



Cultural Discourse In Australian Aboriginal Literature: A New Historicist Re-Reading

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Abstract

The New Historicism sets aside the potted history of ideas, the Marxist *grand recit*, the theory of economic stages, the lock-picking analysis *a clef*, and the study of authorial influence. (*The New Historicism*, 1996)

Every piece of work is a product of its time and the writer is the spokesperson of his age, place and life in its totality. The same holds true for the Australian Aboriginal writings also. The literature of and by these writers is a creative expression of their deep and poignant longing for political and cultural achievements. These writers have justifiably relied on the 'New Historicism' as it offers ample scope to expose and bring to the forefront, their longings and provides an opportunity to achieve their respective goal. It is Geertz who stated that by literary criticism he wants to study the radical political longing which we find in the piece of work. He further says that our interpretive strategies provided key means for understanding the complex symbolic systems and life patterns that anthropologists studied. Thus, New Historicism aims to study the hidden meaning in literature instead of academic criticism.

Aboriginal Literature was the writing with a difference: not poetry or fiction but verbal traces less self-consciously detached from the lives real men and women actually live. Thus, though written, it has the verbal traces of men and women actually living. It is before 1960's that the Aboriginal stories and history had been oral and sounded like Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* which had been oral epics before they were actually written. It is evident from the Aboriginal writings that they are natural story-tellers; for instance, the 'stolen generation' poets echo their feelings which are based on realities. Kevin Gilbert in one of his poems rightly points out a historical fact that when the whites came they had the *Bible* and the natives had the land. But now the Aboriginal have the *Bible* in their hands and the whites have the land. Thus, their whole literature can be interpreted in the spirit of New-Historicism which emphasizes to study the reality hidden in the complex system of symbols. For instance, Kath Walker resists the assimilationist policy by saying that it is not possible to replace her culture by Europeans. She expresses this through symbols like 'the gum cannot be trained into an oak' and her culture is like the river which has been flowing uninterrupted for the last 70,000 years and she calls European culture as 'a pitcher of wine' which is poured in the river.

This present paper aims to study the Australian Aboriginal Literature in terms of New Historicism reflecting the complexities of human thought and mind. Geertz says it is 'quoted raw, a note in a bottle'. It is meant not only to convey the idea of 'empirical' but also to arouse the bafflement, the curiosity and interest that necessitate the interpretations of cultures.

Key Words: New Historicism, Australian Aboriginal Literature, Culture.

DOI Number: 10.14704/Nq.2022.20.17.Nq88096

Neuroquantology 2022; 20(17):764-768

Introduction

Upto bicentenary, the colonizers were not aware of the 'Aboriginal culture and beliefs'. In fact, they never tried to understand the Aboriginal literature as it was thought that they were incapable to write at all. The effect of New Historicism "was like touching one to another: literary criticism made contact with reality." (*Practicing New Historicism*, 20) Or rather, as

Geertz observed: "it made contact, as always, with pieces of writing. But this was writing with difference: not poetry or fiction but verbal traces less self-consciously detached from the lives real men and women actually live." (*Practicing New Historicism*, 21) The Australian Aboriginal literature though written, has the verbal traces of men and women actually living. It is because before 1960's the Aboriginal

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Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest



stories and history had been oral and sounded like Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* - oral epics before they were written actually.

The New-Historicism brings the minor issues to the center as it so happens in the Australian Aboriginal literature. Issues pertaining to Aborigines have been once on the margin but after 1970's these issues figured very prominently due to the attention of the world because of being centralized. So to say a summit was held in United Nations Organization which discussed issues relating to Indigenous people of the world. Since then, the movement of Indigenous people gained momentum. This momentum became so powerful that the Australian Government in 2008 was forced to say sorry to the stolen generation for their unethical behaviour. In Canada also the government was forced to provide 'reserved' area known as 'Nanuwood' where Indigenous people could perform their traditional rituals. Similar things are happening elsewhere in the world where natives are regaining their lost identity. Derrida is another critic who propounded the theory of 'Deconstruction' which presents the paradoxes in the history. His theory is responsible for many movements of the marginalized people apart from the natives. Now, otherness of the others has also been accepted. Edward Said's *Orientalism* helped to draw the attention of the western world towards the culture of eastern world who once upon a time were looked down by them. Ryre in one of his essays "Thick Description" discusses the two types of descriptions - 'thick' and 'thin'. This description need not be brief or schematic, it could be quite lengthy and complicated; an adequate account of the physiology and pneumatics involved in pumping tires would take many pages - but it would not concern it with the agents framing intentions or the culture within which those intentions acquire their significance. Thick description may be a slide; it is a part of the disciplinary interest of anthropology. The shift from the 'philosopher's tale' to the 'native informants' tale is for Geertz a shift from the 'artificial' toward the 'empirical' i.e., toward textual constructions, presented as 'raw' data or 'evidence' that seem less purpose-built, more resistant to simple appropriation, and hence more nearly autonomous. As the anthropologist interprets his exemplary texts, these texts seem to "be embedded in the cultures from which

they come and to possess within themselves more and more of the cultures linked intentions." (*Practicing New Historicism*, 25). This can be applied on the Aboriginal texts as all their texts are embedded in their own culture which were once not recognized by the Australian critics rather their texts were changed by the editors to suit the white or European culture. The Aboriginal writers, in fact, were not allowed to publish their works independently as they did not admire the European culture rather they denounced it. In practice certain constructions of cultural reality appeared compressed and hence expandable.

The Aboriginal story tellers in the first ethnology called *Paperbark* wrote a few stories from which a social system can be studied. Though these stories seem to be very simple, the first Aboriginal writer David Unaipon in 1929 published a collection of stories which depicted the Aboriginal society before 1788. These stories are based on animals, fishes and birds. But the stories help to understand the complex system of the Aboriginal society. This shows the ability of Geertz to suggest that the multilayered cultural meanings by which he was fascinated were present in the fragment themselves, just as the literary criticism of William Empson or Keneth Burke managed to suggest that the dense ambiguities and ironies were present in the literary texts themselves and not only in the acts of interpretation:

Those acts of interpretation were not completely supplementary - they helped to create as well as to disclose the effects of compression - but the dense networks of meaning charted in an effective thick description had to be traceable back to the anecdote initially held up for scrutiny. (*Practicing New Historicism*, 26)

Objective of Study

To study the Australian Aboriginal Literature in terms of New Historicism reflecting the complexities of human thought and mind that necessitate the interpretations of cultures.

New Historicism and Aboriginal Culture

As we are studying Aboriginal culture this technique of literary criticism will be helpful to focus on a specific passage which will interpret culture only. The techniques of literary analysis thus helped to make possible for Geertzian



anthropology something akin to what in optics is called “foreation”:

The ability to keep an object within the high-resolution area of perception. Foreation in cultural interpretation is rather difficult because of problems of both scale and focus. (*Practicing New Historicism, 26*)

For the purposes of literary criticism ‘imaginative’, ‘drama’, ‘manuscript’ and ‘signs’ were reassuringly familiar terms, as was the whole emphasis on symbolic behaviour, but the specific force of Geertz’s work for New-historicism resided in:

The expansion of these terms to a much broader and less familiar range of texts than literary critics had permitted themselves to analyze. For Geertz this expansion reflected an empowering appropriation of analytical tools, an appropriation that confessed the prestige accorded to the supreme achievements of Western high culture. (*Practicing New Historicism, 27*)

Literary criticism could venture out to unfamiliar cultural texts, and these texts often marginal, odd, fragmentary, unexpected, and crude in turn could begin to interact in interesting ways with the intimately familiar works of literary canons. For the interest was never to collapse anthropology and literary criticism into each other but to draw upon their particular strengths, strengths that depended at least as much upon the differences between their characteristic texts as upon their surprising similarities:

Indeed it is an awareness of how those differences are constituted and what they mean – an understanding of the emergence of the literary and imaginative force of the non-literary – that has virtually obsessed not only our own work but that of new historicism in general. (*Practicing New Historicism, 29*)

His thick description of cultural texts strengthened the insistence, the things that draw us to literature are often found in the non-literary, that the concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation and revision. We wanted to argue that human creativity, including narrative and linguistic creativity, only makes sense in the long run because it is a widespread, indeed democratic, possession – a possession that is almost impossible to contain within small elite or sequester from the sweet, familiar light of

everyday. The use of anecdote to show in compressed form the ways in which poetry, drama and prose fiction play themselves out in the everyday world, since men and women repeatedly find themselves in effect speaking the literary language not only in their public performance but also in their most intimate or passionate moments. That culture in turn renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterized by a particular set of circumstance, structures and assumptions and as something that conveys the life world of that moment. The new historicist anecdote as:

Many of us deployed it is an Averbachian device. Of course, we typically moved outside of canonical works of art for our anecdotes; we frequently sought an effect of surprise by selecting passage from what looked in context of literary criticism, like oddly marginal or eccentric works; and we allowed the analysis of the anecdote to pull away from or alternatively to swamp the explication of the canonical work of art to which it was at least nominally conjoined. (*Practicing New Historicism, 17*)

The Aboriginal writers certainly write of their past history, that is, their cultural history through stories and anecdotes which may not have any contact with the reality but by this way they connect themselves to the past instead of breaking away from the past. This tendency can be seen in the writings of the ‘stolen generation’ that did not have the opportunity to live the Aboriginal culture as they were severed from their roots when they were small kids. Their writings break away from the past but that is the recent past after 1788, particularly the women who were subjugated by the white males as well as white females and Aboriginal males as well. They were colonized in the real sense. It is felt after reading their anecdotes that their bodies were sandwiched between the white and Aboriginal male but it was the first right of the white male on the body of the Aboriginal woman. The feminist movement in Australia ignored the colonialization of the body of Aboriginal woman, rather were concerned about their own subjugation. But they never talked as to how did they subjugate the Aboriginal women? If we read this history, the analysis of it will show the callousness and atrocities done to them. On the other hand, the colonialists will not write this sort of history. Thus, Aboriginal writers wrote a



history which could have not been written by the white writers. The methodological implications of this sort of counter-history were several:

first, that the present is not necessarily a superior objective vantage point, but is often, instead, a reductive one; second, that social realities are often not singular or even reciprocal, but multiple and incommensurable and third, that the historian must be able to push beyond understanding a past social reality into imagining the social imaginary. It's little wonder that Thompson sought the history or the unrealized in the visionary poetry of William Blake. (*Practicing New Historicism*, 24) Henry Reynolds is the only historian who wrote the history of repression and suppression of the Aborigines. His, is the New-Historical method which exposes the colonial government. The Aboriginal writers like Kevin Gilbert wrote about being dispossessed from their land and how were compelled to live the life of the slaves:

A dying you linger on degraded and oppressed
Outcasts in your own native land,
You are the dispossessed. (*Because A White Man'll Never Do It*, 69)

Mudrooroo in his book *Us Mob* rightly points out that the Aborigine's relationship with the whites was like the master slave relationship as in America before 1865. The new-historicist anecdote was a conduct for carrying these counter-historical insights and ambition into the field of literary history. The Aboriginal text, thus, can be treated as history. Many of them prized continuities of experience between themselves and their historical subjects, so they stressed their individual qualifications in autobiographical stories. These analyses, which "in many resembled *Annales* – school histories of *longue duree*, generally had two aims: (i) to reveal the unfamiliar in the seemingly identical; (ii) to show the relation between a culture's obviously dynamic elements and its seemingly static ones." (*Practicing New Historicism*, 59)

To speak today of a historical criticism is to recognize that not only the poet but also the critic exists in history; that the texts of each are inscriptions of history; and that our comprehension, representation, interpretation of the texts of the past always proceeds by a mixture of estrangement and appropriation, as a reciprocal conditioning of Renaissance text and our text of Renaissance.

Historicism signifies "different things to its various practitioners; to some, mere attention to the past; to others, context which includes social relations; and to at least some few others, even change over time" (*The New Historicism* 215). Historicism has also been taken to provide an opening wedge for overdue attention to the claims of gender, class and race to the claims of multiple subjects and the uncanonized author. It is believed that literature originates from context. Johnson while commenting on Shakespeare said that Shakespeare's drama is a mirror of life, which reflects that Shakespeare was writing about the society that also includes the history of the time:

Texts do not exist in a vacuum. They remain hostage to available language, available practice, available imagination. Language, practice and imagination all emerge from history understood as structure, as sets or systems of relations of super-ordination and subordination. To write in the name of the collectivity, which is what – however narrowly and self-centeredly all fabricators of text do, is to write as in some sense as the privileged delegate of those who constitute society and culture. (*The New Historicism*, 221).

The voices of white Australians can be seen when they reject the Aboriginal Literature out rightly by calling it a 'protest' or a 'propagandist' literature which does not meet the Australian standards of the Australian Literature. The Britishers, though they brought prosperity with them, did not bring any culture which could be called Australian. Charles Darwin also felt it on his visit to Australia that Australia lacked the literature and culture as these belong to a nation and Australia at that time was not a nation. Despite the prosperity and the material abundance of the colonies, the absence of culture weighed heavily on the fantasies of a modernity otherwise rehearsed in colonial periodicals and miscellanies. A review published in Melbourne's *Leader* on June 26, 1867 linked the poor state of literary achievement in the colonies to the absence of national sentiment in a way that also suggested the emptiness at the heart of settler experience: We want a national literature, but we cannot have it in the proper sense of the term until we have become a nation. Need we say that we're nothing as yet but the rude elements of one? At the very least, a generation must pass away



before we can have the nation itself. For what are the necessary conditions? The soil must be occupied by a people who have been born on it; whose tenderest feelings are associated with it; who love it not only for the hope of transmitting and inheritance to their children, but also for the sweet memories of their own childhood's scenes and attachment... Lastly, as the result of their having been welded into this common life, the people must have an ideal to be cherished and an aim to be pursued, distinct from the ideal or aim of any other people. (*Black Times*, 49)

Shoemaker quotes an unknown critic who reacted on the occasion of publication of *We Are Going* (1964) a first collection of poetry by Noonuccal (Kath Walker):

This is bad verse... jingles, clichés, laborious rhymes all piled up, plus the incessant, unvarying thud of a single message... This may be useful propagandist writing... It may well be the most powerful social-protest material so far produced in the struggle for aboriginal advancement... But this has nothing to do with poetry. The authentic voice of the song-man using the English language still remains to be heard. (*Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*, 155).

The Aboriginal poetry cannot be judged on the basis of the white critics as Noonuccal herself in one of her interviews remarked that "most critics are wrong anyway in the western world. So black writers should not worry about it. That should be beneath their dignity or contempt." (*Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*, 160).

Jack Davis' plays are based on the history which is reversed by him- called 'New Historicism'. He states those statements made by white historians which represented the gauri picture of the Aborigines. Dairi and other Aboriginal dramatists through their plays tried to subvert the history which was baseless. The history written by colonizers denigrated the Aboriginal culture and tradition. But the Aboriginal playwrights tried to establish the superiority of Aboriginal culture over the other cultures.

Conclusion

It is true that art cannot influence many people but however through art at least few can be made aware of Aborigines cause. It can add the number if the Aborigines literature is read by

the people and plays are performed in the main theatre. Finally, it is possible that the international and domestic impact of Aboriginal literature and drama in particular – help to create a climate of opinion which favourably influences the Australian Government to make political concerns to Black literature. Hence, the most balanced view is that while there are few direct and observable socio-political consequences of Aboriginal drama, its importance as a means of furthering the Black Australian cause should not be underestimated.

There are two final factors which must not be overlooked, one of which is education. Theatre may be elitist but education is universal, and it is in the schools and universities of Australia that plays such as *The Cake Man*, *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* will have their most significant effect. Already, in recognition of their literary worth and socio-political relevance, all have been accepted for inclusion in the syllabi of major state high school systems. Lastly, Aboriginal drama has the potential for effective conversion into the media of film, video and television, all of which would greatly enhance the exposure and impact of the works themselves. Education and mass-media are two of the most potent means by which the portrayal of Aboriginality can be disseminated throughout Australia.

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