

The "Dance" as a metaphor of Emancipation in Australian Aboriginal Drama

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Twenty first century Australia is one of those countries in the world which can be proud of its multicultural society, comprising people of many different nationalities. Not always was the population of the Australian continent so varied. The original inhabitants of Australia, the Aboriginal people had lived there for 40,000 years before the arrival of the British colonists. After 1788, when the colonization process started there was an influx of people from Britain and Ireland who represented an almost homogenous group of people of Anglo-Celtic origin. These colonizers eventually became the majority in the society and constituted the "White" population, as opposed to the Aboriginal people who were then pushed to the fringes of minority. This majority later did not want anyone who did not fall into the category of being "White" to settle in Australia, thus preserving its single national culture for a long time.

A series of complex acts, regulations and policies were introduced into the Australian legal system in 1901 collectively known as the White Australian Policy. Its original goal was to prevent non-European immigration to Australia, thus helping maintain Australia's "Whiteness". After the policy was introduced, Australia was a far cry from being a place of mingling of many different cultures as it is now. Rather it was a racist state treating both, the people already living there as well as the immigrants, on the basis of their origin. Despite being the original inhabitants of the continent, the Aboriginal people suffered a great deal in the aftermath of the laws and other policies introduced by the white colonizers. The current issues of domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction and child abuse among the Aboriginal people are the reminders of that era of Australian history in which the laws of the White Australian Policy were in force.

What is to be noted is that as an invader/settler society, Australia's artistic culture has been deeply influenced by its particular experience of colonization. Thwarted by the onslaught of the colonizers, these minority groups initiated a mode of expression known

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as the Indigenous literature in English. It began as the tenor of an Indigenous minority living on the fringes of the majority community. In the words of Mudrooroo, "it was the writing of oppressed people that until the last two decades were completely under the heel of the oppressor" (33). The majority inflicted their superiority over the Aboriginals even to the point of writing on their behalf. The Aboriginals were thought as intellectually sterile to project their condition by themselves. Therefore whatever was thought or understood about the Aborigines came from the pen of the "Whites". They could mutilate the facts as per their convenience to rationalize their colonizing mission. The Aboriginals were often misrepresented in the literature by the colonizers as lazy, inconsequential, drunken, grotesque and filthy. Their silence became a significant weapon in the hands of the "Whites", who played with it to the extreme level of falsity. They were declared primitive and savage not worthy of human life and existence. This necessitated the birth of an authentic voice that would present Aboriginal reality to the outside world without any bias or prejudice. In the words of Mudrooroo, "Indigenous literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the invaders of our land. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood" (2). Indigenous literature in Australia sprang out as a means of counter-discourse against the canonized writings about Aboriginals and Aboriginality. Indigenous writers wrote out of a strong urge to re-write their own histories and present their predicament to the outside world both within Australia and outside. Their writing was a means of catharsis for their grieved soul which was doubly chained; firstly by the invasion of their land and secondly by the falsity of discourse propagated by the white writers.

"Discourse" is a Foucauldian term which means a terrain of thought, a system of knowledge, and a particular kind of language which allow some things to be said and disallow some others. It is the context of speech, representation, knowledge and understanding. It is the context in which meaning itself is produced. Foucault's major contribution has been to show how these discourses condition people's life and inform their thinking. By focusing on power as central to the human condition, he argued that human relations, science, institutions are all caught up in a struggle for power and discourse is a terrain on which the struggle is carried out. The person/ institution that control discourse also control the subjects in those discourses.

Aboriginal writer and activist Jackie Huggins states a case for recording oral histories of indigenous people in *Writing My Mother's Life*:

Aboriginal people did not write down their knowledge, thoughts and experiences. These were passed on in the normal course of social life, by word of mouth supplemented by graphic representations with regionally and socially coded and variable meaning. (37)

Huggins statement reflects upon the oral tradition of Aboriginal art which leads to a demand on the part of the writers to document these verbal narratives into written medium. During the 1960s Aboriginals in Australia demanded the right to self-determination and land rights. These demands were based on historical claims that rejected and re-wrote settler histories of "virgin lands," and discovery narratives by the European settlers. The movement was accompanied by a large-scale production of Aboriginal histories, memoirs, literary texts, documentaries on the pre-settler history of the country. It was an attempt to draft their own histories, in their own languages and narrative modes.

For the purpose of literary and cultural analysis, we can define narrative as the act of representation using signs in a particular sequence so that we construct a specific notion of reality, self and the world. Narrative is used interchangeably with story, plot, form and even structure. Aboriginal narratives be it poetry, fiction or drama can be broadly categorized as the narratives of nativism. They are replete with issues concerning Aboriginals like the problem of land rights, domestic violence, petty crime, imprisonment and alcoholism. They do not seem to romanticize these issues but project them realistically. Apart from the above mentioned issues, these narratives deal with the mythical and ritualistic dimensions of Aboriginal spirituality like never before dealt with, by the mainstream literature. Even the language employed by Indigenous writers is a nativised version of Standard English. They defy the European modes of narrative and employ their own narratology. They rely extensively on the use of sign language, symbols from the natural world, ritualized dances and humorous dialogues all of which are a part and parcel of their cultural nexus.

Literary critic Pramod K. Nayar states that "there are three modes of Indigenous/Native reconstruction: contestation of established stereotypes and discourses, retrieval of buried histories and stories that perform this contestation." The narratives from the pen of Indigenous writers provide their own oral myths and form of

storytelling as a counter to colonial structures of power. Sally Morgan in her autobiography *My Place* writes:

All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history is lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. [...] I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story. (163-4)

This reiteration of the often ignored side of the story is what interests most of the Indigenous writers. Their writing is a plea for freedom; freedom from the shackles of colonization. The structures of colonization not only invaded their land but also subjugated the very notion of identity. Their works therefore reflect the need of their wandering souls for a sense of belongingness. The tone maybe pessimistic, but the tenor is emancipatory. They have a tendency of finding moments of mirth even between the most sordid and grave conditions. This instills a spark of hope in their works which impinge upon the resolve to survive.

One of the common features in the plays by Australian Aboriginal playwrights is the occurrence of dancers and their various moves of dance on stage. In the present paper an attempt is made to illumine the historical, geographical and socio-cultural specificity of dance and trace out the fact that how it is related to the issues of representation and emancipation.

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

These lines from W.B. Yeats' poem "Among School Children" signify the importance of the bodily movements to understand the inner depths of a person's mind. Dance is just not "intuitive, visceral, and pre-verbal" but a universal sign signifying a gamut of emotions. One such emotion is that of freedom. The swaying of the body is a strong metaphor for emancipation. Dance is generally disregarded by literary critics as a non-verbal signifier which is not worthy of much consideration beyond aesthetics. My point of argument is similar to Helen Gilbert's assertion that, "An examination of the performative rather than rhetorical aspects of drama allows us to foreground non-verbal signifiers such as dance as sites of cultural negotiation". The significance attributed to the dialogues as a source of resistance is equally due to these intermittent intervention of dancers dancing midst the stage. As Philip Auslander reminds us, "questions of who or what is speaking through the body and in what language, of what discourses are inscribed on/in the body, are clearly questions of power relations".

The point to be understood is that each such dance has an inherent subversive possibility against the imperial and patriarchal discourse. Dramaturgically speaking, enactment of dance in a play helps in the process of meaning production of a text. It draws attention to the rhetoric of embodiment in all performance, something that is less apparent in dramatization of dialogue, especially within the conventions of realism. Even while focusing upon the body it foregrounds polemic relationships between characters, spectators and features of the set. Moreover, it disrupts the linearity of narration.

But the most important attribute of dance is its function in recuperating postcolonial subjectivity as movement helps constitute the individual in society:

The body and movement are social realities interacting with and interpreting other aspects of the culture. Structured movement systems like social dance, theatre dance, sport, and ritual help to articulate and create images of who people are and what their lives are like, encoding and eliciting ideas and values; they are also part of experiences, of performances and actions by which people know themselves. (Novak 103)

Theorists like Novak and Daly reject the Lacanian notion that constitution of individual identity begins with the child's entry into discourse and argue instead that the infant first gains a sense of self through its own bodily experiences. Therefore, movement (dance) and language (dialogue) both play a vital role in producing the self and the culture.

This means that the incorporation of dance in Aboriginal plays certainly create a sense of identity and cultural cohesion. In Imperial historical accounts, Aboriginal dance was seen as an expression of savagery or exotic otherness. The performances were classified as mere amusing spectacle with no other purpose but to amuse the onlooker. W. Robertson's statement about corroboree is significant to understand the propagated discourse:

The whole programme was wonderful in its savage simplicity. The weirdly painted natives, issuing from the dense blackness of the bush to perform the dances, looked more like wraiths than human beings (95).

The description is akin to a complete eradication of human qualities from Aborigines. To him their art seems like ephemeral, fictional, fantastic but far away from real dance of the dominant culture thus, marginalizing the variant. His failure to acknowledge the dancers'

subjectivity blinds him from discerning any functional aspects of the coroboree vis-à-vis Aboriginal culture and to the possibility of resistance politics.

Aboriginal playwrights focus on movement of body as a part of identity formation. It is this aspect of dance as reified spectacle that is problematized in contemporary Aboriginal drama.

Bob Maza's play *The Keepers* begins with a scene where the two main protagonists- a Boandik woman and a Scottish woman are shown as performing dances of "home", then ritual courting dances, culminating with the symbolic dance of childbirth.

Two figures in leotards emerge from opposite sides of the stage. One is dressed completely in black, the other white. As the stage lightens, an Aboriginal chant is heard in the distance, accompanied by the rhythm sticks. The white dancer freezes. The black dancer performs a dance of the home of the Boandik, then freezes. The Aboriginal chant fades out and slow, distant Scottish bagpipes are heard. The white dancer performs a dance of Scotland. Distant thunder sounds. The dancer freezes. An Aborigine laughs and calls out in Boandik. The black dancer performs a courting dance of the Boandik, then freezes. A Scot laughs and calls out in Gaelic. The white dancer performs a Scottish courting dance, then freezes. The thunder sounds closer, interspersed with bagpipes. There is a loud heartbeat, and the white dancer performs a symbolic dance of white childbirth in a hospital bed, reaching a climax with the cry of the newborn. The white dancer exits. The black dancer performs a symbolic dance of Boandik childbirth, which is sitting up. This climaxes with the cry of the newborn and the dancer exits. (171)

The emerging of the two figures from opposite side of the stage symbolizes the opposing cultures and their descent. One belongs to an Aboriginal tribe and other to the settler culture. Although both come from different backgrounds, yet their movements are clearly related and are performed on a common ground- the same stage space. This obliterates the ideologies which consider Aboriginal dance much beneath the realm of human behavior and white dance firmly within it. These dances affix subjectivity to both the women irrespective of their lineage. It acts as a strong metaphor for each cultures indigeneity which is constituted in relation to the other. The two women sharing the same space dilutes the notion of high and low culture. Both "freeze" when the other is performing, meaning that each culture is worthy of

mutual respect and adoration. Helen Gilbert comments that, "the contrapunctual dances show a process of identity formation common to each culture, and not just a privilege of the colonizers".

Maza's incorporation of dance in the play acts as a mode of empowerment for oppressed characters. It is an encoded act of resistance against the dominant ideologies and epistemologies. Even more powerful than the verbal aspects, these movements embody a sense of self representation by the Aborigines. It is their way of representing their culture in front of the world unaffected by the imperial discourse. It is a way of asserting freedom from the shackles of hegemonic representations which is more or less mis-representation. Another discourse shattered by the dancers is that of the male gaze, since both the dancers chosen by Maza are female. If as Angela McRobbie asserts, "dance as a channel for bodily self-expression connects auto-erotic dimensions with desires for the other" (144-45); the women's dances allow a transgressive cross-racial, lesbian desire that further subverts imperial and patriarchal ways of looking at the body's signifying practices.

The most important symbol used here is that of childbirth. Both the women bear seeds of life irrespective of their cultural difference. It ruptures the Europeanized notion of treating Aborigines as genetically inferior. Maza's Boandik women counterpoint this discourse and establish the similarity in fertility as any dominant culture. It is their way of asserting freedom from the wrongs done by the upholders of power.

As an important mode of narrative in Aboriginal culture, dancing also functions to restore masculine identity and free them from the prejudiced vision imposed by the settlers. In Richard Walley's *Coordah*, Nummy, the "local drunk" and "trickster" figure, escapes the fixity of these roles formed within the dominant discourse of colonization by recreating his Aboriginality through dance performance. Similarly dancing in a *corroboree* gives Billy Kimberley of Jack Davis's *No Sugar* an opportunity to transgress his assigned role of a tracker/informant. Corroboree is a traditional Aboriginal dance linked with mythical rituals and ceremonies. It is a culturally coded sign which allows its participants (male), to shed their everyday role determined within white hierarchies of power. As Helen Gilbert rightly points out, "in this sense, the dance acts as a shaman exorcising evil."

They dance with increasing speed and energy, stamping their feet, whirling in front of the fire, their bodies appearing and disappearing as

the paint catches the firelight. The dance becomes faster and more frantic until finally SAM lets out a yell and they collapse, dropping back to their positions around the fire. (*No Sugar* 66)

Native men are projected as epitomizing lethargy, drunkenness and idleness in the westernized discourse. They are shown as wasting their time and energy in petty squabbles doing nothing except drinking. They do not share the burden of the family whether monetarily or emotionally. These assigned stereotypes are punctured with the vigor and agility of the dance performance. Firstly corroboree symbolizes an exchange of cultural capital which is rich, diverse and perennial. Secondly it uplifts the indolent male out of the sloth into the realm of virility. It re-defines their identity contesting the white dominating ideology. The corroboree is firmly grounded in Aboriginal history and epistemology through its link with the Dreamtime, which Stephen Muecke claims is the “constant supplementary signified of all Aboriginal narrative” (98). It functions as an instrument in the hands of the natives to express their nativism through culturally coded movement and asserting their freedom of expression.

In contrast to the dance in a group even the image of a single dancer is also utilized by Aboriginal playwrights. Jack Davis in *The Dreamers* and Eva Johnson in *Murras* incorporate a dancer in their plays extraneous to the other characters in the play. Its function is to provide a link between the Dreamtime and present. It embodies the spiritual element of the Aboriginal identity which rests upon the roots of the tribal past. Although this single dancer is referred to in the stage directions of both plays as “he”, it is assigned no gender in the cast lists. It raises the dancer above the gender bias and establishes its identity as a universal image of native mythology and culture.

In *The Dreamers*, the dancer forms an alter-ego figure for Worru. Worru is the only character in the play who is upset with the uprootedness from his Aboriginal culture. He tries to present a “half remembered” tribal dance which is rendered complete with the help of the Dancer. Here the intermingling between Worru and the Dancer reflects the intricate bond of unity between contemporary Aboriginal reality and the mystic Dreamtime. Even though the play depicts the life of Aborigines living in urban cities yet their soul is connected to their land and their culture. As Justine Saunders remark in her introduction to *Plays from Black Australia*, “Whether we live in the bush or in the cities, without our culture and heritage we would shrivel up and die. It is the lifeblood that flows in us and sustains us”.

Peter interrupts Worru in between with his “disco dance” which is reflective of the amalgamation between Aboriginal and European culture; but Worru pushes him away and continues with his Tribal dance. The act of pushing Peter away is a counter resistive force against the hegemonic powers and a way of professing freedom against it. Worru’s passage towards death is punctuated by the dancer’s symbolic representation of mythic figures and scenes from Worru’s past. The movement of dancer’s body is reminiscent of Worru’s past memories and relations which are the only source of mirth in his life. He feels trapped in the urbanized world where he is forced to reside. His refuge into the past is his mode of experiencing freedom. It is here that the dancer provides an ancillary support to Worru. There is an inherent sense of camaraderie shared between the two.

Similarly, the Aboriginal identity represented by the mimi dancer in the play *Murras* by Eva Johnson is firmly grounded in myth. Granny’s dying scene symbolizes her return to the earth and the traditional preparation of her body to return to the spiritual world of her dreaming, returning to her ancestors. The mimi spirit is there to return her safely by dancing around her, calling her back into her world, her time. Death is visualized not as an end of life but a returning back to the sacred world of the ancestors. This symbolism conceived as preposterous by the Western discourse derives meaning at the hands of the native playwrights. They thoroughly understand the native rites and rituals. Granny’s departure from the carnal reality is accompanied by the swaying movement of the mimi spirit. This is done to the music of didjeridu and clapping sticks. These dances not only re-constitute Aboriginal identity through a discourse of the body and its performance; they also re-contextualize the rest of the dramatic action within an Aboriginal metaphysic that subverts white cultural aggression and its teleological assumptions by situating the Dreamtime as co-existent with the present.

Aboriginal playwrights frequently use dance as a mode of empowerment for the marginalized individuals/ groups. From a postcolonial perspective, these struggles can be seen as emblematic of the colonizer/ colonized dialectic, a process that, to some extent, hybridizes the identity of both dominating and subordinated groups. The dance then emerges as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity. As a site of competing ideologies, it also offers a site of potential resistance to hegemonic

discourses through its representation of the body on stage as a moving subject. In Stanton Garner's terms, "exploiting the body's centrality within the theatrical medium" allows the refiguring of "the actor's body as a principal site of theatrical and political intervention, establishing a contemporary 'body politic' rooted in the individual's sentient presence" (146).

Thus, the dance is as cogent a motif as dialogue in these plays. It is a very efficacious symbol used by the Aboriginal playwrights who exhale the breath of nativism while engaging their characters in these bodily gestures. The dancer along with the dance is a way in which they delimit the stage off the hegemonic world view. It is their mode of identity recuperation and emancipation. The movement of body becomes a metaphor for their movement from the world of slavish and biased representation often deemed as mis-representation; towards a world of multitudinous opportunities of re-creating identity, righting history and asserting freedom.

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