

(Mis)Representations of Australian Aboriginals in the Media, in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

Ruchi Sharma

Abstract

The representation of aboriginals in literature and media has raised debates about the politics of representation in nation Australia. Non-indigenous writings have generated stories that remain complicit in creating and sustaining particular images of aboriginal people in Australia and beyond. There was a need for the study that specifically focused on how the narratives created by aboriginal writers report indigenous people and issues covering its representation in the media. This research paper studies misrepresentation of the aborigines by the media in the novel *The Swan Book* (2013). The novel was written by aboriginal author Alexis Wright who has consciously incorporated the stereotyping and misrepresentation of aboriginal issues by the media in the narrative of the novel. The writing of the novel becomes a way to control the means of production of aboriginal identities. The paper therefore analyses the aboriginal narrative that engenders the indentity politics in the representation of aborigines as created by the media in the nation Australia.

Keywords: Identity; Media; Racism; (Mis)Representation; Stereotypes.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we find Australia embroiled in a debate where the aboriginal identity is often (mis)represented. The troubled relationship between aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians have been scanned by the government and attempts have been made to promote policies of reconciliation. The rhetoric concerning reconciliation has also found significant mention in the media coverage of the nation Australia as a nation in the making. History has recorded both literary writings and media reports for its representation of aboriginals perpetrating insidious racial stereotypes and attitudes towards the aborigines. Michael Meadows asserts that 'In colonial Australia in the late eighteenth century it was the influence of the imperial power, Britain, that framed the emergence of an Australian journalism and media system (35).'

The attitude and reference drawn about aboriginal people were accompanied by ideas and assumptions about journalism and the ways of doing it by the European explorers before the invasion of the Australian land. These colonial ideologies continue to influence the depiction and understanding of aborigines so much that the media portrays them as 'a problem.' The misrepresentation of the aboriginal community began with the first contact between the aborigines and colonial invaders.

This history of misrepresentation was also embedded in the national consciousness of the non-indigenous writers. Aboriginal Australians were depicted as primitive people where the dominant ideology of the colonial times justified the act of taking the aboriginal land and destroying their culture by further stereotyping them in literary writings and media reports. The colonial construction of drunken and savage aborigines in media still indicates increasing cases of violence and self-harm caused by substance abuse in the aboriginal context.

Today the issue of identity for the aboriginal community in Australia has become much more uncertain in a multicultural nation that Australia has become over the years. The mass media seem to have played a significant role in determining and reshaping the identity of people living in the nation with its colonial past and as a settler colony in the present. Interestingly, the aboriginal stereotypes have not been dispelled in media representation of the nation's first people. Thus the media coverage of aboriginal issues has led to the addition of a new chapter of race relations in the history of Australia. More than two-hundred years of media (mis)representation of race relations has eventually led to questioning racist ideologies by scholars like Dr. Mary Graham, Terri Janke, Marcia Langton, Bain Attwood, and Dr. Anita Heiss. Their studies revealed the picture of a nation grappling with the notion of identity that was haunted by the specter of racist thoughts and assumptions. The broadcast media of the nation also noted various modes of controlling the media representation of aboriginals by the White government. These representations were considered by media as a move by the government of the settler nation towards 'a second invasion.'

This research paper investigates how the narrative of the novel *The Swan Book* written by the aboriginal writer Alexis Wright underscores the misrepresentation of the aboriginals in the Australian media. The study observes how media remains complicit in creating and sustaining the current environment of uncertainty and division in Australian race relations reiterating systematic stereotyping of aborigines. It speculates the role of the media in reporting race as addressed in the novel. The paper conse-

quently observes the unique position of media in the construction and repetition of inaccurate images of these people.

The close reading of the novel in this paper examines the role played by media representation of aborigines in literary writing that traces the representation since colonial beginnings to its modern multimedia forms. The study also incorporates the perspective of reflecting reality in the media coverage by following the processes of constructing reality for the masses. By doing so the media representation of aborigines becomes a key cultural resource that plays an important role in creating ideas and assumptions about both aborigines and their notion of the nation Australia.

Alexis Wright is one of the prominent aboriginal writers whose fictional works examine and reveal the sites of the social struggle of aborigines in the settler nation Australia. Her novels attempt to provide an understanding of race and identity by exploring ideas and assumptions represented by media in news and current affairs stories concerning the position of aboriginal identity and traditional knowledge in multicultural nation. She also looks at the contribution that media has made in bringing the aboriginal issues to the forefront. However, the process of reimagining the nation through her writings is also marked with her apprehensions regarding the trust and faith that the aboriginal community has in the Australian Government.

Wright, being an activist, looks at the act of writing as an empowering agency that helps her aboriginal characters discover their true identities in the narrative of the novel. She has published three fictional works viz. *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006), and *The Swan Book* (2013). She has been the winner of the Australian Literature Society (ALS) Gold medal for *The Swan Book* in 2014. The novel is set in a futuristic, imaginary world with a political critique of the narrative planted in the here and now of the nation. It is set in future after the countries of Europe have been lost in Climate wars and in a period when ideological conflicts are challenged with an Aboriginal President taking over the Australian government. The novel looks at the history of the nation with the wrongs done to the aboriginals in the past, which the narrator suspects would be repeated unless the Australian aboriginal generation learns to understand and prevent them. Jane Gleeson-White writes in her review entitled 'Going Viral' published in the *Sydney Review of Books* - '*The Swan Book* speaks to a vast sweep of storied time, from the Dreamtime to Odysseus (the original boat-person and teller of tales), to today's reality television with its makeover narratives and restaging of 'real' life.'

This paper undertakes the study by looking at the critical works of the

political scientist Benedict Anderson. It explores Anderson's idea of the modern nation as "an imagined political community..." and the concept of nationalism which has been linked to mass communication and print media which has led to the development of a new consciousness of the nation's imagined community. The novel examines how the media in Australia deals with issues that are of critical importance in formulating notions of identity. In doing so, how these formulated notions help in 'imagining' Australia as a nation. It investigates this through a series of events mentioned in the novel which refer to Australia's history which also involves the reporting of Indigenous affairs. The novel illustrates how the continuing reiteration of racial stereotypes in the mass media is a result of the influence of white settler policies which can be combated with the expansion of Indigenous media in Australia. This includes radio, television, and multimedia playing a vital role in the creation of aboriginal identity.

The narrative highlights how cultural systems of the nation eventually led to the concepts of nationalism and ethnicity which were generated largely by mass communication. Anderson has also traced the crucial role played by print technology in the emergence of the concept of nation in his book *Imagined Communities*. He states that the set of cultural conditions in the various cultural form of print technology, broadcasting, and information technology provided the framework for a new consciousness of the nation to its citizens. The media representation then provided a necessary link to the idea of the culture of the nation allowing its citizens to derive a sense of belonging to a particular population.

The novel *The Swan Book* utilizes this idea of the nation as 'an imagined political community' in the narrative. It depicts an imagined nation as most of the fellow members of the Australian nation including members of aboriginal communities meet each other or hear of their people through the media platforms. As a nation both indigenous and non-indigenous people believe in policies of Closing the Gap:

The school children sitting at home with stomachs full of fish and chips were quickly told by departing parents who had just glimpsed him again on the 5 O'Clock News, to watch something educational for closing the gap between black and white, like the serialized exploits of Warren Finch while they were gone. (125)

Aboriginal voice prominently appears in media and newspapers when the male protagonist of the novel Warren Finch begins to become a political spokesperson for the aboriginal people. Wright repeatedly shows how the colonial press reveals framed aboriginal people as a problem, voiceless,

and without any citizenship claim. However, Finch's political success is covered by the media to question and legitimize dominant ideas about aboriginal people and the place they occupied in settler society.

Warren Finch's education is typically called 'special treatment' as he is a 'special test care for the curriculum of education' (102) which is 'a mixed marriage of traditional and scientific knowledge' (107). The novel illustrates this as young Warren Finch possesses a newspaper article that outlined 'the big national benchmark for Indigenous people, to be literate in English.' (93) The act of rereading this newspaper article etches the significance of the English language in his brain. This episode captures the strategy of the white government in using publications to entice a particular set of aboriginal readers to transform their idea of the new nation. This process is nothing less than the government's strategic management of cultural goods where media is also shown as one of those cultural goods and prized possessions.

Finch's appearance on television extends the interpretation of changing hegemony in settler nation Australia where how he presents himself to various audiences for identification as an aboriginal intellectual and moral leader makes him a cultural product for the media. News stories about him become the subject of a different set of instructions for political usage. Wright narrates this culturally specific media production emerging from aboriginal communities as:

This first sighting of Warren was surprising for some. He was not really as handsome in the refined way they had expected from someone who lived in the city. He looked different on television. But all the same, they saw themselves in him, even though he wore a designer-labelled suit of the Menzies era, and they did not. (129)

The notion of mass media includes not only the network within which it operates within the nation, but also includes how it creates and links ideas, issues, and events of the nation moulding information into a structure of attitudes and references. The news media specifically defines national events of aboriginal people by collapsing them, both spatially and temporally, into unproblematic, easily consumable visual clips and soundbites. This information is de-contextualized only to encourage the audience to think about aboriginal identity as a monocultural and detached identity. This representation is however opposite to historical accounts and records which reveal the formation of aboriginal identity and culture as a more complex and continuing process that has existed since Dreamtime. Hence the concept of aboriginal identity and its representation on media platforms becomes a starting point to understand the subject only to check

static definitions of aboriginality given by colonisers.

These elders, seasoned orators with centuries of reading Australian racial politics behind them, the AM to PM news aficionados, and track masters in how to skin a cat, or kill off a lame duck, had partly decided that it would be a good idea for this boy Warren Finch, already the joy of his people, to be brought up their way – the old way – away from the hustle bustle of intra and extra racial Australian politics, a tyranny that they claimed was like a lice infestation in the mind. (95)

In this sense, the novel *The Swan Book* written by aboriginal author Alexis Wright is an honest attempt by the author to map out a process in which media representation is shown from an aboriginal perspective where the aborigines become both participants and observers of the depiction of aboriginality in the media. The novel relates events that have been captured by media, providing simplistic explanations for aboriginal questions, events in a settler nation where the narrative raises more complex and contextual issues regarding the powerful impression of the dominant colonial culture as against the aboriginal culture.

Dr. Mary Graham, an aboriginal philosopher and Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, has mentioned two axioms of aboriginal thinking in her critical essay on aboriginal identity entitled 'Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal World-views.' She explains that in an aboriginal group all individuals are equal and hence aboriginal leaders are absent in their society. Media representations have in contrast mentioned aboriginal leaders in their representations. Wright has utilized this constant reference to the aboriginal leader in her novel by presenting the first aboriginal President as the leader of the Australian nation as the major character of the novel.

The novel shows the active role of the media in the reproduction of racism as it notes the multidimensional structure of routinized relationships between the aborigines and the white governing authorities who attempt to govern aborigines through a well-structured systems of racial beliefs and opinions. These beliefs and opinions are insidiously generated and integrated into the cognitive structures of the aboriginal community which are eventually reinforced by direct and indirect lived experiences. The media captures these sources of indirect or mediated experiences to ensure the process of cultural management in the nation.

Interestingly, the narrative refutes the reproduction and representation of aboriginals as major or minor groups in the nation. The reference to 'mission to kill off any strength and sign of leadership in the Aboriginal

world' (38) is justified with 'racial fanaticism' in the novel. The movement of the aboriginal population becomes a process of creating frontiers for their growth and colonisation. The dream of Australianness in the hope of shaping the next generation is mocked at in the ancestral anthem *Advance Australia Fair*. Incidentally, this is an outcome of 'special treatment' (education) Warren Finch receives in the 'omnipresent Australia' not realizing:

That old war! How long has that been going on for? Does he still think he is in Europe or America? Doesn't he know this is Australia? Who gives him the right to decide on other people's sovereignty? (232)

Wright sets the novel in the future to map a new beginning of Australia with Finch as the President. The 'only public Aboriginal voice of the era' was Warren Finch's as his voice was 'The only one Australian would listen to, and reported in the newspapers, or had given their airways to whenever he spoke publicly.' (291) The significance of aboriginal voice becomes more prominent portraying them as politicians wielding considerable influence in agenda-setting in the future of the nation. The media becomes the primary source of information to show Finch's assassination on television which was 'replayed a thousand times.' The agenda of news media television is to present a preferred version of Finch's life as a political leader.

With the support of aboriginal people Finch is also elected by 'common Aboriginal-hating people to be the Head of the State Australia': he is only the aboriginal man who has made it all the way to the top in a suit and who has retained a degree of respectability. His murder because of 'jealous racist spite' is reflected by the media as a social consequence of the unfair treatment given to aborigines in power as he is seen essentially a threat to the existing colonial order.

Combining the verbal and visual depiction of media in the construction of the male and female protagonists' characters, Wright disrupts the usual reading path that readers generally would follow. She intentionally undermines the current state of affairs into what it means to be an American President and his wife and how it affects the reader's perception of events in Australia. Emphasizing the spatial potential of narrative texts, Warren Finch gets power in the virtual and the mental universe which is reflected in his image on media platforms and how that image has been received by aboriginal and non-indigenous people of the Australian nation. The narrative shows the aboriginal struggle to belong to the land by embedding questions to claim the physical space of the land in the nation. Finch's

political career points towards the choice and rare possibility of Australia being a nation with such disillusionment to have an aboriginal leader as the owner of the land and nation in the political landscape of the future. As 'a promised wife,' Oblivion Ethyl(ene) becomes the most important story for media being the 'First Lady of whatnot':

...this President's wife, she was a very good question indeed. What was she doing? Where was she? The problematic promise bride who had turned up from nowhere! Her name being just too plain forgettable and foreign—the real heart of the issue: who would remember such a fictitious, ridiculous name? (276)

While major aboriginal writers choose to write about aboriginal men in their writings Wright chooses to present aboriginal women also in her novels as major characters. She consciously chooses Oblivion as the female protagonist of the novel to portray the image of aboriginal woman's inferiority. As an abstract concept of forgetfulness Oblivion is a mute girl with traumatic experience of gange rape. Kirkus Review of the book states:

Warren locks up his new bride like a princess in a castle while he travels around with a look-alike "television wife," leaving Oblivia to consort with ghosts, rats, and a lice-ridden old snow monkey while she does her best to liberate the swans that have faithfully stuck with her and bring them home. (Kirkus, 2016)

As the President's wife Oblivia is given gender-determined roles of servitude as she is expected to be subservient as a wife. She is depicted as a commodity, a sexual object, and a slave. Her character is largely invisible like that of many other aboriginal women. The media in the novel also replicates aboriginal histories that have largely specified the invisibility of aboriginal women. As an aboriginal woman, she is sexually exploited, raped, and abused. Using her character as a mouthpiece Wright raises the question whether this is the influence of ideology of racism or sexism that predominates in the settler nation. She uses the words 'miscegenation' and 'rape' to refer to episodes of racial and sexual discrimination.

The novel provides failed linkages between the terrain of identity formation of a new aboriginal elite and the traditional aborigine who are healers of the country. It also unravels a complex history of impediments, interruptions, and disruptions of contiguities between nature and man-made resources, the colonisers and the colonised, pre-colonial and post-colonial establishments. Aboriginal identity is rooted in aborigines' relationship to the land that includes a world witnessed through kinship. Wright shows that for aboriginal people meaning of life is not driven from a great per-

sonage, like Finch attempts to become the political leader of aboriginal people because, in the end, he is just another human being, with all his human vulnerability. After his death, his existence as an aborigine and his services to his community obtain meaning only when he is buried on his ancestral land. It is only after returning to his ancestral land that the significance of aboriginal life for Finch is achieved because land is the only thing that matters to his people.

Finch is a person with aboriginal ancestry and he is therefore expected to identify with the political beliefs of his community. This notion of identity however problematizes Western philosophical examinations of race because in his role of being the President of a multicultural land Finch is expected to accept contested and negotiated meaning and understanding of race. His aboriginal realm of ideas, thoughts, reflections, and perhaps imagination is replaced with the political ideas and assumptions, world view, and moral and ethical values suited to the colonial policies of Australia.

Through various episodes mentioned in the novel Wright shows how mainstream media sensationalizes aboriginal issues and, more often than not, gets it wrong. This kind of reporting encourages racism and reveals a misunderstanding of aboriginal issues which further becomes an act of denying Indigenous people a voice. The absence of aboriginal people from important debates is shown in the novel with as much emphasis as to how their (mis)representation is depicted. The silencing of aboriginal voices shows a vast range of issues surfacing daily by the media becomes a major theme that dominates the narrative of the novel. Eventually, the significance of silence of the subaltern, voicelessness and inexpressibility continues, even when the issues involved are those of aboriginal life and death where the narrator questions:

Why wasn't Warren Finch good enough to receive one last lap of honour? Wasn't an Aboriginal person good enough to be treated fairly and given the respect Australia gives to all of its other citizens? (292)

The journey of life of the silent Oblivion Ethyl(ene) metaphorically points out the notable silence in the narrative about not only her but also other aboriginal people. The narrative further suggests that her husband Warren Finch's character is structured to display the workings of official systems and the way the aboriginal people in powerful positions are effectively silenced. To make more sense of this discourse of silence the media underscores a more complex discussion about what should have been done in case of the death of the President according to western norms to further assure the omission of aboriginal voices from the governing structure of

the nation.

...the major shock-jock news commentators took control. It was a field day of open slather about keeping an unburied body lying about in a public structure. In their broadcasting studios, they governed public opinion by playing paranoia into talk-back fever. (292)

The novel concludes with a more positive line of inquiry that touches upon the aboriginal people's responses to media misrepresentation. The novel shows the growth of the aboriginal media sector in Australia which represents an extraordinary achievement on the biased and perilous state of mainstream media representation of aboriginal affairs. It also offers a salutary critique of the limitations of aboriginal claims placed on multi-media use of information technologies that commodify aboriginal images.

This paper affirms that there is a need to reexamine how the media (mis)representation frames aboriginal people and their affairs in narrow ways. It provides scope for literary and journalism scholars to investigate the role of media in the context of developing national consciousness by utilizing information technology to create indigenous information channels in times when information has become a commodity. Future studies on the subject could explore media ethics and practices used by Australian media in reporting race relations revealed in the research paper.

The paper has discussed the representation of aboriginal perspectives concerning the notions of identity to educate non-Indigenous people. It has studied the role of media that remains speculative of the changing alternative media systems created by aboriginal people to have their voices heard in their nation. The novel becomes a significant text that questions the moral responsibility of media in the nation for the irresponsible circulation of racist and ignorant opinions against the first people of the nation. It explores media (mis)representation as a theme in the novel to suggest a medium that could help in establishing reconciliation between aboriginal and non-Indigenous peoples. The study is crucial for its contribution made by its examination of media representation of the aborigines and highlights how new media severs the link between race, class, and ethnicity in the nation. It suggests that media needs to reorient its practices in Australia to address the problematic relationship with aboriginal audiences and help them reclaim their role as the guardians of freedom of expression and media agents of reality.

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