

Australia and its Postcoloniality : Sites of Conflicts and Resolution

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Abstract:

Before embarking on the journey of understanding the complexity of Australia and its Postcoloniality, a brief review of its history seem very appropriate. Thus to begin, the history of Australia can be traced back to over 48000 years ago when the first human settlements inhabited it. These inhabitants were the ancestors of the indigenous Australians and are believed to have arrived in Australia through the natural land bridges and the short sea crossings. On the European arrival, the natives they encountered were hunter-gatherers having a spiritual connection with the environment and their oral culture as a link to their ancestral past and a major pastime. Soon the aboriginals suffered from the appropriation of their land and identity by the European settlers. But with the rise of literacy and political awareness, the former can unravel the atrocities done in the past and write about it. Thus, this paper attempts to study Postcoloniality in Australian context and its general applicability thereof.

Keywords: Assimilation, Natives, Settlers colony, Aboriginals, Terra Nullius, Hybridity, Marginality.

After many successful voyages, Europeans arrived at different places in Australia, but it was only in 1770, with the arrival and mapping of the east coast which James Cook named New South Wales, that Australia was claimed as a territory by the Great Britain. Very soon the British Government started dumping criminals and fugitives in Australia and the “First Fleet” under the captainship of Arthur Philip, soon arrived making it a penal colony. Joost

Cote, in “TERRA-ISING THE HOMELAND: RECENT DEBATES ON AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY”, says:

Settlement by convicts and poor Irish in the early 19th century, by assisted families and parentless children later, and by boatloads of postwar displaced persons and political and economic refugees in the 20th century, continued, a cynical perspective may suggest, this imaginative tradition. (77)

On 26 January 1788, by raising the flag at Sydney cove, Port Jackson, a date was established as Australia’s national day or the Australia day. The white settlers brought with them the alphabetically written language, the distinction between literature and other writings and the technology for the wide production and distribution of copies. From that day onwards, land and language have been the two major rival determinants of written literature in Australia. Stressing upon this peculiar Australian feature, Ken Goodwin posits:

Language, with its often unrecognized cultural biases, tended to pull the settlers back towards British values. The land, with its many phenomena unnameable in the English language, tended to pull them towards a sense of national uniqueness. (01)

With the establishment of the British colonies penal or otherwise, immediate tension erupted between the introduced culture, with its language, law, education; and the indigenous qualities of the land and its existing inhabitants. Soon after, the indigenous population declined at an unprecedented rate. From a thriving population of 750,000 to 1,000,000 in 1788 it declined in the 150 years of occupation to a mere sum of thousands. The natives had to bear the brunt of new diseases and other maladies which arrived with the arrival of the “First Fleet”, and also the ongoing conflict with the colonisers played a role in their death and decline.

Very soon with the government policies like “assimilation” which began with the Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 many Aboriginals were removed from their families and communities and forced to live among the whites to learn their language and culture. The whole idea about assimilation was to produce a breed of Aboriginals who could be the connecting link between the whites and the natives. More like the one envisioned by Lord Macaulay in India, this was an investment in the rule and hegemony of the natives.

The underlying assumption of assimilation was that, rather than dying out, Aboriginal people would be absorbed into the white population to live like other Australian citizens. . . Many non-indigenous people at the time believed that assimilation and advancement were coterminous, and that full engagement and participation in white society would offer Aboriginal people the best way out of poverty and social marginalisation. It was soon clear, however, that ‘advancement’ was really code for ‘more white, less black’. (Maddison 06)

On the soil of terra Australis, the initial violent conflict of confrontation gave rise with time to incarceration and assimilation. By the time Australia came together as a federation in 1901, its official policy had become, what could be roughly referred to as “Protection”. Protection policies, which contained indigenous people on reserves and missions or in agricultural labour assumed Aboriginal people as merely ancient remnants who would eventually die out. And on many reserves and missions Aboriginal people were prevented from exhibition of any cultural ceremony, use of traditional names, languages and so much so that their names were replaced with Christian names. The intent of these practices of control and contentment may not have been aimed at physical extermination as in the past, but they were genocidal nonetheless.

In considering the meanings of place and space in post-colonial Australia it is important to stress that the nature of Indigenous claims upon space/place cannot merely be viewed as a competition for legitimate property rights or ownership, although this was clearly the premise for the wholesale appropriation of the new colony in 1788. The central tenet of the British claim to sovereignty over the continent was that the land was *terra nullius*. Based upon the Lockean notions of property rights, Aboriginal people were deemed to have no claim upon the land because they had not improved it by virtue of their labours. (Harris 72)

From their arrival, for the colonisers, Australia was a “Terra Nullius” and later on with the “Gold Rush” in the 1850s more and more colonies were setup. Between 1855 and 1890, all the six colonies individually gained independence and were responsible government with minimal constitutional dependence on Britain. And with the passing of Australia Act 1986 any British role in the governance and administration of Australia was ended. On 01

January 1901, after a long period of planning and internal consultation, the federation of colonies were established which resulted in the establishment of the commonwealth of Australia as dominion of the British Empire. By the year 1950, British had lost its clout as a colonial superpower and in and around the same time they transferred most of the powers to rule the commonwealth to Australians. In the later decades Australia after the decline of the British Empire, took to US as an ally and potential protector and around World War II encouraged the immigration of large number of people from Asia and elsewhere, to boost a benevolent self-image in the world community.

With literacy and intellectual growth amongst the Aborigines, they started writing, and speaking back to the colonial masters. This initiative can be summed up as something familiar in the Postcolonial world. The colonial occupation of Australia occurred through the projection of language and the physical appropriation. The process of naming and mapping the land went hand in hand with the construction of white Australian space and simultaneously to the enactment of possession and dispossession. And this phase is marked by the emergence of two types of writers, Aborigines writing in English and non-English-speaking migrants usually Europeans and Asians, writing in European and Asian languages respectively.

As we already know that historically, of course, the question of colour—white—has been underpinning in Australian anxieties about the land. Thus the division and the demarcation of distinctly “Anglo” group against the apparent threat of both the non-white (indigenous and Asian) and the “white-but-not-white-enough” (non-English Europeans). Both groups of writers had emotional reasons attached to their endeavour, and their writings were directed at expressing the alienation from the land and the language, as they had lost their homelands and were forced by changed circumstances to use an alien tongue. Very recently experimentation with language could be seen in the Australian literary landscape:

Some, such as Judah Waten and David Martin, have been absorbed into the mainstream of publishers and readers in Australia. Some, notably Dimitris Tsaloumas, have chosen to write in their first language and to seek publication in their country of origin. With the large numbers of migrants coming to Australia since the late 1940s from countries such as Greece and Italy, substantial communities of bilingual writers and readers from specific

countries have emerged, sometimes with their own publishing outlets. Short stories and poetry have been the preferred literary modes. (Goodwin 267)

Ironically, both the oldest and newest Australians share the theme of displacement, loneliness and withdrawal already familiar from nineteenth-century writing by convicts and reluctant settlers. Also, on a whole, writers from Australia in their works emphasise on the theme of search for identity by a wanderer or explorer, the establishment of a habitation and family line, the quest to recover the past, the sense of being an outcast and the pertinent threat of impending violence and death. The wanderer or explorer, in the work of such writers as Furphy, Brennan, Herbert, McAuley, White or Stow, is usually a metaphorical one rather than being a topographical one, though encounters of strangeness and featurelessness are often common.

In Postcolonial Australia, repeated attempts had been made to make peace between the settlers and the black natives. After a long frenzy of colonial misrule and continued tussle with the original inhabitants, in contemporary Australia, a very large chunk of the population feels a need to be in peace with the Aborigines. Pointing to this Mark Harris, comments:

While there have been at least tentative steps towards rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the last 30 years, evidenced in the belated recognition of native title and the creation of statutory authorities such as the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, there remains an abiding gulf between the two. The experience of Indigenous Australians who have shifted to cities is a prime example of a group who are considered to have no claim to space and place. (76)

After discussing the history of Australia from its earliest inhabitants to the recent developments, it is pertinent enough to discuss Postcolonialism and its suitability in the Australian context, which is what this paper endeavours to.

Postcolonialism has succeeded in permeating the social theory and had arrived at such a position that it has become possible and necessary to study the implications of Postcolonial readings in a series of interrelated fields. The major theorists of Postcolonialism, be it Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said or Homi Bhabha all begun the same way, in the process,

utilising their understanding of the philosophical groundings of the works of French poststructuralist Derrida or Foucault. The most significant movement that began the Postcolonial scholarship was the subaltern studies group which examined the Indian history and its elitist historiography. Its major proponents like Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakravarty tried to transform the way in which issues of subalternity was dealt with, thus the emergence of subaltern studies was a signifier of Postcolonial criticism and discourse.

Postcolonialism is a term usually used to describe a state of being. But the term as a signifier of the period immediately following colonialism is highly suspected. The implication that one is beyond colonialism after achieving independence is laughable in context of contemporary colonialism in countries like East Timor, Palestine, Tibet etc.

If Postcolonialism is the result of colonial practices, or at least the interaction of those practices, then it seems worth providing an example when this moment is detected. One such persistent example is that of the raising of the new flag by a decolonised country. This is usually done in front of cheering crowd as the flags of British or Belgium or French come down heralding the end of colonial rule. A ceremony like this being the moment of the birth of a new independent nation after years of struggle, and oppressive rule by the coloniser.

In the term Postcolonialism, both the prefix “post” and the root ‘colonial’ seem to be loaded with ambiguities. In the Oxford English Dictionary Colonialism is defined as a “settlement in a new country [...] a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state”. Clearly, such a definition does not acknowledge the existence of any other people inhabiting that “new country”, and with the very complicated process of “forming a community” excludes any if resides there. This concept of forming communities become popular after the “great discoveries” in the 16th century and onwards. But such an endeavour has its own pitfalls, as, in the colonial lingo forming one’s community means forming an exclusively white community in a new country by applying the wide ranging method of colonial pursuits like trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide and enslavement. Questioning the aforementioned definition of colonialism, practices like plunder, warfare and genocide would not have been necessary if the colonisers had nobody to plunder, fight against, put to genocide or enslave. Discussing this condition, Iva Polak, wonders:

Given the fact that scholars have started using the term “settler-invader colony” [for certain countries, is] because the white settlers in settler colonies were invaders to the people already residing on the locations “discovered” by white colonists such as Indians in Canada and Aborigines in Australia. So, settling immediately implies invasion or occupation. (136)

In the beginning Post colonialism as a term was used to denote the post-colonial state which is free from the colonial yolk but off late from the 1970's it is used to discuss the various cultural/political and linguistic effects and experiences triggered off by colonialism which gave rise to the colonial discourse theory.

In a settler society like Australia there is the least likelihood of a condition of “Postcoloniality” arising. Bill Ashcroft, discussing the imbroglio of the settler societies and Postcoloniality, explains:

There is possibly no more vexed question in post-colonial studies than the status of the of settler colonies. This is due firstly to a considerable misunderstanding about what ‘post-colonial’ means and also to confusion caused by the deep ambivalence of settler colonial relations to imperial power. Settler colonies, in their appropriations of language, their re-invention of the discourse of place and their various transformations of colonial discourse, reveal the complexity and rhizomic nature of imperial power. They demonstrate in clearer form what is true of all post-colonial societies: that the colonized can be the colonizers, that imperial power circulates and produces rather than simply confines. Much Australian literature is a critique of Australia's own colonial past but to read Australian culture as post-colonial does much more than confirm the complexity of its colonial relations. (01)

And in the Australian literature, the Aboriginal writers share a certain concern regarding the labelling of the term “Postcolonial” to Australian literature. They feel that the term “Postcolonial” has been framed by no indigenous scholars in ways implicit to leave out indigenous people as well as to conceal that in contemporary Australia neo-colonial and imperialist practices still have not been dismantled. One of the major aboriginal writer, Mudrooroo, wrote two extensive studies in which he tried to name the areas of Australian Postcolonial discourse that refer to the literary production of Australian Aborigines. The

alternative terms he came up with was either “Aboriginal writing”, “Writings from the fringe” or “indigenous literature of Australia”, but the usage of the term “Postcolonial” was totally unacceptable.

Continuing the debate over the usability of the term “Postcolonial” to Australian literature, Iva Polak, says:

This becomes particularly poignant when the label “postcolonial” is applied to the literature of settler-invader colonies such as Canada and Australia, countries where colonizer/colonized relationship can also be multiplied from colonialism within. In other words, the colonial subject (e.g. Anglo-Celtic Canadian and Australian) can be both “oppressor (with respect to the indigene) and oppressed (with respect to the metropolitan colonizing culture)” (Griffiths 1996: 175), whereas, in the same token, indigenous peoples (of e.g. Canada and Australia) can be either once or twice oppressed. (136)

Given the circumstances pointed till now it is difficult enough to label Australia as Postcolonial. Yet this has not stopped a number of writers from identifying Australia, its literature and many of its writers as Postcolonial. But in doing so, usually the writers to be labelled as Postcolonial are Anglo-European men and those most greatly affected by colonial Australia are probably the least likely to represent the ‘true’ Postcolonial Australia. This is deeply worrying, given the conditions within Australia, rather than pointing to the present, in relation to the eternal past with all its Aboriginal dispossession, environmental degradation, discrimination and sexism; the term Postcolonial does not seem appropriate. In many avenues in Australia like advertising, term Postcolonial seek to define the removal of the colonial presence in the Australian history, the complete Aboriginal absence and the naturalness of European ownership.

From the earliest point of the white invasion of Australia the process of colonisation has been inextricably interwoven with an attempt to deny or erase any signs of Indigenous presence in the landscape . . .

That part of Australia occupied by Indigenous Australians. . . has been ignored for a large part of the non-Indigenous occupation of the continent. In turn this

has given rise to a 'cult of forgetfulness' which allows for the erasure of any Indigenous presence, be it in history or the landscape. (Harris 71-72)

This way Australia become empty and ready for habitation, and the Aboriginal people present are equated with flora, fauna and the landscape as equivalent subjects for the tourist's gaze. At many instances in the Australian history, during major sports event like the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 or at popular tourist destinations, the white government had tried to relocate the Aboriginals and to present the space as free of them. An example is the shifting of the Koories who densely resided in the Catani Gardens prior to the Melbourne Formula One Grand Prix. In Australia, Postcolonialism is successful as a conservative project that reinforces Aboriginal dispossession to the point at which it is no longer required. Thus Australia has become Postcolonial simply because their strategy of dispossession has finally succeeded as the Aboriginal people are removed from the people's psyche.

This does not mean that the term Postcolonial could not be applied to Australia. It can be but with certain changes and improvements. The focus of works in Australian literature by Indigenous authors and writers of European descent examine numerous Postcolonial issues, including hybridity, first contact, resistance, language usage, immigration/invasion, national identity, marginalization, mapping, naming, settler guilt and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging. Thus they emphasize the Postcolonial nature of Australian literature and utilize Postcolonial theory to analyse Australian texts. Yet, within Postcolonial studies, literature from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean is privileged, causing the literature of settler societies such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (and to a lesser extent South Africa) to be marginalized, ignored, or excluded.

While Australia is Postcolonial with respect to its former British colonizer, yet it remain a very much colonial country, or perhaps more appropriately neo-colonial in its treatment of own indigenous population. Positing the strange position of Australia in relation to Postcolonialism, Jasper Goss says:

What does Postcolonialism imply: beyond colonialism? within colonialism, but different from? does the emphasis lie with the post- or the colonial? Where should Australia be located within this debate given Aijaz Ahmad's description of Australia as a situation where, 'coloniser, colonised and Postcolonial [exist] ... all at once'? Or should a national form such as

'Australia' even enter the debate, as Postcolonial theory has, in some cases, sought to abandon and deconstruct nationalist projects. (239)

Scholars like Goss are certainly not alone in questioning the contemporary relevance, ongoing usefulness, and future of Postcolonial studies. In May 2007, PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association, published a roundtable discussion entitled “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” in which seven Postcolonial scholars debated whether the field of Postcolonial studies is “over.” Such a discussion seems remarkably premature, especially when one considers the large number of articles and books published in Postcolonial studies each year and the fact that many English departments at American universities are hiring Postcolonial scholars for the first time, and adding Postcolonial theory and literature to their doctoral programs as a specialization and comprehensive exam field.

The aforesaid arguments hints towards a very contested and debateable position of Australia and Australian literature, in the contemporary Postcolonial context. As a country which was previously a settler colony and had a different history in comparison to other similar countries, Australia is suitably placed to present a complicated case for Postcolonial scholars. After discussing the many problems Australia as a nation-state has with Postcoloniality, it could be safely argued that things are not very clear for Australia from a Postcolonial perspective. In the historical context, in fact, Australia was never, and is now a “Terra Nullius”. Neither earlier nor now, was it, a final destination where one’s heritage is taken completely away by assimilation. It never was and not any longer be “pure white”, as it has always been occupied by many different collectivises and diasporas. Thus in studies related to it, special attention must be paid to all this factors and then only its complexity and contested identity as a Postcolonial nation-state could be answered.

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