

History of Early Colonization and Displacement of the Aboriginals: *Oscar and Lucinda*

Ashok Kumar Pathania¹ Dr. Anshu Raj Purohit²; Dr. Subhash Verma³

¹Ph. D. Scholar, Career Point University, Kota (Rajasthan); ² Professor, Department Of English, Career Point University; ³Assistant Prof. of English, Govt. Degree College Sarkaghat (Mandi, HP)

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Abstract:

The post colonial literature questions the legitimacy and completeness of history written in form of the chronicles of kings, princes, privileged ruling elites and the colonial and imperial ways of ruling the weaker territories across the world. Such power based narratives of the rulers, also termed as 'mainstream history', offer, either less space, for the indigenous, 'subalterns' or the conquered, or misrepresented them as the black, inferiors, uncivilized or aboriginals. The mainstreaming of history in this sense is the authoritative completeness or truth telling of the past. It is propagated as a matter of telling the story of past which can never be available as undistorted or pure.

*The novels of Peter Carey, the famous Australian novelist, re-evaluate the intricacies of history written by mainstream historians through their writings. In the historical fiction of Carey the convicts, rebellions, historical legends, systematic suppression and colonization of Aboriginals find justifiable records of their voices which could find place in the main stream version of history. The present paper is an attempt to analyse Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) as purely a historical projection of nineteenth century Australia that portrays the early phase of British colonization of the continent particularly when the British administrators and historians were writing the saga of discovering and settling a newly occupied landmass. It unravels the process of spreading the Christianity in the newly occupied land which was one of the main strategies of British colonization across its colonies.*

Keywords: Postcolonial, history, Aboriginals, culture, settlement.

The postcolonial reconstructions of history through literature usually aimed at the subversion of monolithic accounts of history which undermine the reality of the colonized or the suppressed. The post colonial literature questions the legitimacy and completeness of history written in form of the chronicles of kings, princes, privileged ruling elites and the colonial and imperial ways of ruling the weaker territories across the world. Such power based narratives of the rulers, also termed as 'mainstream history', offer, either less space, for the indigenous, 'subalterns' or the conquered, or misrepresented them as the black, inferiors, uncivilized or aboriginals. In this sense, "History", which is controlled by varied structure of power, 'does not provide truth', states N.K. Neb, "it rather offers what gets accepted or is made to be considered true" (150). The mainstreaming of history in this sense is the authoritative completeness or truth telling of the past. It is propagated as a matter of telling the story of past which can never be available as undistorted or pure. Raman Selden endorses the post-structuralists' view point of history as: "History can be considered as another form of fiction. Post-

structuralist thought makes it clear that history is always 'narrated', and therefore the first sense is untenable. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of representations" (188).

The novels of Peter Carey, the famous Australian novelist, re-evaluate the intricacies of history written by mainstream historians through their writings. Universalizing the European concept of colonization across the world they not only expose the historical suppression of the indigenous in Australia as a penal colony and brutal transportation of the Europeans to "Botany Bay" which was the chosen place for the felon, the outcast, the offscourings of British society. In the historical fiction of Carey the convicts, rebellions, historical legends, systematic suppression and colonization of Aboriginals find justifiable records of their voices which could find place in the main stream version of history.

The present paper is an attempt to analyse Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) as purely a historical projection of nineteenth century Australia that portrays the early phase of British colonization of the continent particularly when the British administrators and historians

were writing the saga of discovering and settling a newly occupied landmass. It unravels the process of spreading the Christianity in the newly occupied land which was one of the main strategies of British colonization across its colonies. The novel is set in the mid of nineteenth century, between 1850s and 1860s, exposing Australia as a newly settled land and its relation with England as the remote control of the colony. The early life of the convicts and other migrant labourers in Australia working under British administration and landlords, who were not supposed to be brought to the forefront of historians, are brought into the surface.

Oscar and Lucinda moves around two main characters Oscar and Lucinda who meet on the ship 'Leviathan' which sailed from Portsmouth Port to Sydney in the nineteenth century. Lucinda, an Australian English girl, is the heiress of her parent's property in Sydney. Oscar is a son of a famous clergyman born and brought up in England. On the ship they meet and debate on the topic whether or not gambling is a sin. Later they are seen in Sydney engaged in gambling. Gambling brings bad luck for Oscar and he loses his job, possessions and money. Lucinda helps him provide shelter and both fall in love. In Sydney he plans to build a Church at Bellingen which is a territory of the Aboriginals, and wants to dedicate it to Lucinda. Their love story ends in a break up and Lucinda disappears from the story. The story strikes on various historical issues of early occupation of Australian land by the colonizers. The issues of properties, displacement of the natives, politics of renaming the native place and politics of creating new identity of Australia as a Christianity based nation are apparently seen in the family matters and family based narratives of Oscar and Lucinda. In this context the novel unravels the early history of the colonization of Australia, and the present paper only focuses on the Aboriginals side how the Christianity was used as the weapon of displacing the natives from their land and cultural resources.

The family history of Oscar explicitly accepts the fact that the mainstream history of Australia is distorted in nature because it only sermonizes and justifies the colonial rule of the British government in Australia. The family history of Oscar is divided into two segments in the novel where his father a Bishop has strong faith in Christianity as the religion of improving the human kind. But on the other side his mother is presented as the person who wants to use Christianity for individual purposes and this version of his family history symbolizes the colonial use of Christianity in expanding the British Empire in Australia.

His father's vision towards Australia is not inspired by the colonial ideology but according to Oscar his mother always keeps a dominating ideology towards Australian settlement. Oscar deconstructs the version endorsed by his mother's ideology. The history written by his father reveals the colonization of Australia and its long lasting impact on the Aboriginals. He states, "He did not like my mother's proprietarily attitude towards the church" (3). His mother's proprietarily attitude towards Australian land and resources symbolizes the colonial version of Australian history. Oscar rewrites his family history because he is not satisfied with the oppressive version of his mother imposed on the whole

family during his childhood. In the first chapter of the novel he recalls his mother's description of how Oscar Hopkins transported a church to Bellingen, how she used the story to embarrass the family and how all the family resented it, however, without daring to challenge. "My mother told the story of the church in a way that always embarrassed me. There was an excess of emotion in her style. There was something false" (2). He also recalls that according to the oppressive nature of his mother he is only a stereotypical "Victorian clergyman" (1).

In this way Carey's protagonist dares to peep into his own family background and to refute the ways adopted by his own family members to show themselves superiors to others. He confesses that in his early childhood he learnt to distrust the local history by rejecting the names and identity of local things offering them new names and or identity. In the first chapter titled 'Church' the narrator describes his views about local history and reason behind the name of 'Darriest Point'.

The novel exposes the colonial steps of changing the names of native places and vegetation negating the fact that they were already named in the cultural spirit of the Aboriginal since time immemorial. Many a times they used the military power along with any other possible means to encroach the native belongings. Defying the colonial conception of history the novel proves that the history of the Indigenous has been interpolated deliberately and strategically. History of Australia, thus, cannot be accepted as the only reality as shown by the white historians and writers. This distortion in the Australian history by the colonizers becomes evident in novel through many examples like Oscar's rewriting of his family history and Lucinda's abandoning of her property in Australia. Carey evidently adopts... "the classical post-colonial strongly" states, Bill Ashcroft, "which, to borrow Salman Rushdie's famous phrase, consists in "writing back", to the center – not, incidentally, 'back' in the sense of "for" the center, but 'back' in the sense of 'against' the assumptions of the center to a prior claim to legitimacy and power" (244-245).

The history of the arrival of Christianity in Australia for the purpose of colonization is seen through the life and actions of the protagonist Oscar. He is presented in the novel as a misguided English missionary who is supposed to be sent to Australia, strategically, with a colonial objective of imposing the stories of Christianity on the Aboriginals. The objective of Christianity to make the native civilized appears contradictory in chapter 'Glass Church' where the Aboriginals are seen culturally affluent with their own ways and experiences rooted in their rituals, songs and stories. Ironically, a glass church is planned at Belligen to make the Aboriginal civilized. However, in the story the 'glass church' is asserted as Oscar's religious passion and his struggle to win Lucinda's love, but it also symbolizes the colonial strategy that later brings displacement and dispossession for Aboriginals' culture and history. Oscar, a new clergyman and Mr. Jeffris, a colonial explorer, Mr. Smith and Mr. Borrudaile, British explorers and historians are the characters who work hard to intrude into the world of the Aboriginals and whose mission is to expand the British colonial empire in Australia. Mr.

Borrudaile a member of the 'Ultimo Society' discusses the need of clergy in New South Wales when they were travelling in the ship to Sydney. Mr. Borrudaile details Oscar about the white settlers and their behaviour towards 'Australians'. He does not care about the regular oppression and displacement of the Aboriginals but he strongly feels the need of clergy to make them civilized. The chapter titled 'Bishop Dancer's Ferret' exposes that the Christian missionaries were not solely committed to protect the Aboriginals from the British colonization. The 'missionaries' works were only in favor of the colonizers and it is referred in the novel that the natives were dying under colonial governance. Many characters in the novel are aware of that.

The family history of Lucinda, the female protagonist of the novel, reveals the other angle of past that describes the view point of the second generation settlers in Australia. Lucinda as an Australian English girl is the heiress of her parent's property in Sydney. According to colonial law she is the owner of her parents' property. But like Oscar the female protagonist of the novel also refuses to accept the property as secured to her by her parents. She sensibly considers that the property she is going to adopt totally belongs to the Aboriginals. She intends to get rid of her inheritance because she thinks it has been taken from the blood of the Blacks. "Lucinda is acutely aware of the Aboriginal presence and suffers from guilt" states Peterson, "to some extent, her wager with Oscar can be seen as an unconscious attempt at getting rid of her inheritance, which she feels has been stolen from the Aborigines" (107). The other female character Elizabeth also senses that the Blacks are consistently being displaced from their culture and land resources. When she is on the death bed she is haunted by the concept of displacement of the Blacks from their land: "The stooks turned into blacks. She knew they were not real. They were ghosts. They stood in the stubble slippery fields keening (92). She keeps herself updated about the condition of the Blacks and openly gives arguments in favour of them. She has strong contradiction with her husband on Aboriginals' land issues. She strongly opposes Mr. Leplastrier's behaviour, her husband, towards the Blacks:

She turned and turned on the bed and the stooks turned into blacks, and the blacks into a stooks and the stooks into blacks. Leplastrier had made this bed. Such a fussily made bed. How could a man who could kill a Black with his rifle make such a stupid, romantic bed? (92)

The novel as the saga of Australian settlement records the different views of the settlers about the native Blacks. There is another female character, Mrs. Burrows, whose attitude toward the Aboriginal is apparently opposite than Lucinda and Elizabeth. She openly endorses the idea of shooting out the Aboriginals from their personal property. She argues in favor of the colonial rule and states that the white should shoot the blacks in their self defense and they should not be brought before the law. She feels insecure of the natives and endorses the idea of complete annihilation of the Aboriginals forever. "She talked of calling out the army,

of a final all-out war against the blacks"(172). There are other characters who are the mouthpieces of the colonial ideology towards the Aboriginals. Mr. Jeffris behaves like Mrs. Burrow and advocates the permanent displacement of the Aboriginals from white settlement. "These blacks, he said were the most murderous of all, having been dispossessed of their lands and driven into dense, tumbled country of the 'Falls'. They had their backs against the wall (172). In the story Mr. Jeffris never changes his colonial attitude and take it for granted that the Blacks should be ridden away from their land. He starts a process of exploring new places and maps them in his diary renaming them with new descriptions. In Aboriginals' history and culture these places are already named and valued with centuries old living style and customs of the Aboriginals. Thus, the novel reminds the historical fact of systematic and strategic eradication of the Aboriginals from the colonial version of history and literature.

The novel records the Aboriginal experiences under the colonial settlement by and large. Carey offers a narrative space to an Aboriginal character named Kumbaingiri Billy, who narrates the details of the brutal disorder and anarchy caused by the colonizer to his community and environment simultaneously. The story directly encounters the concept of peaceful settlement of the land. During the British arrival, about 300000 Aboriginal people were living on the island continent divided into about five hundred tribes, each with its own language and totemic rituals. Subsequently, the white colonizers declared that Australia was an unoccupied territory, hence, could be occupied and claimed through the doctrine of "terra nullius" (empty land). Carey presents the Aboriginals and more peaceful and nature loving people. In the novel when a group of the colonizers came into the domain of the Aboriginals they are very innocent to understand the strategy of the colonizers. Kumbaingiri Billy narrates the advent of white settler in chapter 'Glass cuts':

The white men came out of the clouds of Mount Darling. Our people had not seen white men before. We thought they were spirits. They came through the tea-trees, dragging their boxes and shouting. The birds set up a chatter. What a noise they all made. Like twenty goannas had come at once to raid their nests (468).

Billy's narration serves as the alternative version of Australian history that directly subverts the official history of the colonizers and the conception of peaceful settlement as propagated by the early colonizers in the books of history. However, Australia was used first as a penal colony and later during the time of European settlement the Indigenous Australians were subjugated. The arms conflicts between colonizers and the Indigenous began immediately after 1788 and continued approximately for 140 years, but the main stream history of Australia did not mention the Aboriginal resistance and spread the notion that Australia was settled rather than invaded. Regarding this fact C. Kodhandarman states:

There were a lot of conflicts and bloodshed since the arrival of the

colonists. But the Australian generally assumed the Aborigines of Australia had not resisted the coming of the British as they had not prepared themselves for a war and therefore it spread the notion that Australia was settled in rather than invaded. (58).

The Aboriginal culture is significantly known for the nature based life where environment and vegetation are considered the blue print of their survival. Their life is paralyzed if they are detached directly or indirectly from their natural resources. The novel portrays many incidents where Aborigines' land and cultural resources are not only destroyed systematically but all the landmasses, places, rivers and trees are undergone into the process of changing their name according to British language and terminology. Renaming and mapping of new landscapes, strategy of making the natives civilized in the European sense and huge deforestation etc. are the part and example in the narration of Billy. At that time the Aboriginal were completely unaware of the political strategies of Christian civilization and the growing demand of European industrialization. The novel details the colonization of the Narco tribe in mid nineteenth century. The Narco people, as they are unaware of the disastrous arrival of the colonizers, consider the white people as angry spirits of their ancestors by the tribe. The innocence of their life is clearly visible in Billy's narrations. A song is composed by the Narco people on the arrival of these angry spirits.

Oscar and Lucinda largely carries the historical theme of European Industrialization and its impact on the British colonies. The Victorian England had also its industrial and commercial purposes behind the settlement of Australia. The intact natural resources of the large continent were one of the big attractions for the nineteenth century England. The novel largely brings the Victorian period, along with its varied policies, into the discussion. Historically, the Victorian Age refers to a span of time from June 1837 to January 1901 and the action of the novel covers the period from 1950 to 1960. The novel exposes the characteristics of Victorian age particularly the growing conflict between science and Christianity. "the novel is set during a period of great intellectual format, when crisis of faith was being felt as cotemporary science challenged and undermined literal belief in the historical truth of the Bible" (Woodcock, 83). In the novel Theophilus Hopkin is said to be lived in the conflict between science and the historical truth of Bible. As a member of the Plymouth Brethren he believes in the deep literal truth of the Bible; but as a natural scientist he sees the evidence of evolution in every stone. His own faith seems challenged by the scientific notion that can be observed in conversations with his fifteen year- old Oscar. The growing critique of religion becomes the fundamental base of decreasing faith in Church. It resulted into the later concept of using church as an agent of imperialism. The characters like Mr. Jeffris who in spite of opposing to Christianity thinks to use the concept of church as an instrument to explore the Australian land. "Each pane of glass, he thought, would travel through country where glass had never existed before, not once, in all time. These

sheets would cut a new path in history"(441). When this imperial strategy is applied practically an Aboriginal tribe named Narco is annihilated by and large and Mr. Jeffris himself is killed by the joint efforts of the docile Mr. Smith and Oscar.

In the history of world colonization the Victorian Age is often known to the expansion of empire, power and culture across the world where science played a vital role in exploring new places and to spread trade and commerce across the world. For this growth of science, the nineteenth century has been described as 'the wonderful century'. In social and political fields the Victorian age is known to bring huge changes in socio-political life of people. Growing capitalism, miserable condition of working class, industrialization, democracy, feminism and socialism are some of the characteristics of this historical period. The glimpses of all these Victorian features are visible in the *Oscar and Lucinda*. It portrays the growing rationality and doubts on Christianity and faith. In the story it is seen that the narrator is living with his father, mother and sister. The mother is staunch believer of Christianity.

The concept of Christianity has strong connections with Oscar and Mr. Jeffris dream of a glass church at Bellingen, the area where Narcoo people live. Kubaingiri Billy describes how Mr. Reverend Hopkins visits his tribe and tells them the stories of Jesus Christ. Before the arrival of these outsiders the tribe had never listen about Jesus Christ. "It was in these camps the young fellows learned about Jesus. They were told the story of Jesus nailed to the cross. They were told by the Reverend Mr. Hopkins" (469). The narrator, Billy, remembers how Oscar's grandfather The Reverend Mr. Hopkins had come to Australia as a missionary to preach Christianity so as to civilize the Aborigines: "The Reverend Mr. Hopkins told the Narcoo men the story of St Barnabas eaten by lion. He told them the story of St Catherine killed with a wheel. He told them the story of St Sebastian killed with spears" (469).

The novel records the history of early confrontation between the Aboriginal and whites explorers. In the process of their exploration they head towards Mount Dawson, a very sacred place of the Aborigines. Billy narrates this incident how they stopped the whites entering Dawson. In order to terrorize the natives they kills a Narcoo man who stops them to cross Mount Dawson because it was a sacred place for them. Then another Narcoo man named Odalberee takes the white men down towards the Bellingen Valley. In this night all the Narcoo people realize that there are strangers in their country. The concept of glass church, its false sacredness shown by the colonizers and its disastrous impact on the Aborigines can be seen explicitly in the Aboriginal song of glass. Here the 'Glass' symbolizes the material advancement of the whites that is used as sacred weapon, under the guise of Christianity, to 'cut' the natives exploiting their natural resources and cultural belongings. The colonial 'discourses' do not illustrate this obliteration pretending to make the aborigines civilized. However, this is the point which the skeptics of multiculturalism raise, by and large, stating that multiculturalism, "denies the specifically different situation of Indigenous Australians, namely their position as the original inhabitants, their

history of dispossession and genocide.” (Curthoys 30).

The novel provides the glimpses of the politics and administrative functioning of Victorian age and its impact on the life of newly settled Europeans and on the natives simultaneously. Victorian age is known for the rise and growth of industries, sheer exploitation of working class, women and children and growing atheism in public domain due to the remarkable development in science. The workers from poor and middle class backgrounds were transported to the British Penal colonies for working newly opened small and large scale industries and Australia. Their condition was painful and miserable like the labor class of England.

Thus, Carey, as a post-colonial novelist, feels discomforts with the British imperial discourse, adopting “the ‘classical’ post-colonial strategy which, to borrow Salman Rushdie’s famous phrase, consists in ‘writing back’ to the ‘Centre’”. By involving the two family into discussion and with individuals’ narratives of the past Carey deconstructs colonially constructed myths created by official or mainstream history particularly the myth of peaceful settlement of the continent. He also refutes the idea that Australia is a ‘lucky country’ where Christianity entered to ‘save’ the ‘heathen Blacks’ and third, he interrogates the refutable idea that British colonizers ‘opened up’ the country for settlement and ‘civilization’. The novel takes a huge postcolonial turn when the protagonist of the novel, Oscar, doubts his own family history. He concludes that his family history has two versions one belongs his father and another to his mother. He very straightforwardly, declares that his mother’s version of history has unnecessary exaggerations which symbolizes colonial basis of portraying history.

Peter Carrey as a post-colonial novelist strongly challenges the ways of writing history adopted by the colonizers. Through Aboriginal songs and narrations the novelist unravels the displacement and annihilation of the native culture by the colonizers. He also focuses on the fact that how the traditional life styles of the natives are completely altered and destroyed by the industrialization and the colonial policies.

Oscar and Lucinda, explores the origin of Australia by tracing all possible measures of the earlier time of British history. Re-evaluating the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized the novel depicts the contribution of an individual, a family and community in making Australia a nation. Carey refutes the colonial notion of discovering Australia and authenticates the natives’

version of truth and their existence. He re-examines the economic, political and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized people and colonizing powers. In this way, he constructs a new history of Australia which offers place for all Australian – Europeans settlers as well as for the Aboriginal.

However, colonial power, and colonial strategies always reflect the contention of peaceful and smooth settlement of Australia. Carey subverts the imperial version of Australian history where Australia is presented as ‘an empty land’ having no history and culture. His concerns for the Aboriginals can be analyzed in an interview:

Two hundred years ago Australia was a landscape filled with Aboriginal stories, and all of those people, that whole tribe of people, just do not exist anymore. None of their stories exist anymore. The people were killed in order that little church could sit in that landscape and bring in its stories. (Lisa 81)

In *Oscar and Lucinda*, “Carey has reinvented nineteenth century Australia in an attempt to create not costume drama but a narrative explaining the present” (Hassall, 143). The novel was published on the on the bicentenary of Australia, recommends strong re-evaluation of the history of its ‘Christian heritage’ and European’s behaviour with the Aboriginals. It came into existence when the concept of ‘Multiculturalism’ was on the swing. The entire history of Australian settlement explicitly portrays British endeavour to implant the British culture and identity in Australian land and in that process the Aboriginal culture and ways of life have been depleted by and large. In this context the novel reminds the historical process of the implantation of British culture in Australia negating the Aboriginals and unravels the entire process of the transplantation of European culture in Australian land dreamed by the imperial policy of the British. “What was first established in Australia was a transplantation of British culture. The culture of course, evolved away from its British source but the primary identification remained with ‘British’ culture” (Stratton and Ang, 147-148).

Thus, *Oscar and Lucinda* brims the lacunas of history by adding myriad of hidden events and episodes in his realm of fiction. Challenging the idea of any single and authentic history, as imperial history claims, Carey accepts the 40, 000 years old Aboriginals’ history and culture. His historical works present a concrete picture of Australian settlement and provide an alternate to mainstream history.

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