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## **CHAPTER III**

**The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith**

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Thomas Keneally's novel - *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was published in 1972. Chris Tiffin, in his article, comments:

"... a novel which is still his most accomplished and arguably, his greatest."<sup>1</sup>

Clune's novel *Jimmy Governor*, is the real source for Keneally to write his novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. As Keneally himself has stated:

"A more proximate source, however, which seems to have had considerable impact on the novel is the retelling of the Governor Story by Frank Clune."<sup>2</sup>

M.A. Goldsmith, in the beginning of his article, *Thomas Keneally's The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and Frank Clune's Jimmy Governor*, uses a sentence:

"Even a casual study of Frank Clune's *Jimmy Governor* suggests that this history embodies the raw material for Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*."<sup>3</sup>

But this is not to admit plagiarism of Clune's book in any real sense. Keneally selects only the historical details from Clune's novel, to create an imaginative work of literature.

Terry Sturm discusses the plot of this novel in his essay:

*"The events that Keneally has selected for the plot of his novel are arranged in two broadly contrasting movements. The first traces Jimmie Blacksmith's initially confident but increasingly disillusioned attempts to enter white society by identifying himself with the white goals of 'home, hearth, wife, land' and cutting himself off from the sustaining relationships and values of the older tribal ethos, into which he had been initiated ... he is unable to see the surviving structure of tribal myths and rituals except as crude superstitions, and rejects the values and practical codes they embody as irrelevant to his own situation".<sup>4</sup>*

The model for Keneally's fictional hero Jimmie Blacksmith is Jimmy Governor. The readers' first glimpse of Jimmie is of a thirteen year old boy. He is a halfblood boy with rival claims upon him. The novel's first chapter exposes Jimmie Blacksmith undergoing his initiation in tribal manhood. His tribesmen expect and force him to follow tribal law and order. In Muswellbrook, Wongee Tom forces Jimmie to adopt aboriginal way of life:

*"Don't git a job in the opencut. Come round to the Caledonia Sat'dee night. Is all a poor black bastard got left."<sup>5</sup>*

Jimmie takes pride in his tribal manhood, but hopes for white respectability. So he revolts against his tribe and tribal men, as he once talks to Mr.Neville:

*"That mob makes me feel sick, Mr.Neville. I don't want that crowd. I gotter start working. So I kin git property."*<sup>6</sup>

The Mission Station Superintendent, the Reverend H.J. Neville, believing Jimmie capable of getting decent ambitions, inspires him to marry a white girl:

*"If you could ever find a nice girl off a farm to marry, your children would only be quarter-caste then, and your grandchildren one-eighth caste, scarcely black at all."*<sup>7</sup>

Jimme accepts his advice and decides to act accordingly. He nurses his nascent dreams of white respectability:

*"From the moment on he resolves to seek acceptance in the white man's world; to work patiently and industriously, to build up capital, possessions, property; and to consolidate his respectability - to marry a nice white girl off a farm".*<sup>8</sup>

With this hope, Jimmie leaves his tribe to find acceptance in white

man's world. First he accepts a fencing contract from an Irish farmer of Muswellbrook, the 'commercially minded' Healy. Healy pays Jimmie badly and insults him severely. Jimmie works for a number of other farmers, who also paid him in 'the Healy style'. For example, an old Scot Lewis gives him similar treatment. Jimmie also works as a Police tracker, with the constable Farrell. All these white employers pay him badly and treat Jimmie as a 'black'. However, tolerating all this, Jimmie works regularly, nursing his dream. He returns to Brentwood and accepts fencing contract from Mr. Newby.

Jimmie's dream of marrying a white girl is realised. He gets Gilda Howie - a dim, snivelling, pregnant teenager. He married her before a Methodist minister. Both stay in one-room shack on the Newby property. Brentwood is not a sanctuary for Jimmie, it turns out as a hell. Here Jimmie's frustration increases. First of all, his marriage is utterly a failure. The marriage brings him disappointment instead of pleasure. The Newbys are responsible for this. They offer insults and obstacles to its success:

*"Perhaps the marriage might have worked out - had it been given a chance; but it was cruel disappointment to Jimmie. The Newbys offered insults and obstacles to its success. The 51-year old farmer took a perverse delight on asking Jimmie about the impending marriage and - though at first he seemed to help - offered Jimmie's wife an insult hardly imaginable were she married*

*to a white man. Mrs. Newby and her daughters passed judgement; ...".<sup>9</sup>*

Miss Petra Graf, a schoolteacher, boarder at Newby house, also passes judgement, and insults them. Jimmie's frustration by Newbys increases further, after his wife gives birth to a white child. Miss Graf offers to take Gilda and the child away from Jimmie. She addresses Jimmie as follows:

*"You should let her go now. And the baby. There's others better set up to look after them."<sup>10</sup>*

At these hurting words, Jimmie's anger reaches its zenith:

*"His blood drummed ... The blood in his ears sizzled."<sup>11</sup>*

Jimmie Blacksmith's hope of possessing whiteman's status, is further ruined by the arrival of his tribal men. Jackie Smolders, a tribal elder, Mort, Jimmie's fullblooded half-brother and cousin Peter, arrive and start staying with Jimmie. They bring Jimmie's initiation tooth, to ward off the dangers of marrying a white girl. Jimmie having no faith in tribal customs, throws the tooth away in the grass.

Jimmie is fed up with his intolerable situation. A sudden



reverse movement occurs in Jimmie's life:

*"Brutalised by his long suffering, Jimmie Blacksmith comes to imagine himself absolved from personal responsibility licensed to run and and to inflict judgemental justice upon the race which so studiously demeaned and repressed him and his race."*<sup>12</sup>

He declares war on white society and takes revenge on those who treat him badly. The first victims of Jimmie Blacksmith are the Newby womenfolk, including schoolteacher Miss Graf. Because they are the real cause for his frustration. One Friday night, in the winter of 1900, Jimmie visits Newby's old farmhouse with his uncle Tabidgi. At the encounter with Newby, he is insulted:

*"Listen, yer black bastard!..."*

*"Don't talk to me like that. I'll soon bloody..."*<sup>13</sup>

These words of Newby, calling Jimmie 'black bastard' severely hurts him. Within a moment, Jimmie and Tabidgi hack to death Mrs. Newby, her two daughters Vera and Mary and the schoolteacher Miss Graf at the new farmhouse. Jimmie's axe is flecked with the strange mucus of Mrs. Newby's brain.

After the atrocities of Newby farmhouse, the plot takes another turn. The flight of Jimmie and his people starts as fugitives. To make the flight easy and less risky, Jimmie abandons all except

Mort. Jimmie and Mort push on alone.

The news of murder at Newby farmhouse spreads like anything. Pursuit for murderers starts by the Police, army and civilians. Mr. Dowie Stead, the late Miss Graf's fiance is shocked by the sad demise of his beloved. He vows of murdering Jimmie Blacksmith:

*"... say that he would not cease the hunt until he had rinsed it in Jimmie Blacksmith's blood."<sup>14</sup>*

With this bent of mind, Dowie starts patrolling for Blacksmith brothers, with his five friends.

The rest of the novel deals with Blacksmith brothers' movements throughout New South Wales. They abscond themselves and play a cat and mouse game with Police and vigilante groups. Blacksmith brothers successfully evade the capture as two fugitives. Jimmie's aim is to avenge himself on all those who treated him badly. So he leads Mort to Healy's house. They kill Mrs. and Mr. Healy and their small child and injures a female companion. After this murder, Jimmie promises to kill no more women:

*"But no more women, Jimmie promised. No more women."<sup>15</sup>*

Blacksmith brothers create terror everywhere. They turn to be a kind



of myth in the life of the whites. So a Bill of Outlawry is passed, allowing the Police or any one for that matter, to shoot the Blacksmith brothers at sight. Further, the Government declares a reward of £ 500, for their capture.

Blacksmith brothers' fugitive life can be described as the third movement in the novel. The life of the fugitives is too hard in the forest, without proper food, sleep and rest and full of risks. During the course of their plight, only two nights they spend happily with fire, meals and sleep. Mullet, an Irishman, and Miss Nancy from Pilbarra, soothe these brothers with every hospitality. The last victim of Blacksmith brothers is Toban, a young white. Mort kills Toban shooting him in the stomach. With the killing of Toban, Jimmie concludes his killing.

One midday, Blacksmith brothers come across a school house 'Tambourine Public School 1891'. They meet the schoolmaster McCreadie, an asthmatic patient. McCreadie tries to separate Jimmie from his halfbrother. McCreadie, Jimmie Blacksmith and his halfbrother Mort, walk away to make an attempt to rebuild a ritual site, destroyed by white picnickers. But this provides a means of separating Mort from Jimmie. Jimmie runs away from McCreadie and Mort when McCreadie's health fails. Mort alone takes the risk and responsibility and delivers McCreadie to the ministration of some remote settler. After this, both reach a farmhouse and the owner of the house kills Mort shooting

him into his left eye.

Jimmié is an insatiable paper reader. He reads the matter of his killings and trial of Jackie Smolders in the newspaper. He sees the photographs of Mort's killing in the "Mail". Jimmie, ignorant of his fate, pushes on alone, is shot while crossing the Swollen Manning River; but makes good his escape. One of the citizens shoots Jimmie in the mouth. A bullet enters below the left cheek and affects teeth of his upper jaw. Then Jimmie reaches a small school amidst the forest. He enters schoolteacher's bedroom to have some sleep. In the table drawer of the school teacher, Jimmie finds wedding photographs and seven love letters. He goes through these love letters. These love letters are addressed to Clarice, the schoolteacher's wife, from someone who is described only as 'E'. Jimmie wakes up in the mid-afternoon and slips away from that place, as he is disturbed by the arrival of two men on horseback.

*"Wounded and feverish, he steals and creeps from one place to another until he finds temporary asylum in the guest-room of the convent of the Ursuline Sisters at Kaluab."*<sup>16</sup>

Jimmy is discovered and captured in the convent and taken to Sydney for trial. The trial and the hanging of Jimmie may be described as the fourth movement in the plot of the novel. Jimmie's trial is quick and the verdict is procured to hang him. But hanging is delayed as

people celebrate their nation's independence. Both Jimmie and Tobidgi are hanged separately and efficiently by the serious minded hangman Mr. Hyberry in the month of May. Thus, the plot has a linear movement which ends in the classical manner. As W.S. Ramson comments:

*"The plot lacks grandeur; not least because Jimmie Blacksmith is in no way 'expanded' as hero, carries, for instance, no connotations of noble savagery, but it has the simplicity and momentum of epic narrative."*<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Keneally has been successful in substantiating a rather thin story of a black youth and the murder of the whites that he commits and given it the dimension of a minor epic.

Keneally, thus, in the novel deals with the historical theme, i.e. Race-relation in Australia, between whites and aborigines (halfcastes and fullblood). On the theme of the novel, Chris Tiffin comments as follows:

★ *"Race-relations in Australia's past, and, by implication, present are the accepted theme of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, and discussion of the novel, whatever success it is seen to have has started from this assumption."*<sup>18</sup>

Terry Sturm writes:

*"Its central theme, an analysis of how white*

*Australian society oppresses Aborigines, is located in Australian history during the Federation period."*<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Keneally's characterisation is more artistic, imaginative, penetrating and sympathetic than Clune's. Keneally uses the quality of naivety and innocence and vulnerability in his characters to formulate their goals, in a very conscious fashion. Jimmie confronts the whites with a stereotype image of their superior status, and builds his plans of social upliftment into his immediate programme of action. So he rejects his tribal culture upto a certain extent. Keneally, thus lends depth and understanding to the character of his hero. As Chris Tiffin remarks:

*Keneally inherited not only a skeletal story with considerable narrative detail but also an interpretation of the events and characters."*<sup>20</sup>

The Newbys and Miss Graf express the superiority of their race, by protesting the marriage of Jimmie, the halfcaste to Gilda Howie, a white girl. And so Jimmie is caught between the two stools. Keneally's attempt to portray Jimmie's character complex or 'round' by making him a problematic hero representing the dialectics of racial conflict is his contribution to Australian literature on race-relations.

Unlike other white characters, Mr. Neville, the Missionary,

is portrayed by Keneally as a luminous character, having no racial prejudice about the aborigines. He has deep love and sympathy for Jimmie. With his liberal bent of mind, he helps Jimmie in his job and marriage. It seems that, Thomas Keneally develops the Missionary's character as representing the liberal element among the whites. Whether this tribal element succeeds or fails in later years, is another matter. But for the moment, the Missionary's character is a saving grace for the white community. But, by and large, aborigines and whites are contrasted against each other and one pitted against the other for distinctive purposes.

The character of Jimmie is portrayed by Keneally with understanding and sympathy. Jimmie's inside avoids his stay in aboriginal tribes. He cannot follow the rules and regulations and practise the traditions and customs of fullblood aborigines. Secondly, being a halfcaste, he does not want to be called as a "black fellow".

*"Jimmie was a proud man sickened by the resignation with which his race accepted their degradation, who clung to his determination to rise above his birth. He slaved and endured much loneliness, fraud, deception - suffering inordinately before fixing on a grand and bloody scheme of revenge."<sup>21</sup>*

When Jimmie and his wife are jeered out, insulted and spurned, his racial pride and fury immediately surface and his character takes

a violent turn. This insult and feeling of self-protection become the driving force of his character in the rest of the novel. Jimmie is violent and gives way to murder; kills many.

Mort Blacksmith is Jimmie's half-brother. He is poor, simple and different from Jimmie. He stays with Jimmie helping him in every sense, expecting nothing in return. He too becomes the murderer by killing Toban. The owner of a farmhouse kills Mort shooting him into his left eye.

Tabidgi Jackie Smolders is Jimmie's uncle on his mother's side, elder of Tullan section of Mangindi tribe. The uncle represents the older generation of the aborigines whose attitudes towards race relations are traditionally inherited and are hardened. He may be described as a typical aborigine character. He is a drunkard, visits Jimmie at Wollah, thinking that, as a maternal uncle, he could claim money from Jimmie for liquor. His presence with Jimmie, during the confrontation with Newbys and during the later carnage is almost accidental. At the end, he is hanged by the white law.

Gilda Howie, is a sad character, who chooses to make her life with Jimmie, a half-caste. Marriage brings her little satisfaction. She suffers insult from white community. She is the poor victim of the wrath of the white community who would not have cared for her one whit in other circumstances; but, when she aligns herself

with a halfcaste, she becomes the target of the white community, especially women. On the other hand, as she gives birth to a full white child, only four months after her marriage to Jimmie, she provokes Jimmie into denouncing her.

The remaining characters, all white farmers, represent the racist, discriminatory values of Mr. Healy, who paid and treated Jimmie badly.

Female characters in the novel, particularly Mrs. Newby and Miss Petra Graf, become the centre of our attention in the novel as they are the victims of Jimmie's terrible vengeance.

Keneally fits his language to his characters throughout the novel. Each character's speech gives credence to his or her identity. To quote Terry Sturm:

*In The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, there is a deliberate underplaying of introspective modes of writing, of 'inward' self-analysis by individual characters; they are defined very largely through action and dialogue, and through the author's own direct commentary on their behaviour ..."*<sup>22</sup>

For example, Keneally uses dialect in order to create not only a sense of local colour, but also to give the character a sense of

identity. Jimmie addresses Gilda:

*I goin't' take yer t' the Dubbo road. Yer'll git rescued by a farmer or somethink. Tell the p'lice I said I declared war. Tell 'em about how bloody measly Newby was. Tell 'em all the damage done at Newby's I did, not Tabidgi. And I declared war. Orright?"<sup>23</sup>*

The setting of the novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, is focussed on New South Wales in Australia. At the beginning, the novelist Thomas Keneally sets the action of "Jimmie's initiation" in Mungindi tribe at Brentwood, a hundred miles away from Wallah. After the initiation, at the request of Rev. Mr. Neville, Jimmie visits Muswellbrook. He is a servant boy for Neville. He also works for Healy as a fencer; he gets work as a shearing shed sweeper at the Weddin Mountain.

The next job Jimmie takes up is the fencing contract from Mr. Newby near Wallah. He lives with his white wife Gilda at Newby's Land. But from here, Jimmie's flight starts as a fugitive, as he kills the Newby womenfolk and the schoolteacher. Blacksmiths, Tabidgi and Peter flee in the dark, over the open pastures of sheep farmers, after the murder at Newby homestead.

In Keneally's novel, the fugitives' flight takes place more in the forest area. They cross rainy sides of the mountains. At the Barrington tops, the Blacksmith brothers receive meals from



the house of Mullet. They come to Healy's house at Muswellbrook and kill Mrs. and Mr. Healy and their child. Twelve days after Healy's death, Blacksmith brothers are still there in the forest. They visit Nancy's house at Pilbarra and receive kind hospitality. Leaving her house, they go northwards and kill Toban. In October, they cross the Divide and reach Wee Waa Gunnedah. A hunter sees them near Marrurandi and they are chased by a constable and twelve citizens.

Towards the end of the novel, the Blacksmith brothers visit Tambourine and enter Tambourine Public School. At this place, in a farmer's house, Mort is shot dead. Again Jimmie visits another small school amidst the forest, having been shot in the mouth while crossing the river. Lastly, Jimmie is captured in a convent at a misty town called Kaluah. After the capture, he is taken to Sydney and then to Darlinghurst Gaol.

This shows that Keneally's novel has a recognisable landscape which appears to be hostile and intractable. In fact, the space seems to have character of its own in the novel. The landscape as it were, provides the fugitives the best scope for escape, and, yet, it also puts a barricade in their way to put an end to their lives. Thus, symbolically, it foreshadows racial conflict afflicting Australia and also the fate of the aborigines in Australia.

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