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Retelling the Story of Untold History: A Study on Alexis Wright's Carpentaria

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ABSTRACT:
History plays a significant role in preserving a nation's cultural heritage and traditions and in shaping the collective identities of the nation's citizens by incorporating a sense of continuity in them to identify themselves as a part of a broader historical narrative. According to some of the greatest historically significant personalities like E.H. Carr, Mark Twain, and Theodore Roosevelt, such evocative History is possible only by adding a few manipulative narratives that uphold the nation's glory and deleting the bitter truth that distorts the nation's glory. Such biased and fabricated historical narratives are termed as the Dominant historical narratives. As the self-explanatory term suggests, these narratives give precedence to the rulers' perspectives and interpretations while sidelining or silencing the experiences of the Oppressed or the Subaltern. The Institutionalized Historical narratives have gained prominence, especially in Settler colonies like the United States, Canada, and Australia. In the context of Australia, its official history commenced only with the arrival of Europeans, which overlooked the existence of historical footprints of autochthonous populations.
This paper strives to excavate the suppressed historical narrative of the Aborigines by closely reading Alexis Wright's award-winning novel *Carpentaria*. Through this study, an attempt is made to provide a counter-historical narrative that challenges the existing authoritative Dominant colonial narrative.

KEYWORDS: Dominant Historical Narratives, Aborigines, The Great Australian Silence, Relational Ontology, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Ethnocentrism

INTRODUCTION:

"The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future" (Buckenmaier) were the words of former American President Theodore Roosevelt, echoing the significance of the role played by the past in shaping our future. History, the study of the past, helps us gain insight into the complexities of human experience in the past, out of which societies have evolved.
History acts as a relentless teacher which ". . . enable(s) man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present." (E.H. Carr). It preserves our cultural heritage by documenting our ancestors' traditions and helps us to appreciate our roots and values. It also shapes our collective identities as a nation's citizens by providing a sense of belonging that binds us together as one entity. The nation's historical consciousness offers its inhabitants, a sense of pride in their national heritage. It induces a sense of continuity in them to identify themselves as a part of a broader historical narrative.
Creation of such evocative History is possible only by adding a few manipulative narratives that uphold the nation's glory and deleting the bitter truth that distorts the nation's glory. This idea is resonated in the

quotes of significant personalities of the world like, Mark Twain's, "The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice" (Churchwell) and Julian Barnes', "History isn't what happened, history is just what historians tell us" (*A History of the World in 10½ Chapters)*

DOMINANT HISTORICAL NARRATIVE:

Dominant historical narrative is the term given to the biased, fabricated historical narratives focusing only on the rulers' perspectives and interpretations of their historical details while sidelining or completely ignoring the perspectives and interpretations of the Oppressed or the Subaltern. Such Authoritative Historical Narratives have gained prominence in settler societies, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and others.

According to the Dominant Narrative, Australia's official history commenced only with the arrival of Europeans, which overlooked the pre-existing historical footprints of autochthonous populations. The natives' deep-rooted cultural tie to their ancestral land was intentionally left undocumented by the White Historians. The blatant act of historical exclusion and consistent denial of Aboriginal presence culminated in the proclamation of newly charted land as Terra Nullius – a land belonging to no one.

The promulgated Dominant Historical Narrative of Australia projects the English settlers as heroic pioneers for transforming the wilderness into a civilization. It underscores the adversities vividly faced by the Settlers in the new land. R. Hughes describes their hardships as,

To most Englishmen, this place seemed not just a mutant society but another planet – an exiled world, . . . It was remote and anomalous to its white creators. It was strange but close, as the unconscious mind is to the conscious mind. There was as yet no such thing as "Australian" history or culture. (Hughes 2)

The narrative also vehemently dictates the dichotomy that characterizes the British as civilized and projects the Indigenous people as uncivilized. Furthermore, it suggests that the settlers created wealth while the Aborigines looted them. These binary oppositions, established by the colonizers, placed the White settlers at the center and treated the Indigenous people, the true natives of the land, as the "Other" in Australian history.

A different history arose in the Australian memory, and it formed negative stereotypes of First Nations peoples. These stereotypes entrenched the ongoing experience of the marginalisation and systematic discrimination of First Nations peoples in Australia. ("The Great Australian Silence," sec. The great Australian Silence)

GREAT AUSTRALIAN SILENCE:

Historians of the world, especially of Australia, were struck by a profound realization when the renowned Australian anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner, in his Boyer lecture titled "After the Dreaming", mentioned the "cult of forgetfulness" practiced nationwide concerning the overlooked history of Aboriginal people. He also coined the term "the Great Australian Silence" to describe how the nation's settlers intentionally excluded and neglected the history, culture, and even the presence of Aborigines and constructed their fabricated history. The term captured the magnitude to which the dominant history had silenced and marginalized the Australian Indigenous people. It has become an important term to voice out the injustices suffered by Australia's Indigenous people and to promote a more inclusive understanding of the nation's history in contrast to the narrative portrayed by the dominant history.

I need not extend the list. A partial survey is enough to let me make the point that inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window

which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned, under habit and over time, into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so. (Curthoys 233)

The investigation of the Indigenous people's lives, struggles, and adversities became a central point of study in different academic fields of Anthropology, History, Sociology, and Literature. The experts in these fields strived hard to understand the perspectives of the Aborigines based on their respective fields of expertise. The outcome of their study not only revised Australia's timeline but also it transformed its historical outlook. Their inferences juxtaposed sharply with the earlier historical accounts of the settlers and exposed the harsh and hidden realities of their encroachment on Aboriginal land, mistreatment, annihilation, and marginalization of the Indigenous people. The unearthed past resulted in the dichotomy between settlers' dominant historical narratives and Indigenous' subjugated historical narratives.

The impact of White settlers' dominant history was so powerful that it made the creators of the literature overlook the sufferings of the aborigines caused by the foreigners. This had become the crucial cause of the misrepresentation of the Aborigines for a very long period. In the earlier literary narratives, the white writers influenced by the dominant historical narrative focused only on themes like bush life, the oddness of the Australian landscape in contrast to Europe, despair, their sense of alienation, and their struggles to settle in the new land in their works by stereotyping the Indigenous people.

The dominant narrative of history is often influenced by the spirit of ethnocentrism. The term ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to view the world from the perspective of one's own culture. This often leads to the conviction that one's culture or ethnicity is superior to others. This has resulted in a biased and narrow perspective that often rejects or downplays the significance of other cultures and ethnic groups. In other words, ethnocentrism has erased many important historical events and significant contributions of personalities belonging to other cultures. This has created lasting impacts on marginalized people in the realms of the social, economic, and political structures which they face till today. One of the worst consequences of ethnocentrism is the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. The Dominant Historical Narratives of White settlers are one of the prominent examples that reinstate the influence of ethnocentrism to the world. Early White Australian Literature often showed the natives of Australia as primitive, savage, arrogant, violent, beast, uncivilized, plunderers, and inferior to White Australians. The following quote portrays the deeply ingrained attitudes of white settlers towards Aboriginal people, depicting them as primitive and uncivilized, and justifying mistreatment:

They appeared to have no feeling for the beauty of their surroundings, and their only object in life seemed to be to eat enough to enable them to exist. They wandered aimlessly about, hunting when the fit took them, and sleeping when they could not keep awake. The children were all dirty, snub-nosed little savages, with matted hair, and they did not seem to have the intelligence of our children of six or seven. (Gunn 55)

The quote exemplifies that in the same way as the White historians who drafted the dominant history, the creators of Australian Literature also turned a blind eye to the subjugated Aboriginal experiences. However, when the fresh insight into Aboriginal history struck the writers, their literary themes began to witness a paradigm shift. Most of the writers brought the margin to the center by penning about the experiences of the Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal writers like Tony Birch, Alexis Wright, Anita Heiss, and Kim Scott have responded to the stereotypical portrayal of whites in a variety of ways and promoted Indigenous perspectives through their writings. Their influential works have explored the experiences of Aboriginal people in Australia,

challenging the dominant narrative of the settlers. It has also projected the nuanced and complex portrayal of Indigenous life. Their works have brought the injustices and inequalities faced by Indigenous communities to the limelight, which in turn promoted a more accurate understanding of Aboriginal history and culture.

The works of the Aboriginals underscore the significant relational cosmological trait of Indigenous Literature. In contrast to anthropocentric Western theories, it advocates the natives' wisdom of ecology. Their body of work also demonstrates how the Indigenous literature acts as an embodiment of the ethics of Relational Ontology. It conceptualizes the land as a sentient being, challenging the colonizers' view, which considers the land as a mere extractive resource.

Land is fundamental to Indigenous people, both individually and collectively. Concepts of Indigenous land ownership were, and are, different from European legal systems. Boundaries were fixed and validated by the Dreaming creation stories. Each individual belonged to certain territories within the family group and had spiritual connections and obligations to particular country. Hence land was not owned; one belonged to the land. Aboriginal people experience the land as a richly symbolic and spiritual landscape rather than merely a physical environment. (*History: 60,000 Years: Working with Indigenous Australians*, sec.60,000+ years ago to 1788)

This paper deals with the novel *Carpentaria* written by Alexis Wright, a member of the Aboriginal Australian Waanyi people. It was published in the year 2006, and the novel won Australia's premier literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award, in the year 2007. The novel also bagged the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. "Carpentaria" tells the story of the fictional town of Desperance situated in northern Australia. It is a home to the indigenous Warumungu people and the non-indigenous white settlers who live in a state of tension and conflict. The narrative revolves around the lives of the members of the powerful and mystical Phantom family. In his article, *Story-Making, Story-Telling and Story-Keeping in Carpentaria,* Adam Shoemaker says,

Wright's novel is a phantasmagoria of different voices – representing oral history as well as the oral present and future. It lives and breathes characters whose points of view shift and morph in league with the tropical seasons and the heaving, creative land in which the novel is set. Its characters are entirely memorable, whether they are the murderous and venal mayor Bruiser, the toughly resistant Angel Day, or the journeying and questing protagonist Norm Phantom. As engaging as they may be (and as searching, each in their own way), it could be argued that it is the Australian Indigenous concept and reality of Country which is the leading character of Wright's novel. This applies on a number of levels: honouring Country; speaking with, and listening to, Country; being led by Country; protecting Country and caring for Country: these are all core to Carpentaria. (par.12)

The novel opens with the arrival of Elias Smith, a white man with a mysterious past, who comes to the town. He gradually gets involved with the Phantoms and the politics of the town. He is drawn into the clashes between the Warumungu people, who are fighting against the exploitation of their land by the white residents, and the allies that support the establishment of the mining industry.

The story also portrays other characters like Will Phantom, Angel and Normal Phantom's son, who later becomes a leader of the Warumungu people and fights against the exploitation of their land and the industrial development that threatens to destroy the environment and the indigenous people's traditional way of life. The novel reminds the readers of how the indigenous people have fought for their rights, their land, and their lives in a deterministic way. It reflects on the deep-rooted fact that the White historians have deliberately forgotten to include in their history.

Alexis Wright has been appreciated for the inclusion of vivid imagery, lyrical language, nuanced exploration of the indigenous past, and the aborigine's culture, history, and mythology in the novel. Throughout the novel, Wright uses different techniques of storytelling like magical realism, non-linear narrative, and multiple perspectives, to produce a rich and complex portrayal of the town Desperance and its inhabitants. The novelist has used the medium of story to portray the forgotten history of Aborigines. As Sandra Phillips and Alison Ravenscroft say,

By "story" we don't mean only story in the sense of fictional narratives, although it can mean this too. We see story as that which holds knowledge and assists in its production, dissemination and understanding. This is an approach to storytelling as a practice through which knowledge is both generated and carried. In this, we take our lead from contemporary writers – from Alexis Wright for instance and how she figures Indigenous story. In Carpentaria, Alexis Wright doesn't only write story; she writes about story. Story is figured as that which carries knowledge of country, of the stories the country writes and the stories that are told to it. (107)

Jeanine Leane has echoed the same thought in different words. She says,

There are few familiar moorings for readers whose ethnocentric education presupposes that literature and history rely on inherently coherent and linear narratives. People with time and timeless people inhabit the space of the Gulf. Time and timelessness, history, memory and the sacred are central concerns of Carpentaria. Representations of deep and shallow time, notions of cosmos and chaos, history and memory, myth and reason are juxtaposed in Wright's narrative […]. It collapses time and space to honour Aboriginal past, present, memory, future and the sense of collectively experienced time. (151–152)

The novel also deals with the themes such as the impact of colonialism, cultural conflict, identity crisis, sense of belonging, environmental exploitation, and the power politics between the different groups. It also examines the mythological beliefs and spiritual connections of the Warumungu people and shows how their relationship with their land and their ancestors act as their forte and give them resilience during the period of adversity.

Alexis Wright explores the concept of ethnocentrism on Aboriginal communities in Australia and its worst impact. She has highlighted the ethnocentric attitudes of white settlers of Desperance, who consider the natives as inferior and savage. This discriminating attitude of non-Aboriginal characters is reflected in their actions which exploit and control the Aboriginal population through violence and intimidation. Meanwhile, Wright also registers the response of aboriginal people which highlights their resilience and strength. The Aborigines respond in the form of resistance to the oppressive attitudes and strive hard to maintain their cultural heritage and identity even during the times of crisis.

The following lines from the novel Carpentaria highlight how the white settlers claim the ownership of the town and the narrator has also registered the response of the Aborigines to it:

The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all. Sure, they worked the dunny cart in the old days, carted the rubbish and swept the street. Furthermore, they said, the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages, even when it came in. Right on the edge of somebody else's town, didn't they? Dumped the lot of them without any sign of lock, stock or barrel. No, the Pricklebush was from the time before the motor car, when goods and chattels came up by camel train until Abdul and Abdullah, the old Afghan brothers, disappeared along the track called the 'lifeline', connecting north to south. (4)

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE:

The novel also portrays the natives' innate quality of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is a term used to describe the accumulated knowledge and practices of Indigenous peoples that have been passed down from generation to generation about the deep understanding of the natural world. It deals with the relationships that connect different species and ecosystems.

Wright's work explores the significance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Indigenous cultures and how it was used to address environmental challenges. Throughout the novel, Wright highlights the community's deep understanding of their land and its resources, including their knowledge of the seasonal cycles, the behavioural patterns of different species of the land, and the importance of traditional hunting and fishing practices of aborigines. This proves that the natives are ardent believers of Relational Ontology who uphold and celebrate their sense of interconnectedness with nature and fellow human beings. The ethical and reciprocal understanding of ecology that certain characters in the novel have of the land confers on them, the special powers. For example, Normal Phantom's knowledge of the sea makes him appear superhuman. His affinity with water gives him a deep connection to the past and his ancestors.

The Pricklebush mob says that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began. Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea. He stayed away on the water as long as he pleased. He knew fish, and was on friendly terms with gropers, the giant codfish of the Gulf Sea, that swam in schools of fifty or more, on the move right up the river following his boat in for company. (6-7)

Normal remains a reservoir of great information that is disregarded and underutilized by the people and political powers of Uptown. In the novel, the Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the aborigines is contrasted with the exploitative and destructive practices of the white settlers, who are motivated solely by the profit the land and its resources yield. They show little or no respect for the natural environment. This is evident when they support the mining company to be established in their town. The Uptown's white settlers uphold a good neighbour policy with the Gurfurrit mine – a policy, according to Will Phantom 'worked to kill opposition' (271).

Will Phantom, the leader of the Westend Pricklebush Aboriginal community, remains adamant throughout the novel in his campaign against the establishment of a new mine which would damage the environment and culture of Aborigines. He says, ". . . cold and heartless ambitions of politicians and bureaucrats came flying in from faraway cities and capitals to destroy the lives of Aboriginal people (93). His conflict with the establishment of the mine is also evident from the following lines of the novel,

Will scorned the thought of transport ships now frequently moving up and down the northern coastline. The whole oceanic world seemed to be occupied in the Gulf. It was a grey painter's palette of tankers exchanging mining equipment for mined ore that came to the coast, after the flesh of the earth had been shunted there by pipelines, tying up the country with new Dreaming tracks cutting through the old. Big ships, small ships pulled in from all over the world bringing tinkers, tailors, beggar men, thieves. Anchored off Desperance, the ships waited for the barges to bring the ore out through the dredge tracks cut in the grey shallow waters where there were once lush green flowing seagrass meadows. How easy it would be for a ship to stop by some remote reef to pick up a bit of unofficial cargo. Uranium? Gold in lead? Will was knowledge galore, navigating his own nirvana. (277)

In the following quote, the novelist projects the relationship that Will and other aborigines have with his ancestors, the land and all the beings that inhabit it. The white settlers and the mining company, consider the land and its resources as the sources to exploit for profit. However, Will celebrates his connection with the land and the culture which is evident when he is surrounded by tangible reminders of his ancestors and the natural world in the cave.

Will had climbed higher into the hills, until eventually, he came to a large rock cave. Inside, the walls were covered by ancestral paintings telling stories of human history, made and remade by ochre paints, as the forefathers whispered the charter of their land. Will acknowledged their presence, touched the walls in places to embrace the timelessness of his own being. He felt humbled, honoured to be in the home of birds, animals, and clan people of time passed. (130)

The massive cyclone destroys the town. Anthony Carrigan suggests that Wright depicts the "slippage between indigenous-led resistance and environmental agency" (Carrigan 94). On observing the destruction caused by the cyclone, Will realises that the whole of human history could be erased if the Gods decide to "move the country" (473). The cyclone erases both the mine and the privileged side of the town. The intervention of nature in the form of a cyclone completely obliterated the town. This way, nature, which was ignored by its inhabitants, especially the white settlers, writes an alternative history that fills the gaps and silences of the dominant historical narrative. Kate Rigby suggests that . . .the massive cyclone constitutes the most dramatic incursion of the other-than-human into the action of the novel and, ultimately, facilitates its utopian conclusion. (132)

The same idea is echoed in the following quote of Leanne:

. . . for the settlers, the town is levelled and destroyed. For the Aboriginal residents, the town is transformed as part of the cosmos of the underground serpent. It never was a question of 'if', but 'when'. In this way, Wright challenges European arrogance and inexperience with the living land (158).

CONCLUSION:

In "Carpentaria," Wright exposes the issue of ethnocentrism, the ingrained prejudices and biases that exist in Australian society. Through her storytelling, Wright demonstrates the importance of cultural diversity and encourages a more inclusive and equitable society. She has reclaimed and preserved the marginalized history, culture, and traditions of Indigenous people. Through her writing, the novelist has challenged the dominant historical narratives and perspectives imposed on her people. In a nutshell, through retelling the story of an Aborigine's deliberately forgotten history, the novelist has preserved, reclaimed, and shared the rich cultural heritage of the Indigenous people of Australia.

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