



The Aboriginal Theater, a Site for Resistance and Representation

Authors:

¹ **Dr. Sarangadhar Baral & Dr.M.C. Lalthazuali**

1. *Professor, Department of English & Culture Studies, MZU

2. Sr. Lecturer, Women's Polytechnic College, Aizawl, Mizoram

Abstract:

The Aboriginal playwrights used theatre to bring out their stories of personal or historical experience of indigenous life, predominantly verbatim, biographical and autobiographical, taken from real stories. The resistance to white oppression and representation of indigenous people is shown in many forms in their writings, which have sound postcolonial perspectives. In the Aboriginal drama, the Aboriginal playwrights have re-appropriated prevailing stereotypes about the Aboriginal people in their scripts and performances, deploying these to make apparent the colonial assumptions held by the colonizers. The playwrights such as Jack Davis, Jane Harrison and Leah Purcell share a common theme i.e., the Aboriginal experience in the white dominant society. They depict the historical displacement of the Aborigines and their associated loss of identity as a consequence of more than two centuries of colonization. But while Aboriginal playwrights detail the catastrophic effects for indigenous peoples engineered by the Europeans of Australia, they often propose methods of deconstructing Eurocentric epistemological systems. They have reconceptualized place and space in order to undermine the imposed legitimacy of the West and reinforced the other(ed) version of history.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Stereotypes, Stolen Generation, Resistance, Recovery,

DOI Number: 10.48047/nq.2022.20.22.NQ10433

NeuroQuantology2022;20(22):4334-4339

4334

Introduction:

Resistance and representation are very wide areas in which a number of dramas of colonial relations and post-colonial analysis eliciting subversion of those relations have been enacted. The Australian Aboriginal playwrights have consistently utilized the potential for theatre performance to create different frames for images and representations of indigenous Australians. They strike immediate rapport with the multicultural audience in the theatre by dramatizing their stories. In the act of performing their plays in Australia and other countries they awaken the conscience of international community, which in turn exercises moral pressure on white Australians. Clear evidence of this was the creation of the World Council of Indigenous People (WCIP) in

1975, officially sanctioned by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization, and also a French Society for the Promotion of the Culture of Australian Aborigines has been in existence since 1980.

The present paper while highlighting *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell, and *Kullark* by Jack Davis, *Stoen* by Jane Harrison, attempts to critique issues of oral history, performance art, authenticity, and representation of cultural identity of the Aborigines, all obviously debated aspects in the Aboriginal Theater.

Overview: Colony and Script

The western world of the performing arts became increasingly interested in both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture. In 1978, the New York scout, Elaine Gold, visited Australia with a view to securing



scripts of plays written by Aborigines, for possible presentation at Joseph Papp's Shakespearean Summer Festival in Central Park, New York. Four years later, Robert Merritt's play *The Cake Man* was invited to the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado, in July 1982 where it was so enthusiastically received that its two weeks season was sold out. After two years Jack Davis's *No Sugar* was Australia's representative at the same festival and held both popular and critical acclaim. In May 1987, Jack Davis's *The Dreamers* was also received for a four-week season in Portsmouth (Shoemaker 1-3). The dramatized stories of the Aboriginal playwrights have the power to resist the lies perpetrated by the government; and at the same time, they serve the purpose of passing on the story and knowledge to their children, ensuring the preservation of their history, culture and identity.

Australian indigenous artists and dramatists utilized two main sources for a narrative about the history of theatre production - one is the text-based reviews of productions. The other is indigenous community knowledge, which is largely a series of individual oral records. They worked to bring out the historical perspectives by turning to oral sources in the form of interviews with Aboriginal people. The main concern of the Aboriginal plays is to create national and international awareness about the problem of the Aborigines in Australia, which is crucially the Aboriginal identity. The message of their resistance is embedded in myriad ways in the plays which may be collectively called 'Resistance Theatre'.

Looking back in time, in 1838, Governor Gawler addressed the Aborigines in Adelaide: 'Black men. We wish to make you happy. But you cannot be happy unless you imitate white men. Build huts, wear clothes and be useful... you cannot be happy unless you love God... Love white men... learn to speak English. If any white man injure you tell the Protector and he will do justice' (Broome 31). All that is European is the loud universal truth here.

To know the subjugated history a little, though the Aborigines tried their best to resist the European invaders, all their attempts were effectively quelled by the Europeans as they were more powerful with their guns, horses and the 'Native Police Force'- created specially to fight the Aboriginal resistance and eventually it helped end the resistance of the Aborigines. The 'native' police force was established in Port Phillip in 1842, in New South Wales in 1848 (officially in 1855), and in Queensland in 1859. "They marked the absolute rock bottom of government Aboriginal policy. Not only was violence against the Aborigines being institutionalized, but several hundred Aborigines were being encouraged to hound and kill other Aborigines in the service of colonial expansion" (Broome 49).

The white colonizers viewed the colonized subject within the ambit of their cultural standards and deemed the non-white other as uncivilized and barbaric. Through education or general colonialist cultural relations, the colonizers projected themselves as superior to the colonized subjects and taught them imbibe an authoritative identity thrust upon the other. However, the colonized subjects of Australia since the 1960s and 1970s have started to redefine themselves in two ways: trying to break the stereotypes constructed by the whites and trying to reexamine the white construct of indigenous life, culture and history. The Australian Aborigines' imagination of freedom and search for identity must have been spurred by worldwide political destabilizations of colonial regimes in the mid- twentieth century. Various postcolonial thinkers have extensively examined this context, in particular Edward Said who examined this context in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978), which is mainly a searing investigation into how the Western people viewed the Easterners under the lens of their religion, practices, worldview etc. And it can also mean the West's stereotypical assumptions about the East, institutionalized as the truth.

Aboriginalism:

In the *Orientalism*, Said calls into question the foundational assumptions of

Orientalist thinking, such as biological generalizations, cultural constructions, racial and religious prejudices held by the West. This rejection is an erasure of the line between 'the west' and 'the other' (Sered 2011). Said argues that the West's view of the Middle East and Islamic World is distorted by an indulgent epistemology of 'Otherising'. The West viewed the East as the 'Other' in a binary frame- ferocious, savage, unworldly, exotic, barbaric and uncivilized. So, Said rejects these assumptions of the Western thought based on Christianity and Textualist attitude, i.e., an attitude conceptualized by the text written by those earlier Western travelers and scholars whose prejudices are self-evident in their writings about the East in general. As Gina Wisker rightly remarks: Said discusses Orientalism as a Western institutional way of dealing with the Orient, the East, and as he uses discourse analysis inspired by Foucault, he notes the Orient is dealt with 'by discourse, describing, teaching, ruling, settling: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over 'the Orient'... 'the Orient' is also used to suggest the Far East and the treatment of others who are culturally not white; and Western imperial/colonial... Non-Western people are depicted as ill-educated, violent, savage, less than human and also, often, fascinating because exotic." (Wisker 202)

The Europeans developed a complex of superiority vis-à-vis the Aboriginal society and maintained a paternalistic attitude towards the Aborigines. And what is crucial is they felt the need to change them according to their beliefs and white values, even to the extent of reproducing and replicating all European self-images through devious methods of acculturation and assimilation. Thus, the Stolen Generations are a point in real history.

In his essay "Jack Davis and the Emergence of Aboriginal writing" Bob Hodge states "For more than a century Aboriginal Australia had been constructed through a discursive regime that can be termed 'Aboriginalism' a regime that functioned to what Edward Said has called 'Orientalism'"

(Hodge 98). He continues that Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, that is a familiar strategy of imperialism, and Australian Aborigines have been mediated throughout the English-speaking world. Aboriginal culture is 'known' in Britain and America, yet, because of the strategies of Aboriginalism, Aboriginal writers and artists were not taken as experts on this culture. The disadvantages of this situation for Aborigines were by no means trivial. In spite of Aboriginalism's claim to knowledge of Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal people felt themselves victims of a profoundly racist misunderstanding from the dominant society in Australia. Aboriginalism disvalued living the Aborigine and severely limited the way in which they were allowed to produce and communicate their sense of Aboriginality to a wider world (Hodge 99).

An Aboriginal writer Ian Anderson in his introduction to *'The Aboriginal Critique to Colonial Knowing'* argues that it would be a mistake to hold that indigenous critical writing and postcolonial analysis are one and the same thing. Here he quotes Linda Tihwai Smith who says that, "...The field of 'post-colonial' discourse has been defined in ways which can still leave out indigenous people, our ways of knowing and our current concerns" (Anderson 23). He goes on saying that in the context of settled colonial states, such as Australia, colonial structures have never been dismantled; and those artifacts simply linger in contemporary discourse and are actively reproduced within contemporary dynamics of colonial power (Anderson 24). In political terms, alternatively, it would testify that no Gandhi, no Mandela, nor even Martin Luther King has an image of creative possibility beyond and outside the colonial order or binary epistemologies. This conviction has not convinced Australian Aboriginal writers, so far. If that is to be accepted as a fact, then the fighter emerges as a better example of humanity and the civilizational binary. However, in the *Post Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, et al in their introduction to *'Ethnicity and Indigeneity'*, would stress that imperialism has not flourished in an empty space. They rather

underline the Indigene as primarily threatened:

The indigenous people of 'settled' colonies, or 'First Nations', have in many ways become the cause célèbre of post-colonialism. No other groups seem so completely to earn the position of colonial group, so unequivocally to demonstrate the processes of imperialism at work. (Ashcroft, Bill. et al 1999: 214)

Lois Tyson has perceptively written in *Critical Theory Today- A User Friendly Guide* about how the native people's initial encounter with the colonizers led to the disruption of indigenous culture; how Othering (the colonizers treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) as a strategy is implanted; and how the struggles for individual and collective cultural identity and the related themes of alienation, unhomeliness, double consciousness and hybridity are generated. (Tyson 427)

For an esteemed Aboriginal dramatist Davis, the focus on *Kullark* was not primarily on reclaiming the past. It is the present and the place for indigenous people in the present that was Davis's main concern. As Davis states:

(The stories from my family) are still very important to me but I write about my own experiences and very much from urban Aboriginal point of view... Our culture didn't die when Captain Stirling arrived- there is a new urban Aboriginal culture emerging that remembers the past while looking to the new (Casey 140).

It is like the past that is wronged, mutilated and suppressed, now needs to be recovered and relived as a network of relationships, emotional bonding and cultural rhythms to be re-celebrated for joy and peace. In the first stage, the way left is through excavating and re-collecting the past, which necessarily seems a resistance. But the Aboriginal theater takes as simultaneous responsibility to represent the lost and abandoned cultural signs and themes.

The *Stolen*, by Jane Harrison, provided an interesting example of an adaptation of fictional biographies into a different realm of truth-telling, through the device of linking the

five children's stories with the real-life stories of the actors, each of whom tells the audience, as actors and Aborigines, at the end of the play, of their own family's involvement in the *Stolen Generations* narrative. It also foregrounded an issue that has become an important theme in most of the other Aboriginal plays. The fact that it was originally commissioned by the Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative indicates that it is not entirely inaccurate to describe the play as an adaptation of oral history into performance art.

It has become essential for the Indigenous people of Australia to reclaim their culture, identity, history, and land rights, and to counter the kind of history produced by the white officials and writers. As the writings of the Aborigines is mainly based on the oral histories, the authenticity of the oral tradition can be much debated, because there can be a dispute of validity of memory in reconstructing the past. But, we may remember that the Aboriginal playwrights and writers do not base their writings on just one account of an individual, it is formed from most interviews and writings of those who have experienced firsthand or witnessed past events. Jane Harrison was commissioned to write *Stolen* in 1992 by the Ilbjerri and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative, based in Melbourne. During the course of writing the play, Harrison read thousands of oral transcripts and spoke with many members of the *Stolen Generations* of Australia. She heard countless stories from stolen children about abuse, rape, the trauma of parents who were told that their children were dead and the trauma of children who were told their families were dead or had abandoned them, and being taken away as children and to have their own children taken away as adults and of forced servitude to white families.

Kullark (1979) is the first full-length play Jack Davis and the actions moves between different time frames and places in Western Australia: the Yorlah family's kitchen in Perth in 1979, a scene from the Swan river in 1827-34, the Moore river settlement in the 1930s and the Yorlah family in their camp at the edge of the town in 1945. The play does

not move in chronological order, this device is used by Davis to represent a complex set of parallels and opposition between past and present, dramatizing the different possibilities and strategies that were available at different times while also seeing many fundamental continuities (Hodge 100). In *Kullark*, Billy finds out the truth about his mother, at the end of play, whose story was fabricated as dead, and his own childhood set as a lie telling of an abandoned soul in the savior arms of the whites. The play ends in the sad revelation of the fact, and Billy the protagonist dies while knowing his mother just died recalling her child.

As to Leah Purcell's theatre, the notion of authorship and authenticity becomes very complex in regard to the text of *Box The Pony* being a byproduct of various sources Aboriginal and white. Especially performance text is very difficult, because theatre is rarely a site where the conventional notions of authorship and authenticity are validated. T. Sarah Rubidge in her essay, "Does Authenticity matter? The Case for and against authenticity in Performing Arts" (1996) argues, "Plays are written for performance, not publication... In any play, intentions other than those of the author are involved in its creation. These include those of the designers, directors, composers as well as, of course, the performers" (Rubidge 228). Within the post-colonial frameworks that promote "hybridization" and "literary contamination" as weapons of cultural transformation; thus delimiting notions of an authentic indigenous text becomes a far less useful task than examining how the multiplicity of indigenized elements of a text might be deployed (Gilbert 51).

Moreover, the Aboriginal writer is not merely entitled to raise a completely uncontaminated, new story every time; s/he has to accept and use the colonial metanarrative in existence to purposely subvert. Further, if the critical and postmodern insights of linguist Saussure, Roland Barthes and Derrida in the context of originality and authenticity of text and meaning are applied, the entire edifice of 'original' text tumbles down. To follow

Barthes, no text is original and no meaning is absolute; all texts are a combined fabric of multiple voices, echoes, signs, metaphors and citations borrowed from a thousand centers of culture. (Barthes 53)

In most of his plays, Jack Davis uses Aboriginal Pidgin English. The Pidgin languages used by some post-colonial writers perform a similar resistance to the imperial language. This variable use of language—referred to as 'code switching'—can be an effective means of abrogating the imperial standard in favor of a culturally significant discourse (Ashcroft et al. 2002:46). For example, Davis used Nyoongah words such as '*wetjala*' which means a white person, a corruption of the English 'white fellow'. Within the living continuum of survival, Creole languages are now becoming accepted not only as the mass vernacular but also as a more democratized language for art, commerce, and education. This movement represents a refusal to accept the imperialist judgment that Creole or dialect languages should be suppressed since they are 'corruptions' or 'bastardisations' of a pure model (Gilbert and Tompkins 185).

In Aboriginal plays, for example, in *The Dreamers*, writers like Jack Davis, used humor and mimicry to relive themselves of the repressions faced by them, to critique the colonized modes of colonization and as a resistance tool against the hegemony of white Australians. Using these techniques, the Aboriginal playwrights are (re)presenting their version of history in Australia. It may be acknowledged that the Aboriginal theatre sharing with other genres of Aboriginal literature has been able to dramatize more creatively the past of Australian history as suppressed or marginalized. This theatre while representing the Australian reality becomes another cultural mode for recovering Australian history from its assumed non-existence to historicity.

Conclusion:

Though political freedom of self-determination is not allowed to natives, the Aboriginal writers' creative resistances appear all the more worthy of genuine support even from postcolonial nations as

well as postcolonial epistemologies. Because, the Aborigines' new approach to identity issues more subversively questions colonial paradigms and master narratives of authenticity. The theatre breaks also the centrality of the dominant non-indigenous audience. It challenges the tendency to generalize all Indigenous people as having the same experiences (Casey 221).

Works Cited

Anderson, Ian. "Introduction: the Aboriginal critique of colonial knowing". *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*. Ed. Michele Grossman. Melbourne University Press. 2003.

Ashcroft, Bill. et al. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge. 1999.

---. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge, 2002.

Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. U of California Press, 1986.

Broome, Richard. *Aboriginal Australian- Black Response to White Dominance. 1788-2001*. Allen &Unwin, 2002.

Casey, Maryrose. *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1990*, University of Queensland Press. 2004.

--- "Bold, Black, and Brilliant: Aboriginal Australian Drama." *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Ed. Belinda Wheeler. Camden House, 2013.

Davis, Jack. *Kullark / The Dreamers*. Sydney: Currency Press Pty Ltd, 1984.

--- *No Sugar*. Currency Press Pty Ltd, 1986.

Gilbert, Helen & Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, practice, politics*. Routledge. 1996.

Gilbert, Helen. *Sightlines: Race, Gender, and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. The University of Michigan Press, 1998.

Grossman, Michelle. *Blacklines-Contemporary Critical Writings by Indigenous Australians*. Melbourne University Press, 2003.

Harrison, Jane. *Stolen*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2002.

Hodge, Bob. "Jack Davis and the emergence of Aboriginal Writing." *Critical Survey*. Vol. 6, No.1, *Australian Writing Today* (1994) pp 98-104. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec 2012.

Johnston, Anna. "The Well-Intentioned Imperialists: Missionary Textuality and (Post) Colonial Politics." *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Common Wealth*. Ed. Bruce Bennett et. al. The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) Canberra. 2003.

Purcell, Leah. *Box the Pony*. Hodder Headline Australia, 1999.

Rubidge, Sarah. "Does Authenticity matter? The Case for and against authenticity in Performing Arts" *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Patrick Campbell. Manchester University Press. 1996.

Sered, Dannielle. Fall 1996. Accessed Web: 8 Sept. 2011<<http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Orientalism.html>>

Shoemaker, Adam. *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*. Australia. University of Queensland Press, 1992.

---. *An Interview with Jack Davis*. WESTERLY Imprint: 1982, Volume 27, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1982. Pages 111 – 116.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today- A User Friendly Guide*, 2nd Ed. Routledge, 2006.

Wisker, Gina. *Key Concepts in Post Colonial Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

4339

