

Not Sixteen but over a Hundred Years Old: The Subversive Implications in Louis Nowra's *Inside the Island* (1981) through the concept of Melodrama

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Abstract

In the introduction of Louis Nowra's play *Inside The Island* (1981), Veronica Kelly describes Nowra's version of national history as a distinctly post colonial one, where the inarticulate and the marginalised possess strengths inaccessible to their oppressors. The play occasions itself to be embodied in the Australian landscape, in the colonial history. Makeham (1999) writes that, "[the] landscape is constructed in this work as the centre of a complex signifying field...bring[ing] together a range of other discourses concerning...the empire..." ("Hysterical Landscape"). Another dimension, however, is the cruciality of the Australian Melodrama in the composition of the discussed narrative. Smyth (2016) explores the under exploration of the role played by the melodramatic genre in writing, that was typical to the European discourse, but interestingly served as an anti colonial tool for the indigenous Australian writers. The present paper attempts to explore the spatiality of the colonial Australian landscape within the genre of Melodrama, thereby tracing the marginalisation as well as its resistance, as portrayed in Nowra's discourse.

Key Words: Aboriginal literature, Australian identity, Marginalisation, Melodrama
Postcolonial writing, Resistance

In his interview with Makeham, Louis Nowra mentions the absence of an Australian identity, as he says, "...our identity is made up of a skein of skin and bones that covers a void...until we Australians acknowledge that the Aborigines had a vision rooted in the landscape...we will not be part of that landscape, and unless you understand the land you live in...you have no soul" (Makeham 1993). "Veronica Kelly describes Nowra's version of national history as a distinctly post colonial one...where the inarticulate and marginalised possess strengths inaccessible to their oppressors..." (qtd. in "Introduction"). Accordingly, Nowra's

debut play *Inside the Island* (1981) becomes an occasion to the historical consciousness of the Aborigines in the colonial period, as it remains to be invariably significant in the present memory of the Australian landscape, as suggested by Nowra in "...his interest in the past [that] derives from an irritation that white Australians lack a sense of their own history, as exiled convicts and/or opportunistic settlers of a foreign land...and more crucially, as colonisers of Aboriginal peoples..." (qtd. in "Introduction").

The present argument attempts to revisit the writing of Nowra from the lens of the Australian Melodrama as a conceptual genre. In "Landscape and Identity in

Australian Melodrama” Smyth points out that “... even when locally authored, the plotting and characterization of the genre were still derived from English models” (Smyth 363). From a seductive and exaggerated Colonial setting that carried the English narratives, Melodrama travels to Australia, and interestingly results in embodying the Aboriginal voices through linguistic and stylistic excess and/or parody. For Smyth, “enabled groundbreaking developments in the representation of the Australian landscape...” (385). Accordingly, this argument traces certain defining features of the genre of Melodrama and explores its applicability in the Australian spatiality, through Nowra’s discourse of *Inside the Island*.

Nowra reflects on one of the criticisms that he received with respect to the concerned discourse that mentioned him to hate Australia, to which he responds by saying that “There were two things that disturbed me about this criticism. One was that I don’t hate Australia at all and the second was that the more interesting aspect of the play- the interplay of characters- was overlooked” (Makeham 1993). His intellectual inclinations lie in a “hybrid vigour”, that does not attempt to simplify the Australian history as having a linear narrative but rather, it leans towards the voices that underline the colonial beginning. To illustrate the same, in scene two, Lillian Dawson tells Captain Henry about her house that was built by her father years ago. She intends to highlight his “civilised” vision, as she says, “...When he first came here it was just bush- a huge plain of Aboriginals and gum trees. He got rid of the blacks, except for those whom he converted; removed the gum trees. His picture is...painted by a very talented

Aboriginal youth who died soon after...” (Nowra 292). The grim history may be said to be conveyed through this instance alone. Aboriginality, as a phenomenon may be seen to be “Othered”, and their youth signifies both, the future and their present, is depicted to be a potentiality that is reduced to exist only in the past. However, the inevitability of the “traces” that Bhabha understands to be the subconscious of any spatial entity, may be seen to work its way through the narrative of Nowra, in its progression. The Othering also comes across in the way the cultural differences are received to be cultural conflicts that further the distance between the Aboriginals and their land, because of the white occupants that inhabit it. This can be observed in the way the aboriginal past and present expounds the condescending and violent cleansing that encompasses the historical transformations, as is evident when Lillian’s daughter Susan is patronizing towards Sergeant Collins when he says no for the lemonade, and adds, “...not to keen on it. None of me family were. We called it sugar syrup”, to which she says sarcastically, “I’m sorry we have nothing better” (Nowra 293). The subtleties that occupy the portrayal of the power relations between the blacks and the whites can be understood to be present when the Sergeant asks Susan if she has made the biscuits herself, and she tells him “...[t]he cook did. I can’t cook”, and the Sergeant replies, “It’s easy, you’ll get the hang of it. My mum was a great cook. Cooked for six boys”, which is followed by an “awkward silence” (Nowra 293). Here again, one can take notice of the clashing realities of the coloniser and the colonised. While the whites see no need to cook themselves with the domestic help around, it is a practice of routine in the Sergeant’s reality. And his unawareness to

this one sided power relation puts the master's narrative in an awkward and an unrecognized space.

Further, in an attempt to locate Nowra's discourse within the Australian Melodrama, one may turn to the vitality of the senses and the visual perceptions that are noticeable in it. Smyth understands that "melodrama [is] a supremely visual genre..." (364). Subsequently, Nowra is understood to present an "...allusive and highly concentrated visions of the past [that] are designed to confront the audience with their nation's shameful history..." (qtd. in "Introduction" 287). The historical marginalisation finds itself to now become a site of resistance, through Nowra's discourse. Essentially, the stylistic techniques employed by Nowra is grounded in visual exaggerations that allude to the Australian history of colonisation as well as the human condition in terms of the oppressed. Lillian instructs Susan to remember that she has to reach to Mrs. Harrison and her son the next evening. She points out to her that "I did my duty when I was your age. We must help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. It is our duty, our good works..." (297). The patronizing gaze therefore further marginalises the colonised subjects. Another example of the same can be seen in scene four of the play. Lillian and Susan engage in teaching the English manners and the language to Mrs. Harrison and her son Andy. The fact that Mrs. Harrison consumes the coloniser's understanding of the world is exemplified as she is worried about Andy's ignorance towards the supposed necessity to be integrated in the English narrative. She tells Lillian, "...I told meself when me husband ran off after he saw how Andy was turning out...I said Andy's not going

to end up in a looneybin...he's got to end up living proper in *this* world..." (Nowra 297). Andy is depicted to be mentally challenged and his innocence and an apparent ignorance could possibly stand for his childhood that is free of the power relations, as he enjoys performing activities that are native to his own indigenous culture. He is interested in the pepper trees, and is physically close to the landscape than his mother, who frets and struggles to fit in and belong to this world, by breaking away from her roots.

Louis Nowra introduces the post colonial complexity to the discussed narrative, by exposing not only the marginal site as the dwelling of the colonised Aborigines, but also the colonial anxiety that occupies the mind of the coloniser. The threat to lose his conquests, and the repressed memory of having taken over the land that was peopled by an unfamiliar culture that was alienating but complete in itself. It is with respect to this complexity that Melodrama contributes in the Australian "spatial turns", as Foucault conceptualizes (qtd. in Hess-Luttich 3). Melodrama as applied in the Australian post colonial context may be understood to depict textual excess that highlight the underlying tensions as a part of the process of colonisation. This textual excess may take forms of the delirium, chaos, disparaging and parodying narratives, dark humour, and other elements that signify that the overwriting can no more be maintained or contained, and there is an inevitable spillage in the stylistic devices and expression in the discourse of *Inside the Island*, for one to locate it within the genre of melodrama, that as one may observes, results in even salvaging the alternative and underlying narratives of the indigenous voices.

Accordingly, one could explore the various implications of “wheat” in the discourse. As an instance of the textual excess, wheat is metonymic for both the production of colonialism and anti colonialism. In Act 2 of scene two, wheat and wheat flour presents itself as an excess that the narrative cannot contain unless through the delirious end. For the Aboriginal characters, it becomes the object of desire and occupies their songs, as is observed in Act 1, scene 5 for instance, when Tom and Peter sing, “...[h]e goes out into his fields/ where the wheat is four foot high...Old Johnny wipe sweat from his brow/ And leaves a trail of wheat on the ground” (Nowra 299). Here, the act of wiping the sweat and leaving wheat on the ground insinuates the interiority of the Australian landscape and its intimacy with its people. For the settlers and soldiers, wheat brings about the disturbance in the white narrative that makes the psychological and material gaps for the black, Aboriginal past to seep in. Nowra uses “Ergotism”, a grain fungal infection to become a counter weapon for the Aborigines.

Another aspect that marks the excess in the discourse as a characteristic of melodrama would be the repetition of songs sung by Tom and Peter. These songs could be read as the song lines or the dreaming tracks, the concepts that are integral to the mythological framework of the Dreamtime that informs the Aboriginal reality. These songlines or dreaming tracks give out the essence of loneliness and a loss of identity of the people of Australia. This deliberate and repetitive emphasis on the songs could be seen as the articulation of the cultural knowledge that is passed through oral traditions through these songs among the Aborigines.

Additionally, an interesting opening to the play as having Peter singing, “...and though she didn’t look more than sixteen, I knew she was over a hundred years old...” could become suggestive of the Australian landscape that looked new and empty to the white people but was always and already inhabited (Nowra 290). Therefore, this melodramatic excess of the songlines may in turn be revealing the Aboriginal narrative by foregrounding the colonial desire of operation through the fantasy of the “terra-nullius”. This may further insist one to probe this desire, through the workings of the colonial memory, and therefore colonial forgetfulness.

There are a handful of occasions to clearly trace the settlers’ repression of their history with regard to the process of occupation of the Australian land. In Act 1, scene five, Tom tells Lillian, “...you said last week that I could have the wheat growing along the track as long as I cut it in my spare time...”, to which she answers, “so I did...I wonder why I never remember my generousities. Perhaps I’m growing forgetful” (299). Or in scene three, she tells her daughter, Susan, “...the good thing about Australians is that they have learnt not to indulge in soul- searching...” (297).

Nowra also depicts the resistance within the narrative, with the use of the Australian indigenous myths and tropes. One such myth of the missing child is employed with Andy and Susan missing. The trauma is no more seen to be limited to the colonised alone, as Andy is an aborigine, while Susan is a white young girl. The subversive act can be noticed when Andy’s mother, Mrs. Harrison, refuses to help Lillian find Susan, saying, “I’m grateful for what you’ve done for us- but Andy comes first” (Nowra 313). Andy is spotted

subsequently by Lilian and Susan found dead.

The landscape too, as a part of the concept of melodrama as an expressionistic form, presents itself as an excess. With the sky colour tones of twilight, the dark evenings, the hot climate. The excess can be observed here too, when Lilian calls Australia a giant sloth "where there are 800 million Asiatics eyeing us with envy" but the dual perspectives are embedded in her

Australian identity when she finds England to be too green. "Everything so green, it hurt my eyes". Thus the colonisers lose any sense of identity, in the play.

One can therefore see a simultaneity in Nowra's discourse, with regard to marginalisation of the Aboriginals and the landscape's and its original inhabitants' resistance to fully absorb the colonisers, as its own.

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