do Not Take Your Love* to the Town are among the famous Aboriginals' text of the 1980s and 90s. These writings of white and the Aboriginal writers tried to establish truth and reality about the centuries' old struggle of the Aboriginals for survival in their own country. These Aboriginal as well as some white Australian literary writers have largely debated on the various policies and issues of the Aboriginals from policies of 'stolen generations' to 'assimilation' and 'multiculturalism'. In the last decades of twentieth century the colonial occupation of Australia and the legacy of the dispossession of the Aboriginal population were debated in the context of multicultural policy of the then government. These literary texts help creating a parallel discourse against the colonizing mindset and stereotyping that justify the colonization of Australia.

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