

RETRIEVING LOST CHARACTER AND IMAGE THROUGH Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*.

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Abstract

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* is about the poor treatment of aborigines in the 1950s continuing at the present. The first part is set in a mission in the north of the country, where the mother of seven year old Ivy Koopundi has just killed herself by dowsing herself in kerosene and setting herself alight. Ivy is one of the aborigines in the girls' orphanage in the mission. When others follow the example of Ivy's mother, Ivy is partially blamed saying that she is accursed or that her family has *the sickness*. She is abused by the other girls but also sexually abused by the white married director of the orphanage. The viewers see her many years later when she is in an institution, unable or unwilling to speak, and then jump further ahead, where he readers meet her daughter, Mary, who has been adopted by a white family and is unaware of her antecedents till after her adoptive parents' death. She then becomes involved in aboriginal politics. While certainly a polemical novel about the treatment of aborigines in Australia, it is also a well-told story, well worth assessing.

Key words: Lost identity, belongingness, magic realism, genocide, stolen generations etc.

Alexis Wright evokes city and outback, deepening readers understanding of human ambition and failure, and making the timeless heart and soul of this country pulsate on the page. Black and white cultures collide in a thousand ways as Aboriginal spirituality clashes with the complex brutality of colonisation at St Dominic's mission. With her political awareness raised by work with the city-based Aboriginal Coalition, Mary visits the old mission in the northern Gulf country, place of her mother's and grand-mother's suffering. Mary's return re-ignites community anxieties and the Council of Elders again turn to their spirit world.

Alexis Wright, being one of the reputed Aboriginal writers of Australia, reaped lots of critical acclaims through the representations her fictional world. In *Plains of Promise*, the reader gets a feeling of togetherness with reality, and is alienated from the notions that the readers usually have about the Aborigines belonging to a

different culture from his/her. This helps to establish a rapport not only with the literature but also with the culture and the society. She becomes successful in creating a certain space that was very necessary for the Aborigines to survive. The sense of belonging and the essence of displacement got a proper representation in the world of literature through the publication of this novel. Her desire to be a writer was borne with her from her childhood days. *Plains of Promise* is a highly suggestive work raised many thought provoking questions regarding the relationship between White Australians and Black Australians. Wright has produced clear articulations of her typical writing practices. She exercises the independence of thought and is deeply conscious of filtering the influences on her thinking, particularly in relation to how those influences had find their way into her writing through the exercise of her literary imagination. In her own thinking and writing, she has become a watch dog on her writings not to be trapped in the emotional cages manufactured by other people. Random ideas and random solutions for Indigenous people remain futile in her view.

Sharing her strong convictions in an interview with a formalist of Alice Springs News, Kieran Finnane, Wright views: "...I wanted to write from a very early age: I never had any encouragement from the school that I went to - they never expected Aboriginal kids to do well or to do anything! I never felt that the education being offered was directed towards me. The poetry plays, fiction I heard at school intrigued me but the story-telling mostly comes from my grandmother. I had a lot to do with her from a very young age. I listened to her stories and the family talk for all the very early years of my life. That created my imagination -it was full of superstition and also a longing for the traditional homeland ... My grandmother's still very close to me but now she's very, very old. She taught me a lot in life..." (Finnane:I). The main story of the book makes the dreams of Australian Aborigines and the people of the plains of the Northern Territory participate in the highly emotional experiences of the characters. It makes. While the story develops, it makes us question our conscience about how could something like that possibly happen. *Plains of Promise* in this sense, is a powerful example that reinforces the political and social regulations into one another. Since the Aborigines are 'sub-human', the declaration of Human Rights does not apply to them. Wright traces this very vividly in most of her works. Since the natives have no rights, they are simply abandoned without protection to inhuman forces. She brings in the colonial praxis to explain the brutal weapons of the colonialists that categorise them. As a result, victimisation becomes an easy apparatus for these whites. Even Jimmie, the protagonist of Thomas Kennelly's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* faces similar victimisation. On the basis of this idea, Wright defines in her book two sorts of individuals -the first are those for whom privileges and humanity are the same by exercising their rights, and terms themselves as 'social human beings'. And the second are those, for whom denial of rights sanctions misery, chronic hunger, ignorance, can never exercise their rights or, in general, designates to be nothing better than 'sub-human'. Robyn Davidson, another Aboriginal writer similar to writing style of Alexis Wright viewed, "Quite by chance I had arrived in the Alice juts ahead of the first shock waves detonated by the Land Rights Act, under which untenanted stretches of desert in the Northern Territory could be claimed by Aboriginal clans, provided they could prove before a white tribunal that their 'ownership' was authentic. Suddenly the town was invaded by 'southern do-gooders' --young, urban, left-wing teachers, lawyers, doctors, anthropologists,

linguists, artists, who had come to lend their skills to the Aboriginal cause. The Central Land Council, a little grassroots organization, had been set up to administer the Act. Tiny bureaucracies began to form around specific issues -health, housing, education, communications” [Granta70: 56].

If the history of the country is explored, it can be distinctly seen that in 1901 Australia was empowered by Britain to legislate in relation to any race except aboriginal natives. It was advised that aboriginal natives should continue to be excluded from that law, as they remained ‘creatures of exotic value’ under the jurisdiction of the Department of Flora and Fauna. It was not until 1967 that Aborigines were awarded citizenship. Wright’s *Plains of Promise* is another example of the integration of the real and the spiritual world of the Aborigines that has never been portrayed so correctly before. Another Aboriginal writer from Port Lincoln, South Australia, Iris Burgoyne also believed in the spiritual knowledge that the Aboriginal people possess. She thinks that she had: “...gained ancient spiritual knowledge and wisdom and a rare insight into Aboriginal rituals and Law from relatives ascending to her great-great grandparents. While on the mission, I had regular contacts with elders who lived in camps on the outskirts of Koonibba mission. These people refused to set foot on the mission and defended their independent and self-sufficient way of life. They shielded me and many other young Aboriginal people, from the destruction of Aboriginal culture in the face of civilization and Christianization. I often feel about young generations of Aboriginal Australians who suffered loss of identity because of the absence of the lessons on tradition” (Burgoyne: 55). While viewing *Plains of Promise*, one engages with a voice that is familiar and yet alien. The voice seemingly appears that of a psychologically complex story-teller, who unravels a terrible history of the struggle for survival of the Aborigines. Alexis Wright has put heart and soul to portray the complex relationship of the white-black world of Australia. She has encapsulated the horror of a sad chapter of Australian history. Her work facilitates an understanding of the relationship between the Aborigines and the white Australian society. She portrays the brutal reality being legitimised by the white dominance that leads to the subjugation and marginalisation of the Aborigines. She defies the white portrayal of the Aborigines that was either savage and subhuman or exotic and romantic. Wright, very vividly, pictures the legitimisation of the white regime and the atrocious conditions of the Aborigines in her novel.

Plains of Promise is essentially the story of a stranger who, arrives in an isolated community in the grip of a cruel regiment. The novel is primarily set in Wright’s own traditional country around Lawn Hill in the Gulf of Carpentaria. She tries her best to represent her Waanji tribe from the highlands of the south of the Gulf. She always wanted to write a novel set in the Gulf country which is where her family come from. In her own words: “I was living in Melbourne at the time, feeling a long way from home and it seemed that it was never going to come to an end. . . . I guess the novel is in some ways my attempt to come to terms with my separation from the country, not that it's a story directly about me or my family. I also thought, when I started, that it was a way of bringing some attention to the area. Then it was one of the more neglected and isolated parts of Australia although nowadays it’s always in the papers because of where the negotiations have led in the past two years. Because of my family circumstances I'm not able to live up there and apart from that we don't have any access

to traditional lands, we still don't. Not just my family but most Waanji people because the lands are all owned by the powerful whites" (Finnane: 2). This unique characteristic of retreating to one's roots can also be seen in the works of the Aboriginal poet from Derby, Tasmania, Daisy Utemorrah. In her *Do Not Go Around The Edges* (1990), the poetry is filled with memories and experiences of pathos and sadness for leaving her tribal lands back in Kunmunya, in Kimberley. She has often wandered in her dreams to go back to her homelands whereas in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, the protagonist, Sally, has represented this quest for the roots in details. Alexis Wright's book explores the past and present Aboriginal situation through a matrilineage especially the history of mothers and daughters who take us across the second half of the past century. *Plains of Promise* is a story of mothers and daughters, of despairing, anguished, enduring love in the face of systematic, legalised inhumanity. The relative bondage between two female protagonists, Mary and her daughter, Ivy, has been depicted in the intricacies of symbolism. Even the protagonists of Sally Morgan's *Jiv Place*, Daisy, Gladys and Sally have been dealing with such intricate symbolism. Sally Morgan uses the trope of fear and disclosure of racial identity through the incident of the whites fathering children of the blacks making situations more complicated. The racial terror that encapsulates both these female protagonists has a different form of representation.

If the daughter describes the inhuman conditions of the circumstances of incomprehensible horror and trauma correlating the race and colour the mother unwraps an awful, dispassionate environment where survival is impossible. But with her acts of courage and inspiring responsibility she overcomes every circumstance of life. The female protagonist, Mary, perceives the world in a very different way. Her death, after her child is taken from her, is the first in a series of deaths suspected to be suicides. A cover-up by authorities leads the clandestine Council of Elders to conduct their own investigation. The results are inconclusive and the stranger's child is made a scapegoat. The plains that Wright portrays in the novel justify life, which inexorably renews itself despite all the painful obstacles put in its path, and the myriad deaths experienced along the way. Its endless cycles of renewal are in harmony with the world of spiritual existence that enlivens the land with beauty and terror. Thus the stranger is driven to her death: "Alone she saw the blackness of the night and the men who came, small and faceless creatures. They slid down the ropes from the stormy skies, lowering their dirty wet bodies until they reached the ground outside the hut while she slept. There in silence they went after her. One of the important aspects of Wright's *Plains of Promise* is the question of how the novel present's female characters and how it positions its readers in terms of gender. Feminists often comment on the uses made of gender in post-modern fiction and post-structuralism theories. Wright also argues with the Feminists that her usage of specific metaphors does not preclude a specific positioning of the readers in terms of gender. It is seen that in narrative theory, the equation between sexual and textual intercourse is a critical commonplace. Henceforth, Wright portrays her characters in such a way that she neither supports the female subjugation nor male dominance. Mark Henshaw's novel *Out of the Line of Fire* (1988) also frequently draws examples on such parallels. The male protagonist, Elliot, who has been portrayed as a traveller to the country where people were all strangers, almost dies while travelling at the centre of the dry Great Lake, surrounded by thousands of dead pelicans, like him deceived by the mirage of water. He lies unconscious, entombed in a web of grass. Elliot

returns back to senses when the rain pelted upon his body. With fright, he jumps and in a flash of lightening he sees that the water ebbing against his outstretched legs. After the rain finally stopped he notices the greenery of the land in the daylight, but as the darkness approached the nature revealed a different reality: “At night the dead returned, marching over the flat land. This time they feigned their identity as mosquitoes, unrecognisable in their sameness as the stars in the sky. Their living relatives were safe from the retaliations of this battle, where lost spirits fought each other individually The arms and hands of fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters protected their own: “Elliot, a messenger of his people’s spirits Slowly, painfully Elliott awoke. His tomb a sanctuary of dead clans people who left as soon as they felt the renewal of life in the heat he began to generate. They were no longer necessary; relieved of the urgency of family obligation, they could return to fighting one another” (Wright: 81-82). If probed properly the male characters seem to be incredibly violent towards women. All the men are characterised like this in various degrees -white and black except for one poor man. Lawrence, who gets his neck broken when he tries to speak out for the injustice to the women world. He rebels against the excruciating acts that the masculine world always thrusts upon the weaker world of femininity. When Elliot thrashes his wife, Ivy, thinking that the women are ‘the scum of the earth. Lawrence comes forward with a helping hand for Ivy: “One day Lawrence overstepped the mark with Elliot. Elliot released the grip on Ivy, and flung her towards that crowd that had gathered, so that she almost landed in the camp-fire. But such a violent trait has not been portrayed in the male characters of Morgan’s novel *My Place*. Arthur was not very brutal like Elliot. Neither other male characters, like Albert or Howden Drake-Brockman have been violent like Elliot. This saga of Alexis Wright, uncovers the Aboriginal myths and legends but more truly their reality which is alive and still part of their everyday life. So, it is not magic-realism that we find in the book, but an intricate symbolism that will lead us to the discovery of a different reality, that will allow us to take a glimpse to their world but that will not give us the key to- fully understand it. The subtle gap between reality and magic reality has been covered with the absurd world of surrealism.

Wright represents the scenario with a touch of truth and reality. She neither supports the realm of masculine Tyranny nor does she deny the fact of the submissive nature of the feminine world. She rather thinks that contemporary situations and circumstances formulate the mode of conduct of any gender. In an interview by Kieran Finnane of Alice Springs News, Wright blames the circumstances and also the contemporary ruling government for that: “If all the men turned out that way, I don't know how that happened except to say that the characters that I created weren't based on my feelings or perceptions of people in general. But the characters as they developed in the book were true to the characters I was trying to create, they developed in those ways. There was no attempt on my part to make women good and men bad and that's not how I see the world in general anyway. The type of communities created under state laws - missions and reserves - weren't pleasant places for people to live on, whether they were Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Any race of people would have suffered badly under those laws and the way those laws were applied to people” (Finnane:7). The human drama of Wright’s story is fascinatingly amplified in this way throughout the first section of the novel, under the title-- *The Timekeeper’s Shadow*. By its conclusion the stranger’s child, Ivy Koopundi, has all but reached the end of

her journey. Wright also portrays those realities that seem to be never dealt with such finesse. It seems that the torturous life that Ivy leads, she brings painfully alive the phrase ‘the Stolen Generation’ in a very tragic manner after years of sexual abuse at the hands of her ‘protector’. She bears his child at just 14 years of age, who is taken away from her before she even sees her. The portrayal of the life that Ivy spends is quite despairing and dismal. Here a succession of indigenous women forcibly separated from their daughters go up in flames one by one in an agony of longing, loss, despair and love. According to Wright this happens to a large number of people, a lot of Aboriginal people. If one is really an unlucky person, nothing good comes except for those what they can make of their own inner world. Wright wants to protest against the misuse of the Aborigines Protection Act 1911, which was introduced by the government to give the natives their rights to survive because many people were unable to empathise with them as the oppressed, displaced one. Even today the Aborigines are considered as “subhuman ... variants of primitive man ... and are only subjects of anthropology”(25). *Plains of Promise* is a voice of that inner thought whose importance was to give the right words for this protest of the misuse of the Act After the first part of *Timekeeper’s Shadow*, Ivy has been married off to Elliot who passionately loves a woman promised to someone else. He vents his rage on Ivy, who in any case is the whipping character for the entire community. From this point, Ivy drowns in madness, with only an occasional glimmer of hope or pleasure in her life but with more insensitivity, injustice and crushing solitude than any one individual should ever have to bear. To a certain extent, *Plains of Promise* starts to mark time too. The first section has moved along apace, weaving many lives together in a communal tapestry of profound resilience, passion and despair. Now there seemingly appears a chronology of much lesser density. In the second part of the novel- *Glimpses of Distant Hills* -a search for one’s own identity becomes of so much importance that one crosses the borderline of Sanity. Ivy stays for long years in a mental asylum --the Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution --and over there belly-dancing therapy was used upon the inmates. To this Wright reacts quite intensely that this was a bit of a send-up really of schemes applied to Aboriginal people. They come from great ideas from governments or churches, from non-Aboriginal people and sometimes from Aboriginal people themselves. People can be sucked in and some weird and wonderful things might even work but when they fail. Aboriginal people are blamed for them. They’re left high and dry and there is a big enquiry about it. It’s a send-up of those situations. This essence of particularisation to a community and the sense of exploration of ‘the community’, are vividly portrayed with significance on the quest of belonging.

Wright in the novel doesn’t have a good word to say about this. She paints a pretty grim picture of the experiences of Aboriginal people. In a lot of organisations there's cohesion between people at various levels but at the same time it is very hard think that they do. It becomes quite ruthless, given the ruthlessness of the governments they have to deal with, and it really hardens people. It’s on full of our minds that it does harden us and we have to very consciously not let it overtake our lives in all aspects. As a personal experience, Mary is left to defend for herself as the outsider, the stranger as much as Ivy and her mother were. She develops a quite strong temperament to fight against all odds. She believes in the fact that however strong or weak one may be, one's tact for survival leads one to exist or perish. Mary is a very courageous girl to intrude into the

world that she Hunks to be her own. She knows that in such a struggle for space and identity, she has to confront lots of tormenting circumstances, especially from the masculine world. The innate strength that she possesses has been derived from her mother, Ivy. Both women protagonists have been portrayed as strong characters. Despite such innate inherited strength and courage, she does suffer a fair degree of mental and emotional abuse. Although she undergoes much psychological denigration and malignity of emotions from the circumstantial instances, she isn't beaten into submission. She also had inherited this trait from her mother and her grandmother, but the representation of this inherited strength is very different from Wright's representation.

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