

THE QUEST FOR AN AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL IDENTITY: A CRITICAL
INTERPRETATION OF JACK DAVIS'
THREE PLAYS

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru
University in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

GEETALI DEORI



Centre of Linguistics and English
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi 110 067

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CENTRE OF LINGUISTICS & ENGLISH
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE & CULTURE STUDIES


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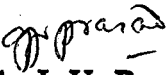
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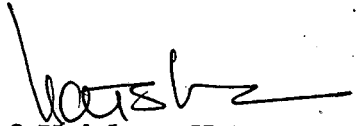
CERTIFICATE

This dissertation titled "**The Quest For An Australian Aboriginal Identity: A Critical Interpretation of Jack Davis' Three Plays,**" submitted by **Ms. Geetali Deori**, Centre of Linguistics & English, School of Languages, Literature & Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any other University.

This may be placed before the examiners for the evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.


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Declaration

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*To my beloved
Maa and Deauta*

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Geetali Deori

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CHAPTER II

EMERGENCE OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LITERATURE

"Writers, who have the nation's ear,
Your pen a sword opponents fear,
Speak of our evils loud and clear
That all may know."⁶⁷

In the last few decades, Australia has witnessed an increased awareness regarding Aboriginal life and culture. Their struggle for their rights to land, to education, to citizenship, to compensation and their quest for an identity has received considerable publicity worldwide. There has been a growing recognition among the Australians to come to a better understanding of the heritage of the 'first occupant' of the Island Continent. This chapter will look at how Aboriginal literature emerged. The main focus will be to evaluate why 'history,' formed a favourite theme among the early Aboriginal writers in their attempt to re-establish their Aboriginal identity. It will also look at the writings of Jack Davis, his treatment of 'history' and 'identity,' and his contribution in fashioning Aboriginal theatre.

As Governor-General Bill Hayden, in his Australian Day address (1996), "praised Aboriginal artists for using the 'redemptive' powers of art to teach non-indigenous Australians about themselves and their land."⁶⁸ Aboriginal art has been a significant player in the Aboriginal struggle to establish itself in the Australian society. With their distinctive "methods, styles, contents, masters and mistresses, regional and local variations, and patterns of change, practices of distribution, and language of interpretation,"⁶⁹ it has emerged as one of the most innovative and effective way of 're-locating' oneself in the complex interchanging Australia society.

As Djon Mundine, an Aboriginal who worked as an adviser at Ramingining from 1980-1994 says "Art is a way of recording history, aspirations and feelings of the period. Art is a communication medium that often transcends language barriers. The aim is that themes, concepts and Aboriginal culture...is accessible to the general public...."⁷⁰ In 1988, when Australia was celebrating its 200 hundred years of colonisation, the work of art that was widely heralded as central to the event was a large mosaic set in the forefront of the new house of the Parliament. The Mosaic, designed by, Michael Jagamara Nelson, reflected the racial reconciliation, so strongly desired by most Aboriginals and a section of Australians. However, this desire failed to improve the relationship between them. As protest in 1993, Nelson symbolically removed a part of the mosaic. He justified his action saying, "White people. You don't seem to understand. They look at my work, all they see is a pretty painting. You, the white people, took this country from us.... White people must understand. This country is the Aboriginals peoples' homeland.... We want to keep our culture strong for our children's children. We cannot do this without our land because it is our land, our dreaming, stories, painting—all tied to our land. This has all been changed.... The government of Australia has not recognised our people and our culture, it is abusing my painting and insulting my people. I want to take my painting back to my people."⁷¹

The above statement by Nelson is vibrated in all the genres of Aboriginal art. For the Aboriginal intelligentsia main concern was to establish a sense of understanding and respect between the Whites and the Aboriginals. To them it was—never art for art's sake, but was a medium to express their 'side of the story' without romanticising it. Thus it cannot be strictly contained within the latest 'academic' trends in which the critics tend to become the centre of concern. Among all it art form the most

notable is, Aboriginal literature. Unlike music, painting, or dance, written literature in the traditional Western form did not exist among the Aborigines. If one traces the root of Aboriginal literature, it begins with the ancient oral literature. Once believed to be dying out, it is clear today, in Australia many aspects of the oral culture have survived and is "thriving as a living, evolving part of contemporary life."⁷² Unique and linguistically specific, it comes from the different Aboriginal tribes across Australia. It reflects a rich and complex diversity of culture and history. Oral songs and narratives is traditionally an 'embodied' and 'emplaced' form of knowledge. The traditional "oral narratives and songs were the primary means of preserving and transmitting knowledge of country, spiritual belief, language, kinship, history, and practical skills."⁷³

The Oral Traditions

Oral narratives can be 'traditional,' 'semi-traditional' or 'non-traditional.' When one goes deeper, one finds that, oral story and songs work in a multidimensional form. Information is transmitted, through 'dialogic transition' in which an array of signifying systems operate simultaneously. For example, on formal ceremonial occasions, performers and audience are both participants. Meaning is assigned to words in the context of dance, ritual gestures, and ground drawings, carving and body paintings. On informal occasions, people might sing songs or recount anecdotes to each other while gathering bush tuckers, or doing their daily chores. Oral tradition thus involves far more than just its set of spoken stories or music. It is in fact, intricately bound with non-verbal communication and also with the broader, dense fabric of social and cultural life.⁷⁴

With the advent of the Whites, Aboriginal people suffered severe cultural disruption and displacement. Waves of frontier violence, disease, and missionaries who banned traditional languages and ceremonies

locked up the Aboriginal people in their own country. Oral tradition was seriously jeopardised. The Whites, failed to recognise the richness of oral tradition, and considered it to be a sign of the 'backward, primitive and ignorant.' The Aboriginal writing—sand drawing, body scars, painting, carving—was basically graphic in style, which the Whites failed to decode. Thus they labelled them as 'illiterates,' simply because they were ignorant about the Western "technique of reading and writing script."⁷⁵

Under adverse political circumstances, the Aboriginals were forced to learn the language of their invaders. The earliest Aboriginals writing in the Roman alphabet was produced in late 1770s. The first piece of 'writing' by an Aboriginal is presumed to be Bennelong's letter to the steward of Lord Sydney, in 1796. Bennelong did not follow the Western norm of a 'one-to-one' address, and dictated the letter as if "everyone he speaks about are in each other's physical proximity, and thus can be spoken so."⁷⁶ This letter reflects the oral tradition that has been ingrained in the Aboriginal learning system. By the late eighteenth-century, texts were produced by dictation and other collaborative modes. Their language was recorded and published by the ethnographers, missionaries, government officials, explorers and historians. During the initial years, most of the works were written by government officials, on behalf of Aboriginals, often 'quoting or paraphrasing' their words. In this way, Aboriginals made their entry into texts authored mostly by the Whites.

The main writing during this period was the translation of the Bible. Along with the missionaries, "Biraban, an Awabakal man from the Lake Macquarie area north of Sydney, began working with missionary Lancelot Threlkeld in his translation of the Gospel of St Luke into the Awabakal language. In the 1870s, James Unapion (father of David Unapion) worked with the missionaries George Taplin translating Ngarrindjeri oral narratives

into written English at Raukkan (point Mcleay) in South Australia."⁷⁷ During the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people were attending missions schools set in the government reserves and settlements. The first school, opened for the Aboriginals children was at the Governor Macquarie's Native Institution in 1815. In these schools, children were taught the 'four Rs'—reading, writing, arithmetic and Christian religion. These schools were also used by the Whites to impose 'cultural assimilation, surveillance and bodily discipline' on the Aboriginals.⁷⁸

As 'literacy' spread, Aboriginals people began writing their own letters, composing petitions to government officials and writing in newspapers. These early writings were mainly written for the White authorities. As a result, most of these writings were done under close surveillance. Thus it needed to follow a certain format, which demonstrated not only their 'mastery' in the craft of writing, but also presented European cultural values and Christian beliefs correctly.

Beginnings of Aboriginal Literature

Modern Aboriginal writing is rooted in the 19th century newspapers—*The Flinders Island Weekly Chronicle* and the *Dawn Magazine*. The main objective of these newspapers was to promote Christianity, civilisation and learning amongst the Aboriginal. These newspapers were strictly censored, edited and printed under the supervision of Whites. The commandant of the Flinders Island closely vetted this hand-written newsletter. However the Pallawah (Tasmanian Aboriginal) writers, did manage to present brief, but accurate events in the colony, which the commandant would have edited. In 1837, it appeared every Saturday, and was priced at 2 pence and profits were distributed among the 'writers.' However, the 'writers' of this journal were typical mission boys, who were supposed to promote Christianity and 'civilisation' among their respective tribes. They enjoyed

the privileges of living next to the Whites and sharing their lifestyle, while the still pagan majority was left largely to be fringe dwellers around the mission. These newspapers were used as a weapon to change the traditional Aboriginal social hierarchies by making them appear inferior. A society rich in their oral tradition was soon found entangled in the web of reading and writing.

The *Abo Call*, another newspaper marked a turning point in Aboriginal literature. The first issue (1 April 1938) identified the paper as 'our own paper' and addressed itself expressly to all Aboriginals. It played a vital role in building a national pan-Aboriginal political constituency. The aim of the paper was to 're-broadcast' the voice of the Aborigines themselves. The paper paved the way for the Aboriginals to speak out their grievances. It also tackled issues, which the government refused to discuss in the open. It contested the dominant White myth of Australia's peaceful settlement, thereby raising white people's awareness and giving the Aboriginals a shared sense of history. The traditional literary portrayal of the Aborigines was gradually taking a new dimension.

Prior to the 1920s, Aboriginals writing was largely political and personal than literary. While government officials used writing as an instrument of colonial administration and control, Aboriginals used it as a means of resistance and political negotiation. The Aboriginal protesters realised the importance of writing their complaints, for that made them official and powerful. Written documents and press releases managed to carry their words to the general public and higher government authorities. So effective were these written petitions that more than once the government tried to prove that these were penned by White trouble makers. In all the cases, they were found to be authored by Aboriginals. Following this success, the first Aboriginal novel came up. Although it was

more in the form of a booklet, it did make its presence felt. Titled *Native Legends*, it was authored by David Unapion who was a polymath whose interests included physics, mechanical and aeronautic engineering, Latin, Greek and English sermons.

Aboriginal literature has witnessed tremendous growth since the 1960s, and more so in the last two decades. The main highlight of modern Aboriginal literature writing is its multi-faceted concerns, which reflects the social, political and cultural changes that they have gone through in the last 200 years. Literature has played a vital and multidimensional role in the Aboriginal quest for an identity. The English language proved to be a powerful tool for the Aboriginal. It helped them to bargain with the new force that was heavily influencing their life—'the white man.' The Whites used writing as a tool of administration and control and promoted Aboriginal literacy as a means of instilling compliance. The Aboriginal people however, used writing as a means of resistance and political negotiation, as well as for personal communications with relatives and friends.

The paradox of the whole matter was that they started using a method, which was forcibly imposed on them. Their knowledge in English, not only gave them a sense of power and social status, but also provided them a platform to raise their voice of protest that they might not otherwise have acquired in the changing environment. In a broader sense, Aboriginal literature is more than just simple, plain well-written literature. It advocates emancipatory politics-like overcoming of systematic injustice, discrimination and exploitation-life politics- creation of the ethical patterns of living and coexistence and sometimes both are used. In recent times profound sense of political and social engagements has been the basic

characteristics of Aboriginals literature, even when this aspect is only 'implicit' or 'allusive'.

There has been a sea-change in the field of Aboriginal writing, from the exploration of the 'fringe' to the consolidation of centrality, from an oppositional dialectic to one which superseded and renounced opposite through, which helped them to establish their identity. For the Aboriginal made the negative implication of writing turn positive. They used words, in order to come to terms with the Whites social, economical and political structure. While Aboriginal writing is comparatively recent, with a rich oral tradition to lean on it has made its presence felt in recent times. This tradition of telling stories, which maintain cultural continuity and provide the hearer with interpretation and analyses of contemporary social reality, is the basis of Aboriginal writing. It gives the non-aboriginal a ring-side view of the problems and dilemma's which the Aborigines are facing today.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, Aboriginal writing has remained outside the domain of 'high literary' genres. As a result, Aborigines were depicted in Australia's 200-year-old White-dominated literature mostly in an unfavourable manner. They were presented as 'objects of curiosity than as individuals.' The 'sable race' existed in early literature as an awe-struck backdrop to the energetic scenes of British colonising.⁷⁹ With the spread of exploration and settlement, contact between white man and the outlying tribal Aborigines intensified. Reports of bloody encounters reinforced the stereotype of the violent and, treachous savages. As one expedients described 'them as implacably hostile and shamelessly dishonest.' In conjunction with the increased flow of fiction from the 1840s onwards there was a constant supply of the non-fictional accounts of colonial Australia. Most of the works included descriptive, and sometimes, ethnographic accounts of the Aborigines.

The Aboriginals presence, in the second half of the nineteenth century Australian literature, was much more marked. Henry Kendall's early poem presents the Aborigines with charisma of the noble savage. In the poem *The Last of His Tribes* it pictures the final stages in the destruction of the Aboriginal tribes but avoids the question of culpability. The stream of memories and reminiscences continued undiminished until the second half of the 19th century. The writers, usually erstwhile squatters, government officials and public figures often reflected on their stay in the colony and their interaction with the Aborigines. Most of these accounts presented a lopsided view of the two communities. The squatters had the most prolonged and closet contact with the Aborigines, a contact that inevitably entailed dispossession and violence. Their literature reveals some close and satisfactory relationship between Blacks and Whites in the secondary stage of settlement.⁸⁰

The second half of the nineteenth century also brought a number of attempts to document the Aborigines in semi-scientific and ethnographic works. They were still represented as 'objects' which was far from the true picture. It included only occasional attempts at a sensitive portrayal of the Aborigines and very little questioning on the accepted Aboriginal stereotypes presented by the white literature. The turn of the century provided no magic line of demarcation. The nationalism and radicalism of the 1890s, which spilled over into the Federation did not bother to acknowledge the Aboriginals. They were excluded from the constitution.⁸¹ White literature paid only the scantiest attention to them. The stories and poems of Henry Lawson and A. B. Patterson, and the Joseph Furphy's novel *Such is Life* paid only the briefest attention to the Aboriginal presence. However, new attitudes, gradually evolved, slowly at first, but more rapidly after the Second World War.

In the past 50 years, the traditional literary stereotypes about the Aboriginals are gradually fading. Contemporary practice has been to place the Aboriginals in the centre of Australian literature. In recent literature, the chief themes have been inter-racial sexual relationships, contemporary racial prejudice, especially in relation to the half-castes, White guilt about the past and the territorial rights of Aborigines today. The starting point of the modern novel of social protest that features the Aboriginals is Xavier Herbert's *Capricornian* (1938). The novel presents a devastating indictment of customary White rationalisation of the treatment regarding the Aboriginals. The need to civilise and christianise and the benefits are the main points of the novel. It particularly attacks the White usurpation of Aboriginal territory, the callousness and hypocrisy of official attitudes as well as the inhumanity of Whites towards the half-castes. In his other work, *Poor Fellow* and *My Country*, Herbert attacks the white community for its beastly treatment of Aborigines. Another writer, Thomas Keneally in his novel, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, brings out a sensational account of tyranny and bigotry faced by the Aboriginals. This portrayal of Aboriginals away from the usual ignoble violent stereotype awakened many Australians to the reality of Australia's racism. How, all these works have not yet managed to create a true and balanced picture of the Aborigines in the White mindset.⁸²

Through these settlers' narratives, both official and popular, racism is normalised and rationalised. These forms of literary accounts justifying dispossession and continuing repression of the Aborigines continue to be passed on to successive generations and the international audience. As Ian Reid pointed out, message cannot just be beamed from one person to another. Understanding needs interpretation. In this case, it requires a clear

knowledge of Aboriginal society, its history, culture and political understanding.

Aboriginal literature saw a tremendous growth during the third decade of the twentieth century. The basic aim of contemporary Aboriginal writers was two-fold. Firstly, it wanted to break the stereotypical and negative image created by the Whites in their literature. And secondly to interpret and re-write the past using their own perception, dismantling the motivated narratives of the colonisers. It contests the veracity and integrity of the image, which the Whites portray even today.

Emergence of a New Generation of Writers

The new dimension of contemporary Aboriginal literature begins in 1964, with the writings of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Mudrooroo Norogin, and Jack Davis. They are seen as the founders of contemporary Aboriginal literature. They were the products of 'assimilation revolting against assimilation.' Through their writing they have successfully left their mark in all the genres of literature. They all shared a number of common concerns and methods. The main theme was their call "for justice and land rights, challenged racist stereotypes, dismantled exclusionary models of national identity and corrected biased historical narratives of progress and peaceful settlement they also insisted on the continuity of past and present. Not only had the past left indelible scars on the present, new wrongs were perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians every day."⁸³ As Oodgeroo said, "let no one say the past is dead. The past is all about us and within."⁸⁴

The new phase in Aboriginal history thus witnessed a great deal of Aboriginal creative writing in English, as did the politicisation of its cause. The writers made themselves heard through their work. They used different

styles of writing in literature as a means to protest against the atrocities of the Australian government. By skilful interplay of words and situations, by using subtle hints, the new club of Aboriginal writers strove to bring about a change in their fortunes. Explaining the new style of writing that emerged during post-1964 Bruce McGuinness says, "they become actors in fact. They are able to act in numerous ways. They portray different images in different ways. With writing, we find that the same situation also occurs. When Aboriginal people write, they write in a style. They're adopt various styles of writing so that what they really want to write about it is there. It is hidden. It is contained within their writing, if one can go there through the subterfuge, the camouflage that they use when they are writing."⁸⁵

Denis Walker further illustrates, "Aboriginal writers have a responsibility here, a very important responsibility, to take that message, not only to the white people but to Aboriginals people as well, so that we can foster within our own communities a very important concept. That concept is that if we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and as individuals."⁸⁶ These writers have played a leading role in the Aboriginal struggle. They were able to develop a new awareness of nationhood among their own people by bringing a balance between confrontation and accusation.

The literature has given a voice to the long silent suffering that the Aboriginal people have undergone. In their writings, one gets a clear view of the Aboriginal socio-political aspirations. For Aboriginal literature is the "expression of an indigenous minority not only living on the fringes of the majority community, but as a separate nation of people which until the last two decades was completely under the heel of the oppressors."⁸⁷ They believed that literature should have a social value not only to the individual, but to the community as well. For the main concern of these

writers is to write about their past correctly, keeping the present in mind. For according to most of them, the past is there only to explain the present and to postulate ideals for the future. For in the past resides the 'true Aboriginality.' With the change in the situation and attitude among a section of Australians from both the communities, Aboriginal literature has begun to turn towards cultural and self-introspection.

An Aboriginal Introspection of Australian Society

The writing of the Aboriginals is to expose the 'hidden underside' of Australian history in which the Aborigines were butchered, beggared and beaten whenever they made a stand, or attempted to retreat's. Until recently "they did not do things, but had things done to or for them."⁸⁸ As Denis Walker states "White people have the arrogant attitude of saying that their way of life, their white, western, straight-line of thinking of how reality should be described is the only one."⁸⁹ The majority accepted and believed the fact that the Aboriginal people were unable to decide for themselves. The dominant and common theme in all their writings has been to re-write history. It has become inseparable from Aboriginal literature. They have developed a strong historical sense, which gave a crystal clear view of the social reality of the past as well as the present. For example in *Kullark*, the slaughter of Yagan and his tribal family are interpreted by his own tribe as well as by Sterling. But only the version of Sterling is accepted as the "true" voice of history. Without any scrupulous research, Sterling 'constructs' the Aboriginal as evil and provides no answer as to why Yagan was killed. Anisuzzaman explains this Western mentality of thinking that only what the West has produced in the last five hundred years is universal and modern and the rest is all traditional and ancient.⁹⁰ But one should remember that history written by the West suits only the western or White viewpoint. White historians conveniently left out all that that did not fit into

their structure of arguments. Thus, views of other societies are held to be traditional and not modern. With colonisation, Western views not only became dominant but also the 'universal ones.' In a similar manner, the history of Australia has always paid more attention to the White interpretation. In recent times, the emergence of Aboriginal literature has paved the way for a new wave of Aboriginal social action.

Through her first publication, *Oodgeroo Noonuccal*, a part Aborigine was able to end a period of White 'deafness.' It paved the way for Aboriginal writers to make the Whites hear their true story and plight. Her first poetry collection titled *We Are Going* (1964) was able to hit the right cord with the Australian reading public. Oodgeroo opines that its success was inevitable not because she was a good writer, but because the Aboriginals had a voice for the first time. Her work reflects the doom of the Aboriginal race in the hands of the Whites. Her work demands a change in the Whites attitude towards the Aborigines. She sees it is as her responsibility to record the aspirations and frustrations of the Aboriginal people. For only then, will the Aboriginals, be able to find "a place in the Australian society to that of the White man, but without forfeiture of his own identity."⁹¹ A consequent success of Oodgeroo work reflected the social and political responsibility of the Aboriginal Literature. It managed to present crystal clear view of the Aboriginal condition and there search for and identity.

Like Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert's main concern was to correct the historical lie that Australia was a 'peaceful settlement.' Besides writing the first Aboriginal play *The Cherry Pickers*, his most famous work is his poetry collection called *Inside Black Australia* (1987). It speaks of the truths of Aboriginality and justice as being the only principles on which Australia can survive. He presents contemporary Australia as a battleground between the Aboriginals and the Whites. His poetry reflects simplicity, emphasising

more on content and communication rather than formal innovation. His narrative style reflects the rich oral culture, which he has inherited. His work emphasizes Aboriginal dispossession and settler brutality and hypocrisy. As he states, "I have adopted writing as a means of voicing the Aboriginal situation...I try to present as truly as possible the Aboriginal situation and the Aboriginal response. There is the need to educate White Australians to the present situation of the Aboriginal people...I'm presenting it as honestly as possible-it's not a pretty picture."⁹²

In terms of critical and non-fictional works the name which comes first is that of Mudrooroo Narogin. Although his 'identity' is being questioned now, his contribution to Aboriginal literature cannot be overlooked. According to Mudrooroo, "Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the White man. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood."⁹³ His novel *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) was a path breaking work, popular among both the White and Aboriginal readers. It gives a prophetic description of land, tradition, identity government and community that are the main concerns of the Aboriginal people today. Mudrooroo's critical output during the late 1980s and early 1990s was instrumental in representing the interest of Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal society in a critical field dominated by Whites intellectuals. Through his writings he was able to make both the communities realise that Aboriginal literature is not the outcome of one community, but comes from different Aboriginal communities—Nangas, Nyoongah, Djamadjis, Murris, Kooris, Yolngus and other regional groups. Mudrooroo's main contribution in Aboriginal literature has been the creation of timeframes in Aboriginal history. By dividing Aboriginal history into a number of periods, he has provided a structure with which to authenticate Aboriginal literature similar to White literature at the same

time making it easy for readers to understand Aboriginal literature. This helps the reader to understand Aboriginal literature and also make the history of Australian literature more balanced. Mudrooroo's division is as follows:

1. **"The Time Of The Dreaming:** From the Beginning to 1788: Prehistory: Before the Coming of the Europeans.
2. **The Time Of The Invasion(s):** A convenient cut-off date for this period might be 1901 and the coming into being of the federation of the Australians colonies.
3. **Punitive Expedition and Protection:** The utter conquering and control of indigenous people with the framing of restrictive legislation.
4. **The Colonial Period: Paternalism Then Assimilation:** A convenient cut-off date is 1967 when a referendum was conducted which made Indigenous people Australian citizen
5. **The Period of self-determination And Self-Management:** The official policy from 1967 to 1988.
6. **The Period of Reconciliation:** Sharing cultures."⁹⁴

The above division helps the reader to understand the topic and issues, when one reads Aboriginal myths, more specifically 'dream' time narratives.

Another notable figure in Aboriginal literature and the focus of our study is Jack Davis. A well-known poet, activist, editor and playwright, Davis inspired and encouraged a generation of Aboriginal actors, directors and playwrights. His play acted as the 'written voice' of the Aborigines of his generation. His play highlights the happiness and gentleness of the Aboriginal society, where humane life was always considered to be part of the natural cycle of life. Davis speaks about the inevitable imposition of European values, which he fears will totally destroy the Aboriginals rich and

meaningful traditional life. His works deals with the 'lost culture' of his people, who have been 'marginalised' in mainstream Australia.

Consolidation of Aboriginal Theatre

Until the advent of the White man, the Aborigines lived in complete accordance with Nature. They do so even now, but for a different reason and with a difference in attitude. This clearly gets reflected in Davis work specially his plays. As Robert Hodge says "Where Whites could only see a barren and meaningless land, Aboriginal could see and hear and smell a thousand signs of life that guaranteed them a rich and varied existence in their own country."⁹⁵ Although Kevin Gilbert wrote the first Aboriginal play in 1968, it was Jack Davis who built and made Aboriginal drama popular to the white audience. Although it took only eighteen months for theatre to establish itself in Australia, it took nearly two decades for Aboriginal theatre to establish itself. By the time Davis entered the field of drama Australian drama had covered a long way.

A significant achievement during the 1980s was the consolidation of the Aboriginal theatre. Considered to be the oldest among the different art forms, it reflects in a detailed and emotionally important way the thought and the life of a community. Being a social activity, it is inextricably linked with the origins of the society. In one sense, the origins of theatre lie in the origin of society because it is by impersonation and identification that man relates himself to others. The history of theatre is therefore considered to be the history of the human race. The way it narrates life and its "actual events" makes it the story of man's developing mind. Theatre is one of the oldest forms of human communication and has played a vital role in almost every society in the world. For the primitive man, it was an attempt to communicate with god or spirits and was an indissoluble part of communal life. In the modern world, it is an attempt to communicate between man

and man, between the dramatist and the community or as the psychoanalyst says "between the unconscious of the artist and the audience."⁹⁶

Jack Davis: Transformation from a Mill-hand to a Renowned Writer

Born in 1917, into a family of eleven, Davis spent most of his childhood in the southwest timber and dairy town of Yarloop. Unlike his parents, Davis had a carefree and protected childhood till the age of fourteen. His father was one of the three children, of a Sikh (Davis' grandfather) "whose occupation was that of a hawker. His father's name was Billy Bunsingh, but when the police gave him to a squatter family named Davis, he was called Billy Davis."⁹⁷ Davis father was forcibly removed from his Aboriginal mother, whom he never met again. Similarly, his mother Alice McPhee was also a half-caste Aboriginal from Kimberley district. As Davis states "At twelve years of age I was a gawky, big-boned, tousled brown-haired boy with large feet, a large nose, brilliant teeth and grey-green eyes. These I inherited from an unknown Afghan camel driver grandfather, who had his origins in India and probably died in the Kimberly's where he sired my mother and five other girls from an equally unknown group of tribal Aboriginal women." Like his father, Davis mother was also forcibly removed from her Aboriginal mother and was given to a White family, who gave her, their family title—McPhee. The above account of Davis parents reflects the exploitation of a 'race' whose life was totally turned upside down by outsiders.

As a boy, Davis was an average student 'with eight years of schooling' and an avid sportsman. Davis was very fond of reading, special the dictionary. In latter years his access to the libraries in the stations he worked increased his knowledge. At the age of fourteen, Davis along with his brother was sent to the Moore River Native Settlement. As Davis states

"Moore River may not have been the success, for me, that Mr Neville or my father had anticipated, but the short period that I spent was an experience both deep and indelible. After all these years find it difficult to return to Mogumber: the ghosts are too vivid and my spirits become restless in the presence of memories so strong.... Yet my writings are peopled with characters and livened with impressions that are derived from my stay at Moore River all those years ago."⁹⁸

In this settlement Davis experienced and witnessed for the first-time white oppression against the Aboriginals. The short stay left a deep and indelible mark that later gets reflected in his works. Most of his works, specially his plays narrates incidents which he has experienced himself in his short stay in the settlement. Often using a dictionary as his only text Davis 'flirted with verse' and managed to give a new dimension to Aboriginal literature and more specifically to theatre.

Before turning to be a writer, Davis had a chequered career, spanning from different phases as a mill hand, a lay preacher, a boundary rider, a boxer, a horse breaker, and a stockman to an engine driver. As Davis states, "To obtain a second-class ticket I needed to have two qualifications: a citizenship-rights certificate and a trade certificate through an examination.... Twelve months or so later I returned to Perth and completed the examination for a second -class engine driver's certificate. I was considered to be a phenomenon, an oddity, since an Aboriginal engine driver was unheard of, but I didn't see anything odd about it.... I simply expected to achieve whatever goals I set myself. I was sure I was equal to any of my white mates and acted without reservations."⁹⁹ In all his work one gets to see this sense of 'equality.' Besides his odd-end jobs, he also worked as the Director of the Aboriginal Centre in Perth. He was the first chairman of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in Western Australia, as well as a

member of the Aboriginal Studies Institute in Canberra. He was also a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board.

In 1977, Davis was awarded the British Empire Medal for his contribution to Australian literature and welfare work among his people. In 19981 he was Aboriginal Writer of the Year. In 1985 he received the Order of Australia, for his contribution to Australian theatre and was also named Western Australian Citizen of the Year in arts and theatre. He received an honorary Doctor of Literature by Murdoch University, Western Australia. Davis voiced the need for a healthy interaction and friendship between the two communities.

Davis' works, specially his plays, indicate a desire for a different ordered environment in which, life can be lived according to ones own terms and conditions. His works reflects his belief that the time will soon come when all Australians with Aboriginals ancestors will be proud of their roots. His works enabled him to lay bare the truth, the anger, the frustration and the determination of the Aboriginal people. Most of his writing narrates tales of successive generations who witnessed "their beloved country stripped of its possessions and saw their own race wane as the blood of the Whites mixed with Blacks."¹⁰⁰ His works present a pattern which is immensely subtle and complete, that has a far reaching impact. Here the Aboriginal consciousness reaches an impasse where the possibility of change between the Whites and the Aborigines are visible. In his work, the Whites are presented not in white or black, but in shades of grey. Through the use of subtle humour, Davis tries to build bridges of reconciliation between the Whites and the Aborigines, without much bitterness or anger. As Davis states, "I think you can only cry for a certain time. You only cry for a time under any circumstances. And in writing this I had lots of frustration and lots of agony."¹⁰¹

Most of his work revolves round the different aspects of history and culture of Western Australia. He along with Mudrooroo did tremendous work in saving the Nyoongah dialect, spoken mostly by the Aborigines of Western Australia. For according to Davis the disappearance of the various dialects, throws light to the disappearance of the Aboriginal culture since the white invasion. Whatever is left today is just one-tenth of the original Aboriginal culture. His main works are:

The First Born and Other poems (1970), Jagardoo: poems from Aboriginal Australia (1977), John Pat and other poems (1988), Black Life: poems (1991) are his poetical works. His famous plays are *Kullark (1979), The Dreamers (1982), No Sugar (1985), Barungin (Smell the Winds (1988)). In Our Town (1992), Honey Spot (1987)* was a play written for children, *Aboriginal Writing Today (1985)* which he wrote along with Bob Hodge is a non-fictional work. Besides the works mentioned above he wrote a number of short stories and was also one of the major editors of the journal *Identity*. Journals that featured Aboriginal writing and formed the base for many Aboriginals writers to get their work published, without the interference of a White editor.

The main objective of Davis' writings was to celebrate both the Aboriginal voices of Australia and to raise them loudly in areas that for so long seemed deaf to their words. But his success as a playwright throughout the world and his acceptance by both Aboriginals and the Whites suggest that Davis has succeeded in "tapping into a vein that threads across generations, language barriers, and of course racial lines."¹⁰² According to Davis, drama provides a special look at the Aboriginal slice of Aboriginal existence or life, With a rich oral tradition that acts as the backbone to Aboriginal drama, it gives a new look to it. The

oral narrations constituting of songs, music, dance and storytelling element becomes central to the Aboriginal practice and experience of drama.

Davis has effectively presented and used Aboriginal culture in his plays, which serves two points—politics and dramatic. This not only makes Aboriginal drama appear different from western drama but also becomes a mouthpiece of protest. Among the Aborigines, theatre of the European type did not exist. Music, song and oral narratives provided popular entertainment and didactic performances. Apart from these were the non-secular performance-intricate ceremonies that passed on the traditional wisdom. Dramatic elements were important in the performance in which myths were enacted, or rather danced out, but these were truly social manifestation with close communion between the performer and the viewer. They were staged in a little arena with little scenery were used as backdrops. Costume, particularly body painting and props were important, either to strengthen the connection with the mythical pastor to symbolise ancestral divinities. All these elements are used by the Aboriginal theatre today, which makes them appear different from the western theatre. The rich oral tradition forms the backbone of modern Aboriginal theatre.

Davis incorporates the oral cultural devices of storytelling, song, dance, music and history in his multi-layered plays. His plays are usually written using a combination of English and Nyoongah words. The main purpose of using Nyoongah was to make people realise that English is not the only language in Australia and also to 'demonstrates to Whites the enormous impact of being forced to learn and speak a vastly different language.'¹⁰³ The use of the Nyoongah words provides credibility to the countries Aboriginal population. In the broader sense, Davis presents to the Whites that without a language people cannot survive. For language is a determining factor in an individual quest for an identity.

Besides language, Davis uses a lot of songs and dances in his plays. They form an integral part of his plays. It symbolises the rich culture that the Aboriginals had before the Whites arrived. Davis uses these in a centralised form, focusing the audience attention positively on the mode of communicating with the past and present in a 'language other than words.' The songs in all his plays retell the original events in the creation of the locality, the history and the essential religious and spiritual attitudes of the people. In these songs, the entire group participates. They join in recollecting events from times long gone by.

All these different forms help to express the Aboriginal view of history and time. He makes authentic use of other texts that give detailed accounts of past experiences, which helps him to evaluate the past in a concrete manner. For Davis displays a wide range of emotions, "Don't just show them the comic side of life right through...show them sadness, pathos, gladness, happiness, sorrow and all the in-between...all those emotions."¹⁰⁴ The balanced use of both the Western and the Aboriginal culture that initially was used more as a compulsion has led to the emergence a different type of Australian theatre.

The mixture of these two elements makes the plays of Davis unique. He further explains this by saying, "You see we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world.... We've acted up before magistrates. We've acted up before the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime."¹⁰⁵ The spontaneous flow of dialogues, of action, of song and music and the stage set-up, completely seduces both the Aborigines and white audience. Davis manages to captures exactly the way the Aboriginal and white behave and express themselves in defined situations. He does this with such great

attention to time and logic, that his plays provide entertainment with a cause and conviction rather than simple amusement.

One of the main highlights of Davis' work is his dealing with history. In his plays, he captures the frustration of dealing with the past while living in the present. He has forced a re-assessment of Australian history and drama. In this connection he has stressed the point that "Aboriginal drama must be watched and read differently from white drama."¹⁰⁶ Davis' plays juxtaposition white versus black custom, of traditional versus urban Aboriginal life and oral versus written culture and so forth. One gets to see all this in his plays *Kullark*, *The Dreamers*, *No Sugar*, and *Barungin*. To him "the past is related to the present and the present is related to the future. The three of them are combined together and that happens to be existence. We cannot be unless that is so because that is part of living."¹⁰⁷ When the government tells the Aborigines to forget their past they are actually denying a part of their own history. From the beginning Davis stressed on the need to rectify the history, which for so long has been misinterpreted. His idea is that if one clears the past one gets a clear picture of the present and future.

According to Davis, when one is using history as a medium to construct a new version of the past, the most essential factor is not merely to enhance the proper and clear understanding of the past, but also to make the past better suited to serve the needs in the present and aspirations of the future. Therefore the construction of the past does not become an end in itself, but it becomes a means for constestation of the present. In most of his plays, Davis makes an attempt to rectify the official White versions of history which are full of lies and has been manipulated in the name of power. For nearly 200 years, these inaccuracies have been fabricated as White history. Nearly all his plays viz. *Kullark*, *Dreamers*, *No*

Sugar, *Barungin* and last play *In Our Town* represents the new history, which is like the Pandora's box waiting to be opened. His plays are not just mere depictions of massacres, beatings, deprivation and evictions that the Aboriginals have gone through, but are also a celebration of Aboriginal life that remains.

His plays are based on an imaginative re-creation and re-interpretation of history. His history present a somewhat awkward and tense relationship between the Whites and the Aboriginal. The main concern of his plays, is basically to rewrite the 'misinterpreted' history of Australia, which is indirectly linked with the question of finding—identity and its existence. His plays tackle this problem in great depth and from different angle. The plays debate the policies and the laws that challenged the very existence of the Aboriginal. The Australia that emerges out of these plays is very different from what has been presented till now by the Whites. Till date, it also challenges the colonial historiography by questioning some of the assumptions behind the imperialist concern. It presents a kaleidoscopic view of the various historic events, which decided the faith of the Aborigines. In fact, it is said that the beginning and continuance of Aboriginal literature in English was an outcome of the process of reconciliation. As Davis states, "It is a real pity that so much of the history of European-Aboriginal relation can be characterised by conflict and degeneration. The initial Aboriginal response to settlement was one of co-operation. It would have been a much richer country in terms of culture-and-conscience-if that co-operation had been reciprocal."¹⁰⁸ His plays pave the way for the quest of an identity, which the Aborigines have been struggling to acquire for a long time.

According to Davis, White history is alien to the Aboriginal people because it lied or tried to suppress the actual events, that was important to

them. Davis interrogates White documents and histories demanding that they declare the truth of this Aboriginal people. His work revolves round two principles of organisation that are often seen as more 'Aboriginal'. They are "the principle of repetition, whereby the same fundamental patterns recur, under different guises and in different circumstances; and the principle of circularity, which sees beginning and ends meet in the closure of a circle."¹⁰⁹ With the emerging nationalist movement, the clamour for independence at all levels made it imperative that the colonised people regain and restructure the past on their own terms. The most important question raised in the plays, was thus the question of identity.

Until very recent years, the Aboriginal people of Australia were often defined in negative terms by legislation and Whites perceptions. In recent decades, with the concept of multicultural society being mooted by the Government, the question of self-identification of the Aboriginal people within the Australian society as a whole. His play tackles the different dimensions, which constitute the quest for an Aboriginal identity. As Gilbert states, "Who is a Aboriginal? Is he or she someone who feels that other Aboriginals are somehow dirty, lazy, drunken, bulging? Is an Aboriginal anyone who has some degree of Aboriginal blood in his or her brain and who has demonstrably been disadvantaging by that? Or is an Aboriginal someone who has had the reserve experience? Is Aboriginality institutionalised gutlessness, an acceptance of the label 'the most powerless people on earth'? Or is Aboriginality, when all the definition have been exhausted, a yearning for a different way of being, a wholesome that was presumed to have existed [before 1788]." All these questions get reflected, in some degree, in most of his plays.

CHAPTER III

ABORIGINE-WHITE RELATIONS IN *KULLARK* AND *NO SUGAR*

Far, far away,
Where saints in glory stand,
Bright, bright as day:
Oh, how they sweetly sing,
Worthy is our Saviour King!
Loud let His praises ring,
Praise, praise for aye!
There is a happy land,

Far, far away.
No sugar in our tea,
Bread and Butter we never see.
That's why we're gradually
Fading away.¹¹⁰

The above two versions of the same hymn mark clearly the line of demarcation in Australian today. Davis succeeds in establishing the central division, which operates in both *Kullark* and *No Sugar*. On one hand, Davis presents the 'false celebration of White values,' trumpeted by the official history. The Australian Day celebration of 1934 in the Moore River Native Settlement, depicted in *No Sugar* has the Chief Protector of the Aborigines Mr. Neville, addressing the gathering which mostly consists of Aborigines. He says:

Today we are gathered here to celebrate the birth of this nation Australia one hundred and forty-six years ago at Sydney Cove in the Eastern States. As I was driving up, I remembered that it is only a hundred and four years since the British flag was first raised on our West Australian shores. As I drove through Guilford, Midland and Bullsbrook, I saw men on the road, hundreds of men, and I was reminded that the World is in a grip of depression and that many people are suffering from hunger and deprivation of many of the essentials elements which for a counted existence. But you (Aborigines), in this small corner of the Empire, are

fortunate in being provided for with adequate food and shelter...It doesn't hurt to remind yourselves that you are preparing yourselves here to take your place in Australian society, to live as other Australians live, and to live alongside other Australians; to learn to enjoy the privileges and to shoulder the responsibility of living like the white man, to be treated equally, not worse, not better, under the law. "¹¹¹

(Act Four, Scene Five)

As Neville uses words like 'fortunate,' 'provided adequate food and shelter' and to 'learn' and 'shoulder responsibilities,' he is rebuked by the Aborigines. The hymn sung by the Aborigines, reflects the unofficial history of cheating and suffering. As Jimmy attacks Neville and reminds him that in the name of food, they are 'provided' with "rotten spuds, onions, bread and drippin' and black tea."¹¹² When Neville reminds the Aborigines about why they are in the settlement; Jimmy shouts at Neville and says "so he (Whites) could have a nice, white little town, a nice, white little fuckin' town."¹¹³ The main aim of this chapter will be to evaluate the claim by the Whites that it was a 'peaceful, bloodless settlement.' In both the plays, Davis develops the theme of independent and sustained Aboriginals resistance.

Davis' first play *Kullark* (1979) and his third play *No Sugar* (1985) narrate past events and experiences of the Aboriginal people. These events not only dominated, but also left an indelible mark on every Aborigine's life. The two plays form a single structure, two aspect of time related by a pattern of 'continuities and differences.' In *Kullark*, which means 'home,' covers the history of Aboriginal since 1929. Davis presents dramatically the three stages of the Yorlah family, starting from its first contact with the Whites. Yagan, Thomas Yorlah and Alec Yorlah, represent the three different generations that suffered at the hands of the Whites. Along with their suffering, Davis also depicts the change in attitude among

the Aborigines as time went by. Their gradual realisation that, they were or are no less than the Whites at any given period, is reflected in the play.

In *No Sugar* Davis, talks about the 'impact' of the contact. With time, the Government policies, not only created a social and cultural liabilities and limitations, but led also to a pervasive factor which raised the complex and multi-fold question of identity. The policy that Davis brings to the forefront is the policy of 'assimilation.' It is considered to be the most harrowing, ghastly and awful policy implemented during the time of colonisation. The subtle evaluation of the 'past' in both the plays provide important clues to the present condition of the Aborigines and their eagerness to know their true "history." Both the plays question the intentions of the Whites and their laws, which left the Aborigines, totally baffled. Throughout the plays, the Whites are presented as 'invaders' and 'intruders' who claimed the new land as their own.

In the plays, Davis evokes a pervasive sense of historical consciousness. As Joan Rockwell states, "fiction is not only a representative of social reality but also a necessary functional part of social of social control and also paradoxically an important element of social change."¹¹⁴ It gives a comprehensive history of the atrocities suffered by the Aboriginal people at the hands of the Whites. Davis presents and interprets the various social and political issues, which have been left uninterpreted and in the dark for a long time.

His narration of history in *Kullark*, is a "creative distortion in line with what the meaning of the event was."¹¹⁵ By inter-relating and intermixing fact and fiction, Davis provides veracity to Aboriginal history, which no catalogue of history could provide. Written to protest the commissioning of Dorothy Hewett's *The Man from Mukinupin* it was basically to 'set the

records straight.' When Western Australia was celebrating the sequicentary, *Kullark* represented 150 years of White oppression and exploitation of the Aborigines. The past that the Whites refuse to acknowledge, has become gradually, the lifeline of the Aborigines existence. The main contention is about the way it has been interpreted. *Kullark* presents an Aboriginal perspective on Western Australia's recent history.

Kullark: First Contact between the Aborigines and Whites

Like all his other plays, *Kullark* also is a multi-layered play. In *Kullark* the main action takes place against the backdrop of people living within their traditional culture, independent, willing to make concessions in respect of the arriving strangers. The play is broadly divided into two parts—Act One consists of 'The Steel and the Stone' and Act Two 'The British Years.' The action of the play moves from the kitchen of the modern Yorlah household, in Western Australia, around 1979, to a farm in the Pinjarra area in the 1830's. It then moves to the Moore River Settlement in the 1930's and to the Yorlah' chaff-bag humpy in 1945. All these areas are of historical importance to the Aborigines. The way time is illustrated in the play depicts the chaos within Aboriginal history. For Aboriginal history was written only in the 1980's when questions were raised about their identity. The way identity is treated in the play provides a metaphorical representation of history. In the play, Davis explores the relationship between the invader and the invaded. With time, the change in relationship led to the success of one, and the failure and subjugation of the other.

To begin with, the relationship between the Aborigines and the Whites was friendly. Before the permanent settlement by the Whites, the Aborigines had become accustomed to overseas intruders, whose stay had been temporary. Thus, when Yagan met Sterling and Fraser, it was of a

more curious and peaceful nature. For Yagan, Mitjitjiroo and Moyarahn, the Whites, "were so light skinned, the Nyungar believed them to have come from the traditional island of souls of their own ancestors and called them *djanga* (the dead)—their own dead relatives returning. Ironically, the coming of 'the dead' meant death to many Aborigines."¹¹⁶ They appeared like 'devils' come from the world of the dead. For Stirling the Aborigines appeared to be fascinated by the colour of the skin, 'believing it to be painted white.' Once the surprise ended Yagan and his men quite readily learned the pidgin form of English, but the English people refused to learn the Nyoongah language. The dialogues carried out in two different languages metaphorically express the one sided nature of adjustment. The Aborigines not only learned their language, but also developed a taste for their food and tried to understand their customs. This peaceful existence was for a short time for it is clearly visible that adjustment was made only from one side.

As Stirling states, "but care must be taken in dealing with them for they are vengeful and capricious and will not hesitate to resort to offensive weapons. The intention I adopted, therefore, in dealing with the native, was to avoid all possible means of quarrel with them, and the necessity consequent thereon of rendering them hostile to future settlers in revenge for the severe measures we should be obliged to take, if put to our defence...."¹¹⁷ Thus, they were taught the benefits of Western civilisation, with utmost care. In the beginning, they were neither exploited nor ill-treated by white settlers nor were they unjustly deprived from their land.

However, by the end of the second year settlement conflict arose. The Whites being ignorant about the Aborigines were careless in their dealing with them. As far as the Whites were concerned, the Aborigines possessed virtually nothing of value, except the land they occupied. They

were nomadic people, few in number, with neither religious belief nor any trace of social or political organisation, who neither wanted to buy nor to sell anything and have no idea of private property. They concluded that they were living in a 'state-of-nature.' Therefore when Captain Cook sailed into Australian waters in 1768 he was instructed to take possession of any country he found uninhabited. As a result, New South Wales was annexed. So when the First Fleet arrived in 1787 and discovered, that it had inhabitants, the government was instructed to 'conciliate' the inhabitants. For the truth was that Australia was occupied and that the Aborigines were not living in a 'state-of-nature.'¹¹⁸

As for the Aborigines, they wanted to continue to occupy their land. They literally lived of it. They used its flora and fauna for their survival. Unknown to the Whites, they had strong emotional and spiritual ties with the land. "Here were their sacred sites—the home of their Dreamtime ancestors, whose spirits still dwelt among their rocks, rivers and caves and natural features had been the setting for the great deeds of these ancestral heroes who might have given shape to the various clans."¹¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, to the Whites land was nothing more than an economic resource. They believed that as the Aborigines were not using the land properly, it ought to be transferred to the Whites who could 'improve' the land and produce commodities for the benefit of Australia and therefore would lead Australia into a more prosperous and civilised life. The contrast of ideas and beliefs led to conflicts. As the last lines of the song sung by Yagan reflects:

Then, oh *wirilo, wirilo*, sings
The *jungara* came across the deep blue waters
To rend my soul, to decimate and kill ¹²⁰

As depicted in the play, the Aborigines saw no reason as to why they should change their way of life or accept the beliefs and standards of Western civilisation, which radically differed from theirs. On the other hand, the Whites were unable or never attempted to understand the culture of the Aborigines. For they believed that the Aborigines would be in a better position if they abandon their customs and embraced those of the Whites. Gradually all this, led to the segregation of the Aborigines in their own land.

The struggle for food and against the White laws by Yagan, Yorlah and Alec represents three different generations under the White rule, each having to face White atrocities in some form or the other. With Yagan, one gets to see the double-sided nature of the Whites and their intentions. Yagan was an Aboriginal leader during the initial phase of White settlement of the Perth region. As Davis remarks, "Yagan was a natural born Aboriginal leader. He was a great orator among a people with a strong oral tradition. Don't be misled by his stumbling English. In his own language he was accomplished in law and religion and was politically astute. He was the master of ceremonies during the *corroborees* and acquainted himself with infinite dignity and grace. Possessed of an imposing physique, he was powerful and athletic. Above all, he was intellectually, morally and physically courageous."¹²¹

As depicted in the play, Yagan's sheep stealing incidents, which though seemingly minor, raise an important ideological issue that points out the differences between the Aborigines and the Whites laws. When Yagan defends his action by arguing that if the natives wildlife belongs to everyone so too should all the produce of the land, including the sheep. He fails to understand the inconsistency and hypocrisy of White notions of ownership. As Davis states, "Yagan must have been extremely puzzled by the events during the early years of cultural contact and the inevitable

clash. The Aborigines were at first friendly and accepted promises of friendship at face value. Although their own law was depreciated, they were promised the protection of British justice." It was only gradually that they realised that they had become intruders in their own homeland. "British friendship depended on this reversal of status being accepted without complaint." For according to the Whites 'stealing' is an act of defiance of their laws, therefore one should 'ask.' For if one is caught stealing, one will be punished and may be even killed. To Yagan, these laws made the White man appear mad to him. The discrimination against the Aborigines increased as the conflict increased. The Aborigines realised that the same British law that appropriated their land enabled them to be shot with impunity.

When Yagan decided to stand by Aboriginal law, and to enforce the principle of a life for a life, it appeared barbaric to the Whites. Following the change in attitude among the Aborigines, several clashes occurred where lives were lost for a mere sheep or a bag of flour. The reason was the one sided nature of the law. The death of Yagan's father, Mitjitjiroo, who apparently was killed because Yagan killed a white man, presents the Aborigines in a distinct, albeit temporary, disadvantaged position. However, there was no certainty that those who attacked were the ones to be punished. In a land defined as unoccupied, the Whites brought their law with them. Thus, no recognition was given to Aboriginal law. However, the new White laws could not bind Yagan. He continued to lead his life according to the Aboriginal law. He did not indiscriminately kill Whites as claimed by the Whites, but was simply seeking justice for the death of his fellow tribesman.

In this whole cat and mouse game, William Keats and his brother James treacherously kill Yagan. As Alice narrates the incident, "Yagan

invited them to his camp and shared his meal of damper with them. The elder boy held his rifle casually in his arms and waited for Yagan to move unsuspectingly into the line of fire, then shot him through the head. Another native, Heegan, attempted to spear the boy, but was shot in the head by the younger brother. As the two boys fled, now unarmed, a third native speared Yagan's killer while his brother escaped. A party of settlers returned to the site. Yagan and William Keats lay dead. While Heegan lay moaning, one of the settlers put a gun to his head and blew it apart. He then hacked off Yagan's head with a knife and skinned the body to souvenir his tribal marking."¹²² The reaction to the whole issue was as follows:

" To Mr. T. J. Pettigrew, FRCS,

Dear Sir,

I am sending you the head of an Aboriginal native of a tribe that frequents the recently formed Swam Colony. Known as Yagan, he was believed to have been a leader of his people and ever disposed to violent and criminal activity His nature was sullen, implacable and ill-tempered, in short a most complete and savage villain. His killer removed this head in order to obtain a reward of some thirty pounds. It was then smoked in the stump of the tree for three months, which has preserved, but caused the facial features to shrink, and the hair to become somewhat lank. I hope never the less that this piece will prove of phrenological interest and a worthwhile addition to your collection."¹²³

(Act One, Scene seven)

With the death of Yagan, the Whites took more stringent action. For the confrontation was no longer regarding right or wrong, it was a clash of 'steel and stone.' Wherever the Aborigines resisted, they were killed or imprisoned. The lesson learned was that men with guns could defeat men with spears. At the end of the day the Aborigines had little choice as they had to succumb to the demands of the settlers. With disposition from their

land, disease, and the virtual disappearance of their culture, the Aborigines were sent to Government settlements and reserves.

These reserves set up in order to 'civilise' the 'conquered people, lacked direction,'¹²⁴ and added a new twist to their suffering. The settlements attempted to convert, destroy, displace, isolate and eventually assimilate the Aborigines into the western mould of living. It was to 're-fashion' the Aborigines from their 'indolent wandering' and to rise 'these degraded people to the status of god-fearing, hard-working Christians.'

WHITE ACTOR: The new Government is tackling the issue with the committees, inquiries, legislations, regulations, investigations and a new government department, headed by the Chief Procter of the Aborigines.

NEVILLE: It is my opinion that these half castes can be made into useful workmen and women, but unfortunately they are most often found in communities whose influence is towards laziness and vice, and I think it is our duty not to allow these half-castes, whose blood is, after all, half British, to grow up as vagrants and outcasts as their mothers now are. A half-caste, who possesses few of the virtues and all of the vices of the Whites, grows up to be a mischievous and criminal subject. It may appear to be a cruel thing to take an Aboriginal child from its mother, but it is necessary in some cases to be cruel in order to be kind.¹²⁵

(Act One, Scene I)

The result of this led to the worst episode in Australian history later came to be known as the "stolen generation." The pain is reflected in the song sung by the black actor:

The child grew up and had to roam,
From the mission home, he loved so.
To find his mother he tried in vain,
Upon this earth they never met again.¹²⁶

As Davis states, "Separation from the district of their birth and loss of contact with their friends and relatives was terrifying to my people, and no single factor had more influence in the breaking the back of the Aboriginal resistant to European settlement than the establishment of ...penal settlement. The Abduction of Aboriginal children throughout the state and the isolation of adults at Moore river were so destructive of Aboriginals culture and cohesion that it took decades before new leaders could begin to emerge."¹²⁷ These settlements totally changed the whole social structure of the Aborigines.

By implementing innumerable laws, people were forced to stay in the settlements. Initially these settlements were for the mixed Aboriginal race, later it indiscriminately engulfed all the Aboriginals. When Thomas Yorlah was arrested under Section Twelve of the Aborigines Act, his line of defence was that he had only a 'quarter native blood' and his wife is 'half,' so what do the kids become. But without listening to his appeal he was removed to the Moore River settlement. For it is evident that the state played a key role in defining and determining who is and who is not an Aboriginal. This highly paradoxical situation made these reserves appear like 'concentration' camps with harsh rules that separated women and children from the men. Even if an Aboriginal were released from these reserves, a lot of rules bound their movements. They entered a world where their freedom ends at "six o'clock in the evening." This point will be discussed in more detail towards the end of the chapter

Following the Second World War, there was some sign of change in the Australian attitude. Along with the White soldiers, they were welcomed "to the land fit for heroes."¹²⁸ The parting note for Alec, Thomas Yorlah's son, is an honourable discharge and the citizenship right. As a parting advice, his colonel warns him: "You'll find it isn't enough, Alec. You'll have

to try harder, do better, prove yourself more than a White man. I'm ashamed to say, Alec that Australia is still a racist country, Oh, not in physical terms so much, but morally and mentally we're still a racist nation at heart. People will always treat you differently and find some excuse to justify their actions."¹²⁹ The message of the colonel highlights the "Australian story." Compared to his father, Alec situation has changed on the surface. As it is reflected, when Alec's mother Mary, informs that a tent has been 'fixed' for him. To this Alec replies "Army life, tent. Home life, tent. There'll be some changes so don't forget to look for that house."¹³⁰

Since the first interaction with Yagan, both the communities have covered a long path. Things have changed on both sides. However, the Aborigines still seem to be at the receiving end, a truth that the Whites have been denying not only to the Aborigines but also to themselves. The war, in another way, helped them to raise their voice that was lost in the whole confusion of White people's laws and legislations. It cleared the image of the White people 'being invincible.' Although the 'wetjalas' (the Whites) still prefer to keep the distance with the 'nyoongahs,' (Aborigines) they no longer could terrorise them:

POLICEMAN: I know your father, Tommy. Caused me quite a bit of trouble from time to time.

ALEC: Well.

POLICEMAN: Well, I hope you don't take after him.

ALEC: The ol' man always told me that you are pickin' on him for nothin'

POLICEMAN: As far as I am concerned, your father is a troublemaker.

ALEC: To you maybe.

POLICEMAN: And while we are on the subject, now you have got your citizenship rights, just make sure you stay from the reserve.

ALEC: Moving out next week, me and the family got ol' Beaumont's place just outa' town, so you can't tell me, I can't live with my family

POLICEMAN: I didn't say that. Just make sure that you tell the rest of the relatives to stay from the house.

ALEC: That's your job, not mine.

POLICEMAN: It's also my job to see that natives with citizenship rights live up to the privilege.

ALEC: What privileges?

POLICEMAN: To be the same as any white man.

ALEC: Some bloody privilege.

POLICEMAN: If you can't keep up the standard, you can always turn your rights in, you know Alec.

ALEC: That would bloody suit you, wouldn't it?

POLICEMAN: I wouldn't get too cheeky if I were you, Yolah. I thought the army would have taught you to have more respect for a uniform.

ALEC: One thing the army did learn me was to sorta' look past a uniform to the man inside. ¹³¹

(Act Two, Scene Five)

As Davis states, "there was a cost attached to the benefit bestowed by the citizenship rights. Once a citizen, you could not cohabit with reserve Aborigines, and could not even share a bottle of beer or wine with relations who did not hold citizenship. The law looked upon such sharing as supplying liquor and it carried a jail penalty and possible loss of rights. To many, the obtaining and carrying of an official recognition of citizenship was degrading at best they resented it, and at worst refused to obtain it."¹³²

The Aborigines were left in total confusion with these new rules and regulations that bound them up even while releasing them. Each new benefit had a long list of dos and don'ts, which left the Aborigines back at

where they started. Yagan and Yorlah basically fail to understand as to what it was that they did caused them to be hated so much and compelled to follow rules, which were in no way for their benefit. There was utter chaos and a lot of unnecessary bloodshed. For in spite of following the rules made by the Whites, there was a lot of uncertainty looming in the mind of the Aborigines. As Jamie states:

You know, Dad today everything in that courthouse was White. White walls, White judge...only one black spot in there...no, three-me in the box and two up in the gallery. Yeah, it's an awful bloody feeling' all up there on your own. ¹³³ There was a general sense of hopelessness and lack of spirit amongst the Aboriginal people.

No Sugar: Reflections on the Assimilation Policy

In *No Sugar*, Davis provides a microcosm view of how the Aborigines were reduced to a minority and marginal status. Set during the Depression of the 1930s it presents how the Assimilation policy totally left the Aborigines in a state of uncertainty. It was the last nail in the Aborigines' coffin. Interweaving fact and fiction, Davis manages to present the stark reality of the assimilation policy. As Mudrooroo states "the policy of assimilation attempted to submerge a dark minority, the remnants the victim of a brutal colonisation, in Anglo-Celtic and culture without questioning the rights to do so. A first step was to make all Aborigines ward of the state without any rights of citizenship. They were trainee citizens who had to earn their right to be Whites. But in tandem with assimilation went a racism that effectively broke the policy. Even when granted citizenship rights, Aborigines still found themselves discriminated against, still found that they were not accepted by the Whites majority. They were caught in a no-man's land between Black and White. To the Whites they were considered black and to the blacks they were considered quislings or 'jackies'."¹³⁴ Like the Yorlah family

in *Kullark*, the Millimura family in *No Sugar* also suffers under the policy of 'assimilation.'

The play explores the life of the Millimurra family who was forced to leave the Moore River Native settlement. It narrates the hardship that the settlement inhabitants endured, including the forceful eviction from places where they were residing for generations. The play opens with the Millimura family residing in the Well Aboriginal Reserve. Joe Millimurra is reading the lead story about Australia centenary celebration in the special edition of the *Western Mail* newspaper, which symbolises the voice of White power. Davis uses it as a metaphor; for the Aborigines the 'official history is oblivious to their reality and experience. Joe's hesitant reading of the words in the paper reinforces how alien the celebration and the White language is for the Aborigines:

Joe: The pag...page...page-ant pre-sented a picture of the Western Australia's pre-sent conditions of hopeful optimum-optimis-tic prosperity, and gave some idea of what, men mean when they talk about the soul of the nation.¹³⁵

(Act One, Scene Two)

Parallel with Cissie complaining to her mother about the pie: "Old Tony the dig always sells us little shrivelled ones and them wetjala kids big fat ones." Both the incidents reflect the attitude of the Whites towards the Aborigines. It exposes the hypocrisy and pomposity of the White position, which purports to be acting purely in the best interests of the Aborigines while, firmly maintaining the status quo of White supremacy.

When the Government implemented the policy of assimilation, its purported objective was the welfare of the Aboriginal people. In practical terms it meant "all Aborigines and part Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single

Australia and community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians."¹³⁶ But this was far from the truth. For the Aborigines were brought under the "Government of Western Australia, Fisheries, Forestry, Wildlife and Aborigines." It provides a linguistic reminder of the less-than-humane status of Aboriginal in the White official eyes. The interchange between Neville, whose title, Chief Protector of Aborigines, further confirms their status as object rather than subjects. The play also highlights the different treatment received by the Aborigines and the whites, which the government introduces, totally sidelining the Aborigines.

With innumerable webs of laws and legislations, the Aborigines found themselves in a soup. The rationing of food, scarcity of job and inadequate access to medical facility made life in these reserves worst then hell. As stated in the play, the dole for unemployed Whites is seven shillings per week, only two shillings and four pence is allowed for the 'native rations,'¹³⁷ which is cut even further, with the result that meat, soap are no longer provided. Ironically, tobacco is still included in the ration, which according to the White officials is a necessity and unlike soap is not a luxury item.¹³⁸ The scene closes, with Mr. Neal, Superintendent of the Moore River Native Settlement, advising that, "if you provide the native the basic accoutrements of civilisation you're half way to civilising him."¹³⁹ At this point, the question which comes to the surface is, what exactly do we mean by 'civilising,' for in the following scene, the Millimura family share their food with Frank Brown, a White, despite having little for themselves. When Frank cites the Millimura family's kindness and tries to justify his act of buying liquor to Jimmy, the J.P. is not prepared to listen to him. "it's my duty to protect natives and half castes from alcohol."¹⁴⁰ In the intervening

scene, one gets to see the irony in Jimmy's parody of the Negro minstrel show. They were treated like scum and at the slightest provocation were arrested. As Davis states, "The discriminatory laws have been a source of pain and aggravation to many Aboriginal families."¹⁴¹

The Whites avoided the Aboriginals like plague, they were considered the carriers of all fatal diseases. The irony is that these diseases were a gift of the White society to the Aboriginals. As Davis states, "In 1933, the entire population of Northern camp, eighty-nine people in all, had been arrested and interned at the Moore River Native Settlement. The move was a result of a complaint, made by the Northam Municipal Council that the Aboriginals were a health menace. There was an alleged scabies epidemic. Yet, on the arrival at the settlement, only one mother and her three children proved to have the parasites. Application of the lotion would quickly have eradicated the trouble."¹⁴² As depicted in the play the, whole of the Millimura family was evicted from the land that they had been residing in for generations. No investigation took place as to whether they were suffering from scabies or not. Laws were imposed indiscriminately and most of the Whites saw no difference in shooting a 'native' or shooting a wild dog. In the same way the Aboriginals were moved from one place to other as and when needed. It exposes the White prejudice, although purporting to be carried out in their interest of the Nyoongah's health. As Jimmy states, "You reckon blackfellas are bloody mugs. Whole town knows why we're goin.' Coz *wetjalas* (the Nyoongah word for Whites) in this town don't want us 'ere, don't want our kids at the school, with their kids, and old Jimmy Mitchell's tight 'coz they reckon Bert 'Awke's gonna give him a hidin' in the election."¹⁴³

In the new settlement, the 'cat-o-nine tails' ruled the Aboriginals. Mr. A. O. Neville, Superintendent of the settlement, ruled like the colonial

establishment. He was representative of bureaucracy, authority, cruelty, oppression from the outside society and there was nothing that those inside the settlement could do."¹⁴⁴ He had the backing of the whole White community, who approved his way of handling the Aborigines. He was free to apply whatever standards he chose, including the act of appropriating young Aboriginal women. In short, he was inviolable. When Mary tells Joe, her refusal to work in the hospital, for that implies, that Neal wants the girl for himself reflects the insensitiveness of the White. The Aborigines were considered as mere objects, with no say of their own. They were mere puppets at the hands of the Whites. In the meanwhile, the Aborigines frustration turned inward and they argued among themselves. They fail to cope with the confusion, and felt victim to alcohol and diseases.

A focal point of the play is the corroboree. In Act II, Scene VI, Billy, Joe, Jimmy and Bluey sit by the fire and paint themselves with 'wigli' in traditional fashion and sings the various songs from their regions. Sung in the original language, Davis was offering the reader a bilingual insight into Aboriginal Australia. It was a deliberate move by Davis to reserve the power structure that the Aboriginals faced when they were expected, to not only to understand, but also to read and write the language of the Whites. The song highlights the disappearance of the old way of life and also how in olden times heirlooms were passed from one generation to the next. It momentarily releases them from their white-allocated roles as police trackers, drunken tricksters and inadequate providers into the lost freedom of tribal manhood. The song also brings to light, Billy's story of how he became the 'black crow's of his tribe. The slaughter of his tribe shows the suffering that he had to go through and how it forced him into his subservient and treacherous way of life. His recounting of the 1926 Oombulgari Massacre, forms a link between the past and the present,

reminding the audience that 'protecting' and 'exterminating' the Aboriginals are merely the reverse sides of the same coin.

The play, like *Kullark* shows the survival of the Aborigines even in the most inhuman conditions. As Billy says "You song man, you fella dance men. This still your country... [Whites] make fences, windmill make'em road for motor car, big house, cut'em down trees [but it's] still your country!"¹⁴⁵ The message reflects the will to survive.

Davis' in both the plays conveys the fighting spirit of the Aborigines. The past acts as the support system for their survival. However, by the end of the assimilation period there arose the struggle for dignity and the quest for an identity. His quest for an identity is manifested with a lot of confusion. It needed to come to grips not only on the question of identity, but also to know, to understand, what can be the components of an Aboriginal identity. It is a problem, which has not been dealt with sincerity, have left the Aboriginals with a lot of unanswered questions. For they want to 'build' their own identity on their own terms and conditions and for this, the correct and truthful knowledge of the past is necessary. For identity is a social construct; its maintenance depends not only upon the individual, but also upon the readiness of the others to confirm the chosen identity of the individual. Although the Whites agreed to grant them land and citizenship, it was at the cost of slavery. Thus being deprived of their land they not only became dependent on the Whites for food, but their source of spiritual life was also affected. They were prevented from maintaining a world of meaning encompassed by their law, which touched every aspect of their life and provided a framework for their identity. Thus the sedimented knowledge about the inferiority of the Aboriginal world permitted social legislation, which in turn, was instrumental in destroying the Aboriginal people and their locus on identity. Through policies and laws, they were not

only segregated from the mainstream, but were presented in a negative light. Thus with the growing hostility he gradually faded to locate himself with environment which changed colours like the chameleon. He found himself in a no man's land where he was neither fit to throw the boomerang nor was he ready to hold the gun. Although both the plays end on a positive note, they do raise a lot of questions which are left unanswered till date. The song sung by the actor reverberates the plight of the Aborigines:

You the once smiled a friendly smile
Said we were kin to one another,
Thus with guile for a short while
Became to me a brother.

Then you swamped my way of gladness
Took my children from my side,
Snapped shut the law book on my sadness
At Yirrkala's plea denied

I remember Lake George hills,
The thin stick bones of people;
Sudden death and greed that kills,
That gave you church and steeple....

You murdered me with rope, with gun,
You massacred my enclave,
You buried me deep on McLarty's run,
Flung into a common grave.

Then you propped me up with Christ,
red Tape
Tobacco, grog and fears,
Then disease and lordly rape
Through the brutish years.

Now you primly say you're justified
And sing of a nation's glory;
But I think of a people crucified,
The real Australian story.¹⁴⁶

CHAPTER IV

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY IN *THE DREAMERS*

The tribes are all gone,
The boundaries are broken:
Once we had bread here,
You gave us stone.

We are tired of the benches,
Our beds in the park;
We welcome the sundown
That heralds the dark.

White lady methylate
Keep us warm and from crying.
Hold back the hate
And hasten the dying.

The tribes are all gone
The spears are all broken;
Once we had bread here
You gave us stone.¹⁴⁷

(Act One, Scene Nine)

The song laments the suffering, misery, deprivation and emotional starvation that the Aborigines have gone through in the last two decades, in the hand of the Whites. The saddest part is that misery, harshness, starvation and privation is still ever present in Aboriginal society further complicating the matter. Sung by a group of tribal children, held in chains, it shows a dreary picture of the Wallitch family in particular, and the Aborigines in general.

Roughly around the same time that *The Dreamers* (1982) was invited to be performed at Portsmouth, England in May 1987, the re-enactment of the launch of the British First Fleet took place. Davis' play provided "a suitable ironic counterpoint to the beginning of what Aboriginal Australians

term 'the invasion' by highlighting the poverty and dispossession which afflicts many contemporary Aborigines as a result of that historical event."¹⁴⁸ As one viewer stated, "Since the play itself, which embodies much humour as well as good theatre, also says something politically and socially penetrating about Australia, it will create at least an image of our country overseas as any other aspect of our external relations."¹⁴⁹

The play reflects a more developed historical consciousness based on the quest for an identity. Although written in 1982, it is the mirror image of today's condition also. It reflects the cultural conflict that the Aborigines are going through. Some want to return to their old way of living, while others want to participate fully while still attempting to become acceptable in the white world. The play presents the Aborigines as a de-tribalised society. The main highlight of the play is the breakdown of traditional life and the feeling of alienation from all quarters of society. As Gilbert states, "The Aboriginal people have, since their de-tribalisation, been indoctrinated with the handout system: they are there only when the boss calls, they will earn only when the boss dictates. They will live and construct their society only as the Europeans decides."¹⁵⁰

It presents the shadowy future that they are facing today. Some of the Aborigines want to retain some of their values and structure and some of them want to participate fully in mainstream Australia, by consciously or unconsciously embracing some of the White customs. Divided into 'beeruk'-summer and 'moorga-'winter, Davis focuses on the consequences of the contact and impact on the Aborigines.

With the policy of assimilation, majorities of the Aboriginal people were forced to transform and acclimatize themselves to the changing Australian society. From semi-nomadic food gathering and hunting tribes,

they changed into sedentary families. Followed by a change in their 'ethno-genetic' make-up, most of the Aborigines today are culturally and genetically different from the Aborigines at the time of first contact. The policy of assimilation has totally isolated them from their roots. Worrui's mistaking of Darren, the White friend of Meena, as an 'evil spirit,' though treated at the time, as a joke, was in fact a sarcastic remark on the past.¹⁵¹ The Whites were indeed 'evil spirits' destroyed their Aboriginal society by creating a complex social system, which left the Aborigines firmly at the bottom of the social ladder.

As reflected in *No Sugar*, the whole of the Aboriginal society went through a considerable change. The Aborigines found themselves for the first time 'categorized as a unified group' by the Whites. It was assumed that "Aborigines could be transformed and made more 'like us,' by careful tutelage and guidance. It was also assumed that Aborigines, after making the transition from 'primitive' to 'civilized,' would then be rewarded by being made citizens. One by one, Aborigines would leave behind their affinity to kin and country and, as individuals, each would take on the mutual obligations and responsibilities of citizenship. It was to be a prerequisite of citizenship that the individual must demonstrate that he or she was in every way 'like us' except for skin colour."¹⁵² In this whole process of transforming them 'like us,' the Aborigines were caught in two worlds. This ambiguity and conflict regarding 'colour' is reflected in *Kullark* statement when Rosie talks about Mary, who is married to a White:

Rosie: Oh yeah, every year she brings me tea towels, and every year she tells me to keep 'em nice and clean. Just because she's married White she tries to think White, she'll always be black. She's blacker than me.

(Act One, Scene Four) ¹⁵³

Followed by Worru faith in the Nyoongah doctor further reflects the 'mistrust' that the Aborigines have for the Whites. As Roy says in Act 2, Scene II, *Nyoongahs* never went to *wetjalas* doctors in them days. They were frightened of them.¹⁵⁴ As Kevin Gilbert states, "he is a victim: a victim of colonization, a victim of government policies that have been wrong and a victim of discrimination."¹⁵⁵ This element of 'mistrust' and 'fear' in Rosie and Roy reflects the complexities that the Aborigines are facing.

Confusion about Aboriginal Identity

The whole confusion lies in the destruction of a society, which was totally different from the Whites. The Aborigines were a semi-nomadic people. Their society was based on 'egalitarianism.' It was largely non-competitive, and the social organization was based on sharing food and possession. They gathered food and created objects. Unlike the Whites, they worked only when necessary, not in order to 'get ahead.' There was no single Aboriginal 'nation,' or language, or religion. Instead there were hundreds of 'tribes,' of languages, and sacred legend—cycles or 'Dreaming.' Unlike the Whites, the world of the Aboriginal was not 'global' or 'national,' but was 'overwhelmingly local.'

They put great energy into their religious ceremonies. Most tribes believed the world was made not by a single God, but by a number of their 'ancestral creation-spirits during the primal creation period.' They believed in re-incarnation. To the Whites, the holy places of the Aboriginal were not to be taken seriously as 'they were not man-made, but it seemed, mere swathes of nature.' To the Aborigines the holy places of the whites seemed trivial because their shrines were 'merely man-made.' For a long time the Aborigines failed to understand the "story of the stable."¹⁵⁶

To the Aborigines, the land was their 'spirit country.' They had an earthbound philosophy. "The earth gave life to a man; gave him his food, language and intelligence; and the earth took him back when he died. A man's 'own country,' even an empty stretch of spinifex, was itself a sacred ikon that must remain unscarred. The Aborigines, were people who trod lightly over the earth; and the less they took from the earth, the less they had to give in return. They never understood why the missionaries forbade their innocent sacrifices. They slaughtered no victims, animals or humans. Instead, when they wished to thank the earth for its gifts, they would simply slit a vein in their forearms and let their own blood spatter the ground."¹⁵⁷ For according to the Aborigines, "to wound the earth is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you. The land should be left untouched: as it in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence."¹⁵⁸

With the advents of the Whites, 'power counted and not philosophy.' The views of the Whites and the Aboriginal regarding land were poles apart. The Aborigines lived in awe of environment, the Whites on the other hand treated it as 'adversary to be subdued.' When the Whites moved into areas that predominantly belonged to the Aborigines, they restricted the Aborigines 'access to essential food and shelter and sacred places.' Their life was turned topsy-turvy. Their values and their social culture were uprooted. They were 'dispersed' from their lands and were reduced to 'hangers-on' of white settlements. The following table presents the different values between the two communities, which reflects how hard it must have been for the Aborigines to adjust themselves with the changing environment. However it should be remembered that, the values as listed below would not be applicable to all Aborigines and White Australians as there are exceptions to this general type.

Values concerning	Whites	Aborigines
Possessions	Acquisitive, Accumulate	Share, Use
Environment	Exploit	Adapt to
Land	Own, Secular	Related to, Sacred
Time	Linear, historical	Cyclic, Mythical
Innovation	Commanded	Condemned
Changes	Approved, Desired	Disapproved Status quo
Reality	Material	Spiritual
Orientation	Future	Past
Interaction	Competition	Co-operation
Rights and obligations	Individual rights	Kin obligation
Relationship	Limited	Extensive
Basic Unit	Individual	Society
Society	Diverse	Unified
Status	Stratified	Egalitarian

Source: "From Dreamtime to Nightmare: The Voices of 168 Aboriginal (ex-) prisoners in New South Wales," ANZFS, vol.23, no.3, November 1987, p.108.

As reflected in the table, the Aborigines were seesawing between the values of two worlds. This state of affairs, which was forced on them by discriminatory practices and by laying innumerable barriers in the social, economic and education front have led to the consequent devaluation of individuals. As stated by a former Aboriginal prisoner, "I do not plan for the future. I do not plan for tomorrow. I do not know what I am going to do in

an hour's time. To plan ahead is useless, because there is no future...for me."¹⁵⁹

Unlike the Yorlah family in *Kullark* and the Millimura family in *No Sugar*, the Wallitch family in *The Dreamers* have come a long way. While the settlement of *No Sugar* gets replaced by the fringe dwelling in *The Dreamers* and food is no longer rationed nor does one's freedom end at 'six in the evening,' there prevails still a sense of incompleteness. Although, the Wallith family has more material possession than the Millimura family, it has lost its most precious possession—its spirituality. It is this vacuum which if filled will solve the innumerable problems not only of the Aboriginals but also of Australia in general.

Today, a large part of the Aboriginal population lives in urban areas or in adjacent country towns, which are far removed from Aboriginal traditions and culture. Their contemporary situation, with specific problems, is a consequence of their having a past that is still 'present' for them. The Wallitch family lives in the suburbia. As Dolly complains, "I wish we'd a decent place to live in. No hot water, no locks on the doors, worse than livin' in a bloody camp."¹⁶⁰ Their house is minimally furnished, with an old laminex table, chairs and vinyl couch. Even the basic necessity of day to day living is not available. The kitchen' living room is shabby and untidy, dirty dishes piled up on the sinks, rubbish, bottles, cigarette packets on the floor. Clean clothes are draped over a chair in front of a single bar radiator. They do not have hot water or soap, which is reflected in the quarrel between Shane and Meena. The men sit 'lethargically,' while the mother Dolly rushes around doing the household chores. The portrayal of the Wallitch family depicts a socio-economically-deprived family. Nowhere does one get to see the rich cultural heritage that they once owned.

However with White oppression and the forceful imposition of a alien culture, the quest for an identity has become a complex multi-faceted problem for the Aboriginal people today. With the younger generation virtually knowing nothing about their rich cultural heritage the people are further separated from their roots. Compelled to follow a culture that was not theirs to begin with, and which made fun of their tribal culture, Aboriginal culture was slowly dying out. Granny Doll in *Barungin* laments:

[pointing at the didgeridoo] That's all *Nyoongahs* got now, and that don't really belong to us. Dances are gone, laws gone, lingos just about gone, everything finished.

Meena: Aw, Mum, things change.

Peegun: We got reggae, rock, soul, lots of things¹⁶¹

(Act Two, Scene Three)

With innumerable laws and legislations, the Whites were able to subjugate the Aborigines and leave them at a dead end:

You have turned our land into a desolate place.
We stumble along with a half White mind
Where are we?
What are we?
Not a recognized race
There is a desert ahead and a desert behind¹⁶²

(Act One, Scene Nine)

As Davis states, "people have no control over their own lives, and no means of breaking out of the abject condition."¹⁶³ However one thing which hasn't changed much is the relationship between the law and the Aboriginal people. Although they no longer have a 'chief protector,' their constant brush with the law shows the stereotypical image that the White man has about them. By the time Eli comes home from the 'gaol' she had

lost count of the number of times she had been incarcerated. As she humorously replies to Roy: "Yeah, Sergeant thought about puttin' a brass nameplate on the door for me; Elijah William Zakariah Wallitch."¹⁶⁴

As reflected in *Kullark*, the law discriminates against the Aboriginals. As Peter states, "Look, Nyoongah's buy their grog from *Wetjalas*, they break the law and they get jugged by *wetjalas*. The lawyer's White, the cops are White, the magistrate's White, the warden's White: the whole box and dice is White. Put a Nyoongah against all them. I tell you we ain't got a bloody chance."¹⁶⁵ The reaction to all the policies and the laws have left them in a state of confusion, where they are not able to either go back to their "old ways," nor are they fully accepted in the modern society. Their present is still bad and their future is uncertain.

Confusion about the Future

The squalor and the meaninglessness of contemporary life and the gradual degradation of Aboriginal culture, gets worst. In the two earlier plays, one witnessed the gradual disappearance of the Aboriginal self. The Government reserve was like placing a hot stick in the center of ants' nest. It sent the Aborigines 'rushing to the mound to escape the heat.' Unfortunately, the land around the 'nest' was already 'occupied.'

When one looks into the character of Uncle Worrui, one gets to see the pain, decay and uncertainty that the Aboriginal people are going through. He symbolizes the rich past of the Aboriginals, which the younger generation is not aware. He acts as a medium to communicate between the past and the present. He represents one of the world's oldest cultures, practically their relationship to the land and he recalls with nostalgia the rich, glorious past. In order to provide a better future he is struggling to keep it alive. It is a treasure, which cannot be cast aside. When he narrates the stories, the song and dance to the younger generation, they are as

ignorant about it as the Whites. As Davis states, "Worru fascinated me. Although I was only fourteen years of age and he was a man of at least forty-five, he came from the Northwest, the same area where my dad came from and he was of the same tribe. I used to spend many hours talking to him: he used to sing Aboriginal songs and I used to write down the Aboriginal words.... He was a remarkable man. He could track things, which I couldn't see. He could also throw a spear forty or fifty feet, deadly accurate, and even a stone thrown at a bird, seven times out of ten, he would bring the bird down, Worru. He had a beautiful voice and to hear him sing in his own language...is lost because he has been dead for many years. His songs were something for Australian culture to remember."¹⁶⁶

In the play, Worru personifies the last link with the tribal past. He laments the degradation of the Aboriginal society at the hands of the Whites and the younger generation's total ignorance about their heritage and history. His illness and eventual death personifies the condition of the Aboriginal today. When Jack Davis meets Worru, after fifteen years in Perth, "his eyesight had gone, he was dressed in hand-me-down clothing, he had taken to drink."¹⁶⁷ Worru's life reflects the glorious Aboriginal past, the shabby present, followed by an unpredictable future.

As the play proceeds, one is exposed to the communication gap between Uncle Worru and the Wallitch family. Worru recalls the carefree days (briefly in Act 1, Scene 1) especially the trek from Northam to the Moore River Settlement; a tribal family appears singing a tribal song, with the man leading and carrying weapons, the women and children following with bags, 'kulumans and fire.' As they disappear, Worru recites a poem, which reveals the main theme of the play:

Now we who were there
Who were young,

Are now old and live in suburbia,
And my longing is an echo
A re-occurring dream,
Coming back along the track
From where the campfires used to gleam.¹⁶⁸

The poem recited by Worrु highlights the plight of the Aboriginal people today. In the play when Worrु rises up and begins a drunken stumbling version of a half-remembered tribal dance, Peter turns the volume up and continues his disco. Worrु pushes him aside and continues to dance, until his feet get entangled and he falls heavily to the amusement of Eli and Roy. Both the situations present the sorry state of affairs that the Aboriginals are in today. The play in other words showcases the wealth of a society whose existence is at stake. With the songs and dances, the play becomes a life portal of the Aboriginal society.

Through the effective use of music and dances, Davis presents the degradation of the 40,000 year-old Aboriginal culture. The counter-discourse between the past and the present is tackled by the way the younger generation looks at Worrु and his knowledge. They fail to relate with his thinking. He is looked upon more or less, as an antique. The only person who enjoys his tales and realizes their importance is Dolly. Both of them go down the memory lane and recall their days when tribal life was still to be seen:

Dolly: ...And you know that was the last time I saw a corroboree at Moore River.

Worrु: [excitedly] *kia, kia, the Yongarah dance, the Waitj dance, the karda, the yahllarah, the middar, the nyumby, the nyumby...Yuart, they all finish now, all gone.*

Dolly: Never mind, Uncle you're still with us you're *Moorditj*, you gonna live to be one hundred.¹⁶⁹

(Act One, Scene Seven)

The younger generation fails to communicate with Worru. As it gets reflected in the conversation between Darren, Shane and Meena, when Darren meets Worru for the first time:

DARREN: Hey, that old man, is he for real?

SHANE: He sure is.

DARREN: How old is he?

SHANE: Must be nearly a hundred.

MEENA: Nah, no he's not, he's about eighty.

DARREN: What language did he talk?

MEENA: Oh that's just *Nyoongah* talk

DARREN: Can you talk it?

SHANE: Nah, not really.

DARREN: What did he mean by noon...noon...

MEENA: *Nyoondiak*? That means brains.

DARREN: What for eyes?

[MEENA AND SHANE look at each other blankly]

MEENA: I dunno

[She giggles]

Shane: Don't ask me, I wouldn't have a clue. I know what *Wetjala* is, that's you!¹⁷⁰

(Act One, Scene Six)

Although some traditional bush food is consumed at times, the staple diet consists of 'bread, butter and tea.' Tinned meat has replaced kangaroo meat. White flour and bread have replaced the use of seeds. Soft drinks and alcoholic drinks have become a part of their staple diet. The change in the food habits illustrates the drastic change that the Aborigine went through. In the past they were happy and content living in the bush,

but with the advent of the Whites and with each passing year, they were engulfed by new policies and laws, which acted as salt to their wound heart. As a result they were seldom integrated into the White 'community' nor were they any longer able to live by the own values.

This was followed by a change of relationship between the young and the old, within the society. The younger Aborigines who remained in contact with the Whites were more conscious about their 'negative' picture passed to them by the Whites in the form of school textbooks. They had no sense of now, past, or future. As reflected in Act I, Scene VII, when Meena receives a 'ten page assignment on Aborigines,' her treatment and reaction reflected the growing distance between the past and present among the Aborigines:

Meena: I just worked out something amazing: you know how Aborigines have been in Australia for at least forty thousand years, right?

Roy: So they reckon.

Meena: And if there was three hundred thousand here when Captain Cook came, that means that...that ...hm, hang on, hang on...

Shane: Come on, what's the big news then?

Meena: Shut up you ...listen...forty thousand years plus, three hundred thousand people, that means that over twelve million Aborigines have lived and died in Australia before the white man came...

Shane: Oh boy, they must've shot a lotta 'roos and ate a lotta dampers.

Meena: They didn't shoot them.

Shane: I know! Three dampers a day for forty thousand years, how many's that, Pop?

Roy: I dunno, better ask your mother.

Dolly: Me, I wouldn't have a clue.

Meena: You don't count it up like that, slowly. Anyway, flour is white man's food. Aborigines used grass seeds. [Reading from a book] Jam seeds, wattle seeds, and-

Dolly: [removing the damper from the oven] OK. Who wants a feed instead of just talkin' about it? ¹⁷¹

(Act One, Scene Seven)

The problem faced by the Aboriginals is the difficulty in adjusting with the 'sedimented' lifestyle. When Meena receive a ten-page assignment on Aborigines, she is completely taken aback by the facts. The information she receives is from the textbooks written by Whites. The incident shows the dilemma that the Aboriginals are facing. Another incident which illustrates this further occurs, when Dolly warns Meena about her going out with boys, for she does not wish Meena to walk "around with babies."¹⁷² She wants Meena to "get a decent office job or become a nurse."¹⁷³

AS Kevin Gilbert states "this education or rather re-education of the Aboriginal Australian must include a barrage of intensive propaganda about Australian history, identity and culture to counteract the negative material that is constantly raining from the major society at present...Aborigines should change this situation. Aboriginals should be building a modern culture, something that is meaningful in today's context. This radical re-education of the Aboriginal by Aboriginal and the direction is vital."¹⁷⁴ The widening communication gap within the Aborigines community reflects the displacement, alienation of the self, negative perception of one's past, traditional and cultural incompetence; it reflects the heritage which 200 years of colonization have left them with.

It speaks about the innumerable challenges and choices, including whether to rebel, to conform, and to fight or to compromise with the present situation. Although social conditions have changed radically and

the Aboriginals have been able to move from the narrowness of their immediate past the shadow of the European -induced past still rests heavily upon many minds. In the name of reconciliation, disillusionment, poverty, drinking, unemployment and lack of education still engulfs majority of the Aboriginals. Their aspirations are restricted, not by the limits of need, but by the limits on their hopes.

Denied a common Australian identity, they seek an Aboriginal one. Their ignorance and confusion is a condemnation of the rest. Thus the difficulties of identity and definition include that of how to regard such people, who have some Aboriginal ancestry and have either forgotten it or wish to do so or have no particular reason to be highly conscious of it. The whole situation is demoralizing to the individual. The question of reconciliation with the Aboriginal peoples remains outstanding, because it affects the foundation of the Australia State and conflicting cultural values. For the Aboriginal, despite the democratic foundation of the Australian State and its desire to incorporate all its ethnic components on an egalitarian basis, this State is a manifestation of colonization, whose consequence remains to this day, notably through the limitation of their land rights, the tragedy of the abducted children, cultural clashes and highly precarious living conditions outside the majority of Australians. Thus the resolution of conflict is dependent on negotiation on equal terms between Australian government and those who originally possessed the continent, the eminent owners of Australian lands, of which they have been dispossessed. The missing link is yet to be traced, which will add a sense of completeness to the Aboriginal survival. The play ends with a ray of hope as Shane, receives the Aboriginal heirloom from Worrui, which symbolises the existence of the Aboriginal culture.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The significant political and socio-economic changes that have occurred in Australia in the last 213 years have clearly influenced the Aborigines. Their marginal status within the Australian society points out to the ways in which the 'past' has played an essential role in moulding their identity. The process of transformation and adaptation was not a smooth one. The Australian paradox is that it refuses to accept its past mistakes and as such often repeats them.

The time has come for Australia to reassess its attitude towards its 'original' settlers. An identity gulf has long existed between the Aborigines and the Whites. Different versions of what happened in the past continue to be used as a political weapon. Australia should try to come out of its jaundiced view regarding the Aborigines. For the Aborigines do not want 'charity' but demand 'justice.' As Xavier Herbert states, "Until we give to the black man just a bit of the land that was his, and give it back without strings, to snatch it back, without anything but generosity of spirit in concession for the evil that we have done to him—Until we do that we shall remain what we have always been so far, a people without integrity, not a nation, but a community of thieves."¹⁷⁵

Although, attempts are being made to ease the centuries old conflict, beginning from the way history is taught, one should remember that the 'truth' about history needs sustained understanding. For it is equally important, on the other hand, to establish how much of the past needs to be taught. To both the Aborigines and the Whites, history is viewed from different angles. For the Aborigines it is about their subjugation in their own land and for the Whites it is about their triumph in a new land. The real

problem is the difficulty experienced by both the Aboriginals and the Whites in narrating their past, which has to keep pace with the rapidly changing Australian society and its needs. In other words, "history is the past reconstructed for an ever increasing series of present. Its importance lies not in its exposition of 'truth,' but as a device, which orders society and gives meaning to a collectivity."¹⁷⁶ In the case of the Aboriginals, it helps them in their quest for an identity. The need of the hour is to remove the veil of dust from the musty records, and to 'rewrite' Australian history without any prejudice, but with pride and honesty.

Changes are taking place within the Australian society to rectify their mistakes. The Government has introduced a number of policies with all good intentions, for the betterment of the Aboriginals. However, the point is that these policies are very different from the real requirements. White Australia is yet to accept that Aboriginals are at par with them. When it tells Aboriginals to adopt White ways and manners, they should also attempt to adopt some of theirs. As mentioned earlier, there has always remained a great gap between the 'purpose' and 'implementation' of the policy.

In the case of the assimilation policy, it was 'theorised' that the Aboriginal people would always be 'resistant to civilising influence'. As Bleakley illustrates, "it was not so much a matter of the colour of the skin as the colour of the mind." Even when attempts were being made by the Aboriginals to 'locate' themselves in the White world, they faced hostility and rejection. The policy of integration also remained unsuccessful as the policy failed to address the main concerns of the people. With uncertainty visible in the horizon, the Aboriginals are not sure regarding the reconciliation policy. Although the Australian Government and people have shown tremendous interest in solving the Aboriginal 'problem,' the refusal to say 'sorry,' on behalf of the Government and the people, has

raised a lot of questions. Some of the Whites view the idea of an apology as a kind of "catharsis, an expiation of guilt and shame they feel about their forebears, and indeed an act of self-hatred and abasement." This refusal reflects the hypocrisy and commitment or rather the lack of it, of the government and Australian people to give back to the Aborigines what has been rightfully theirs.

The Aborigines do not want to be left behind in Australia's march to 'progress.' They want to break the stereotype image of being dirty, lazy, stupid and immoral people. Often stated by the Whites as 'people without purpose and identity, the Aborigines want to re-affirm their identity that has been 'debased' and 'demeaned' by the Whites. If given the chance they are in no way inferior to their fellow White citizens. For they want to be affirmed, recognised as Australians who are proud of their roots. They no longer want to be seen as a 'different people' who require special attention. They want what is rightfully theirs, and definitely not on the grounds of sympathy.

For the problem is not only how 'others see us, but how we see ourselves.' When the Aborigines came in contact with the Whites, they thought the "White man riding a horse was a beast with two heads, one in front and one on top. Others thought bullocks were the White man's women, or saw the Whites ships as birds or fish." In the same manner, the Whites considered the Aborigines as "brutes, monkeys, savages, with not a single pleasant feature on their face." The Whites failed to understand that to the Aborigines considered them as 'invading robbers.' The Whites implemented their traditions and customs, making the Aborigines 'guests' in their own land.

The emergence of contemporary Aboriginal literature, is an outcome of this 'tradition.' As the Aborigines realised, their 'spear' was no competition to the Whites man's 'gun.' They then started using the 'pen' as a weapon, although it was forcefully thrust into their hands initially as part of the White man's efforts to 'civilise them.'

Aboriginal writing has two purposes—political and social. Through their writing they were able to express their resistance to settler repression, reconciliation with settler culture, celebration of Aboriginal culture, a reconfiguring of aspects of traditional culture and language and testifying to community and cultural survival,' are the main themes of Aboriginal writing. Their literature acted as the catalyst agent between the two communities. Through their writing, they were able to present to the world the true picture about their sufferings. The Whites were also able to clear a lot of their doubts regarding the Aborigines. As for the Aborigines, they were clear about what they wanted. It helped in their quest for an identity. It also gave the Aboriginals a broader perspective about their past, their present status and future hopes and aspirations. It gave them a sense of achievement, along with a sense of dignity and pride in their community.

In the writings of Jack Davis, one gets a clear view of the vicissitudes in the Aboriginal quest for an identity. Through his writing, and more specifically through his plays, one gets to see the rich, affluent, vibrant, colourful culture of the Aborigines. It acts as the 'silver lining' in the dark clouds of uncertainty and confusion. With music, dance, folklore and Aboriginal language, Davis' plays become a treat for both the reader and the audience. In his plays, Davis tries to strike a balance by trying to evaluate the 'past' events that shaped Aborigin and Whites relationships. He questions 'history' and tries to find an answer regarding the Aboriginal quest for an identity. One also gets to feel the pain, suffering, frustration,

heartburn and anger that the Aborigines have undergone. The most fascinating thing about his plays is that they it always ends on an optimistic note and leaves the reader and the audience with a dream, a desire for a better future.

Although White Australia is slowly coming to terms with the Aboriginal cause, it still has a long way to go. The process of understanding and appreciating Aboriginal people and their culture is witnessed in Australian society today. In this process of understanding, both the parties will gain in building an Australia that will truly be a 'unique' country. For what the Aborigines want is to re-affirm their identity, which for so long has been defined by the Whites. What the Aborigines are longing for is to find a place for their 'socio-cultural' life in the 'technologically-oriented' society. With the world entering a new, previously unimaginable realm of development, there is a growing need to maintain and defend the basic markers that give meaning and structure to identity. For without an identity, one always finds oneself in a vacuum and above all, in life the "I" acts as the guiding soul to life.

The call for reconciliation between the two people is best reflected in the poem *Integration* by Jack Davis with which this study concludes. And it is this process, if continued, that will bring peace to this old culture.

Let these two worlds combine,
Yours and mine.
The door between us is not locked,
Just ajar.
There is no need for the mocking
Or the mocked to stand afar
With wounded pride
Or angry mind,
Or to build a wall to crouch and hide,
To cry on sneer behind.

This is ours together,
This nation
No need for separation.
It is time to learn.
Let us forget the hurt,
Join hand and reach
With hearts that yearn.

Your world and mine
Is small.
The past is done.
Let us stand together,
Wide and tall
And God will smile upon us each
And all
And everyone.¹⁷⁷

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CONCLUSION

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