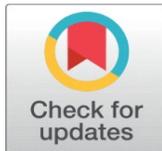


"POSTCOLONIAL PARADOXES AND CULTURAL CRITIQUES: A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS THEMES IN SELECT NOVELS OF PETER CAREY"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the postcolonial themes and cultural critiques in the novels of Peter Carey, focusing on *Illywhacker*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, and *Bliss*. Through the lens of these works, it examines the portrayal of Aboriginal themes, settler identities, and the legacy of colonization in Australian literature. While Carey's narratives offer incisive critiques of Australia's colonial history and its cultural implications, they grapple with the inherent limitations of settler perspectives in representing Indigenous voices. The study highlights Carey's use of satire, magical realism, and unreliable narration to deconstruct colonial myths and interrogate Australia's cultural consciousness. By comparing Carey's works to Indigenous-authored texts, this paper underscores the need for authentic representation and agency in addressing Aboriginal issues in literature. Ultimately, it situates Carey's novels within the broader framework of postcolonial Australian literature, emphasizing their contributions and limitations in engaging with themes of identity, dispossession, and cultural erasure.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Aboriginal Themes, Australian Fiction, Colonial Legacy, Settler Narratives, Magical Realism, Cultural Erasure, Representation, Indigenous Voices Etc

1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Carey stands as a towering figure in Australian literature, celebrated for his ability to weave intricate narratives that interrogate the cultural and historical underpinnings of the Australian identity. Writing in the postmodernist tradition, Carey's works employ satire, magical realism, and unreliable narration to explore themes of identity, colonization, and cultural displacement. While his novels do not center on Aboriginal voices, they engage with the colonial legacy that has shaped the lives of Australia's Indigenous peoples. This study focuses on three seminal works--*Illywhacker* (1985), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), and *Bliss* (1981)--to examine how Carey portrays Aboriginal themes and Australia's postcolonial dilemmas, revealing both the potential and limitations of non-Indigenous representations in Australian fiction. Australian literature, like the nation itself, has been profoundly shaped by the legacy of colonization. Early colonial writers often viewed the land and its Indigenous inhabitants through the lens of European superiority, depicting Australia as a "savage land" devoid of culture or history. Over time, however, the voices of Indigenous Australians and more nuanced settler perspectives began to challenge these simplistic portrayals. Postcolonial Australian literature has increasingly grappled with issues of land dispossession, cultural erasure, and the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples. Peter Carey writes from a settler perspective, reflecting on the colonial attitudes and societal transformations that have defined modern Australia. His works delve into the tensions between myth and

history, identity and erasure, offering a satirical critique of Australia's cultural and historical consciousness. However, as a non-Indigenous author, Carey's portrayal of Aboriginal issues is often filtered through the lens of settler narratives, raising questions about authenticity and agency in representing Indigenous experiences.

Illywhacker presents a sweeping vision of 20th-century Australia, narrated by Herbert Badgery, a 139-year-old trickster and self-proclaimed liar. Through Herbert's unreliable narration, Carey critiques the myths of Australian history, including its colonial past and the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal characters appear only fleetingly, and their voices are muted, reflecting the historical silencing of Indigenous perspectives in settler narratives. Carey's portrayal of Aboriginal issues in *Illywhacker* is emblematic of the settler tendency to acknowledge Indigenous struggles without fully engaging with them. The novel critiques the exploitation of land and resources—a process that mirrors the dispossession of Aboriginal people—but does so from the perspective of white characters. The absence of Aboriginal voices in the narrative underscores their historical and cultural erasure, a silence that speaks volumes about the ongoing impacts of colonization. Set in 19th-century Australia, *Oscar and Lucinda* chronicles the lives of two unconventional protagonists, Oscar Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier, whose shared obsession with gambling leads to the construction of a glass church in the Australian outback. While the novel primarily focuses on themes of faith, ambition, and identity, it subtly critiques the colonial attitudes that underpinned the settlement of Australia. The Aboriginal presence in *Oscar and Lucinda* is largely symbolic, representing the dispossession and marginalization of Indigenous peoples during the colonial era. The construction of the glass church, a grand and fragile symbol of European ambition, serves as a metaphor for the imposition of settler values and institutions on an ancient land. The church's ultimate sinking into the river highlights the futility and destructiveness of these colonial endeavours. Carey's depiction of Aboriginal issues in *Oscar and Lucinda* is nuanced but limited. While the novel critiques the colonial enterprise, it does so from a settler perspective, with Aboriginal characters remaining peripheral to the narrative. This reflects the broader challenge of representing Indigenous experiences within a framework shaped by colonial history and settler worldviews.

In *Bliss*, Carey combines magical realism with biting social satire to critique the capitalist ethos of modern Australia. The novel follows Harry Joy, an advertising executive who experiences a spiritual awakening after a near-death experience. While *Bliss* does not focus explicitly on Aboriginal themes, it engages with issues of land exploitation, cultural erasure, and spiritual alienation—issues deeply tied to Australia's colonial history. Carey portrays the Australian landscape as a site of exploitation and degradation, reflecting the environmental and cultural impacts of colonization. The absence of Aboriginal characters in the narrative mirrors their historical marginalization, while the novel's critique of capitalism serves as an indictment of the colonial attitudes that continue to shape Australian society. Harry's spiritual journey in *Bliss* can be read as a metaphor for Australia's struggle to reconcile its colonial past with its present identity. The novel suggests that true reconciliation requires confronting the historical injustices inflicted on Indigenous peoples and recognizing their enduring connection to the land. While Peter Carey's novels offer valuable critiques of Australia's colonial legacy, they fall short in representing Aboriginal voices and perspectives. This limitation highlights the broader challenges of non-Indigenous writers engaging with Indigenous themes. Authentic representations of Aboriginal experiences are more effectively achieved in works by Indigenous authors such as Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, and Sally Morgan, whose writings center Indigenous perspectives, oral traditions, and cultural resilience. By juxtaposing Carey's works with Indigenous-authored texts, this study underscores the importance of authenticity and agency in addressing Aboriginal issues in literature. While Carey's novels contribute to broader discussions of postcolonialism and cultural identity, they also reflect the limitations of settler narratives in capturing the complexity of Indigenous experiences.

Jack Maggs (1997) reimagines Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, setting the tale in 19th-century London while centering on Jack Maggs, an Australian convict who returns to Britain. Through Maggs' perspective, Carey explores themes of identity, displacement, and colonial legacies. The novel delves into Maggs' struggles for redemption and societal recognition, subtly engaging with Australia's colonial history and its implications for Indigenous Australians. Though Aboriginal challenges are not directly foregrounded, the text reflects dispossession, erasure, and power dynamics, using Maggs' plight as an allegory for broader colonial injustices. At its core, *Jack Maggs* interrogates the legacy of British colonialism, illustrating its profound impact on individuals and societies. Maggs, as a convict turned colonial subject, symbolizes the disruptive force of Empire. His perilous journey back to Britain, motivated by longing and a desire to reclaim agency, mirrors the plight of Aboriginal Australians whose lands and lives were irrevocably altered by the same imperial forces. Maggs' quest for agency echoes the broader struggles of Indigenous Australians to resist systems designed to erase their culture and autonomy. Carey's nuanced depiction of power imbalances in London reflects the

broader colonial dynamics that subjugated Indigenous peoples, portraying a world unwilling to confront its colonial excesses.

Maggs' convict status highlights the British Empire's exploitation of marginalized peoples, whether transported convicts or Indigenous communities. Australia's penal colonies served as a mechanism for Britain's territorial expansion and resource extraction, perpetuating the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. The sacred ties between Indigenous Australians and their lands were severed by colonization, resulting in cultural disintegration and marginalization. Carey subtly critiques this erasure, drawing parallels between Maggs' struggles to assert his narrative in a dismissive society and the silencing of Indigenous voices in Australian history. The social and political dynamics depicted in London, dominated by entrenched privilege and power, metaphorically expose the systemic exclusion faced by Aboriginal Australians under colonial rule. Maggs' sense of dislocation as a man caught between two worlds—neither fully embraced by Britain nor rooted in Australia—serves as a metaphor for the cultural dislocation imposed upon Aboriginal Australians. Colonization fractured Indigenous communities, imposing European norms and governance structures that undermined their cultural identities. Maggs' yearning to reclaim his place in a society that marginalizes him parallels the Aboriginal peoples' ongoing struggle for recognition, cultural preservation, and rightful belonging in their ancestral lands. Carey's portrayal of displacement underscores the deep psychological and cultural scars left by colonial expansion.

Violence, both explicit and systemic, emerges as a critical theme in Jack Maggs. The penal system's brutality serves as an analogue for the violence wielded by colonial forces against Indigenous Australians. While Carey's focus is on Maggs' personal tribulations, the narrative's underlying commentary on coercion and power speaks to the broader colonial project's violent suppression of Aboriginal resistance. This systemic violence, aimed at assimilation or extermination, echoes through Maggs' confrontations with societal forces that seek to control or destroy him. The novel's exploration of this violence underscores the pervasive brutality of colonialism and its enduring consequences. Carey also critiques historical amnesia, a recurring motif in Jack Maggs. The British characters' reluctance to acknowledge Australia's colonial realities parallels Australia's tendency to minimize or ignore its treatment of Indigenous peoples. Maggs' efforts to confront his past and reclaim his life symbolize the necessity of addressing colonial legacies and recognizing their impact on Aboriginal communities. The novel thus becomes an allegory for reconciliation, urging societies to confront uncomfortable truths about their histories. Carey's depiction of Maggs' resilience and defiance reflects the enduring spirit of marginalized peoples, including Aboriginal Australians, who have resisted colonial oppression and asserted their agency against overwhelming odds.

Similarly, Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) reimagines the life of Ned Kelly, Australia's infamous outlaw, blending historical fact and fiction to critique colonial systems. The novel examines the broader societal conditions that shaped Kelly's rebellion, subtly addressing the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups, including Aboriginal Australians. Although the novel focuses on Kelly's defiance against British authority, the plight of Indigenous peoples forms an implicit backdrop, reflecting the systemic injustices faced by both groups. Carey's decision to limit the direct representation of Aboriginal voices mirrors their historical silencing and exclusion from dominant narratives.

Through Kelly's first-person narrative, Carey exposes the mechanisms of British colonial rule—legal suppression, economic exploitation, and cultural degradation—that oppressed both Irish settlers and Aboriginal Australians. The parallels Carey draws between the Irish underclass and Indigenous peoples underscore the shared suffering of colonial subjects under imperial authority. While Kelly's story is foregrounded, the novel gestures toward the deeper injustices endured by Aboriginal communities, whose dispossession and erasure were central to Britain's colonial project.

Land emerges as a central theme in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, symbolizing both loss and resistance. For Kelly and his family, land is a contested space, reflecting the broader patterns of dispossession that devastated Indigenous cultures. The commodification of land, central to European expansion, disrupted Indigenous Australians' spiritual connections and ways of life. Carey's portrayal of land as a source of conflict and identity highlights the devastating impact of colonization on both settler and Indigenous populations. Carey also examines cultural erasure, illustrating how colonial policies sought to obliterate Aboriginal traditions and impose European norms. The novel's implicit commentary on cultural disintegration resonates with the experiences of Aboriginal Australians, whose identities and practices were systematically undermined by colonial forces. The struggle to preserve cultural integrity amid relentless colonial pressures is reflected in Kelly's defiance against the forces seeking to control him, echoing the resilience of Indigenous communities.

Both *Jack Maggs* and *True History of the Kelly Gang* reflect Carey's broader engagement with Australia's colonial legacies. While focusing on settler narratives, Carey's works invite reflection on the dispossession, erasure, and marginalization of Aboriginal Australians. By highlighting the enduring consequences of colonialism and the resilience of those who resist it, Carey's novels challenge readers to confront historical injustices and consider their implications for contemporary society. Through richly layered narratives, Carey offers a profound meditation on identity, power, and the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the past's enduring scars.

Peter Carey's novels represent a significant contribution to Australian literature, offering incisive critiques of the nation's colonial legacy and cultural identity. Through his use of satire, magical realism, and postmodernist techniques, Carey engages with themes of land dispossession, cultural erasure, and spiritual alienation. However, his portrayal of Aboriginal issues is shaped by the limitations of a settler perspective, with Indigenous voices remaining largely absent or peripheral in his narratives. This study reveals the paradoxes of Carey's engagement with postcolonial themes, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of his approach. By examining the ways in which Carey's novels reflect and critique Australia's colonial history, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of literature in addressing the nation's cultural and historical complexities. Ultimately, it calls for a greater emphasis on Indigenous voices in Australian literature, recognizing their essential role in shaping the nation's identity and confronting its colonial past.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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