
CHAPTER I

Australiyan Background and Literature

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I) Australia : the Continent:

William Walsh quoting R. Bolderwood describes Australia in his Commonwealth Literature:

*"This was the best country in the whole world, he used to say, for a gentleman who was poor or a working man. The first sort could always make an independence if they were moderately strong, liked work, and did not drink. There were few countries where idle, unsteady people got rich. As for the poor man, he was the real rich man in Australia; high wages, cheap food, lodging, clothing, travelling. What more did he want? He could save money, live happily, and die rich, if he wasn't a fool or a rogue ..."*¹

Australia is the smallest continent and the largest island in the world. This is the oldest continent surrounded by ocean expanses. Lying southeast of Asia, it is between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is level in surface and regular in outline. Australia consists of five mainland States, namely (i) New South Wales, (ii) Victoria, (iii) South Australia, (iv) Queensland, (v) the Western Australia, and the island State of Tasmania.

The continent of Australia has wide diversity of climate. It is relatively warm and dry with no extreme cold. The continent is subject to great variations in rainfall. Over large areas, droughts and floods occur. However, Australia has large areas of less rainfall. Therefore, 40 percent of the continent is desert area.

II) Australia's Aborigines - the original people of the Island Continent:

The aborigines are the original settlers of Australia. It is perhaps more than sixty thousand years ago the aborigines arrived in Australia. The first of the aborigines to this land were 'Negrotis' and then Murrayians arrived. These aborigines were venturesome people from South Asia. They were wandering hunters and food gatherers. They formed their own race.

Before the arrival of the First British Fleet in 1788, there were approximately 250,00 aborigines on the continent and in Tasmania. These aborigines were divided into some 500 tribes. In each tribe, there were 100 to 150 members. Each tribe occupied a tract of land and spoke a different language. It was binding on their part that the members of each tribe should wander within the boundaries of its own territory, in search of food. In case the food became scarce in one place or plentiful in another, the camps shifted from one place to another. Generosity was dominant among aborigines. They were friendly with one another, visiting each other on ceremonious occasions. Aboriginal family was simple in structure. Each family consisted of a man, his wife or wives and his children. They ate and slept together around their own fire.

The physical appearance of aborigines is similar to American Negroes. They resemble people from wild tribes of India, with their

dark brown curly hair. Though they appear black, their skin was of light-brown colour. Their nose was generally broad and flat. Aborigines were not so much particular of their dresses. Many of them still lived in the stoneage manner. Hardly did they use any dress except girdles and waist belts. Even the partly civilized aborigines used little clothing. Aborigine men and women used kangaroo and possum skin rugs, as clothing. Especially aborigine girls are beautiful, but they lose their charm quickly.

Aborigines used yams and other vegetables for their daily food. They also ate white ants, caterpillars, kangaroos, wallabies, pussumes, bandicoots, wombats, dingoes, birds, snakes and even lizards. On some special occasions, people from some untamed tribes become cannibalistic. Tribes at the coastal belt always get abundant food, fish, turtles and various kinds of shellfishes. In the tropical north, wild pigs were used for excellent pork.

Aborigines followed their own tribal traditions, customs and laws. The men administered all tribal matters; the young men were the hunters. But according to tribal law, the hunted animals were brought to the mia-mias (tribal camps) and were distributed among all the members of the tribe. There were no kings and chiefs among the aborigines. The higher position was held by the medicine man. He was the headman, whose decisions on all matters were final. Polygamy was practised among aborigines. They were bound to wed according to

tribal pattern. One of the strange customs observed by the aborigines was avoidance of mother-in-law. The plight of the widows among aborigines was harder. Because their mourning included wailing and shrieking and more than that gashing of their heads with some knives. A ban of silence was placed on the luckless widows. Breachers of some of these laws were punished by death.

Gradually, these aborigines progressed from barbarism, but they retained their culture. Thus aborigines in Australia lived in harmony with themselves and Nature. They were governed by mystic rituals of kinship and primary unity.

III) Coming of the Whites and British Colonization:

Britishers extended and expanded their colonies to many countries in the World. Accordingly, they also set up their colonization in Australia. Australia is a country which has received many migrations from outside countries. The fourth migration to Australian land brought Europeans. European migration to Australia was started in the year 1788 and is still continued. In 1770, Captain James Cook, a European, landed at Botany Bay near Sydney. Again in 1774 and 1779, James Cook visited Botany Bay as per the demand of British Admiralty. During his third visit, Sir Joseph Banks accompanied James Cook. Joseph Banks suggested the committee of the British House of Commons to found a colony at Botany Bay in Australia. He further recommended a thief

colony as a solution to the problem of convicts. Transportation of convicts from England to Botany Bay was suggested by him. Meanwhile, it is American War of Independence which turned Europeans' eye towards Australia. Because American colonies stopped importing convicts from England.

Recommendation of Sir Joseph Banks was realised in 1787. The First British Fleet with eleven ships sailed to Australia. In those ships, there were 1,500 persons, out of whom 800 were convicts. After a troublesome voyage of eight months, the Fleet reached Botany Bay on 20th January 1788. On January 26th, the night after the convicts landed, the British Flag was unfurled at Sydney Cove. Arthur Phillip, a retired naval officer, was selected as the first Governor of the British Colony. Under his efficient rule and hard efforts, the British colonization work was started. He had distributed the convicts for the cultivation of land. The convicts set to work to till the soil, to build the huts and put tents. The colonists used the labour of convicts to provide food to the settlement.

During the period of colonization, they suffered many hardships. There was lack of all necessary things. There was no adequate food supply, no proper clothing for women, no ammunition for guns, no medical supplies and no grog for mariners. More than that, early food harvests failed. By early 1790, the settlement was threatened with starvation. So colonists imported food from England. Arthur Phillip

and other officers with their patience and hard work obtained most of the necessities. Thus, the colonists in the initial stage of colonization demonstrated a 'battle for survival' in an alien environment. To improve the situation, Arthur Phillip thought of introducing a new policy. He started granting of lands to officers and ex-convicts and assigned convicts as workers to free settlers. But he did not remain in the settlement to observe the fruits of his policy. He was forced to go back from Australia as he was fed-up with hardships and more than that suffered by stomach pain.

After Arthur Phillip's departure, the settlement was administered by the senior army officer - Major Francis Grose. He too made land grants to the officers and ex-convicts. More than that, he encouraged the officers to engage in trades. With these efforts, the quantity of goods in the settlement increased rapidly. Some ex-convicts improved their conditions by their industry and hard work. Simon Lord and Charles Williams were the two ex-convicts who prospered and rose to respectability. Many such prosperous convicts sold their lands to military and civil officers. These officers accumulated wealth rapidly by the extension of their estates and by the sale of goods. In this way, more and more wealth of settlement concentrated in the hands of military and civil officers. These officers were haughty and arrogant to all outside their class. They were ruthless and vindictive towards those who attempted to interfere with their source of wealth.

To preserve law and order and to stop convicts from further crimes, punishment was used by the settlers and government officers. They preferred flogging as punishment.

Out of anguish, terror, suffering and the labour of the convicts, the signs of civilization appeared in the settlement. Churches, Schools, Courts and Government offices arose. During the same time, the settlement began to expand. The discovery of gold in Western Australia had helped the economy of all the colonies. Between 1880 and 1920, railway construction in Australia began. The spread of the state education network rendered education to the children.

IV) Racism (Black-White Race Relationship) in Australia:

Really speaking, racism in Australia is based upon prejudice and violence. Till the First Fleet came to Australia, the aborigines, original settlers lived in harmony. The coming of whitemen to Australia was to bring the harmony to a rude conclusion. With the spread of exploration and settlement, contact between whitemen and tribal aborigines, intensified. Europeans' entry into this country was followed by a period of hostility. British colonization in Australia caused a danger for aborigines in every field. Whites misused their power in the alien land, Australia. Their ultimate symbol of dominance and supremacy of white race forced them to treat aborigines and halfcastes as underdogs'. They were cruel towards aborigines. The aborigines were considered

to be:

"... the most debased race on the face of the earth and the connecting link between man and the monkey tribes".²

In the beginning, Europeans offered them the gifts of their civilization. These gifts were totally opposite to the laws, traditions and customs of aborigines. Therefore, aborigines resisted them in the beginning. Hence, afterwards Europeans started treating them with contempt and disregard. They set off prolonged hostilities with aborigines and became a menace to them. They robbed their lands, their once customary dignity, destroyed their race and culture, exploited them and reduced their women to prostitution.

To settle and expand their colonization, Europeans seized the lands of the natives. They drove them away from all the food gathering areas and pushed them into bushes. Their open forests, the best hunting grounds were occupied by early settlers as sheep pastures. They found Australian land suitable for prosperity. Because of the dispossession of their own land, the aborigines were rendered utterly poor. They could not acquire the freehold title to ownership of any part of their ancestral lands.

The settlers confidently believed that the extinction of the Black race is inevitable for their own prosperity. Their intention was not merely to drive away the aborigines but to completely eradicate

them. In Queensland and Tasmania, the clashes were bloody and more protracted. A report on the Sydney Bulletin of June 1880 confirms the attitude:

- *"In North Queensland, the blacks are never allowed within the township. The Whites hold possession of the valleys and when the hungry black descends from the range in search of food ... he's shot. And what is happening in Queensland now happens every day in New South Wales".³*

They drove them from their hunting grounds and murdered them without fear of consequences. They attacked aborigines' camps and homesteads and burnt and butchered them. For such crimes against aborigines, no punishment was given to them. Complimentary to this violent murder the aborigines contracted diseases from the civilized whites. This disease was introduced in this country by Europeans. About half the native population of Sydney died from smallpox. At the time of White settlement, it was estimated that there were about 300,000 aborigines in the country. However, by the late 1800's, Professor W.H.Stanner estimates that:

" ... a good half of the continent's 600 or more or less obliterated; and that the aboriginal population had been reduced to 60,000".⁴

The dispossession of their land caused poverty, hunger and starvation among aborigines. Therefore, they were compelled to

become the cheap source of labour for settlers. They entered private employment and started working as fencers, well sinkers, teamsters, drovers, stockmen and shearers. They became loyal and efficient employees at almost every Station. But these loyal and efficient employees were not treated fairly. Employers demanded these workers to work for longer hours accepting lower wages. Some employers were reluctant to pay in the form of cash. They provided rations, but many times, it was short. In 1865, the 'Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission' passed the resolution that the aborigines are to be paid the same rates as Europeans. In spite of such resolutions, the prevailing conditions did not change. Many employees were ill-treated by their employers in different ways. The Reverend J.R.Gribble, a pioneer 19th century Missionary writes:

"Many natives have been short in the back for no other reason than that they were running away from their masters".⁵

Trade Unions have not shown interest in the position of aborigine employees. Upto 1964, aborigines were not permitted to join "Australian Workers' Union". Dispossession of lands, poor wages and job insecurities caused economic insecurities among aborigines. This economic insecurity is still the main barrier to social equality of the aborigines.

The housing condition for aborigines was considerably below the standard. Less work has been done on their housing. They were given uninsulated accommodation in desert.

Aborigine education system suffered from the same disadvantage as that of housing, lack of food, etc. Their education system was controlled by Church bodies. It continued to suffer from disadvantages of overcrowding, poor facilities and inadequate training of teachers. The organization of the education system was purposely divided on a racial basis. Very limited half-castes and a few fullblood aborigines received the benefit of the standard education available to the rest of the community. Some Europeans protested against the admission of aboriginal children to Australian public schools.

l The major cause for race prejudice in Australia was the exploitation and rape of aboriginal women by Europeans. The sexual contacts between them led to a deterioration in race-relation and often violence. White males viewed black women as the founts of their sexual satisfaction. They regarded these women as easy targets for sexual assaults. They generally considered that black women were nothing but 'sluts or whores'. Among Whites, the man capturing blackwomen was called '**mastering**'; raping them was '**gin-basting**'; the keepers of aboriginal women were called '**gin-shepherds**'. Whites raped aborigines, enjoyed them and spoiled them as they pleased. Capturing and raping of young aboriginal women was common in Australia. In 1800's, it was reported that troopers had sold a native girl for \$1 after raping her throughout the night. The term 'rape' meant a crime against property. Though European settlers committed this crime, they were never punished. Aborigines raped white women as revenge for the rape of their women.

Kidnapping and raping of aboriginal girls and women were hardly recorded. But kidnapping and raping of white women by blackmen were frequently traced and considered as worse crimes than murder.

Europeans' sexual relations with tribal women caused the complex social relations. Tribal laws were broken by Europeans. This has often caused violence by aborigines. The notorious case in this regard is "**the Hornet Bank Massacre**". In this massacre, nine members of Fraser's family, whose sons were forcefully raping blackwomen, were cruelly butchered by blacks. Their acts were really the cause of the atrocity. The last racial clash of significance in Australia was in 1900, when seven white people were murdered by Governor brothers - Jimmy and Joe and Jacky Underwood. This historical event has inspired two novelists, Frank Clune and Thomas Keneally and their novels *Jimmy Governor* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, respectively.

Since time immemorial, aborigines began the long unequal struggle with Whitemen who had dehumanised their race in every respect. They started fighting for justice and to possess their own land; to save the decay of their race; to get fair wages for their labour; to get proper educational facilities for their children; to have tolerable housing conditions; to save their women from rape and kidnapping; and ultimately, to maintain their tribal law, customs and traditions.

In the present time, Government is formulating many policies

to bring harmony between these two races. But the situation is still going worse. As Professor A.P.Elkin has pointed out:

"Protection policies not only failed to ensure the arrival of the aborigines; they also failed to protect them from harsh treatment".⁶

VI) Australian Literature:

Australia is a young country and the growth of the literature is traced over a brief span of time. The literary history of Australia is less than 200 years old. It started from 1788, the arrival of the First British Fleet. Australian literature is mainly concerned with the problems of national identity. Therefore, we can say that 'Australian literature reflects the characters of Australia'. Geoffrey Dutton, in his general introduction to *The Literature of Australia*, says:

"Literature in Australia has grown strong from its own roots and its own idioms. Without the need any more to be self-consciously 'Australian' it can take an individual and mature place in the world-wide literature of the English language".⁷

In reviewing Australian literature, one has to assess mainly poetry and fiction rather than drama.

The history of Australian poetry is largely a study in the adaptation of European poetic consciousness and tradition. As Judith Wright says:

"The history of Australian poetry from the First Settlement in 1788 until the end of the First World War is largely a study in the adaptation of the European (and specifically English) poetic consciousness and tradition to entirely new, and apparently hostile conditions".⁸

In the beginning, poems were written by English Writers. The first Volume of verse in the country was *Wild Notes From the Lyre of a Native Minstrel*, published by Charles Thompson in 1826. In a sense, he inspired young native-born poets like - Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Judith Wright, Robert D.FitzGerald, Kenneth Slessor, Douglass Stewart, Kenneth MacKenzie, A.D.Hope, James McAuley, David Campbell, etc.

The history of Australian fiction also goes back to the first Settlement. Australian prose fiction began with Henry Kingsley's novel, *Geoffrey Hamlyn* in 1859. It was quickly accepted as a local classic. Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton* was the first novel which appeared in Australia and was published in 1830-1. *The Guardian* was an anonymous novel published in 1838 by an Australian.

Novelists favoured the moral development as the central

theme of their novels. Before the middle of the 19th century, novels were often fictionalised accounts of colonial life. There were a number of contemporary novelists who dealt with the literature of protest. The earlier Australian novelists in their novels depicted a new world Hero engulfed by the corrupt and sophisticated wiles of Europe.

Joseph Furphy and Henry Lawson represented the main literary tradition of the nineties. Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) was recognized as the major Australian novel. Marcus Clarke, in the preface to *Long Odds* (1869) says about the novel:

"The best Australian novel that has been, and probably will be, written".⁹

The concept of the Australian natural character was presented in it.

Among Australian women novelists, we can name some, two novelists Henry Handel Richardson and Katharine Prichard who are remarkable. Henry Handel Richardson strongly presented the European city in *Maurice Guest* (1908) and Australian reality in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (a trilogy, 1917 to 1929). Her another novel *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910) was an autobiographical novel.

Katharine Prichard published her first novel *The Pioneer* in 1915. In her another novel, *Working Bullocks* (1926), she tells the

story of life among timber-getters. The psychological analysis in Australian fiction was first attempted in this novel. Prichard succeeded in depicting aboriginal woman as a luminous figure in her novel - *Coonardoo* (1929). The other two women novelists can be named here are Barbara Baynton and Kylie Tennant.

One of the novelists who has dominated fiction for over twentyfive years is Patrick White. Harry Hesseltine says:

*"On his own merits, White, it might be argued, is the first indisputably great novelist that Australia has produced, the first whose work can properly be judged in an international rather than national forum ...".*¹⁰

Since 1948, Patrick White has written a series of fine novels about Australian life and Australian landscape. In his novels - *The Tree of a Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), he took stories from the past. His another novel, *The Aunt's Story* (1948) is simpler and more ambitious than his other novels.

Two of the younger writers who were identified with Patrick White are - Randolph Stow and Christopher Koch. Randolph Stow was famous for the treatment of landscape in his novel. His first novel *A Hunted Land* (1956) is a good example. His other novels are - *The Bystander* (1957) and *To the Islands* (1958). Christopher Koch's novel -

The Boys in the Island (1958) brought him fame.

'Miles Franklin Award' recognized many Australian novelists. It was awarded to distinguished novelists since 1950. Patrick White won it in 1957 with *Voss* and in 1961 with *The Riders in the Chariot* (1961) In 1958, this award was given to the young novelist Randolph Stow for his third novel *To the Islands*. In 1966, it was awarded to Peter Mathews for *Trap* (1966) and in 1967, to Thomas Kenneally for *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967).

VI) Aboriginal in Australian Literature:

Peter Corris has suggested that:

"A few Australian writers - Kenneally, Idriess, Herbert and Stuart himself - have been outstandingly successful in writing about Aborigines from the inside ... At all levels then, the Aboriginal perception has been an important theme in Australian literature ..."¹¹

The portrayal of aborigine is a constant feature of Australian literature. It presents the life of aborigines with full light. The expedition of aboriginal life is made more in novels than in poetry. The only poem with aboriginal theme was Charles Thompson's *Black Town*. The poem expressed pity for aborigines.

One of the earliest novels pictured aboriginal was *Alfred Dudley or Australian Settler*, which was an anonymously authored novel.

Charles Rococraft, in his novels - *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) and *The Bushranger of Van Diemen's Land* (1846), portrayed the experiences of the settlers against busrangers and aborigines. Thus, in 19th century, with few exceptions, Australian fiction portrayed aborigines.

Eleanor Dark dealt with aborigines in her novel *The Timeless Land* (1941). Novels such as F.B.Vickers' *The Mirage* (1955), Donald Stuarts' *Mallonkai* (1976), etc., explored the inner experience of aborigines. In *The Mirage*, F.B.Vickers dealt with a halfcaste struggling for admission to White society. Frank Clune's novel *Jimmy Governor* (1959) and Thomas Keneally's novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) were better than other novels which have portrayed aborigines and halfcastes and the problems of racial prejudice. Katherine Prichard's *Coonardoo* and Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1955) were the two novels which successfully portrayed aboriginal woman as a luminous character. Both novelists created the Station life.

VII) Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can say that in Australian literature, two streams emerged. The first stream is the literature seeking its inspiration from the European tradition, the second is a literature seeking its inspiration from within Australia. Novels dealing with the aboriginal life or problems may be said to belong to the second category. In the history of the novels dealing with the aborigines, the figure

of Jimmy Governor or Jimmie Blacksmith, is historically very significant. Frank Clune wrote his novel on a historical incident involving a halfcaste called Jimmy Governor, and his murders in the year 1959. And Thomas Keneally wrote his *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, on the same theme in the year 1972. Both writers made use of the same historical event which shook Australia in the year 1900. It is extremely interesting from a literary angle to compare the two novels from the point of view of their themes and techniques and arrive at the authors' attitudes to their predilections with regard to the aboriginal problem. The novels raise problems related to racism, morality, politics and humanism. I intend to analyse the novels from this comparative point of view and try to identify the Australian attempt to grapple with the racial issue in the subsequent Chapters.

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