
UNIT 1 AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to give you a broad overview of Australian literature and then introduce you to some of the problems that are part of any attempt to answer the questions: What is Australian literature? Why is it relevant for the Indian student of English literature? What is the nature of its relation to Indian literature?

1.1 INTRODUCING AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Australian literature is a large body of writing that can include early versions and English translations of Aboriginal song sequences or folktales, the memoirs, journals and ballads of early European explorers and settlers. It also includes the more formal works of literature that followed as writing and publishing established its sway on the island continent. Like the literature of any other nation it captures in many ways the growth and development of Australia into the country that we know today.

It can be said that much of what we can include under the category of Australian literature from the early phases of its development was not what would be traditionally considered literature. For example, the oral songs and stories of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia were passed on orally from generation to generation without being written. Even when they were recorded in English versions it was done more with an anthropological intention than a literary one. The idea was to learn more about the culture and values of the Aboriginal peoples from a scientific point of view than to study the aesthetic aspects of these creations. Similarly, the records, memoirs, diaries and journals that are today included under the study of literature were not always meant for this purpose. They were often the private or official records of explorers, administrators and settlers. However, these works are important sources that reveal how the land, circumstances and people of Australia evolved in the thoughts and imagination of the people who lived there or visited it. They show how Australian literature came to be written and the early influences on this body of writing.

The ballads of the convicts and the bush songs belong more to a period when Australian literature began to be an institution in itself. Periodicals like the *Bulletin*, which started publication in 1880, were part of this trend. The ballads and bush songs, which had earlier been mostly part of the folk tradition, now became part of the literary tradition. Writers began to consciously cultivate and develop the forms, themes and figures of the oral ballads and bush songs. 'Banjo' Patterson belongs to this school of writing. 'Waltzing Matilda' a ballad about a swagman – a travelling farm worker in the Australian outback – has become to many Australians of European descent, a kind of unofficial national anthem. This is in part because it

captures the spirit of surviving in a harsh landscape, the pioneering spirit as well as a bold attitude to life and the authorities.

Literature in Australia developed and began to take on many other forms such as the popular short story, the literary version of the fireside yarn. Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton were prominent short story writers who contributed greatly to the growth and development of this genre during this formative stage. Their writing captured features of the growth of the Australian cultural myths of the Bush and its people. The hardships and spirit of the European settlers and bush people during the pioneering days finds expression in their work.

At this early stage of development it was but natural that the writers who were mainly from among the British settlers would bring to their writing the values and forms of the British traditions of literature. In this sense, early Australian literature was constantly looking over its shoulder at England. This soon developed into a source of tension as some writers felt that the best direction for Australian literature was to follow and maintain British traditions of great literature. Others felt that as Australia was so different from England that it should cut the umbilical cord from the mother country and develop an identity of its own as a nation and this should be reflected in Australian literature.

Australian history and literature do reveal the many tensions that have gone into the making of the Australian nation. These are : the tension between the old country of England, the metropolitan colonial centre and the new country of Australia on the antipodean margins of the British Empire; the tension between the settlers and the indigenous Aborigines; the tension between early waves of settlers and more recent immigrants; the tension between the old language, images and literary forms of British literature and the idiom, images and literary forms taking root in the new environment of Australia. All these tensions shaped the themes and forms of Australian literature.

As in much of the rest of the English speaking world, in Australia the first half of the twentieth century saw the genre of poetry being more popular and the second half saw the novel rising to prominence. A.D. Hope and Judith Wright are the canonical figures of Australian poetry during its heyday. Patrick White, Australia's Nobel Prize laureate, is probably the best known and most taught of Australia's novelists. Their writing began to move away from both a purely derivative imitation of European forms as well as a focus on the people and mores of the Bush. Modern Australia, of the cities began to figure more distinctly in their writing. As the face of the Australian nation began to change, its literature began to reflect that change. Writers like Kath Walker, Mudrooroo, Kevin Gilbert and Sally Morgan have brought the poetry, drama and stories of the Aboriginal peoples to the forefront. There has also been a trend towards autobiographies, biographies and life-stories gaining more and more popularity. The multiculturalism that is being promoted at a political level is being reflected in the diverse voices being heard in the realm of Australian literature. Today there are more women, Aborigines, immigrants whose voices join the exciting confluence that is Australian literature.

1.2 PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Having briefly introduced Australian literature let us look at some of the problems associated with trying to answer the question: "What is Australian literature?" How do we define Australian literature? This is not an easy task as different people have different definitions of it in different contexts. The difficulty of defining 'Australian literature' is connected to the problems of giving clear simple definitions to the terms 'Australian' and 'literature', both separately and together. The reasons why these

difficulties arise are because the meaning of these terms keep on changing with time and with different contexts.

Many people take it for granted that literature should be studied with "the 'nation' as a primary context and framework of reference" (Bennett and Strauss, 1). One of the important reasons for this is that the nature and themes of literature are influenced by, and in turn influence contemporary social and political realities. Since for a long time, the category of the 'nation' has been seen as a unit in social, political, cultural and historical terms, the study of literature has been linked to it. The study of literature has thus become deeply related to the way national identity is created and presented. The nature of both the 'nation' and the literary storytelling or 'narration' connected to it, are constantly changing. The definitions and content of both the nation and its literature change as social and political conditions change, demanding similar changes in the way both are presented. This situation is seen in the case of 'Australian literature' as well. In their introduction to *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, the editors Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss make a comment about the wide and changing range in the presentation of Australia in its literature. According to them the images of the country includes many things. There are images from an Aboriginal Dreaming describing how the world came into existence according to Aboriginal folklore. There are the pre-discovery European imaginings of Australia as *Terra Australis Incognita* – an empty and unknown land. There are also experiences recorded by early settlers, which vary from paradisiacal to purgatorial. More recently the literature has also revealed shifts from the sense of a 'white Australia' or Australia for Australians of Western Europe to the more recent notion of Australia as 'part of Asia'. Many of these representations operate at times well beyond the confines of the 'national'. (4-5)

The land now known as Australia had been occupied for several thousands of years before the British invasion and eventual colonization of the island continent. Often, that part of the land and the peoples who lived there before the colonizers came, is hidden when Australian history and literature is presented as having its 'beginnings' only in the past two hundred years during which the colonizers have been there. This way of presenting Australian history and literature was connected to the legal misrepresentation of the Australian land as being *terra nullius* – an 'empty land' that could therefore be claimed and legally possessed by the colonizers without any consideration for any earlier claims by Aborigines who lived there before. This kind of presentation of the civilization, culture and contribution of the Aborigines as not existing, was a colonial act that for a long time left the Aborigines outside or on the margins of discussions of Australia as a nation.

This way of thinking about Aborigines is increasingly being challenged by and on behalf of the Aboriginal people. The Aborigines are telling their own stories and histories of the Australian nation and making them available for everyone. They are also laying claims to the legal possession of the land. Later waves of immigrants from Southern Europe and Asia, as well as other groups silenced by the powerful colonial version of Australian identity, history and literature are also producing histories and literatures. These versions question the traditional presentation of the Australian nation as a nation created by white colonizers, mostly from Britain. All this is forcing people to take a new look at what has traditionally been considered 'Australian' literature and make it include texts and voices it had earlier ignored.

Within traditional 'white' Australian literature itself, the idea of what constituted the 'Australianness' of Australian literature was a point of debate. This became especially marked as the people of the Australian settler colonies tried to define both for themselves and others the nature of their political, social, cultural and literary relationship with the former colonial centre, Britain. At least two positions became important in the early decades of the twentieth century. One argued that truly great

literature had to follow the rules and traditions of the literary models of British and European literature, as these were universal and eternal. The other position argued that the distinctive features of Australian literature should express the tendency to define 'Australia' without using Britain as a reference point or model. Ian Turner captures the sense of urgency felt at that point in history, to define the Australian nation as different from Britain through literature, when he quotes Nettie Palmer from *Modern Australian Literature* (1924):

Australia was no longer a group of more or less important colonies hanging loosely together...on the ample bosom of Britannia; Australia was henceforth Australia. What that name was to mean it lay in the hands of her writers, above all, to discover. (43)

This sense of urgency was however complicated by the problem of the actual nature of the difference which Australian literature was supposed to present. If Australia and its literature were to be defined in terms of their differences with Britain and its literature, it was not very clear which areas of difference would be focussed upon. Would it be the real and very obvious differences seen in the land or differences in the spirit of the people that were more difficult to define and describe? Either way both sets of differences were constructed and depended on whatever aspect writers consciously chose to focus on – the land, the people, their spirit or a combination of these three. Another aspect of this whole effort of creating a distinct national identity was the two-way pull of wanting to cut loose from Britain while still desiring to retain its respect, interest and recognition. Literature was supposed to perform the function of creating national images that projected a national identity. This national identity was marked by a sense of distinction and a sense of national pride in its differences from the British identity. Australia wanted to be more than just another colony or just an imitation of Britain. Ian Turner quotes T.G. Tucker from *The Cultivation of Literature in Australia* (1902):

If we ever have an 'Australian' school of literature, it will not be because of the fauna and flora and geography and idioms of Australia which may be introduced. These make nothing in art. ... It will be because our Australian atmosphere, our national life, occupations, religious ideas, have inevitably and unconsciously created in our eyes and hearts and intellects some difference in our way of regarding things, so that we perceive strength and beauty and pathos in some new light, and adapt our representation thereto. (43)

As any nation attempts to tell its stories through literature and history, the nature of the identity that the nation wishes to present defines the standards that decide what is considered valuable and authentic within those literary and historical representations. The nature of the target audience of those literary and historical representations will also determine their tone and content. For example, when the writers, who belonged to the group of the European settlers, wrote with the audience in the metropolitan centres of Britain and Europe in mind, for a long time the emphasis was on the exotic and bizarre in the new land. The inverted seasons where summer peaked in December and winter in June, trees that shed their bark instead of their leaves and animals like the kangaroo were presented as points of fascinating interest. Later on, when publication and the primary reading audience shifted to Australia, the emphasis shifted as well. The focus was on creating a white Australian settler identity through the rather repetitive literary creation of characters, themes, and situations that were symbols of that identity. The myths of the Australian Bush and the culture of bush life developed in a big way during this period. Now the boundaries of the reading public and the publishing industry have expanded to include the voices and points of view of previously ignored and marginalised groups such as the Aborigines,

immigrants and women. As a result, there is more diversity in the set of historical and literary representations available in Australia.

Australia – the nation with its many cultural, political and social aspects – and Australian literature – the body of writing that have been used to present some aspects of the nation and its sense of identity – have always and continue to be constantly changing. 'Australian literature' is thus a term used to categorize a constantly changing body of writing and not any fixed set of books or ideas. There is no simple answer to the question, "What is Australian literature?" Just as there are no simple answers to the questions, "What is Australian?" or "What is literature?". Because of these reasons it would be harder still to attempt to define 'Australian literature' in the traditional terms of certain 'characteristic features' or any 'recognised canon' or set of books that are considered 'great literature'.

This block makes no attempt to do either. Instead, an attempt has been made to quickly and briefly discuss some of the changes the term 'Australian literature' has been used to cover within the traditional Australian literary studies programmes. These programmes have focussed on the more widely studied white Australian literary canon, as well as outside it on texts and ideas that challenge the values and standards of the white literary canon. The traditional canon of Australian literature mainly included only white writers of European descent. As a result it made it seem like the only narratives of importance in the Australian continent were white ones – with a leaning towards white male perspectives. Today that is being challenged as Aboriginal, women and immigrant writers assert the importance of their narratives and literary creations. One example of how this is happening is the way life-stories have begun to gain prominence equivalent to that of the novel. This trend was started by the spate of Aboriginal and immigrant biographical and autobiographical writing. The block simultaneously attempts to suggest and explain why what has been included under the category has changed and continues to do so. Since the term 'Australian literature' and the standards connected with it are themselves dynamic, our understanding of it must also be flexible and open.

1.3 MATTERS OF RELEVANCE

Postcolonial studies in English departments became important in the latter half of the twentieth century as literature departments began to explore the influence of colonization on history, society, education and writing in the colonized countries. Postcolonial studies have on many occasions tried to show how English studies in the colonies has been a part of a deliberate programme to create colonial subjects who would believe in and follow colonial norms and values. In India, the introduction of English education helped create a class of Indians who could not only help British officers in their work of governing India, but who also were aware of and were expected to believe British values and ideas on culture. Their education in English thus made them very useful to the British in maintaining colonization.

This was a pattern that repeated itself in many colonized countries. It was realized that even after independence, the choice of books and the points of view taught in English literature courses helped continue a kind of mental colonization. As a result of questioning the traditional English literary studies curricula in India and abroad, they were revised to include a wider range of writing in English. This wider range taken from many countries was supposed to expose the student of literature to many different points of view, different standards, values and cultures.

In Australia, the questioning of literary studies programmes that focussed only on British literature was part of the creation of a national identity that wanted to be different and separate from a British colonial legacy. Historically, the emergence of

Australian literature as an academic subject (Dale, 134) began with the inclusion of non-British texts, lectures and postgraduate research starting in the field around the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1940s, Adelaide boasted the first full-fledged course in Australian literature. By the 1970s and 1980s a Chair of Australian literature had been created in Sydney. Scholarly journals, literary histories and bibliographies were being produced as proof of the acceptance of Australian literature as a subject in academic institutions.

During this period, Australian literature as a subject developed in a spirit of trying to cut loose from the British colonial influence. This was similar to other attempts at the national and political level to move away from a British colonial identity. The limits of this trend were reached by the 1990s. At that time as links between various subjects began to be explored, a need was felt for literary studies to go hand in hand with historical and cultural studies as well as to move beyond the narrow limits of a purely national focus.

Traditional English literature courses in many Indian universities after independence, too focussed primarily on British literature from Chaucer to Eliot. American literature and Indian writing in English were included within these traditional curricula as optional papers, mostly at the Masters level. The changes made in the curricula to include the points of view such as those of postcolonial and feminist studies brought in a new body of texts and alternate interpretations of traditional texts.

The introduction of Australian literary studies courses to Indian universities is part of the result of the sudden popularity of postcolonial literary studies at universities. At first, the trend was to include samplings of literature from postcolonial regions such as Australia, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent under the term Commonwealth literature or Postcolonial literature. One of the main areas of similarity among the literatures of all these places was seen as the British colonial experience. It was not long before it was pointed out that the experience of colonization was different in different regions and places. The nature of British colonization in Australia and Canada was vastly different from that in Africa, India and the Caribbean. For one thing, Australia and Canada were settler colonies where people of British origin came to settle down. In that sense their colonial experience was in many ways more similar to that of the United States of America (which has never quite called itself as postcolonial).

Furthermore, it was felt that the whole postcolonial studies project, while seeming to bring into English literary studies courses books and literatures in English that had till then been outside it, still maintained Britain as the dominant reference point. At this point, the tendency was to move away from the broad category of Commonwealth or Postcolonial literature. Instead English literary studies programmes began to separately focus on specific areas such as Africa, Canada, America, Australia and India while maintaining the postcolonial point of view as one of the contexts of interpretation and criticism. There was also a shift in terms used and it became more acceptable to use New Literatures in English instead of Commonwealth or Postcolonial literature.

When Australian literature studies was taken out of the larger field of postcolonial studies where the primary focus was the nature of the response of Australian literature to and its questioning of the colonial experience with respect to Britain, new angles of study began to emerge. The traditional Australian canon was itself questioned on the grounds that it was preoccupied with the male point of view and was quite closed to the writing of women, Aborigines and new immigrants. At its worst, it was seen to simply substitute Henry Lawson and Patrick White for the study of Chaucer and Shakespeare in the traditional canon. A study of Australian literature that focussed on more local issues such as its relation to Aboriginal writing or the

writing of women revealed power struggles within Australian literature that questioned its values in exactly the same way that it questioned the values of traditional British literature.

As the 'global village' – a phrase coined by the communications guru Marshall McLuhan—becomes a reality, there are opposing trends towards the globalization as well as localization of studies. The universal and the particular are becoming subjects of interest at every level possible. They are not merely seen as opposites but as connected parts of the same system. Any understanding and questioning of the study of the global/universal notions of literature requires a comparative understanding of the specific features of the literatures of as many nations as possible. This is where the study of Australian literature gains significance for the student of English literature in India. On one level, it is a questioning of the traditional focus on British literature. On another, it also includes a criticism of the politics and some of the problems with categories such as Postcolonial and Commonwealth literature. Finally, it makes us aware of a body of writing that reveals interesting power struggles of its own. In short, the focus has shifted from British English literature to literatures in English. Just as there is a shift from English with a capital "E" to world englishes, so also the study of world literatures in English has become important within academic institutions.

1.4 JUXTAPOSITIONS

The literatures of India and Australia can be compared and contrasted in many areas. Two such areas are the similarities and differences in the postcolonial situation in both countries and how both countries deal with cultural diversity. As discussed before, the idea of postcolonialism is itself quite controversial and raises many questions. This not a bad thing on its own. Like many other concepts, the idea of postcolonialism often assumes for purposes of argument that the postcolonial situation is or has been more or less the same everywhere. This is often justified as being for the purpose of opposing the forces of colonialism more effectively. However, once colonialism has itself been opposed, it becomes necessary to find what aspects of 'postcolonialism' need to be examined and questioned.

It has been argued that as studying aspects of postcolonialism became popular and fashionable, the field of 'postcolonial' studies began to continue certain negative trends of colonialism in new ways. This is known as neocolonialism. One way this happens is when the study of postcolonialism keeps Britain and British colonialism at the centre of almost all discussions. Even when they are being analyzed from other critical perspectives, British writers like Shakespeare, who are considered the major writers of British literature and the English language, are at the centre of most arguments. The only difference is that in a traditional curricula they were praised and now they are analyzed from different critical perspectives. While it is crucial to examine and criticize colonialism and make an analysis of its effects, there is a need to eventually move away from just discussing the colonizer and colonised. Also, it is not a solution to just move from praise to criticism or merely reverse the order of importance.

Another criticism of some types of postcolonial studies is that their arguments and discussions seem to assume that colonialism is a historical phase that is over. This kind of an assumption does not take into consideration aspects of colonialism that continue to affect society, culture and politics even today or new forms of colonialism that now hold sway. Simplifying the concepts of colonialism as well as postcolonialism for the purpose of studies and analysis tends to make it seem as if 'colonialism' as well as 'postcolonialism' are the same in all contexts and situations. Distinctions are not made between different degrees to which people in a colonial

situation played along with or resisted the colonization. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge point to an instance of this when they comment that many postcolonial theorists, such as Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) fame, "do not sufficiently recognise the differences between 'settler' colonies such as Australia and colonies like India which were colonised by a foreign power" (xii). According to Mishra and Hodge this perpetuates wrong points of view that merely assumes that the colonizer and the colonized were against each other in all situations.

This is not to argue that one context is more or less truly 'postcolonial'. It is merely to recognise some of the problems of assuming that the word 'postcolonial' is always used to refer to the same thing or that the colonized always opposed the colonizer. It is also to stress the results when these differences are ignored. It would be a mistake to celebrate the ways in which white Australian literature opposed Britain without realizing the role that white Australian literature has played in pushing Aborigines and their experiences to the background. The same principle applies to the difficult relations between the better-known canonical texts of Indian writing in English or texts available in English translation and untranslated writing by Dalits and literature in the regional languages. The latter have often been ignored or pushed to the background by the 'postcolonial' framework in English departments which has given maximum coverage to texts available in English, most often by expatriate writers. These are then used to study how the postcolonial spirit is reflected in 'Indian literature'.

'Multiculturalism' became a popular public and political slogan in Australia from the 1980s when the entry of immigrants from Asia began to change the population profile of the island continent. Though the first settlers were also culturally a mixed group, coming mostly from Anglo-Saxon and Irish backgrounds, cultural and racial differences became more obvious within the population when in the post World War years the entry of immigrants from South-Eastern Europe and then later from Asia began. The policy of multiculturalism became a way to controlling the wide variety of socio-cultural values and differences that came into contact with one another.

On one hand, this focus on multiculturalism gave a great boost to Aboriginal and immigrant culture, art and literature. On the other, in the process of creating a space within the larger framework of Australian culture for so-called alternate cultures and practices, there was also a tendency to take only some aspects of those cultures – like specific art forms or food – and 'sell' them as different from 'mainstream Australian culture'. This kind of marketing promotes certain kinds of difference while at the same time always making clear that it is not quite part of the mainstream. It leads to a very subtle kind of marginalization. This face of Australian multiculturalism has also at times drawn attention away from tendencies towards conservative right wing nationalism and beliefs that Australia should be for 'white' Australians.

In India, questions of cultural pluralism were taken for granted for a long time, as the main focus of most discussions on culture was on the impact of British colonialism. The existence of social and cultural divisions, be they religions, caste or class, was blamed on the British colonial policies of 'divide and rule'. Today, there are developments in the social and political fields, such as the rise of right-wing versions of nationalism in India, which are making us think about our claims to cultural tolerance and pluralism. In this context, looking at the Australian situation may help throw light by comparison and contrast on how the practice of cultural pluralism has hidden the many ways in which the voices of women, migrants, dalits and adivasis have been ignored in social, cultural and political fields, as well as in the area of literary studies. The diversity of languages in India and the politics of translation and marketing within an academic/publishing context wherein Indian writing in English, especially that produced by expatriate Indians has gained a sort of importance over

writing in the regional languages and writing by groups such as Dalits or tribals, too become interesting points of study.

Thus though both Australia and India can be broadly classified as postcolonial nations with multicultural social frameworks, a more detailed analysis reveals similarities and differences that can be used to question the reasons behind these frameworks and their ground level implications.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Australian literature is a term that should be used with awareness of its limitations and the political implications of what it includes or leaves out. The changing body of writing the term has been used to refer to is relevant to the Indian student of English literature because many aspects of it provide a valuable tool to compare and contrast Indian literature against.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Explore some of the limitations and possibilities of using the term 'Australian literature'.
2. Discuss some criticisms of the idea of postcolonialism in relation to Australian literature
3. Compare and contrast some aspects of Indian and Australian literature, making clear why such comparisons may be useful.

1.7 WORKS CITED

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