UNIT 5 EARLY LITERATURE

Structure

5.0 Objectives
5.1 Provisional Demarcations
5.2 Colonial Writing
5.3 Women's Writing
5.4 Aboriginal Writing
5.5 Let Us Sum Up
5.6 Questions
5.7 Works Cited

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall briefly sample the early English literary works in Australia and their themes from the colonial period. We shall also try and find out whether these works are/were inclusive or exclusive with respect to the various sections of Australian society and if so, how these groups were portrayed in the literary discourses.

5.1 PROVISIONAL DEMARCATIONS

For the purpose of this section, Australia's literary history has been divided into three: the **first** deals with the early colonial writings, which were mostly dominated by white males. These consisted of travelogues, poems, bush tales, yarns and ballads. They mostly described the experiences of various people, the heroic hardships endured by the convicts, ex-convicts, settlers and government officials in the development of Australia. The **second** section deals with women's writings that tended to tell the white woman's story and her experiences during this period. The **third** deals with Aboriginal writings. Aboriginal writers give their own version of events during the conquest and occupation of Australia by the white colonizers. In their literary works, themes about dispossession, economic deprivation and racism are covered. These literary works give us glimpses of Australia from the establishment of the penal colony to the present as seen, experienced or presented by various authors. It is through these writings that we see how Australia has been trying to come to terms with its past and the struggle to build a multicultural society.

5.2 COLONIAL WRITING

The journals, diaries and letters of early voyagers, explorers and settlers were the first pieces of writing to be inspired by European contact with the Australian continent. Of these documents of initial contact, according to Delys Bird, the accounts of William Dampier published as *A New Voyage Round the World* (1689) and James Cook which respectively provided a picture of the land as "degraded and barren" and "as offering a fertile future" established " the terms of a dialectical paradigm ... moving between ... prison and paradise, gloom and optimism, that shapes much colonial writing" (23). Excerpts from Cook's account of April 20, 1770 in the Macmillan Anthology tells one side of the beginning of the story of Australia's colonization:

> The weather being clear, gave us a good view of the country, which has a very pleasing appearance: it is of a moderate height, diversified by hills and vallies, ridges and plains, interspersed with a few lawns of no great extent, but in general covered with wood: the ascent of the hills and ridges is gentle, and the summits are not high. We continued to sail along the shore to the

> northward, with a southerly wind, and in the afternoon we saw smoke in several places, by which we knew the country to be inhabited... (16)

Literary writing traces its origin to 1800 when the first printing press was imported for use in the production of government orders. In 1802, the first books: *New South Wales General Standing Orders* and *The Road to Botany Way* were produced. Thereafter, the colony's first newspaper, *The Sydney Gazette*, was published. The gazette served as a forum for people to express their experiences by way of poems, ballads, plays and short stories. Ken Goodwin while analyzing the writings of this period notes that "the question of relationships between the governing class and the governed" (14) was central to several of the plays of this period. For example, in the works of Charles Harpur (1813-68) and other early novelists we see a graphic description of the experiences of the convicts. They deal with the depiction of guiltless convicts, harsh overseers, brave bushrangers, and brutal police and magistrates. **David Burn's** (1799-1875) earliest play, *The Bushrangers*, is based on the exploits of Mathew Brady, a notorious leader of a bushranging gang of escaped convicts. Its aim was not so much to glamorize bushranging but to expose the Governor's oppression of free settlers such as Burn. In 'A Captain's Lament on the Death of Captain Logan' we catch a glimpse of some of the dilemma and agony of being a convict:

> Our overseers and superintendents –
> These tyrants' orders we must obey,
> Or else at the triangles our flesh is mangled
> Such are our wages at Moreton Bay.

Much of the writing of this period contained the idea that Australia was a vast empty land and that it is the convicts and the early settlers of European stock who developed the land. This gave them the right to call themselves 'pioneers'. Here, attempts at re-creating history in a way that simply denies the indigenous Aboriginal presence in Australia can be noted. Laurie Hergenhan in his observations notes that "the suppressed lack of an indigenous history" (xi) – the idea that for Australians, history is what was initiated or happened overseas – is a colonial legacy. Instead of being a weakness or cultural handicap, this myth of Australian emptiness has driven many writers: **Lawson**, **Clarke**, **Richardson**, **Keneally** and others before and after them, both to claim and re-create an indigenous past as a way of being independent and [illegible]ing from a history forced from the outside and modeled on to Eurocentric narratives. Mary Gilmore, for instance, re-writes the past and suggests in 'Old Botany Bay' that the convicts were the first pioneers:

> I was the conscript
> Sent to hell
> To make in the desert
> The living well;
> I split the rock;
> I felt the tree
> The nation was –
> Because of me.

While looking at the understanding of this period (1855-1915), Shirley Walker observes that "it is interesting that there is little suggestion of love or passion in the male poetry of the period. Moreover the stock perception of the typical Australian required a re-assessment of the past: the rehabilitation of the convict and the bushranger to bring them to an historical relationship with the popular image"(165). Russel Ward (1965) in 'The Australian Legend' proposes this historical relationship when he suggests that the values of 'mateship' originated in the close bonds between fellow convicts.

As we see in Gilmore's 'Old Botany Bay' the guilt shifts from the convict, no longer the villain, to the system itself (imposed on the colonies by the British). In novels like **Marcus Clarke's** *His Natural Life* (1874) and the short stories of **Henry Lawson**, the suffering of the convict is justified in metaphysical terms – he becomes a Christ-like figure who gives his life for another.

The image of Australia that emerged from this self-determining process was an indigenous one, centered upon the bush. By the 1880s, Shirley Walker (165) observes that the bush had become a label for both the landscape and a social reality characterized by egalitarianism, collectivism and 'mateship'. Central to this idea of the bush was the dignity of physical labour, the elevation of the bush worker as a hero, and the celebration of radical nationalist values, which were presumably to be found in their purest form among the bush workers. The Sydney *Bulletin* established in 1880 and edited by J.F. Archibald encouraged writers such as **Gordon**, **Paterson** and **Lawson**, and it served as an influential instrument for the expression of national ethos. Its snappy paragraphs, verses, ballads, anecdotes and short stories, all of great vigour and authenticity, helped to mould a group myth about the nature of Australians and their society.

The writers of the 1890s wrote against the social context of a growing awareness of a sense of nationhood, unionism and socialism. Ian Turner comments:

> The first thing about the writers of these years was that the tone of voice was unselfconsciously, unmistakably and often 'offensively' (as Joseph Furphy said) democratic, lower-class Australian – and this was possibly the first time in any literature that this had been the dominant tone. Not that there were no gradations: Lawson characteristically saw the country from on foot, and his feet were mostly hot and tired and blistered, while his contemporary, and a better balladist, 'Banjo' Paterson, saw it from on horseback; Lawson's future was unlike anything that had gone before, while Paterson's was a return to an idyllic pastoral beginning; Furphy wrote of bullock-drivers, Edward Dyson of miners and city workers, Miles Franklin of remote feckless station-owners, 'Steele Rudd' of small selectors grubbing a living out of a back-breaking farm. But there was a sufficient community of language and sentiment to link all these, and many more, with what was fresh in the nineties air.... They rejected old-world models, both literary and social; they spoke the vernacular, and spurned romance. They shared a humour whose central element was an ironic understatement which seemed designed to make more manageable the manifold difficulties of the lives they knew. Their view of human nature was optimistic: there was pathos, even horror and despair, in their work, but not tragedy, for defeat when it came (as it often did), came from without and not within. And in all this they were close to their people and their time. (Turner, 34)

The Bulletin published these writers and had an agenda to lampoon and shame the hypocrisy and imitativeness of Sydney society. Turner quotes J. F. Archibald's comments on the city of Sydney in *The Lone Hand*, (1907):

> It was a Cant-ridden community.... Sydney, socially, limped in apish imitation after London ideas, habits and manners. Politically and industrially it was the same.... Sydney invited revolt from existing conditions, and The *Bulletin* was the organ of that revolt. (35)

The *Bulletin* writers of the 1880s and 1890s were also the first to exploit the Bush tradition as a sort of cultural alternative to metropolitan values. By their time Ross comments:

> .... almost a hundred years after its foundation, Australian society and culture had changed considerably. The rigid structure of the penal settlement had broken down as a result of the emancipation of convicts, free immigration, the growth of a native born population and the extension of settlement to other centers around the Australian coast. (11)

In the cities—particularly in Sydney and Melbourne – cultural circles evolved around periodical journals and literary groups. The *Bulletin* writers drew on vernacular sources – the ballad and the yarn; they introduced the 'Australian' voice and language into literature, and therefore gave their readers that shock of recognition which occurs only in transplanted cultures when the double vision they instill is suddenly resolved into a single familiar image (Ross 13-14).

The principal writers of the Bulletin school, as Shirley Walker puts it, were also heirs to both a populist tradition and a cosmopolitan one. As Graeme Davison has pointed out, many of them were urban dwellers, closely connected with radical movements such as secularism, republicanism and land reform. These according to him would have promoted the same egalitarian ethos, which Russel Ward maintains was derived from the conditions of early settlement.

Literature of the period however, depicted racist tendencies and ideas. Most Australians at that time wished to exclude other races from the island continent's social fabric, as these were seen in derisive terms. Australia's white Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic (to include the Irish) make-up, as Walker observes, "was always emphasized, racial purity was a national obsession and violence to minorities such as Aborigines was endemic". According to David Malouf in *A Spirit of Play*, this belief in racial superiority and exclusiveness resulted in deliberate attempts to eliminate Aborigines. It was one way of effecting a white Australia policy. Malouf continues, "As the *Bulletin* put it with its usual brutal candour: 'Australia for the Australians – the cheap Chinese, the cheap nigger, and the cheap European pauper to be absolutely excluded'"(105).

What is characteristic of the literary writings of the colonial period is that most of the writers were men. This was because firstly, the convicts and the early settlers were mostly males. Secondly, the first migrants to Australia were mostly men. "Mateship', an expression of male solidarity, vigourously excluded the woman, often delegating to her the passive virtues of stoicism and endurance.

5.3 WOMEN'S WRITING

However, one of the first female writers of this period to gain prominence was **Catherine Spence** who migrated with her family from Scotland to South Australia. Jane Austen was a strong influence on her literary output. Her novels dealt with the problems of white female immigration. She thus has the distinction of being the first woman novelist to write about Australia and the first to deal with women's problems. Her first novel, *Clara Morison, A tale of South Australia during the Gold fever* discusses from a woman's perspective the social, financial and moral issues of the time in Adelaide (Goodwin, 20-21).

The male writers of this period showed an inclination to portray men as heroic, hardworking, and thus responsible for Australia's growth and development. The women were, as a result, often depicted as subordinate, weak and dependent upon the men for protection and their livelihood. In some of the plays, poems or novels of this period the Aborigines were presented as "half human, stupid, amoral, and unworthy of consideration".

Later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we see women writers such as **Judith Wright, Beverly Kingston, Ruth Teale, Kay Daniels, Barbara Baynton, Elizabeth Jolley, Helen Garner, Kylie Tenant, Christina Stead, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Sally Morgan** and **Glenyse Ward** narrating their experiences in the Australian society. In his review of women's writing in Australia, Hawthorne (114-122) critically looks at their place in the larger Australian society and argues for its consideration as central rather than 'marginal' in the understanding of an emerging culture in Australia.

In his review of individual writers, Hawthorne describes how **Barbara Baynton's** short stories show the extent, to which it is possible for men to go in order to humiliate women, and suppress any outcry against that behaviour. Barbara Baynton was the daughter of a carpenter and, although at the end of her life she mixed in upper-class circles, it was not until her marriage to a wealthy seventy-year old doctor that she no longer had to sell bibles from door to door to secure a living for herself and her young family. In their 'Introduction' to Barbara Baynton, Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson write that each story in *Bush Studies*:

> has an inexorable progress towards a dire conclusion – death, rape, rejection or some combination of these – and the progress itself is in the form of an ordeal which serves to heighten the victims (and our) perception of his or her vulnerability

The story 'Squeaker's Mate', for instance, tells of the poverty of bush life and the cruelty of Squeaker (the man) to his mate (the woman). The title of the story portrays a male-centred social environment wherein the woman's identity revolves around her social relationship with the Squeaker. It is also an implied criticism of the male-centred cultural vision of 'mateship'. This discursive bias extends along the realm of work as well.

However, when a tree falls on the woman, breaking her back, the Squeaker's cruelty towards his mate reaches new proportions. But the woman whose name, Mary, we learn only towards the end of the story, despite her immobility, has her revenge. It is evident that Mary knows precisely her powers and also the mind of her oppressor. Once disabled, she knows, too, that waiting in silence is her most powerful weapon. She finally does demonstrate this power at the end of this extraordinary story.

In Barbara Baynton's stories, Walker observes, "the bush is grotesque and actively malevolent, inhabited by sinister and predatory creatures, both male and female. The victims mostly are raped or murdered or left, broken-backed to die when their usefulness is over". The bush society is far from the egalitarian caring community of Lawson's dreams where people toil and bake and suffer and are kind. One of its most grotesque female manifestations is the wretched old hag begging for money for drink at the roadside shanty in 'Billy Skywonkie':

> She pointed to her toothless mouth (the minion of which seemed to be to fill its cavernous depths with the age-loosened skin about and below). A blue bag under each eye aggressively ticked like the grills of the fowls.... Alternatively she pointed to her mouth or laid her knotted fingers on the blue bags in pretence of wiping tears. Entrenched behind the absorbed skin-terraces, a stump of purple tongue made efforts at speech. When she held out her claw, the woman understood and felt for her purse....

Images such as this should be set against the sentimental versions of pioneer womanhood that reinforced the narrow male tradition.

Similarly, **Mary Murnane's** *Uphill All the Way* (1980) documents the hardships suffered by women in domestic life, childbearing and sweated labour, the vicious double standards of colonial society and most disturbing of all, prostitution of convict and Aboriginal women and the removal of children conceived by them. Feminist histories such as Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975) and Miriam Dixon's *The Real Matilda* (1976) challenge the idealized images of women. Dixon sees the distinguishing feature of Australian society to be its contempt for women and traces this to "our formative decades" with their violence and brutality towards women and widespread prostitution of women (Walker, 168).

5.4 ABORIGINAL WRITING

Adam Shoemaker includes in the early phase of Aboriginal Australian writing in English (14-17), journalism exemplified by *The Aboriginal* or *Flinders Island Chronicle* published between Sept 1836 – Dec 1836 in Tasmania and public petitions, the most famous of which he regards the bark petition presented by the *Yirrkala* people of Arnhem Land of 1963. The publication of **Kath Walker's** poetry, the plays of **Jack Davis** and **Kevin Gilbert** and the novels of **Colin Johnson** (later known as Mudrooroo) after the 1960s strongly proved the literary presence of Aboriginal voices. Since then there has been no looking back.

Among Aboriginal writers as well, the initial pattern of publication brought to prominence more men writers than women. In more recent times, Aboriginal women have gained ascendancy in this field of telling their stories. **Ruby Langford** in her novel *Don't Take Your Love to Town* describes her life as a travelling worker in Queensland. As an Aboriginal woman, we read about the ordeals she has to undergo in order to earn a living. She also gives a brief description of her life, and the gradual disintegration of her Bundjalung community and Aboriginal culture, and their deliberate dispersal to the towns and cities by the colonial administration. She describes:

> I felt like I was a living tribal but with no tribe around me, no close knit family. The food gathering, the laws and songs were broken up and my generation at this time wandered around as if we were tribal but in fact living worse than the poorest of the poor whites and in the case of women, living hard because it seemed like the men drank and gambled and disappeared. One day they'd had enough and they just didn't come back .... my women friends all have similar stories.

From her work we get a vivid glimpse of racist Australia in the late fifties and early sixties.

Similarly, *My Place* by **Sally Morgan** and *Wandering Girl* by **Glenyse Ward** are two other autobiographies, which document the experiences of Aboriginal women in the Australian society. In her book Sally Morgan describes how the Aboriginals are mistreated and discriminated against and her own self-discovery of her roots as an Aboriginal. In *Wandering Girl*, **Glenyse Ward** describes the life she led as a slave girl in a farm during the 1960s. From her book we get an idea of the general perception of whites towards the Aboriginals. They were meant to be invisible, silent and nameless:

> Soon as I opened the door all the chatter and laughter stopped. You could Hear a pin drop as all eyes were on me. All of a sudden, some poshed-up Voice with a plum in her mouth came out of the crowd, 'Tracey dear, is this your little dark servant?' I just stood there smiling. I thought it was wonderful that at least people were taking notice of me. There were sniggers and jeers for everywhere. I turned to the lady who did all the talking and said,

> my name is Glenyse. She was startled; she said 'Oh dear, I didn't think you had a name' (Hawthorne, 119).

These writings mirror the experiences of the Aboriginal womenfolk and their circumstances in a society that has been dominated for a long time not only by white male administrative officials but also male writers. What is significant is that the black experience in white Australia had not been told before from a black person's perspective. From the time of the invasion to the nineteen seventies or eighties, the black presence in Australia had either been ignored or deliberately distorted by white Australian writers. The emergence of these black writers has to an extent filled this lacuna and corrected the biased distorted picture of the Aboriginal history, presence and experience in white dominated Australia.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

The early literature of Australia is marked by the changes in the cultural environment that produced it. The perspectives of this Unit and the way it has been arranged are just one way of looking at the writing of this period. As you become more familiar with Australian literature yourself, other perspectives should inform your awareness.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss some of the reasons why the early colonial writing may have been dominated by male writers.
2. Discuss some aspects of women's writing in Australia.
3. What has Aboriginal writing contributed to Australian literature?

5.7 WORKS CITED

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