CHAPTER V

A NEOCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF SEAL INDUSTRY

(OCEAN)

Seal Industry flourished at Bass Strait islands of Australia even before European settlement. The discovery of precious fur seal in 1797 attracted many ships to the island, which was unknown till then. It became a highly profitable exporting commodity that fascinated foreign Sealing industries. Sealing ships from United States and United Kingdom used to take seal skin and seal oil from these islands. There were many uninhabited islands with abundant seals, which were occupied by European sealers during the sealing season by killing the natives to establish camps. The contacts began between sealers and natives as they used to trade Aboriginal women, kangaroo and seal skin for flour, tobacco and tea. The sealers abducted and enslaved countless Aboriginal women, who were kidnapped as slaves and subjected to pillage, rape and murder.

During their capture many Aboriginal men and children were killed. In many instances the abducted native women, who were used for sexual pleasure, were left at fishing towns or at trade centres, while the sealers sail back to Europe. These women would die a miserable death from sealers’ disease, leaving their children for their fate. The consequences still haunt the country in the modern era and live on in the survivors. European settlement led to the near extinction of Aboriginal tribes, who live on today as a distinct group with mixed ancestry. Though they claim Aboriginal identity, they are entirely dispossessed of their culture and lands.
Aboriginal people used seal skins as fur coats, jackets and boots. Seals were hunted for their pelts, fat and flesh. Every organ of seals’ body fetched handsome money for the hunters. Pelts were used to design fur coats; seal oil was used in lubricants, cooking, cosmetics and seal meat had a great demand as its rich in proteins, vitamins and iron. Canada, Greenland, Namibia, Norway and Russia had the largest Sealing industries. New methods in hunting the seals and involvement of many international companies reduced the number of seals in few years. These companies were in search of new places for seal hunting and found Australia and New Zealand. The early known European contact was with Tasmanian Aborigines when British and American seal hunters started coming in great number. They used to visit the islands in Bass Strait and Tasmania. During the sealing season, from November to May, sealers were brought and left on uninhabited islands.

From a postcolonial perspective, the seals of Australia became the victims of the oil-hunger of the advancing machine technology of the Industrial Revolution. Their valuable skin brought the extinction of seals. Sealing proved to be one of the earliest sources of wealth for the colony. The twilight had come to an end and the industries had to be closed down. The exploitation of resources by capitalist nations and the sudden doom of the species have been the pertinent questions raised by postcolonial critics.

Most of the European sealers were convicts or ex-convicts, and some were sailors. These convicts were working men or women who committed crimes of robbery because of severe poverty in the great cities of England. In a way to deal with the same poverty they had been used in sealing industry and were sent to
Australia. They stayed on the islands even after the sealing season as it could offer them free life. They established semi-permanent camps on the islands, which were very close to Tasmania so that they could be in contact with Aboriginal people. These islands were afar from Sydney, where the actual colonial administration was located, which just left the sealers with no control.

They traded with the natives like hunting dogs, flour, tea and tobacco for kangaroo skins. Slowly there was demand for Aboriginal women as the women were extremely skilled in swimming and hunting seals. Men traded their services during the hunting season and some of the women were sold to sealers on a permanent basis. Same time, sealers took on many raids along the coasts to abduct Aboriginal women by killing Aboriginal men. Native women’s position is quite disturbing. They are 45 times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be victims of family violence by spouses or partners. (Gordan S, et al. 47)

The women are victims of violence and sexual offending at a rate ‘unheard of in the rest of Australia’. By early 19th century, the produce of seals had gone down drastically because of ceaseless hunting. Most of the seal hunters left for Europe but few sealers stayed as permanent residents on the islands by establishing families with Aboriginal women.

It portrays and charts the destinies of the life of Caleb Mathews, his wife, Eugenie, Belle, an Aboriginal woman and Johnny Mullagh, during 1880s. Caleb, an Irishman, is the captain of a sealing ship, Ocean. His crew includes Silas West, Vanderlin, Briggs, Gavez and Armstrong. They are on a contract of Crown Service
to hunt seals and collect the seal oil. The ship has four try pots, casks for the oil, presses and bales for the skins, building materials, tools, medicines and weapons. The sealers are basically convicts, who were employed to collect the seal skins and oil. Bass Strait is separated from the main land of Australia and it was difficult for the authorities to enforce law and order from Sydney. This makes them more independent and they are on to Aboriginal tribes.

The crew anchor near an uninhabited island, which they call Sea Elephant Bay, after the seals. The Aborigines have inhabited the island. It has an abundance of seals. Caleb plans to build a village on it:

“A couple of huts for the men and myself, a shed for the skins, a cookhouse, and a jetty to the south of the creek. I placed each of these with the mind of an artist, or so I pleased myself to think, and even contemplated a bench at the edge of the sand from which to admire the bay at the fall of evening. This wasn’t going to be a hovel of shit and semen and stinking sailors. This would be a little town of honest working men. That was my dream.” (6)

The ship is one hundred and sixty days of journey away from London. The law and conscience of a civilized society don’t work here. Caleb is barely in charge of the ship. He can’t be bossy on them. The crew can’t bare him if he commands them. So it’s better for him not to pay attention to what they do. “Sealers do not salute their captain, they tolerate him – if he’s lucky.” (8) The ship’s owners, Crown Service have taken the government contract in order to pay the ship’s way to Van Diemen’s Land (presently called Tasmania). Their profit comes from the seal industry. The crew has to catch abundant seals and fill in the ship with its skin and
oil. They are aware of this contract, that’s why, as soon as they reach Sea Elephant Bay; they’ve started moving the stores from ship to the island. Seals’ oil is of the very highest quality and it’s very costly, fetch the company large amounts of money.

The Aboriginal women are known for their skill at sea. The crew members capture two young girls, Fanny and Belle, and a woman – Woonaji, by killing few natives in the process. Michael Walsh and Colin Yallop say:

It was a fact of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture that the men seldom learned to swim: when they needed to cross a body of water, they were often ferried across on rafts by the women, who were proficient swimmers. The Aboriginal men were therefore of limited use as labourers to the sealers, but the women proved to be invaluable. (Crowley, Terry. 58)

They have brought trouble to the new island by capturing Aboriginal women. One of the girls, Fanny tries to escape by swimming the passage to the nearest islands. But the men knock her unconscious and chain her. Vanderlin with other men brings the load of lumber from the ship and start building the huts. Four days later Caleb climbs onto the roof with his telescope and immediately he is impressed by the scenic beauty of the island. Personally, he derives solace from it. He decides to arrange cannon on the headland of the island, to warn the sea pirates and other ships of any attack. The abundance of seals available there can cause them trouble from other sealing ships.

Bruce Pascoe is always astonished by the country, which is more beautiful than the portrait of a great painter. Abundance is the word that he recalls all the time whenever he thinks of the place. He makes Caleb say, “Can you see what this
country is like, a country where you can swim in the water at nightfall, where one sweep of the net can harvest you all you can eat, a country where we might have all we want.” (11)

Caleb is attracted towards Belle, loves her, and can’t take his eyes off her. She with the remaining Aboriginal women helps the crew in catching the fish. They are very handy in the daily routine on the island. They collect vegetables, eggs for meal and their skills at fishing are amazing. Physically they are stronger and swifter than the crew despite the rigors and risks of their life. One day Caleb tries to catch fish with his bait, but can’t even catch one. Fanny begins to sing, sweeping her hand over the surface of the water. “The song calls on Gurrugumar, the westerly wind, to blow and flatten the seas so the fish can be caught.” (Cruse, Beryl, et al. 27) Within a minute a seal comes almost six feet away from them. Caleb’s surprised; he never knew of this skill where people sing fish to them.

The men have their demands after work everyday. They want the enslaved girls. Vanderlin has seen the excessive oppression of the European courts. Briggs and Palmer, from Ireland and Scotland respectively, have seen the oppression of their native lands in the hands of England. West was born at sea, is a law to himself. He speaks little but very handy at sea. Caleb is aware of the fact that people with independent attitudes cannot be controlled by an authority. He feels the land itself reflects distinctiveness. “Liberty, Fraternity and Equality are spoken of in every land but it seemed to me it sprang from this land between the fissures of the rock and every time we drank her water we imbibed her soul.” (13)
Another ship, *Black Witch*, with Captain Saunders and the crew, anchors near the island. The crew of both ships becomes great comrades and it’s a festive mood on the island. Saunders advises Caleb that the seal skin and oil will fetch them high price at Sydney and Hobart. Ocean’s holds are three parts full already. So, they can sell the procured oil and skin at Sydney and make dividends. And on Sea Elephant Bay, with plentiful of seals, it’s not a problem for them to catch seals again for the owners. Moreover, they are planning to retrieve the goods from the sunken ship at Greencape, which is a two day sail from the island. The vessel is heavily provisioned with all items including gold and diamonds. If they can collect the provisions from the sunken vessel, they would be rich. The crew of both ships brought back precious goods from the sunken ship. Sealers gave up the idea of going deep into the bottom of sunken ship. The native women’s knowledge of the sea came in handy for them. Their skill on the sea is quite amazing:

Despite the labours of continuous diving over a period of several hours the girls showed no sign of exhaustion and brought up items of a value which would most likely equal the returns of … whole sealing season and yet they showed no interest in the goods themselves. (16-17)

With the retrieves, all of them can make a fortune. Caleb plans to settle down after the voyage with his share. The island has become a home for the crew. It’s situated in a remote area and unknown to the rest of the world. They restart the work of making seal oil from the caught seals. They need to make ready the store sheds and wood for the try pot fires. As per the plan of Caleb, West has arranged cannon
on the headland. When they lit the fuse the blast fired a ball almost a mile out to sea. They are safe now from other sealing ships. They have secured the place.

The island is actually owned by natives. Whenever the crew digs in the sand they find implements and hearth stones used by the natives. At the east end of the bay they find small stone huts with grass baskets, spears, grinding stones etc. The natives lived on it even before the crew landed on the island. Often they see a native canoe observing the crew of Ocean. The natives can’t dare to come on to the island when Caleb’s men are around. There’s a danger that those natives can return to the place and destroy their preparations and habitations, if they are away. That’s why they begin preparations to defend the island of any possible native attack.

They prepare their sail back to England, leaving some men with the food and women. Their first halt is at Kowloon, a trade centre. They’ve sold their share from the retrieves and the profit that they made is incredible. With the share that they have got from the seal oil and skins, they are richer than they’ve expected. They relax and enjoy their stay at the place. Caleb calculates his earnings and sends a message to the ship’s owners that their money of the seal industry has been deposited in the form of gold at L’loyd’s Chancellery in Kowloon.

The families of Caleb and Miss Eugenie O’Breheny, belong to Irish descent, suffered under British rule during the Irish War of Independence. He wants to ask her to marry him. And their marriage will depend on whether she agrees to come with him to Australia. He wants to buy some property in Australia, the land that amazed him, with the money he’s made from the voyage. The crew’s journey back
to England was a pleasant one. All the crew members are elated to return to their native land.

The ship reaches London. Caleb gets a message to meet the owners at the Imperial Hotel. Sir Wallace Gilbey, the Chairman of the company looks distracted and depressed as, “he himself was ill and the partnership had suffered some personal and fiscal ructions despite the buoyant nature of London’s markets.” (26) He is bankrupt. He offers Caleb the ship as his payment. Caleb bargains, buys it for a cheaper price, and owns the ship. By accepting the ship he makes it certain to return to Australia. He informs Silas West of his plan, who readily accepts to be on the deck.

He meets Eugenie at Wales. She works as a school mistress. When they were children, the oppression of Ireland in the hands of England was questioned by many. Her father and Caleb’s father fought for the Irish freedom. They were killed by the loyalists of British. The people who killed them came back next day beaten up Eugenie’s mother and raped Eugenie repeatedly one by one. She was still a girl then, hardly twelve years old. And her mother died after few days of the incident. With the death of her father she lost her reason. Her family’s settled in Wales leaving London. Caleb is unaware of the physical assault on her. She is a kind of a reserved person. They greet each other. It seems like a meeting between strangers though they know each other long back. There’s no joy shared between them. He feels the gap, breaks the silence and reveals his plans of settling in Australia; living on Sea Elephant Bay; and the profits he’s made out of sealing industry. He promises her, “will never raise a hand against you and will treat you as well as a man of my social
graces might manage, for it is obvious to me that you have an independent intellect and a determination which requires respect – and affection.” (30-31)

Eugenie resigns her job and accompanies him to Haverford, where they get married. They leave for London to buy loads and sail back to Australia. Throughout the journey he tries to discover her thoughts. It’s very hard to read her mind. Sometimes she seems to be enjoying his company and other times she looks very passive of her life with him. She considers him a dreamer, always buried in thoughts. But he considers himself a practical person. His early life was a bitter disappointment for him. He left his native land and became a sailor and later a captain. Life is confusion for him. He doesn’t understand what he does as a sailor or as a captain; has done nothing for his family or nation. He may be morally superior to other crew but he is the same, selfish and drawn towards native women. He never derives pleasure from anything, led a life of bewilderment. Only the calmness, harmony and the scenic beauty of Sea Elephant Bay delight him.

When the ship comes closer to Sea Elephant Bay, Caleb tries to find his friends on the island. There’s no sign of life. Nobody’s there to wave an arm at the ship or to welcome them, no smoke and no dinghy. The crew has been looking at him eagerly waiting for his announcement of the sight of their friends on the island, but gradually they sensed the danger. “We rounded the southern point where the cannon was clearly visible but nobody was on the jetty to welcome… the place seemed deserted… all could see for themselves that our island was abandoned.” (44)

As soon as they left for England the place is occupied by native blacks. Caleb’s left some of the crew members along with the Aboriginal women. No trace
of them. The total village which they built during their first voyage has been destroyed. But the natives haven’t touched money, charts, books and oil. The stone houses at the end of the Bay have been rebuilt with new turfs on their roofs; and some fishing nets laid for the fishing, have been found. It’s evident that the blacks have left the island just before the Ocean’s arrival. They have seen the ship approaching the island and silently left without the crew’s notice.

The crew announces that they are going across to the mainland to find their lost friends. Caleb can’t go, has to be with Eugenie. Other crew except West left for mainland. Both Caleb and West waited anxiously for the return of the ship. Eugenie kept herself busy observing the stone and turf houses and the wooden dolls of the black children. The ship comes back with the loss of another three members. He senses the death of his crew members who were left on island. If complained, the death of his crew will be investigated. But that will lead the law to inspect the murder of Aborigines in the crew’s hands. A total thirty eight blacks have been killed by his crew. Moreover the riches they are harvesting from the sunken ship will be exposed. By then the British law, in the hands of Governor Gipps and Protector Robinson has become very powerful in protecting the Aboriginal rights:

Aboriginal petitioning began during the era of direct British control. The earliest known examples occurred in Van Diemen’s Land. In the early decades of the 19th century, this colony saw bitter land wars between colonists and Aboriginal people, and in an effort to halt the violence Lieutenant Governor Arthur sent George Augustus Robinson on a “friendly
mission” around the colony in the early 1830s, to persuade the survivors to retreat to government sponsored reserves. (Belmessous, Saliha. 185-186)

Governor Gipps, in particular, stated to kill or hang the whites who kill Aboriginals. He was the person who thought of education for the blacks. Many settlers aren’t happy with his move towards responsible government. His policy towards the Aborigines was humane, practical and daring. Caleb’s men are safe from any punishment as the reports written by the Correspondents to the Governor can be altered.

The work of building the village has resumed. They are less in number and they are tired of rigorous work. At this point of time they catch two Aboriginal women. The women are brutally beaten up. The crew tries to hide this from Eugenie but she knows it. The shrieks and cries of the women are audible across the island. She’s very annoyed and irritated with the crew’s behavior. She herself has undergone all those physical assaults in the hands of British loyalists. Moreover, she starts visiting the chained women to consol them and to offer them some food. The crew doesn’t like this. They come to Caleb with a demand that she shouldn’t visit the women. Eugenie doesn’t like the proposition but she is helpless.

One day Caleb sees Eugenie conversing with West. She comes to Caleb and informs, “one of the native women (Woonaji, the elderly woman who was caught by his men during the first voyage) has been found by West. She was hurt when her boat capsized on the reef while the natives were escaping. West saw the smoke she was sending up as a signal to her fellows. She has a child, Caleb, a very fair child. It’s father is probably on this island.” (49) West has been looking after her. She is
kept in a small cave among the rocks. Nobody from the crew knows the news. They will kill her with the child if they know her presence, for the murder of their friends. Surprising thing for Caleb is that West wants to accept Woonaji as his wife and the child as his own. Eugenie pleads Caleb to help West in getting away from the island. Caleb arranges for the secret journey of West, in fact, he himself will drive the boat, a small boat, not to be seen by the crew. Eugenie will be on the island only. The disappearance of West will surprise the crew. But they’ll be happier as they can divide his share among themselves, of the voyage.

Silas West’s character is modeled on an Irish sealer named Brien, who accepted the baby son of an abducted native woman. Silas West lives the rest of his life, almost forty one years, on an uninhabited island with Woonaji. People hardly know whether he has lived or died. He’s never been to the main land and has never thought of meeting Caleb during these many years; doesn’t like the crimes on blacks by his crew on Sea Elephant. Eugenie has been very kind to them, arranged for their escape from Sea Elephant, and sent gifts for their baby. Though he is a white man he could live with a black woman for so many years.

Caleb has been very busy since his return to the island. He’s been feeling the burden of keeping all the crew happy. Moreover the tension between him and his wife doesn’t make him relax. Now he is free from everything. He sails towards south with West, Woonaji and the child. It’s a two day voyage. They reach small islands where West plans to live the rest of his life. Caleb is depressed for leaving him. He has been a very good friend, the only person he can depend upon. The functioning of Ocean will become more burdensome in his absence.
During his return journey to Sea Elephant Bay he finds smoke from one of the islands; examines it with his telescope. He sees Belle, fishing in the rock pools. He always thought of her, “the glass hovered as if by itself on the gorgeous form of Belle. She was a beauty, it has to be said… Belle lingered in my dreams because she was truly beautiful. And for me, dangerously irresistible.” (55) He knows that there might be few more Aboriginals on that island. It’s death going on to the shore. But his desire for her doesn’t make him think about the trouble. He’s grounded the boat to the sand, takes a gun and runs for her. The natives are more in number than he’s expected. They attack him with spears. One spear catches him just below the collarbone. He doesn’t give up. He fires the gun which has killed an Aboriginal warrior trying to attack him. This act silences them and they run helter-skelter. He grabs Belle and retreats to the boat. Two black men follow his boat in a canoe. He reloads the gun and shot at the canoe killing them both in a single shot.

The natives are ignorant of guns. If they know that it would take few seconds of time to reload the gun after a shot, they would have pierced him with arrows and spears. On his command Belle removes the spear from his arm. He fears unconsciousness because of the wound. And regularly applies sulphur powder on to it, which saves him from poisoning his body. When he recovers from the injury, he forces Belle for sex three times. She hasn’t said anything and all three times she avoids looking at his face. Twice she has been abducted and both the times her mob has been killed mercilessly. It’s painful for her. She hates white men for their greed and selfishness. They can do anything for their happiness and self-interest. She tries
to fight back but stops because of severe sobbing, the pain of losing her land, her people and her independence again.

The women in Australian society had witnessed or experienced patriarchal and colonial oppression in both the settler society and in their own communities. Critics were not blind to the effects of colonialism and racism on indigenous men. When compared, they understood that Aboriginal women suffered more in many ways in which racist and sexist oppression was evident in most of the instances. It was found that the women experience a profound lack of security in their lives.

The abduction of Belle by Caleb is an act of immorality and depravity. He’s killed three men and faced a whole mob putting his life at risk. This is all for a woman. He tries to contemplate his act:

The couple of hundred seconds that elapsed between grabbing Belle’s arm and shooting the warriors had changed my life irrevocably, a life I had imagined was on the point of becoming more sedate than that of a sea captain, more civilized than that of a sealer and more respectable than either.

(58)

The boat comes closer to Sea Elephant Bay. There’ll be two problems if he takes her on to the island. First, the crew will avenge the death of their friends by killing her. Second, the respect and reverence that Eugenie has towards him will be evaporated in no time as soon as she comes to know his desire for Belle. Hence, he takes the boat further east, out of the sight of Sea Elephant Bay and leaves her on a sandbar near Port Albert. After his return to Sea Elephant Bay he suspects that he is affected by venereal disease. In a very short time he finds that he has infected the
same to Eugenie. Same year the crew has sent a cargo full of seal skin and oil. All of them have plans to settle down, not on Sea Elephant Bay. Caleb leaves her at George Town as she wants to visit a doctor and he himself plans to undergo medical treatment for the disease.

Eugenie knows that Caleb has brought in the curse from an Aboriginal woman. She doesn’t feel bad about Caleb. She considers him “a good man, but just a man, struggling within his capacity to make sense of all that befell him; his physical self, his fortune, his new country…” (64) At George Town she visits a doctor, which is of no use. She has to consult a convict woman who’s an expert in the disease. Moreover that doctor spreads the news of her disease to the town’s people. She is recognized immediately. She can’t even get a room for rent. People avoid her. She wants to find a job. There are many children but very less number of schools in the town. She’s educated and has worked as a teacher at Skomer.

She consults Mr. Hull, the mayor of the town to seek help in getting a job. It’s not a problem for her as she has sound educational qualifications. She informs him that she is going to take over Wesleyan school. It’s a school abandoned by the mission and it has some black students, studying in it. He tries to counsel her:

Surely not, Mrs Mathews, I imagined a rather more refined sort of college. It would be nothing to move the blacks up the river. They’re better off out of town … I believe that all attempts to Christianize them will prove ineffectual … I believe that it is the design of providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races, and that independently of all other
causes, since we have occupied the country, the aborigines must cease to occupy it. (69-70)

He sounds like a fool for her and she settles down at George Town as the head-mistress of the school.

Eugenie hates him and of course all selfish men. She belongs to an oppressed race. It’s her responsibility to educate another oppressed race. She is ill treated and never considered as an equal by the town dwellers. Everybody’s intentionally despised her. They think that with social boycott they can crush her psychologically. But her life has prepared her for such denials. She has been ready for all these. She excels in her profession and is recognized as a superior teacher. She writes to Johnny, one of her students:

You’ll hear a lot of gab from Irishmen about being outcast and siding with he oppressed. Well that is true, unless of course the oppressed are black or Chinese, then even an Englishman becomes good company for most Irish…This new society was as class conscious as any I’d known. The new rich strove to cement their good fortune by commandeering preferences to land grants and trading licenses at the expense of those less fortunate and, of course, your people were considered slaves at best, an unwanted species at worst. (70)

The first European visit to George Town was in 1798 and a settlement was established in 1804. It was chosen because of the Tamar River which makes all the lands fertile and possible for agriculture. The European settlements are mostly established on the banks of rivers. Their imminent problem is native settlement.
Once again there are many instances of brutal killings of natives by settlers. Johnny’s grandmother narrated these incidents to Eugenie that, “men rode back into town as heroes after the slaughter of a whole clan of Palewa people, and were received in glory, garlanded… women throwing garden flowers in their path, taken into the public houses and their triumphs lauded as a great advance for the district.”

(70-71)

Eugenie mentions the importance of the year 1830, especially October 7th. It was the year in which Governor Arthur planned to get rid of blacks. He declared Martial law and banned Aboriginal people from entering settled areas.

Martial law was followed by other means of control. In October 1830, 2200 male settlers formed a line across Van Diemen’s Land. They intended to drive the Indigenous population southward towards the Tasman Peninsula.

(Williams, Nat., et al. 34)

All the men in the colony carried guns, pikes and bamboo sticks to hunt the blacks. Anybody who is associated with or related to natives is driven away from the town. There was widespread violence. All the women whisper among themselves the dangers they may face from blacks.

Their eyes rested on Dilly Mullagh, Johnny’s mother. Her fate was same as any Aboriginal woman. She was left by a sealing ship at the town when she was pregnant with Johnny, as usual the father’s unknown, but usually a sealer. She couldn’t travel from there as she was close to delivering the baby. Nobody attended to nurse her. Moreover she was chased by a minister’s wife to the garden of the school. Eugenie and Mrs. Kennedy, the housekeeper, helped her to deliver the baby.
She was bleeding heavily but recovered very soon. The weeds of the land, Aboriginal medicine, restored her health. Mrs. Kennedy doesn’t want to send her away since her own mother underwent the same disgrace; she was thrown off a sealing ship. Dilly became a maid at the school:

   Everyone knew Dilly. At one time or another every child at the school, and that meant every child at the settlement, had their nose wiped or their shoes tied… She was an instinctively kind woman, especially to children, but what could she do with adults, they acted as if she didn’t exist. (73)

   The settlers are hostile towards the school though they themselves and their children get education from there. The reason for their hatred is the presence of black people. Mrs. Kennedy, Dilly and few of the students are black. Furthermore many natives regularly come to see both the women in great number. And the place has been a shelter for many ill-fated blacks. The men search for natives from town till the barrier. If they find and kill any natives, they could be welcomed with a grand hero’s reception by the women of the town, but can’t find one. In the frustration of not receiving a grand welcome, they have seen Dilly, spat out their aggravation on her and killed her, “been badly beaten about the head, broken arms, one broken leg.” (75)

   Johnny, who was nine year old then, was looked after by Eugenie. Later he disappears for six years, taken away by his uncle Bung Eye Armstrong. They live in Wybalena settlement on Flinders Island. During 1930s,

   Aborigines were persuaded under pressure to move first to Bruny Island, a refuge off the South East Coast which was soon abandoned, and then to the
Furneaux Islands in the Bass Strait. These islands were already inhabited by white seal hunters and their Aboriginal women. The dispossessed Aborigines from the mainland formed settlements on Woody, Gun Carriage and Flinders Islands. (Kirk, Mildred)

The natives were made to live at different places, which were soon evacuated and were forced to live in the Wybalena camp on Flinders Island. They don’t know that it will be a temporary settlement. Hence, they built houses with stones. Aunty Ida Armstrong lives on the island with her large family that includes her sons, nieces, grand daughters, grand son of Belle, Caleb Mathews Junior. Her husband Uncle Georgie Hummock, a Bunurong, was a comrade to Trugannini, along with Belle:

In 1830, George Robinson, the Protector of Aborigines, moved Trugernanner (Trugannini) and Woorrady to Flinders Island with the last surviving Tasmanian Aborigines, numbering approximately one hundred. The stated aim of isolation was to save them, but many of the group died from influenza and other diseases. Trugernanner also helped Robinson with a settlement for mainland Aborigines at Port Phillip in 1838. After about 2 years of living in and around Melbourne they became outlaws, stealing from settlers around Dandenong before heading to Bass River and then Cape Paterson where members of their group murdered two whalers at Watsons hut then shot and injured other settlers around the area. (Trugernanner. Wikipedia)

She was accused of killing white men and was arrested; was sent back to Flinders Island with her rebels to the custody of George Robinson. That’s how Georgie
Hummock and Belle came to the island. But by the time they reached, the camp was empty as all the blacks were killed or shot to death.

George Augustus Robinson (1791-1866) was the Chief Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip District, from 1839 to 1849. Before that he was requested to serve as a mediator between settlers and natives to relocate the natives at Wybalena settlement on Flinders Island. The condition of the Aborigines was pathetic with no proper action taken by the authorities. He visited the settlement in 1832:

He reported it to be in an unsettled state, suffering mostly from lack of discipline among the Europeans, who had long enjoyed intercourse with the black women. This caused the Aboriginal men grave dissatisfaction … presence of armed guards terrified the Aborigines, creating the wrong impression in their minds of the nature of the settlement… the only shelters available to the blacks were three ‘breakwinds’: thatched roofs sloping to the ground, open at the top and closed at each end, each holding twenty to thirty people… Couples recognized as being married shared the same blanket, and the blacks slept around fires burning in the centre of the windbreaks, accompanied by scores of dogs. No furniture was provided for the blacks…clothing and blankets were filthy. The food shortage was critical. (Rae-Ellis, Vivienne. 107-109)

Honestly, theirs was a life full of freedom and liberty. They have been in rapport with nature. Hunting, fishing and agriculture have been their professions for ages. Suddenly they are made to vacate their villages and forcibly sent to a camp run by
Europeans, where the welfare of the natives is least bothered. They are disheartened and demoralized, and “they sit every day looking south towards their home, it is the most dispiriting thing... ever seen.” (76)

Johnny’s stay at Flinders Island for six years makes him a man. He’s lived like a pirate, been imprisoned for few times. He is accused of killing a man at Devonport. Luckily, he escapes death but his uncle is hanged for the crime. He comes back to George Town, to the school again. He is treated as a man though he is fourteen, does all sorts of works at school. He’s so quick at learning different things and very clever at studies. Old people request him to write official letters. Very few black youth are as promising as Johnny. He is the future for them. But the whites always consider him as a thief, a law breaker. The magistrate of the town comes looking for him whenever there’s any theft or an assault on whites in the town.

One day Johnny takes Eugenie in a boat across the river, near a waterfall. She feels pity for not visiting the place though she’s been living there for more than twenty years. It’s more beautiful than any other place, nature at its best. It seems like god’s own land with the pure, cold river water, looks as if directly flowing from heaven. Johnny says, “Ma, why don’t you swim, the water’s not deep... Swim, Ma, put your head in the water... It’s a blessing, Ma, it’s a consecration. If you do that the country will baptize you.” (79) She’s very surprised to hear this from a fourteen year old, who speaks like a man of divinity. She feels, “speaking like a priest or a prophet. Oh, your country wasted you, Johnny, what it missed by never seeing past the blackness of your face.” (79)
European occupation has imbalanced the ecology of Australia. Urbanization, starting of unlimited companies and mushrooming of industries caused severe environmental problems and extinction of hundreds of species of fauna. The river water is polluted, resulting in the death of people and aquatic animals:

Land clearing is a major issue which causes long term changes to the ecosystem. With European colonization land clearing continued on a larger scale for agriculture- particularly for cattle, cotton and wheat production. Since European settlement a total of 13% of native vegetation cover has been lost. The extinction of 20 different mammal, 9 bird and 97 plant species have been partially attributed to land clearing. Land clearing is a major source of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions, and contributed to approximately 12 percent of Australia’s total emissions in 1998. (“Environmental Issues in Australia”. Wikipedia)

Within few years the scenic beauty of the place disappears as Borthwicks establish a wool industry near George Town. There’s great demand for the sheep wool in England. A plant’s been set up above the falls which is followed by the construction of houses for the workers. Eugenie questions Borthwicks for wiping out attractive nature. In reply, she’s given a cheque of thirty pounds as a sponsorship for setting up a library in the school. She tries to convey her anguish but she’s misunderstood. She visits the place again but she doesn’t find the same beauty. “The ferns have all gone… the rocks above the falls are foul with offal and the stink of the place is putrid. Great rafts of green slime cover the creek and creep into the estuary.” (81) What disturbs her is the materialistic nature of the European settlers. They turn
the place to a hell for making money. Natives don’t do things like that because they respect nature. It’s god for them. It’s a reason behind the migration of natives to other places, no drinking water, no fish to eat and full of pollution. She concludes that, “the human can’t build a house without destroying his home.” (82)

Eugenie wants Johnny to fight for the rights of indigenous people. He can argue for classless society, a society where there are no slaves, slums, and poor people. His people are dispossessed of everything, treated as outcast. She’s a reason to suggest him, every race and tribe has its own way of living. They can live peacefully even if the Europeans settled in Australia. But the outsiders made their life, land, water, even air, miserable. The elders dream of their life on the riverbanks, along the estuary – a blissful life, still a dream.

The cynical question regarding the native culture and folklore is thoughtless and unwise. They have a rich culture and their way of life is fairly civilized. There’s an order and harmony in everything they do. Mrs. Kennedy informs Eugenie:

…everybody had similar houses, shared the food, the labour, the celebratory dance… the great trench of ovens were swept out each morning with goose wings, new baskets woven every afternoon and fish, wallaby, possum, potato, greens, all wrapped in separate baskets and cooked under hot stones in the ovens… the removal of food was greeted with song.. the elders dispersed the food according to the law, each with enough, each person taking food to the one they’d been designated to provide for, designated that role even before they drew their first breath. (83)
Chub Kennedy is the captain of Yolla. He with his brother Stock Kennedy comes to meet Aunty Ida’s family. They take the mutton bird oil collected by the family to Melbourne. And he is engaged to Veronica, niece to Aunty Ida. He has three kids from the first marriage. Eugenie gives him a letter and requests him to deliver it to Johnny Mullagh who lives on the Murray. He comes with the information that the church people have been searching for kids on the mainland to send them to a Christian home at Hobart. Now they are after the kids on islands. Aunty has to be very careful as she looks after a total thirteen kids. And the kids of Chub Kennedy will join them. Uncle Georgie always speaks in his native language, advises her to take the family to Seal Island, also known as Sea Elephant Bay. It’s a remote island and out of the reach of white men. Chub and Stock take the family in their ship to the island. Aunty doesn’t want to leave her land but she has to, for the fear of losing the kids.

It’s a three day journey to Sea Elephant Bay. The huts on the island have already been burnt down but the cabins of Caleb and Eugenie are good for shelter. They clean the cabins and unpack their luggage. Till the white people stop chasing their kids they have to live on the abandoned island. Aunty Ida is contented that her family is with her. She is busy, “scheming and planning so that all within range of the warmth of her gaze would be safe and well.” (109) Caleb Mathews, who actually built the village, has become old and lives in the light house on Deal Island. Chub and Stock Kennedy supply him the goods. He maintains a log book of the ships that cross the island. He’s lost most of his face and has become blind because of the venereal disease that he got from his forced intercourse with Belle. And his wife
Eugenie has never returned to him from George Town, employed herself in the school and they are childless. But Belle has Caleb’s child and in fact her son and grandson are named after Caleb. The boy now lives with Aunty Ida’s family. Eugenie knows the boy as he has been to the school. Chub takes the boy to the mainland in his ship to deliver the letter of Eugenie to Johnny.

Aunty Ida narrates all the details that she knows to her nieces and kids – the arrival of sealers to their land for trade, their atrocities on blacks and how they left a generation’s future in great confusion. She reckons the crimes on her people on the island. She says:

‘There was trouble here, you know. All them sailors, even that Captain Mathews so I was told, all of ‘em treatin’ our people bad.’

‘That Bunurong mob killed some of Captain Mathews men was what I was told, Aunty.’

‘Course they did, Vronica, had to after they treated our women like that. Law. Had to. Rapin’ ‘em, beltin’ ‘em up. Terrible they were. Our mob kill a coupla poxy sailors an’ all hell breaks loose.’ (102)

Alec and Gavin are sons to Aunty Ida. Alec wants to become the captain of a ship like Chub Kennedy; plans to join a course, Captain’s Certificate at Eugenie’s school. He is engaged to Gwennie, great niece of Queen Trugannini. Both Alec and Gavin make the dwellings ready and fix the nets for the fish. Bowman, Captain of the Prion, visits the island and seeks the help of both the brothers. They aid him in minor repairs to his ship. He’s given four bottles of whisky to Gavin and lent a
journal to Alec. While Alec reads the book Gavin makes merry with the bottles. The book is a detailed account on the voyages across Australia. It clearly states the rich flora and fauna of the islands in and around Tasmania:

All the islands of any magnitude in all these straits afford plenty of many kinds of game, such as kangaroo, badger, porcupine, and many species of waterfowls such as black swans, geese, several kinds of ducks, teals and a variety of beautiful birds in the woods and bushes. They provide a substantial larder for any ship that lands there. (Delano, Amasa)

It also criticizes the way of living of the Aborigines as unrefined. They are unreceptive to the modern cultures and modern civilization. The material possessions like gold, sapphires are nothing for them. They never think of owning, building fences and drawing borders to the land. Nothing impresses them except the ship and its vast size and design.

The definition of civilization itself is contradictory, which has several meanings. It differs from place to place and society to society. Civilization can be advancement in urbanism, progress in trade and agriculture, art styles, architecture, proper law and order, an administrative system, etc. The natives of Australia are civilized in every respect. Records state that the natives traded with their neighbors, tilled the land for agriculture, believed in sacred gods, and are experts in rock art. There’s no point in the European view, which considers them uncivilized and uncultured.

Alec can’t accept the European perception of their culture. He’s upset when he reads the article from the journal. Their opinion on native culture disturbs him.
“Tears of anger sprang from his eyes, tears of sorrow that no soon should his ancestors have been dismissed as beasts. As if the British ships were the first they’d seen. As if they didn’t have better jewellery than the painted beads the Englishman offered.” (114) The British have their plans and means to separate the natives from their culture. His brother Gavin has become an alcoholic with the bottles that are given to him by sealer ships. Gavin enters the room and in total state of madness calls Alec a Christian. Alec is already aggravated by the comments on his people and culture by the British, and being called a Christian, adds fuel to the fire. Both of them brawl at each other during which Gavin takes a fire poker and hits at Alec, which causes Alec, his eye.

Bruce Pascoe says that the natives used to drink alcohol made from plants, which was not harmful to health. Alcohol consumption turned to destructive results after European invasion. Jens Korff says:

Aboriginal alcohol use changed significantly after white people invaded Australia. Within weeks of the arrival of the first fleet the first pubs opened, and this would shape the way Australian society developed over the next few decades. Many Aboriginal labourers were paid in alcohol or tobacco. In the early 1800s a favourite spectator sport of white people in Sydney was to ply Aboriginal men with alcohol and encourage them to fight each other, often to death. White settlers also gave alcohol to Aboriginal people as payment for sex. Alcohol-induced prostitution had a harmful effect on child rearing and accelerated the birth rate of mixed descent children, usually rejected by their European fathers. It was, in fact, white people who introduced Aboriginal
people to alcohol. But they didn’t teach Aboriginal people about the dangers that go along with alcohol consumption. (Korff, Jens)

Alec meets Eugenie in the year 1854 and requests her for admission to Captain’s Certificate at the school. She declines his request stating that a one eyed person cannot become the captain of a ship. Alec knows very well that she’ll die very soon and she wants to see Johnny before her death. She has no hope whether Johnny would come to meet her. He offers to take her to Johnny in her boat Dalrymple. It’s a small boat used for fishing. She doubts him but he assures her that his people cross straits using boats which are smaller than her boat. They start journey towards Murray and she promises him her boat. During the voyage she takes too much of opium powder. They cross the Deal Island on which her husband Caleb Mathews lives. She doesn’t ask Alec to anchor there.

Alec takes the boat to Sea Elephant Bay. Aunty Ida and veronica are terrified to see the old lady covered in a heap of rugs. Her body is decayed and she smells rotten. Ida considers it a miracle if she survives another day. She advises him to quickly take her to Port Albert where a Bunurong mob lives, from there to send a message to Aunty Kneebone to find and inform Johnny and young Caleb of Eugenie’s arrival. If she dies during the journey he has to smoke her spirit. Ida is happy for the boat but she wants her son to return to her safely.

When they come near Snake Island, Alec finds her health deteriorate totally. He stops the boat at the beach and lit the fire. Three black men come there in response to the fire. One of them is Karborer, a Bunurong elder. Eugenie asks for
Johnny, needs him beside her as a son should always hold his dying mother’s hand, but he isn’t there. Johnny gets the message and he is on his way. Karborer, knowing that it’s her last breath, gestures Alec to pretend as Johnny. He consoles her and on her request kisses her. She dies very happily that she has met Johnny at last. That’s the end of Eugenie. They smoke her spirit and Karborer prepares Eugenie for burial at the Sea Elephant Bay. They tie her corpse with paperbark.

Eugenie Mathews was well loved by the people of the strait who knew her by her kindness to their people but that’s not why they afforded her the honour of choosing the sacred paperbark for the shroud. It was simple expedience. The disease had so corrupted her body and the weather in April was still warm so that disintegration was well underway. The paperbark would bind her for long enough so that Alec could get her back to Sea Elephant. (137)

Johnny and young Caleb Mathews are few minutes late and join Karborer’s men after the boat leaves for Sea Elephant Bay.

Johnny doesn’t know what to do and how to respond to the death of Eugenie. He has stopped mourning long back as there won’t be any end to the sufferings that his people face. “So much had been taken from his people there was already too much to mourn, so that the grief for the surrogate mother he genuinely loved just felt like emptiness.” (138) He doesn’t like his people lamenting all the time as losers. White men have committed so many crimes on them, killed them, raped their women and stole everything from them. Instead of fighting against the suppression, for that matter, repeated crimes, his people mourned and accepted their ill fate.
Johnny’s character is modeled after all those young Aborigines burning for justice. Johnny is educated and can think like a white man. “He had the arrogance of a white man. Some of the ruthlessness, too.” (163) He has an idea to fight back. He knows enough of the white world to protect his idea from attack. He needs to plan, spend some time to put the plan into action, a plan which can shun away poverty, embarrassment and dishonour of his people in the hands of whites. Since his childhood he has been listening to the names of all those Bunurong elders and how they grieved for the loss of the country. Nobody is alive now, all of them are killed. He is frustrated that the customs and the way of Aboriginal life are lost.

The increasing impossibility of maintaining the law with so many elders gone, with young men and women crowded into mission houses and drunken slums, this clan and that clan all confused, no one to receive the new babies and cradle them in arms, to separate the hairs on their head, feeling the hair, deciding whether this baby is eagle or crow, finding its designated place, its destiny, its birthright… Babies born and no one knowing where they were from, what was right for them, how to determine their role in the great cycle of life they had inherited. (139)

He himself is not taught and brought up by his people, nobody to decide his role in the cycle of life. Diana Marshall observes how the elders teach the young natives, their tradition:

Young Aboriginal Australians learn sacred stories during initiation ceremonies and gatherings. Initiation ceremonies mark the passage of a child into adulthood. For girls, these ceremonies are usually quite simple. For boys,
these ceremonies may take several years to complete. They learn the traditions and sacred stories of the group. (Marshall, Diana. 11)

Even the elders at the stations and reserves have given up their responsibility as they belong to different Aboriginal tribes and groups, can’t think about a single tribe, the chain’s broken there. They’ve learnt from their elders but can’t pass it on to their next generation. The secret of the greatness of their culture will be lost with their death. He feels furious and irritated whenever he thought of what’s lost. And he’s enraged for

the greatest pain of all… was the insult that these supposedly superior beings could not see the neatness of their way of doing things, the fairness of it, the overpowering respect given to life and spirit, that these Christians, these devout servants of a spiritual life, could not witness the hand of God at work, could not contemplate an eighth day when God woke up rested and got it right, discovered fairness and put it in a black skin.’ (140)

Johnny doesn’t want to waste time contemplating on what happened, prepares himself to fight.

Alec wants to take back his family to Flinders Island, their real place of dwelling. But the white men still are in search of black and half-caste kids. He wants to write a letter to the Governor asking him to leave his people and place alone. Nobody can disturb them if they get the right of ownership in the form of a paper. He doesn’t like running away from one island to another whenever there’s news of police or missionary. Aunty Ida doubts whether her people will ever have right on their land.
Alec’s letter may not get them the island. Instead it’ll make the settlers understand the importance of the island and think of occupying it. Johnny mentions life in Barmah country on the Murray. It’s located in the thick jungle and far from the reach of any whites. The natives own it and never disturbed by any intrusion. People lead a harmonious life. Unlike the other islands and towns where the blacks are outcast, life on Barmah beams with Aboriginal ceremonies. Ida knows Johnny very well that he is a rebel at heart. She questions him what he is doing on Barmah, he is needed here on these islands.

En route to Barmah, after the funeral of Eugenie, Johnny visits his people at various mission houses. His cousin Young Caleb and Uncle George accompany him. They avoid Port Albert and many other coasts. Black people owning a boat itself is punishable as per white law. There’ll be watch out all the time for the blacks. Police are instructed to maintain law and order, in fact, white law. They are destined to live either in mission houses or at reserves. Pitiable thing is that there are dogs which are trained to attack black men. Ronald and Catherine Berndt describe the horrific details of the camps:

The authority of European men was largely based on the threat of force. Their ascendancy rested primarily on the maintenance of fear among Aborigines. Any manifestation or even hint of rebellion was met with instant physical punishment… Being continually on the watch for any cheeky of familiar behaviour on their part, more particularly of men or of older and unattractive women, the European men were ready to suspect it on occasions when it was not there and to apply the inevitable punitive measures for surprisingly trivial
causes… . For example, three young men were caught trying to make off with a few cattle. They were chained up at the homestead for several days and severely beaten to ‘teach them a lesson’… The suggestion of physical force in the background of everyday affairs became explicit on other occasions when it was quite unprovoked. There were several blind Aborigines at Birrundudu. In one incident, the overseer suddenly shot into the ground around the feet of one of them who was approaching the homestead, raising little bursts of dust in a semi-circle, and laughed to see him transfixed with fright… His rule was, he used to say, that he always went armed when there were Aborigines near, which was most of the time; and as far as we could see, he always did. By night, when he was in at the station, he kept his three dogs chained at his door to guard against Aborigines sneaking in to attack him; he had trained the dogs to dislike Aborigines and ‘go for them’ at his order.’ (Berndt, Ronald and Catherine Berndt. 124-125.)

Aboriginal destitute parents with many children are forced to live in the unhygienic camps, which are already over-populated. Johnny listens to the black people at destitute camps run by whites. They discuss with him, ways in which a bag of flour might be procured, the only acceptable currency being women. A man could work for a week and earn a cup of tea and a pair of pants with the knees all gone. Cut two ton of wood for a loaf of bread with the bottom all charred… they “were scorched with further shame while the people chanted hymns and prayers and those who prayed were fed bowls of soup and stale bread. Those who didn’t went without.
You could turn a Muslim into a Jew with that policy. The people were starving.” (161)

The land is full of kangaroos and the rivers are full of fish. But, everywhere signboards are displayed that shooting kangaroos and catching fish is punishable by death. The natives can’t read out from the signboards and they are punished for the above offences. Uncle George witnesses the camps in astonishment:

Crow men living with crow women and Ganai living with Bunurong. All these people crowded together, living together, praying together, begging together and eventually sleeping together against the (Black) law. But how could you blame them. They were hungry and the law had not protected them from the power of the amerjie (white man). (161)

The blacks are taken to mission houses. They have to go on their own because of starving or else they’ll be taken in neck chains, as if, they were animals. Deborah Rose speaks of the crimes on blacks in the name of discipline:

Beatings, rape, deprivation of food, hunting people away, constant verbal abuse and the occasional killing were ‘disciplinary measures’. (Rose, Deborah Bird. 175)

The mission houses have to be looked after by the whites. But they give up as soon as they find another place to plunder and another tribe to rob. The blacks wonder “what kind of God could love thy bloody neighbour one minute and cast down false idols in the next!” (162-163) Johnny informs Uncle George of the life on Barmah. Though it’s not George’s country, many of his people live on it. They’ve
moved to Barmah as the conditions are worse on the mainland. He reveals his plan to Uncle George of setting up a town or a camp for blacks on Barmah:

You see, Uncle, we gotta fight for this land now. We sit down here long enough they’ll decide they want it. We steal even one bullock every now an’ then, even one, that mob find out an’ they come out shooting’. We gotta do something’, Uncle, gotta find some way of keepin’ this land… If we just do it blackfells way we’ll lose it. In the dry season, they’ll come in ‘ere with their horses an’ when they see our huts they’ll chase us off… If we can’t do it their way, they’ll chase us off again and again. No matter how many times we move, set up camp. (163)

His people are shot for their faith in spirits and are mocked at even in the art. Their nakedness is barbarity for the Europeans, always treated them with their boots. The pain and humiliation of the blacks have delighted them. They are considered as a wicked race. In his essay *Australian Morality*, Prof. Irving King from University of Michigan gives a clear representation of the white mindset:

According to the earlier explorers and missionaries and the careless travelers of even recent years, the morality of the Australian aborigines was of a very low grade. Almost all such observers agreed in placing them in the very lowest stages of culture. They were described as bestial in habits, naked, lacking all sense of virtue; the men cruel to their children and wives. They were said to be addicted to infanticide and cannibalism, were cruel in their tastes, shiftless, lazy, stupid, deceitful, in fact were possessed of all conceivable evil qualities; they were deaf to the lessons of religion and
civilization, ready at theft, and had almost no regard for the value of human life. (King, Irving)

Johnny’s frustration and impatience can be felt by any native. Uncle George believes that faith in the land and belief in spirits of ancestors are the only ways to get freedom. The whites have no respect for the land, for that matter, any land. If some land interests them and fetches them more capital, they come and build fences and houses on it. Once they lose the interest, they leave it and go for another. “They’d leave the ground that was beginning to recognize them, beginning to show grudging respect for their spirit, just up and leave with never another thought for the ground they’d demanded should feed them, should shelter them. No respect. No love.” (165) With the horses and guns, they suppose that they can occupy any piece of land under the sun, and consider themselves as original inheritors of everything.

Bruce Pascoe says that Johnny’s rebellious thoughts of fighting back are a shock to the understanding of people like Uncle George. The passiveness with which they accepted their life to be decided by white man is questioned by youngsters like Johnny. They can’t digest the vindictive treatment of their elders, wish to take the responsibility, has to protect the land. His faithfulness for his people depends on his service to them. He isn’t planning something which is beyond his energies. He has learnt some skills at Eugenie’s school, knows how she’d run the school in a hostile community and unfriendly atmosphere.

People like Eugenie, who support Aboriginal cause and treat them as equals, are hard to find. In Barmah, Johnny doesn’t know anybody, who he can rely on except Kenna, a white man, works in the forest. He cuts fence posts and rails from
the forest. He is very compassionate with the blacks and treats them well. Johnny meets him and informs him of the camp they are going to build in the bush. He asks him to enquire about the title of the place- ownership of the land for his people. Kenna is ready to help Johnny and that he’ll enquire at the Lands Office in Echuca, about the piece of land on which they are building a camp. Kenna is instructed at the office that the place belongs to the Crown, King of England. The blacks are glad that they don’t need a title for the land and continue their work of building the camp with rejuvenated joy. Johnny knows that “a day would come when the King would discover that he had a desperate purpose for that very same bit of swamp even though he’d never seen it.” (170)

After witnessing the turmoil of his people at mission houses Johnny decides to make the blacks earn some money for the livelihood. He knows that poverty is the worst enemy. The camp, known as Barmah camp helps the blacks to increase their economy by breeding fish and selling them to the farmers; raising redgum trees for the wood, which fetches them decent amount of money; grazing herds of wild cattle for meat and milk. They also help Kenna in building the fences of farmers for which they are paid. With the money they earn, they buy tea, sugar and flour. Uncle George is proud of his nephew Johnny, who has realized the dream of a town for his people. He is happy to see so many of his people living together.

Australia is a land of wild forests which are full of wild cattle, which were not herded or domesticated for food. The first European settlers who faced severe starvation, planned to tame the wild cattle and make use of the land, which they considered empty, though they can see Aborigines using the land. They built
stockyards and started stock industries. With the help of Aborigines, the wild cattle have been driven to the yards, which are used for milk and meat. They gained monopoly on the industry that the blacks can’t eat meat for days and months. In one such incident when the Overlanders try to swim thousands of cattle across the river for the stockyard, the natives, Yorta Yorta tribesmen, have chased them in to the forest. The blacks then make merry by roasting a bullock in the mound oven. Stealing bullock is a crime as per the white law. For each bullock the whites lose £15. The whites consider the herd and the stolen cattle by Aborigines as their own property. And the reports of Barmah camp and blacks owning herds of cattle made them envious:

What was a blackfella doing with a herd of cattle, three hundred strong? They’d get that upstart Johnny Mullagh, too big for his boots that one. Get rid of all of them, too dangerous letting them build up their numbers in the forest like that… News was that the niggers were using their own branding irons. Acting as if the cattle were their property. We’ll show ‘em who’s boss! (172)

It’s the duty of cattlemen, also known as stockmen, to look after the cattle on a property owned by the European settlers. They graze the stock in the forest and drive them to the stations, are paid for their work by the owners. These are white men, belong to convict’s families. They don’t like the blacks who threaten their authority on the forest. They have been discussing the disturbing presence and activities of the blacks, back in the forest. They can ignore it as their condition is almost same as blacks in the eyes of settlers. But some of them are cruel and jealous, can’t assimilate blacks leading a better life.
Barmah’s become a paradise for the blacks. It has a livestock of two hundred cattle. They have a brand for the cattle, brand Y, after Yorta Yorta, their forest name. They are excited as well as joyous of their property. A girl, while collecting fish from the river, sees the white men coming towards the camp. She runs wildly to the camp and informs others. All of them look at Johnny. He’s thought of this day already, but not this early. They are not doing anything wrong there in the camp. But he has doubts because the white man never allowed the black to own anything. In the early days of settlement when the settlers started the stockyards of cattle, the cattle used to destroy the crops of the natives, which made the blacks starve. They killed three sheep to safeguard their crops, which infuriated the settlers.

The Constable, Foxy Ferguson approaches the camp with his deputy and seventeen policemen. Johnny decides to face them.

“Whose cattle are these, Mullagh?” Foxy Ferguson asked at last.

“Wild fella, boss,” Johnny answered, ashamed of the deference that came automatically to his voice.

“Wild?”

“Forest fella, all longa river, boss.”

“Look like overland cattle to me, Mullagh. I see the brand isn’t registered. That’s an offence in itself. Get your niggers to turn ‘em out, I’m taking possession of this mob for the Crown.” (176)
Johnny stands horrified unbelieving that the cattle will be taken away from the camp, can’t digest his dream being shattered. Moreover his pride is at stake making him powerless in front of his people.

The natives see his refusal and immediately prepare themselves for the war. They take up whatever weapon is available for them and are waiting for Johnny’s command. When one of the constables tries to draw the bush pole from its mortise, to release the cattle, Caleb, in rage, gets a rifle from the tack and shoots him in his chest. He “couldn’t think why he took up the gun, whether it was because of what those cattle represented to his people or the humiliation it would mean for his cousin (Johnny), but whichever the thought, he’d taken up the weapon…” (177) The sound of the gun disturb two hundred cattle and result in a stampede. Johnny can’t comprehend what’s happening around him, can’t see anything in the cloud of dust, can only hear gun shots while trying to escape from the hooves of the horses and the wide horns of the cattle. In no time the cattle are gone and also the police by the time the dust settle.

The dream has evaporated like a bubble. The mishap results in the death of Caleb and a small boy. Caleb’s head has been torn away and the boy’s been shot through his chest. Johnny “could hear the shocking, grieving wails mounting from several different directions, enough to let him know that the Barmah haven was no more, that the attempt at reclamation had been snuffed out like a poor man’s candle by the thumb and forefinger of God.” (178)

Uncle George takes Johnny to Port Albert. They are given shelter by the natives. They sense trouble with his presence on Port Albert. He waits for Chub
Kennedy’s boat to go to Deal Island to inform the news of Caleb’s death to Captain Caleb Mathews. He finds Alec on Dalrymple, goes to Deal Island with him and climbs the steep hill to the light house. He finds the Captain Caleb’s corpse in the pond. Coincidently, both the Caleb’s are dead. Johnny wants to continue the job of Captain Mathews of writing the log book. He finds no hope in anything now. Alec returns with Aunty Ida. She forces Johnny to come back to the mainland. She is a lady with strong will power, wants her family to stay together as all of them are scattered to different places, no unity, no ancestors and no food.

Alec wants to write letters to the Government to give them back their island. He seeks the help of Johnny. Johnny has no hope but he can’t say no to Alec after watching his enthusiasm and innocence. He knows that his people are living for survival. And he also knows that, “his (Alec) great grandchildren would be dead ten years before gubba men gave even a skerrick of that land back.” (188)

*Ocean* is the fifth novel written by Bruce Pascoe. It charts the personal histories of the first Australians. The wiping out of seal species and sealing industry; the abduction of Aboriginal women; the fate of half-castes; the beginning of stockyards and beef industry; and the crimes on native people are the significant themes discussed in the work.

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