

# Diversity and Resilience: Aboriginal Narratives in Australian Literature

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## Abstract:

Aboriginal Australian literature serves as a powerful medium for exploring the multifaceted experiences of Indigenous peoples in Australia, navigating themes of cultural resilience, identity, and resistance in the face of colonial oppression. This paper aims to critically analyze the concepts of 'Terra-nullius', 'genocide', 'stolen generations', 'magic realism', and 'Dreamtime literature' within the context of Aboriginal Australian literature, highlighting their interconnectedness and significance in shaping Indigenous narratives.

**Keywords:** 'Terra-nullius', 'genocide', 'stolen generations', 'magic realism', and 'Dreamtime literature'

Australian literature spans a period of 200 years. Australian literature produced during the nineteenth century relates generally to bush life since the first settlement in 1788. Till the 1960's, Australian literature/history hardly received any attention even in academia, as the general notion was that there was nothing serious to be learnt from Australian literature. Only English read British literature was given serious and critical attention and importance. By the 1970s, however, Australian history and literature started gaining importance. With the commencement of Aboriginal studies, Australian Aboriginal studies literature also became a part of academics in many universities all around the world. Today, a great deal of interest is evinced in the academics circles of India and many researchers are focusing on Aboriginal Australian literature. As Australian writing, until recently, was solely in the hands of the Whites, Australian history was constructed from the perspective of the dominant White society, and, quite naturally, the literature and the ideological myths of the Aboriginal people of the Aboriginal people were shunted to the margins. The whites almost crushed the original inhabitants of the land into insignificance. They dispossessed the Aborigines, who were the rightful owners of the land and this resulted 'in violence', racial discrimination and neglect which destroyed many Aboriginal communities and degraded most Aboriginal people. Being regarded as inferior and subhuman, the Aborigines were completely ignored in the writing of Australian history. Thus the very existence and the identity of the Aboriginal race were suppressed.

Until recently, Australian literary history ignored the importance and with various themes through different genres like Aboriginality, Settler Identity, Alienation, Exile and Relationship to land. They invariably emphasize the injustice meted out to the Aborigines in the past. Australian Aboriginal literature began with David Unaipon's *Native Legends* (1929), the first book published by an Aborigine in Australia. Gradually re-emerged with Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first book of poetry *We are Going* (1964). A small but steady flow of books followed in the years up to the publication of Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black* (1977), a land mark work. Aboriginal literature now includes poetry, fiction, drama, autobiography and biography.

The most useful survey of Australian Aboriginal literature is Adam Shoemaker's *Black Words, White Pages-Aboriginal Literature 1929-198* (1989).

Before Australia was colonized, the Aborigines comprised hundreds of tribes spread all over Australia, with different languages and cultures. Aboriginal culture was unique, as manifested in their artistic and cultural expression. Their knowledge of their country and their consciousness of their native culture were remarkable. The present research on Australian Aboriginal writing in English encompasses a multiplicity of works of works in all genres and styles. The present paper explores the theme of identity and displacement in the works of two prominent Australian Indigenous authors, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. This Ph.D. thesis delves into the profound exploration of the theme of lost identity and displacement within the literary works of two distinguished Australian Indigenous novelists, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. By conducting a comprehensive thematic study, the research aims to unravel the intricate narrative layers that portray the multifaceted experiences of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

### **Objectives:**

- **Thematic Exploration:** Undertake a detailed analysis of the themes of lost identity and displacement as they manifest in the selected novels of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright.
- **Comparative Study:** Conduct a comparative examination of the narrative techniques, cultural contexts, and storytelling methods employed by Scott and Wright in conveying the experiences of Indigenous characters.
- **Cultural Context:** Explore the socio-cultural backdrop within which the novels are situated, emphasizing the impact of historical events, colonialism, and contemporary challenges on Indigenous identity and displacement.

### **Narrative Strategies:**

- Investigate the narrative strategies employed by Scott and Wright, including language use, storytelling traditions, and the incorporation of Indigenous cultural elements, to convey a nuanced understanding of the characters' sense of lost identity and displacement.

### **Impact on Identity:**

- Examine how the characters navigate and respond to the challenges of lost identity and displacement, exploring the ways in which these themes shape their individual and collective identities.

### **Cultural Resilience:**

- Investigate instances of cultural resilience and resistance within the novels, emphasizing how characters draw upon their cultural heritage to cope with and overcome experiences of displacement and identity loss. This research further contributes to the broader discourse on Indigenous literature, offering insights into the complexities of identity and displacement as portrayed by Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study employs close textual analysis, comparative literature studies, and cultural studies methodologies. The goal is not only to enrich academic scholarship but also to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Australia, as articulated through the powerful narratives of Scott and Wright.

**Significance:**

This research contributes to the broader discourse on Indigenous literature, offering insights into the complexities of identity and displacement as portrayed by Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. By focusing on these specific themes, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics affecting Indigenous communities in Australia and their representation in contemporary literature. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the larger conversation surrounding Indigenous literature, providing valuable insights into the intricate themes of identity and displacement as depicted in the literary works of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. By concentrating on these specific themes, the study seeks to enrich our comprehension of the complex socio-cultural dynamics that impact Indigenous communities in Australia, particularly in the context of their representation within contemporary literature.

The analysis delves into the profound narratives crafted by Scott and Wright, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of Indigenous individuals grappling with issues of identity and displacement. Through this focused exploration, the research not only enhances our understanding of the challenges faced by Indigenous communities but also highlights the resilience and cultural richness embedded in their stories.

By honing in on the specific themes of lost identity and displacement, the study aims to amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples, offering a nuanced perspective on their struggles, triumphs, and the ongoing impact of historical and contemporary factors. This research contributes not only to academic scholarship but also to a broader societal awareness, fostering a deeper appreciation for the diverse narratives within Indigenous literature and the broader implications for understanding and respecting Indigenous cultures. Ultimately, the significance of this study extends beyond the academic realm, aiming to promote a more inclusive and empathetic dialogue on Indigenous experiences in Australia.

**Methodology:**

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, this study employs close textual analysis, comparative literature studies, and cultural studies methodologies. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial literature, Indigenous studies, and narrative theory.

Through this thematic exploration, the research seeks not only to enrich academic scholarship but also to contribute to a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Australia, as articulated through the powerful narratives of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. In employing a qualitative research approach, this study engages in a multifaceted exploration of the themes of lost identity and displacement within the literary works of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. The research utilizes close textual analysis, delving deeply into the language, symbolism, and narrative structures employed by the authors. This method allows for a meticulous examination of how these literary elements contribute to the portrayal of the complex experiences of identity and displacement among Indigenous characters. Furthermore, the study adopts a comparative literature perspective, juxtaposing the works of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright to discern both commonalities and divergences in their approaches to depicting Indigenous experiences. This comparative lens extends beyond the surface, considering the unique narrative techniques, cultural contexts, and storytelling methods employed by each author. By doing so, the research aims to unearth the distinct nuances and artistic choices that contribute to the rich tapestry of Indigenous storytelling.

Cultural studies methodologies are integral to this research, facilitating an exploration of the socio-cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by the narratives. This involves an examination of historical events,

the impact of colonialism, and contemporary challenges faced by Indigenous communities. By grounding the analysis in the broader cultural milieu, the study seeks to elucidate the ways in which identity and displacement are intricately woven into the fabric of Indigenous life and literature. The theoretical frameworks of postcolonial literature, Indigenous studies, and narrative theory provide the conceptual underpinnings for this research. These frameworks guide the interpretation of the texts, offering lenses through which to understand the power dynamics, cultural complexities, and storytelling traditions inherent in the novels of Scott and Wright. Through this thematic exploration, the research transcends mere academic inquiry. It aspires to contribute to a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Australia. By unraveling the powerful narratives crafted by Scott and Wright, the study seeks not only to enrich academic scholarship but also to foster a broader societal awareness that promotes empathy, respect, and a deeper appreciation for the diverse and resilient narratives of Indigenous peoples.

From the very beginning, far-reaching incompatibilities were the main factors which led the Europeans and Aborigines being unable to come to terms with each other. The contrast was enormous in that one was 'civilised' and 'sophisticated' and the other considered 'uncivilised' and 'primitive'. Therefore, it was difficult for Europeans and the Aborigines to understand each other's complex societies, habits, intelligence and social values. To the Aborigines, an intrinsic part of their life was deep emotional attachment to the land, which had mythical and social values of considerable significance. The entire continent had mythical signs and values related to their tribal system and status. They were completely dependent on land for their dreams and aspirations. Through it, they had acquired their inspirations for art, music, dancing, and other forms of cultural standing and lived in comparative harmony with their environment. Their lives were not at all simple. They were with harsh climate, inhospitable land, droughts, and fires; they had a lot to contend with. Despite all the adversities, they lived in relative peace and harmony until the arrival of the Europeans. For any Australian Aborigines, fight for the land rights was their perpetual vital issue. They were intimately familiar with all aspects of it, as their dependence was directly related to it. Their everyday living demanded that they should have adequate knowledge of land. They were in harmony with all living creatures around them. Through mythical beliefs and dreaming their natural world was included in their social world. Ceremonial sites were of particular significance, unlike other areas for hunting and gathering. Not only the ceremonial sites but also the whole concept of land was sacred to them. Their mythical beliefs came very close to creation of land, and since myth was closely related to their socio-religious terms, land became the sacred issue in an Aboriginal culture. In British terms, land was a God-given gift to them. It was highlighted by special significance and related to their sacred beliefs with spiritual importance. Land was an inalienable and incontrovertible right of possession. Spiritual linkage to land by birth thrust a particular tribe to a sector of land, which facilitated food, ceremonial sites, and everything else for everyday living. Even today, landowning groups can be easily identified all over Australia. Land holding was a spiritual phenomenon, only truly held by mythical beings. Their human representations were granted alien on land to hold not for themselves and their future off springs but for the dead as well. There was definite ownership linkage through birth, myth, and death. Land title was held by signifying ritual emblems possessed by a particular tribe who had relevant claim. The title was not transferable. It was inalienable heritage of the particular tribe. For generations together Aborigines had relied for their livelihood only on hunting and centre-round in clans. At the same time as the colonised white empire gave commercial importance. They created commercial outlook to land and glorified the private property. The Aboriginal culture was based on primitive communal society, where

sharing food and everything else was regarded as being quite normal and acceptable. Therefore, the Aborigines was unable to comprehend that when he took white man's property, he was stealing, and not merely using the particular item as a public property. Such an act did not warrant punishment. In his society, everything was public property. Hot climate necessitate daily hunting, as no food could be stored for any length of time. They all shared in fishing, hunting, and gathering available plants and seeds. In those circumstances, they had very little time to do anything else. Every activity related to the commune rather than the individual. Their system of living and any form of government were quite informal. There was no chief or king or leader as such. If the clan was not sanctioned by an elder on matters of misdemeanor or disputes, they were left to float along very much like the unstable nature and variations of the environment. People were not static. Ecology played a part, where they were bound together in the scale of nature in complex relationships. There was no competition, little violence, and they lived in comparative peace. They developed a classless society, where struggle for anything else other than food would be no longer an issue. They buffeted round in a constantly transforming environment which sometimes brought about for the betterment. Against this attitude to life, they were persuaded by the white society to be 'civilised', whenever they were conquered or whenever they came into contact with white missionaries or station owners. Naturally, it was a giant leap for them to adapt. Those who did not want to be 'civilised' were possibly shot or cleared away from the white environment by using deceptive strategies. Since the white men placed no value on the black women's consent, women were taken as they pleased. The Aboriginal girls were viewed as sexual commodity to be used by pastoral workforce of both whites and black stockman as they deemed fit. They ended up with all the vices and diseases of the white society. The Aborigines, then as now, could not overcome the huge obstacles which confronted them. This was largely due to the fact that the white society had mistakenly assumed that the Aborigines had no culture and badly needed civilising. Later, they systematically had begun to assimilate them and their children into the white culture, which the Aborigines consistently tried to reject. Others, such as the outback station owners and missionaries, merely regarded them as part of the environment which was there for them to exploit.

Terra-nullius, the legal doctrine used to justify the colonization of Australia, denied the existence of Indigenous sovereignty and ownership of the land. In Aboriginal Australian literature, authors such as Kim Scott in *That Deadman Dance* challenge the narrative of Terra-nullius by reclaiming Indigenous histories and asserting the enduring connection to country. Through the portrayal of Indigenous characters' struggles against dispossession and marginalization, Scott highlights the resilience of Aboriginal communities in resisting colonial erasure. The Aboriginal peoples have inhabited the Australian continent for at least 65,000 years, making them the continent's original inhabitants. By the time of European colonization and the establishment of the Australian colonies, Aboriginal peoples had developed rich and diverse cultures, languages, and societies across the continent. Their presence and impact on the land were significant and deeply intertwined with the Australian landscape.

Before the official federation of Australia in 1901, the Aboriginal peoples' lives were dramatically affected by European colonization. The arrival of British settlers had profound consequences for Aboriginal communities, including dispossession of land, violent conflict, disruption of traditional ways of life, and the introduction of diseases to which they had no immunity. During the period leading up to federation, Aboriginal peoples were often marginalized and excluded from the political processes that were shaping the nation. Their rights were frequently ignored, and they faced widespread discrimination and injustice under colonial administrations.

However, it's essential to recognize that Aboriginal peoples have always maintained connections to their land, culture, and traditions despite the challenges they faced. Throughout this period, Aboriginal communities continued to resist colonization, maintain their cultural practices, and assert their rights to land and self-determination. In the lead-up to federation and beyond, there were voices advocating for the recognition of Aboriginal rights and inclusion in the new nation. However, it wasn't until many decades later, through various social and political movements, that significant strides were made towards acknowledging and addressing the historical injustices experienced by Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. This included movements for land rights, reconciliation, and the recognition of Indigenous rights in the Australian legal and political system. Before the official federation of Australia in 1901, the landmass that we now refer to as Australia consisted of separate colonies, each with its own administrative structure. These colonies were primarily established by the British during the late 18th and 19th centuries for various reasons, including penal settlement, exploration, and economic development. The major colonies included New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania (formerly known as Van Diemen's Land).

Each colony operated largely independently, with its own government, laws, and administration, although they were all ultimately under British sovereignty. They had their own systems of governance, including colonial legislatures and governors appointed by the British crown. These colonies evolved separately, with different economies, social structures, and political landscapes. However, there were movements towards closer cooperation and unity among the colonies throughout the 19th century. This culminated in the federation movement, which sought to unite the separate colonies into a single nation. This process led to the drafting of the Australian Constitution, which was approved by referendums in the colonies and eventually enacted by the British Parliament in 1900, paving the way for the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia on January 1, 1901. This marked the beginning of Australia as a unified nation-state, with its own federal government and system of governance.

**Genocide:** The legacy of genocide looms large in Aboriginal Australian literature, as writers confront the historical and ongoing impacts of violence and displacement on Indigenous communities. Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* provides a poignant account of the Stolen Generations, illustrating the systematic removal of Indigenous children from their families and the resilience of those who resisted assimilation. Through the lens of literature, the trauma of genocide is not only exposed but also humanized, fostering empathy and understanding among readers.

**Stolen Generations:** The Stolen Generations policy, which forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families, has left a profound and enduring impact on Aboriginal communities. In works such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generations is explored, highlighting the ongoing struggle for cultural identity and belonging. By centering Indigenous voices and perspectives, Aboriginal Australian literature serves as a tool for healing and reclaiming agency in the face of historical injustices.

**Magic Realism:** Magic realism emerges as a literary device employed by Aboriginal Australian writers to transcend conventional narrative boundaries and convey the richness of Indigenous cosmologies. In novels like Sally Morgan's *My Place*, magic realism is used to blur the lines between past and present, reality and myth, inviting readers into a world where ancestral spirits and Dreamtime stories intersect with contemporary Indigenous experiences. Through the fusion of the mundane and the magical, Aboriginal Australian literature challenges Western notions of reality and offers alternative ways of knowing and being.

Dreamtime Literature: At the heart of Aboriginal Australian literature lies the concept of Dreamtime, a spiritual framework that underpins Indigenous storytelling and cultural identity. In works such as Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, Dreamtime literature serves as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all living beings and the enduring presence of ancestral wisdom in the landscape. By centering Dreamtime narratives, Aboriginal Australian literature celebrates Indigenous knowledge systems and affirms the ongoing vitality of Indigenous cultures in the face of colonial pressures.

There are several significant Aboriginal literary texts that offer profound insights into Aboriginal experiences, cultures, and perspectives. *My Place* by Sally Morgan is an autobiography that recounts the author's journey of self-discovery as she explores her Aboriginal identity and family history. It provides a powerful account of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal families and communities, as well as the resilience and strength of Aboriginal culture. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington is a memoir that tells the true story of the author's mother and two other young Aboriginal girls who escape from a government settlement in Western Australia and trek over 1,500 miles along the rabbit-proof fence to return to their families. It sheds light on the Stolen Generations and the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families. *The Tall Man* by Chloe Hooper is a non-fiction book that investigates the death of an Aboriginal man, Cameron Doomadgee, in police custody on Palm Island, Queensland. Through meticulous research and interviews, Hooper explores issues of systemic racism, injustice, and the fraught relationship between Indigenous Australians and law enforcement. While not written by an Aboriginal author, *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin delves into Aboriginal culture and spirituality through the concept of songlines-- the paths across the land that mark the routes of ancestral beings. Chatwin explores the significance of songlines in Aboriginal culture and their connection to the land. *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright is a novel that provides a sprawling and lyrical portrayal of life in the fictional Aboriginal community of Desperance in northern Australia. It weaves together mythology, politics, and environmental themes to create a vivid portrait of Aboriginal life and struggles. These texts offer diverse perspectives on Aboriginal experiences, histories, and cultures, providing valuable insights into the richness and complexity of Indigenous Australian literature.

#### Conclusion:

Aboriginal Australian literature provides a platform for Indigenous voices to reclaim their stories, challenge dominant narratives, and envision alternative futures rooted in cultural resilience and pride. By critically engaging with concepts such as Terra-nullius, genocide, stolen generations, magic realism, and Dreamtime literature, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of Indigenous experiences and the ongoing struggle for justice and reconciliation in Australia. All of these texts contribute to the overarching goal of *Benang* or 'For a better tomorrow,' emphasizing the importance of understanding and preserving Aboriginal experiences, cultures, and perspectives for the future.

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