The present study proposes to assess the nature and contribution of Australian Aboriginal women's autobiographies in English. It will attempt to describe and evaluate major trends of content and representation in them as well as their integration of the form of autobiography to their cultural-political situation and purposes. Around the periphery of this field, the study will attempt to place these autobiographies within the context of Australian Aboriginal literature.

Australian Aboriginal literature in English comprises a variety of works in all genres and styles. It also represents a variety of attitudes to the Aboriginal situation, urging us to approach it cautiously to avoid the common errors arising from over-generalisation. For example, in her article "One Aboriginal Woman's Identity: Walking in Both Worlds", Lillian Holt starts her discourse with a warning that provides an introduction to Aboriginal women's writing. She is strong in her denial of the assumption that one Aboriginal woman writer writes for all women:

No, I am not speaking on behalf of all Aboriginal people, nor all Aboriginal women. We are not an homogenous group. This needs to be said because often Aboriginal people are burdened by the expectation that any one of us can be a "spokesperson" for our whole race. Taken to its extreme, such an expectation means that if one Aborigine fouls up, the whole race gets the label. So I make this plain at the beginning: I speak
Holt's words introduce readers of Aboriginal literature to a world of debates, discussions, controversies, traumas and assertions, and most of all to differences, and to the need to avoid glossing over differences. Apart from all these, the above statement reminds us of facts in the history and lives of the Aboriginal people of Australia. Aborigines, as Holt says, were not a homogenous group. Before colonisation they comprised hundreds of tribes, spread all over Australia, with different languages and different cultures.

Colonised Australia, however, does present a very grim picture of Aboriginal people in general. They are in a minority in their own land and many Aboriginal tribes and most languages have, in fact, become extinct. Land, sacred to Aboriginals, has been lost to the colonisers. Only their Aboriginal consciousness keeps them united in this predicament in spite of their differences in language, culture, colour, region and religion. It is also this unity that makes them fight, at times with a martial spirit, against discrimination and motivates them to assert their Aboriginal identity.

In his book *Living Black*, Kevin Gilbert says, "White people’s devaluation of Aboriginal life, religion, culture and personality caused the thinking about self and race that I believe is the key to modern Aboriginal thinking" (Gilbert 1978: 2). Similarly, Adam Shoemaker says that a fundamental relationship exists between the sociopolitical milieu and Aboriginal creative writing in English. He reasserts his view by further saying that black creative writing cannot be studied in isolation and that it must be examined and evaluated in terms of the social environment which surrounds it and the historical events which precede it (Shoemaker 6). Both Gilbert and Shoemaker construct a context to
meet, understand and interpret Aboriginal literature. These statements implicitly suggest the rise of Aboriginal literature from Aboriginal suffering and Aboriginal activism. Aboriginal literature springs from such depths of experience that without an introduction to history and culture it becomes impossible to interpret it.

At the same time, as will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Aboriginal literature also adopts strategies of deliberate silence over certain issues, almost as a means of holding power in hand. It is interesting to look at various arguments about Aboriginal literature being the outcome of Aboriginal suffering. For instance, in a cautionary tone Stephen Muecke says, in "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis", that the "repressive hypothesis"

is one such framing which I have rejected because it is burdened by a Romantic legacy of the expressive self. It would say that Aboriginal literature is the psychological outcome of social oppression....

Authenticity, problematic as it is for many reasons, is a necessary part of the formula which produces the repressive hypothesis. (Muecke 405)

But it is also important to see the variety of opinion Aboriginal creative writers themselves have held about their writings, for they have held and expressed diverse views about themes, intention and inspiration of their works. For instance, Melissa Lucashenko does not see Aboriginal writing as a distinct body of work, but more as an issue of content: "Aboriginal writing to me at the moment is a protest literature I suppose and it's centred around land and social justice and legal stuff" (Ruffo 212).
Although she says that Aboriginal literature is a protest literature, Lucashenko does not rule out the possibility of other themes. Similarly, other motives also co-exist in the shaping of contemporary Aboriginal literature, as we understand from Mudrooroo's observation that over the last decades conditions have improved and with this improvement Indigenous literature has begun to turn towards cultural and self introspection. Guilt and blame are not enough for the continuation of a literature and so histories from an Indigenous viewpoint are being constructed; life stories (often in collaboration), novels, short stories and poems are devoting their words to the Indigenous existential being in what is now said to be a 'multicultural' Australia and what in a few years time will be a republican Australia. (Mudrooroo 1997: 3)

Hence, we may say that an Aboriginal literary discourse emerges from the Aboriginal suffering as the new history (in the short or the longer term) of colonised people expressing themselves in the language of the coloniser. However, Aboriginal writers do adopt strategies of shaping this history by selective disclosure. Yet, although most Aboriginal literature deals with the colonial predicament, it is not confined to the coloniser-colonised discourse alone. For example, in her personal interview with Adam Shoemaker, Mona Tur, who writes under her tribal name of Ngitji Ngitji, says, "I'm not one for political things. I get most of my poetry through nature" (Shoemaker 221). But she admits that she is aware of the fact that politics and life go together and that she responds in the form of poetry to atrocities on Aborigines. However, we shall refrain from discussion of such examples, for in the present thesis we have chosen to focus on
the theme of colonised vs. coloniser as it is expressed in Aboriginal women’s autobiographies.

Aboriginal literature functions as an introduction to the people's history and present predicament, and as an eye-opener to non-Aboriginal people. Refusing to fit automatically into any western intellectual discourse, Aboriginal literature emerges as a decolonised/decolonising literature in its spirit, content, purpose and functions. This literature functions not only as literature, but also as a historical, social, political and economic discourse, and it also inevitably bends the English language. Anne Brewster rightly observes that by reclaiming and rewriting history, Aboriginal women intend educating both black and white Australians. She goes on to say,

For white Australians this education has the purpose of revealing the violence of colonisation which has been suppressed in official histories. For Aboriginal people the narration of the past has the additional role of producing a sense of unity and group solidarity. The awareness of a common past can thus bind together people who have been dispossessed.

(Brewster 1996: 53-54)

Aboriginal literature emerges as a multidimensional and interdisciplinary discourse as it explores and recreates the Aboriginal situation of both today and the past. At times, it seems to consider the validity of the linear classification of Aboriginal life into past, present and future phases of time. In her article "Chasing an Identity: An Aboriginal Perspective on Aboriginally", Nellie Green says: "It is the Aboriginal way of thinking to respect that the past is as much of the future as it is the past" (Reed-Gilbert 52). Although their original concepts of time are different from the western concept of
linear time, Aboriginal writers do divide time in order to address three important sequential phases in Aboriginal history: the first phase is the Aboriginal past before the advent of whites in Australia; the present, extended over the past two hundred years and standing for the colonial situation; the future as the most powerful phase of Aboriginal life, for Aboriginal writers envisage a future which will be constructed by subverting the present and, wherever possible, reverting to the lost Aboriginal glory. Especially, Aboriginal spirituality raises the question of whether or not, or even how, to return to the "traditional" Aboriginal lifestyle and a pre-colonial or non-colonial state. Aboriginal writers look in the direction of Aboriginal spirituality for a redressal of their suffering. For the crucial practical question of turning towards a co-existence with the mainstream society on the basis of liberty and equality fails to address the inner being. Again, to quote Anne Brewster, what she says about Sally Morgan's *My Place* applies just as well to spirituality in contemporary Aboriginal people: "We can see that this spirituality is hybrid and draws not only on visions of the past and traditional Aboriginal culture, such as the Aboriginal music from the swamp, but also on Christian imagery" (Brewster 1996: 27).

Mudrooroo compares Australia to a Grandfather Tree in whose shade many smaller trees and shrubs grow. This metaphor aptly identifies the ideal. For he hopes for a new, just and peaceful nation that still values Indigenous ideals, of caring and sharing, of putting old wrongs aside and concentrating on the future. He demands that the majority group should negotiate with indigenous people as equals rather than imposing solutions on them. Regarding the question of spirituality, and the Aboriginal hope for their future, he says:
It is rarely acknowledged that Indigenous people were not the passive victims of an overwhelming advanced civilisation in the face of which their beliefs and customs simply crumbled away. This is a racist belief which needs challenging, for there is ample evidence that resistance to cultural domination from Indigenous people was intense and that in response to the missionary impact they consciously modified their beliefs. Many of them did not become Christians, but succeeded in accommodating their beliefs to the new Christianity. (Mudrooroo 2001: 45-46)

Thus, by deconstructing the history of Aboriginal spirituality in its confrontation with colonial experience, Mudrooroo suggests, we can make room for an ideal future in which spirituality will play a significant part.

In his attempt to reconstruct history and visualise the future, he comes across to us as a committed Aboriginal historian as well. It is not out of place to quote here his classification of Aboriginal past in order to contextualise the Aboriginal situation as the Aboriginal people may see it. This classification of Aboriginal history is as follows (Mudrooroo 1997: 5):

1. The Time of the Dreaming: From the Beginning to 1788; Prehistory. Before the coming of the Europeans.
2. The Time of the Invasion(s): A convenient cutoff date for this period might be 1901 and the coming into being of the federation of the Australian colonies.
4. The Colonial Period: Paternalism, then Assimilation: A convenient cutoff date is 1967 when a referendum was conducted which made Indigenous people Australian citizens.


6. The Period of Reconciliation: Sharing cultures.

Australian Literature, and even the social sciences, seem to participate at times in the attempt to prove Australia a "terra nullius". Early Australian Literature which describes Australia as a new and uninhabited land is an example of this. Even when the Aboriginal presence was acknowledged, it was either exorcised or condemned. The portrayal of indigenous people ranged from omission to overstatement. For instance, the concept terra nullius, the theory that Australia was uninhabited and unowned before Captain Cook stepped on its coast in 1770 (Horton 1994). A part of white Australia considers only this two hundred year old history. Yet many loopholes, pitfalls, absences and degradations arise from or are condoned by this view. But for Aboriginal people, who had to prove in the court of law that Australia was "terra Australis", inhabited if not owned by Aboriginal people before the advent of whites, the past is the glorious Aboriginal past. This glorious past, according to Aboriginal writers, relates to a life of rich culture and heritage, stemming from close association with land, nature and liberty. Such literature as existed during this period was, of course, purely oral. Several factors played a crucial role, thereafter, in partial elimination and distortion of Aboriginal oral literature. Some of these factors will be discussed in the present chapter. For orality
becomes a significant aspect of our subject alongside awareness of the past, as it is virtually impossible to dissociate the sense of a "speaking self from autobiography.

Distortion of oral literature during the process of colonisation did not, fortunately, lead to its complete elimination. As Stephen Muecke observes in his article "Aboriginal Literature-Oral",

Aboriginal "Oral Literature" is alive and well...its response to colonialism was not one of acquiescence, but one of fighting back with words, making stories in order to come to terms with the structure of colonial economy and law and the place Aborigines were supposed to occupy in it; of articulating suffering; of satirising the various figures of the colonial administration and the pastoral industry. (Hergenhan 28)

This oral literature, which has thousands of years of history, lives today in the form of reconstructions in narratives of myths, tales, legends, and songs. However, much of it now exists in English and, operates as influence on written literature, again in English. It is not just Aboriginal spirituality that fought against the coloniser's religion; oral literature fought against it too. While Aboriginal spirituality accommodated some aspects of Christianity without losing itself, oral literature fought against colonisation with words, even as it adopted, eventually, the coloniser's language and literary forms.

A significant proportion of contemporary Aboriginal literature takes its cue from the Aboriginal oral tradition. It is thus influenced by both colonial and native traditions and forms. For instance, anthologies of Aboriginal writings such as From Our Hearts: an anthology of new Aboriginal writing from southwest Western Australia (Kapetas 2000) and The Strength of Us As Women: Black Women Speak (Reed-Gilbert 2000) prove how
firmly Aboriginal literature is rooted in its oral tradition and how strongly the Aboriginal writers have continued the oral tradition, although the form and the language have, of course, been modified. When the qualities of oral literature present in contemporary Aboriginal literature are mentioned, immediately women writers like Lisa Bellear, Anita Heiss, and Ruby Langford Ginibi come to our mind, apart from many other prominent or less well-known writers. For instance, let us look at the poem "Long Ago" by Rosemary Plummer:

Long ago
there lived
an old woman
with a kangaroo bone
through her nose
She was wise
foremost of others
in various ceremonies
The people
of the tribe
called her Mukku Jangu.... (Reed-Gilbert 24):

The poem goes on to describe the "old" woman's lifestyle and capabilities. The storytelling mode, simple diction, spontaneity of feeling and the theme of the poem all echo the oral tradition and the poet's commitment to it. The poem not only depicts an Aboriginal situation but also embodies an Aboriginal mode of articulation, except that it is written in the English language. In her book "Literary Formations: Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism" (1995), Anne Brewster points out the essential qualities of oral literature, such as direct address, telling as opposed to scripting, and the strong or manifest, assumed presence of a listener. She also finds other works such as Evelyn Crawford's "Over My Tracks: a remarkable life" (1993) akin to the Aboriginal oral tradition.
This tradition seems to be quite strong particularly in women's autobiographies, for like the tradition of storytelling, to which they are closely related, autobiographies also aim to record events, experiences and feelings for "direct"-sounding transmission, and to help in constructing histories; the spontaneity, the intimacy and identity with the experience mark them strongly with properties associated with oral narration. For instance, Joan Newman argues that in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, “A primary concern for the author was to achieve a successful integration of the oral aspects of the narrative and her own written testimony. This unity is particularly desirable in a narrative whose thematic concern is a unity between the narrator and her Aboriginal heritage” (Newman 1988: 380). She goes on to argue that the narrative use of the bird-call, for instance, operates powerfully at both a literate and an oral level since the origins of the sign of impending death are oral and folkloric, even though the form may be written. Mudrooroo also puts this idea across clearly when he says,

Indigenous literature has been and often still is an oral discourse with different devices, such as absence of closure, narrative dominance, epic style, collective authorship and recitation, generic fluidity, repetition, non-verbal and semi-verbal markers and other devices which are often edited out when the literary text becomes an artifact to be read rather than heard.

(Mudrooroo 1997: 57)

The Aboriginal "present", if the term is considered in a larger sense as the period after colonisation, is the gloomiest part of Aboriginal life. It is full of discrimination, ill-treatment and degradation, loss of land, people, culture, language and religion, and natural surroundings. While Aboriginals speak with nostalgia about their pre-colonial
past, they speak with fear, hatred and protest concerning the colonial and post-colonial present. Memories of trauma and turmoil, massacre and violence at both physical and deeper levels dominate this period. This present has accommodated both the current reality and the stories of earlier alienation, elimination and even extermination of Aboriginal people. This present has, significantly, also witnessed the tumultuous struggle of Aboriginal people for survival and preservation of identity in white-dominated and racially discriminating society. In this struggle, the works of the authors we have chosen to study play an important role, even as they highlight a neglected aspect of this subject, the women's representation of their own predicament.

For this appreciation we need to recount, at least briefly, the history of colonisation. James Cook (1728-79) reached eastern Australia from New Zealand aboard the Endeavour on 19 April 1770, first sighting land at Point Hills in what is today's Victoria. His name became a short-hand term for theft in Aboriginal tales later on. He had his first face to face contact with Aborigines on 29 April at Botany Bay. The very first meeting resulted in Cook's firing at them to threaten them, peppering with light shot the legs of one man who then picked up a shield to defend himself (Horton 1994). The two sides of this story in a way anticipate the subsequent centuries of colonisation and resistance. Henry Reynolds' *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Re-Examination of the Tasmanian Wars* (1995) provides a detailed record of the European colonisation and native resistance, for instance the Black War (1824-1831), in Tasmania. In his Introduction to the book, Henry Reynolds notes:

Identifying themselves as Aborigines, community members provided the springboard for the modern Aboriginal rights movement which emerged in
the 1970s - a development which surprised many Tasmanians of European descent, who had been taught to believe that the island Aborigines had disappeared a hundred years earlier. (Reynolds 5)

The notion that Tasmanian Aborigines had been totally wiped out was, thus, given the lie.

The invaders/settlers also made friendship agreements with Aboriginal leaders at other times and in other places. There were other factors leading to the fresh burden placed on the Aboriginal people. Convicts were deported to Australia from overpopulated eighteenth-century England. Prison houses were constructed in Australia. The dwellers of these also gradually turned into settlers, in addition to other settler-colonisers. In the name of friendship agreements too, in fact, land was "legally" snatched away from Aboriginal people. Indigenous culture, language, religion and freedom were also severely threatened with elimination by these forces, as by newer institutions such as reserves, missions, dormitories and the policy of separating children from parents. Thereafter, naturally, the Aboriginal people remained alienated outsiders in their own land.

A number of Aboriginal people, including children, were massacred during early colonisation. Women were sexually exploited, raped, abused, tormented and subjugated. Flour and water holes were poisoned, Aborigines were buried alive, and were tied to trees for shooting practice. Blankets used by people suffering from deadly diseases in London were distributed among the Aboriginal people. Terrible venereal diseases were transported into their midst by whites. Contacts between whites and Aboriginals led to complex situations of miscegenation. In the name of reform and education, mixed-blood children were, against all natural laws, removed from their Aboriginal parents. The Australian government believed that since mixed-blood children had white blood in them,
they could be reformed and made into "human beings", unlike full-bloods, who were, they believed, beyond reformation. For the same "reason", Aboriginal parents were not considered fit to look after them. This entire "stolen generation" grew up in missionary dormitories to become domestics in white households or to suffer worse fate. Many full-blood Aboriginal people were already serving whites in virtual slavery. Mixed blood children eventually came to be called half-castes, quarter-castes and coloured people, accepted neither by Aboriginals nor by white people, thus becoming double-outcastes.

By means of such destructive mechanisms, the Aboriginal population in Queensland, for instance, had reduced from an estimated 120,000 in the 1820s to less than 20,000 by the 1920s. This reveals that Aboriginal society was being systematically and ruthlessly dismantled (Smith, L.R. 122). Raymond Evans unveils the fact that this aspect of Australian history continued even after such practices were legally forbidden:

Although children can no longer forcibly be taken from black parents by police protectors and missionaries under the Aborigines Protection Act, institutional control over black lives, police violence against blacks, poverty, malnutrition, disease, worsening alcoholism, educational and occupational discrimination, substandard housing and persistently virulent strains of white racism remain constant features in the daily lives of Queensland Aborigines. (Evans 19)

The twentieth century, thus, not only witnessed some of the landmarks in the history of white colonisation but also in the Aboriginal movement of protest and self-assertion. The Aborigines Act of 1905 had made the removal of Aboriginal children legally acceptable. These "wards of the state" had no rights under white law and any resistance to this
absence of status was put down firmly, even vehemently, by the white government. However, the subsequent century also witnessed the assertion of Aboriginal identity and self-determination. Aboriginal people began to force their way into official Australian history and mainstream life as a people with definite aims and objectives. It was, simultaneously, the time of the rise of a modern Aboriginal literature, distinct from mere collections of traditional myths, and with a certain new consciousness of Aboriginality and approaches to consideration of Aboriginal identity. Naturally, this movement took many long decades to consolidate, to be noticed, and to achieve noteworthy results.

The 1960s, especially, saw the emergence, resurgence and strengthening of Aboriginal political movements. It was the result of action groups lobbying for recognition of Aboriginal rights. Aboriginal literature reflected this new mood as well. The white government's calls for assimilation and reconciliation were interpreted by some as a policy of division, of seeking to alienate individual Aborigines from their communities, of pushing them into white society, only to be dislocated, dispossessed and discriminated against. The Civil Rights Movement led to the 1967 referendum that finally allowed Aborigines to vote. Only in 1967 were Aborigines "granted" citizenship status in their own land. The Aboriginal Arts Board was established to enable aspiring Aboriginal artists to publish their work. The Mabo case was a remarkable milestone in Aboriginal history, for it attempted to restore Aboriginal land rights in Australia. Mabo was the Chair of the Torres Strait Border Action Committee in Townsville and had always been active in defending the Torres Strait Islanders' rights. In 1982, he and four other Torres Strait Islanders began legal proceedings to establish traditional ownership of their land in the Queensland Supreme Court and the High Court of Australia. In 1992,
four months after Mabo's death due to cancer, judgement was given in favour of Aboriginal land rights. This judgement led to the Native Title Legislation and to the establishment of the Native Title Tribunal for hearing Aboriginal claims to land (Lippman 1994).

It is in these historical circumstances and from this resulting situation that Aboriginal literature emanated in Australia. Thousands of years of tradition of storytelling, corroborees and transmission of myths, legends and songs, all provided an impetus to this contemporary literature. Contemporary Aboriginal literature, therefore, occupies a very significant place in Aboriginal history and movement because it is written in the language of the colonisers, adopting new genres and with new purpose and function, in contrast to the literature of the traditional Aboriginal societies, and because elements of the indigenous tradition were preserved and exploited in it. It is, therefore, necessary to appreciate the Aboriginal oral tradition, because that is where Aboriginal literature has its roots and because it provides a background to contemporary Aboriginal literature. As Jackie Huggins rightly observes,

Aboriginal studies is now concerned with the transformation of an "oral literature" into a written literature, without necessarily destroying the original form in the process. The written mode of expression releases material that was previously to a large extent encapsulated in a local or regional setting, and makes it available for more general distribution and reinterpretation. (Huggins 1998: 40)

This understanding of the presence of oral literature in the background is important for us here, as oral narration and autobiography are essentially related. To
begin with, the Aboriginal oral literary tradition dates back thousands of years. As it was
an oral tradition and secrecy was maintained about the sacred myths, most of it became
increasingly inaccessible and gradually disappeared. In recent times some efforts have
been made to collect and publish this literature. But since oral narrative became written
and Aboriginal languages gave way to English, some inevitable changes may have taken
place. Although for the non-Aboriginal reader it may be "merely" Aboriginal oral
literature, for Aborigines it is spiritual and totemic as well as historic. It is not mere
literature, but, more crucially, culture and history being passed on to future generations.
Traditional Aboriginal culture, in fact, does not separate literature from cultural
transmission.

Not just their literary tradition but also their languages have either already
perished or are perishing. The oral narratives have suffered considerable modifications
and loss. Because of such factors, it is very difficult to access Aboriginal literature,
except when it is rendered in English. Inevitably, evaluation of this literature has to be on
the basis of an understanding of this constraint. So, such Aboriginal oral literature as is
available in English becomes the basis for any study of Aboriginal literature for non-
Aboriginals. The conclusions we reach from the study of Aboriginal oral literature in
English would definitely have been hampered by these factors. On the other hand, it
cannot be ignored that white Australians have made a significant contribution to the
effort to make Aboriginal oral literature available. However sympathetic they may be
their role or presence is bound to have its own mediating effect. For instance, Aborigines
may feel consciously or unconsciously constrained to narrate only a particular part of
their literature. This may lead to representation of selective memory or other content. On
the other hand, it is not impossible that whites themselves may want Aborigines to narrate specific aspects and dimensions and not others or all. All these factors affect our approach to Aboriginal literature, and they must also circumscribe our conclusions from research in this domain.

While we examine the interpretation of the white editor, we may also recall the politics involved in the translation of an oral tale in native languages into written form in English, especially when the coloniser is involved in the translation. Stephen Muecke gives an example of an oral tale transcribed by K. Langloh Parker which goes like this: "Mullian the eaglehawk built himself a home high in a yaraan or white gum-tree. There he lived apart from his tribe, with Moodai the opossum his wife..." (1953). Muecke says that this can be contrasted with the work of an Aboriginal narrator Paddy Roe whose English has been transcribed precisely, with pauses indicated by line division:

Well this fella used to look after the trough he had-
   oh he had childrens too-
he had childrens-
he had about five or six children-
and a old lady-
mother for the children-
old man.... (Hergenhan 1988: 32-33)

This example tries to prove how transcription in this instance displaces translation as a strategy for rewriting and the authorship and identity of the Aboriginal narrator are retained thus concentrating more on the linguistic techniques. It also hints at the distortions that are possible in translation.

In this connection, it is relevant to cite some critics who indeed suggest or maintain that such literature of the past has no resemblance to the current Aboriginal situation. Some critics have also questioned the influence of Aboriginal oral literature on
contemporary Aboriginal literature. For instance, Mudrooroo quotes Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt (The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia 1989) who state that the oral literature of the past has little relevance for contemporary Indigenous writers and that the land cannot speak through their work (Mudrooroo 1997: 23). Aboriginal autobiography, which closely follows the story telling tradition, also comes in for this criticism. For instance, in his consideration of the "Repressive Hypothesis" Stephen Muecke also says that, with its focus on individual history, autobiography is very far removed from traditional Aboriginal genres; and, having adopted modern western language and genres, they cannot expect to draw on traditional oral literature. This criticism surely seems to have a point at least in theory. But, in contrast, a glance at the bulk of indigenous writings over the last few decades reveals a major, continuing prevalence of interest in the tribal past. This prevalence suggests the importance and the relevance of the past to the current situation of the Aboriginal people. Whatever such criticism may claim, the presence of tradition and orality cannot be ignored.

Let us now look at some oral narratives by way of example. We shall identify some of the crucial issues that such oral narratives manifest. Most available tales embody a kind of warning as to how, if one does not abide by the rules and regulations of the tribe, one will be punished. This aspect provides a clue to one chief purpose of traditional Aboriginal literature. This literature, being part and parcel of Aboriginal life, teaches Aboriginal people how to conduct themselves as members of the tribe. One can consider the effect of such acts of cultural transmission in oral narrative form on the members of a tribe. Similarly transmitted were important cultural values such as respect for nature,
kindness to animals, sharing with other living beings and one's roles in a tribe. Aboriginal people believed that their estate had been given to them at the very beginning of time, when the ancestors created the landscape and established the laws and customs which governed family and interfamily relationships (Nyoongah 1994: ix). Aboriginal oral literature seems to embody these customs and laws and pass them on to the future generations as other belongings that are passed on by tradition. Thus, it becomes a record of history, a warning for the future, as well as a set of rules for behaviour in the present.

In his *Introduction to Aboriginal Mythology*, which is sub-titled as *An A-Z spanning the history of the Australian Aboriginal people from the earliest legends to the present day* (1994), Mudrooroo Nyoongah (Mudrooroo Narogin) traces how Aboriginal oral literature is land-centred and reflects that interconnectedness with all of existence, that reciprocity between all, which should not be lost:

Kinship was and is the tie which binds the communities, not only to each other, but to the stars above and the earth below and the plants, the animals, the very rocks and landscape.... The Dreaming is a continuous process of creation which began in the long ago period called the ‘Dreamtime’.... (Nyoongah 1994: vii)

This reasserts how the essence of Aboriginal oral literature is relevant even in contemporary times. Saying that the universe is a bio-mass, Mudrooroo Nyoongah continues, "we must tend it, for we are the caretakers, and we are not lost souls, but parts of a whole in which everything is related. So we should not pillage and destroy, but co-operate and tolerate, nurture and care for the whole universe with its myriads of living and breathing things" (Nyoongah 1994: xi). No doubt the emphasis is on co-operation,
preservation and co-existence. But Aboriginal life was/is not free from conflict. While oral literature depicts the conflict between human beings and nature, contemporary Aboriginal literature represents the conflict between the coloniser and the colonised. Although nature has not played havoc as the colonisers have with Aboriginal life, the conflict that comes through the oral literature functions as a caution to the future generations from the experienced ancestors in a society where age and experience are highly respected and valued. Thus, oral literature sets up a background for the contemporary Aboriginal literature in English. Therefore, our emphasis here is not on establishing a comparison or a contrast between oral literature and contemporary literature, but only on showing how a connecting thread runs through both, although their context, medium, language and situation are different.

Aboriginal oral literature celebrates creation and sings of the harmony between nature and humanity. But it also depicts the tussle between nature and the human being: man trying to subjugate nature and nature trying to subdue or surpass human power. (The tales discussed below, unless otherwise mentioned, are taken from Wise Women of the Dreamtime: Aboriginal Tales of the Ancestral Powers, collected by K. Langloh Parker and edited with commentary by Johanna Lambert, 1993.) For instance, the tale "Wahwee and Nerida: The Water Monster and the Water Lily" is basically a love story, but it also explores and exposes Aboriginal beliefs and lifestyle. It portrays a struggle between selfish humans and powerful nature. It tries to establish how possessive and selfish nature also can be, and how, ultimately, human beings are defeated in conflict with nature and must become part of it. It also reiterates the values that Aboriginal women impart to their children, the "nonpossessive and nonacquisitive" values that characterise Aboriginal
tradition. Aboriginal children are culturally conditioned from an early age on the principle of sharing. Many available Aboriginal tales establish such an idea or interpretation of tradition.

While many stories depict the conflict between nature and human beings, there are also stories which specifically present women who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their community. Whether the tales come from the belief that women can sacrifice themselves for the sake of the community or from the expectation that they should do so is debatable. Since oral literature functions as a record of the past as well as a code of norms, probably these tales are examples as well as instruction. Although Aboriginal culture and literature proclaim that man and woman are equal, perhaps because of white mediation or intrusion, published Aboriginal tales depict man as warrior and protector and the wiser of the two. And woman tends to be represented as the witch to whom man falls prey. Woman or the body of a young and beautiful woman is compared to a spider in the tale "The Spider". Here an old woman lures men in the form of a young and beautiful woman and kills them. She ultimately turns into a spider after death. Whether philosophical or abstract concepts like youth and beauty, ultimately leading to old age and "ugliness" and bringing about death, are involved in such representations or not, the stereotypical image of woman as an alluring temptress is definitely reinforced here. In the context of the traditional Aboriginal respect for old women and their role in spiritual activities, it is interesting that in this story the old woman disguises herself as a young woman to lure men, as is the depiction of a temptress or a witch.

Johanna Lambert, the editor of Wise Women of the Dreamtime, provides a detailed interpretation of each story that is included in this book. She examines the stories
taking parallel examples from different contexts, including Hinduism. According to her, "The Spider" contains four levels of understanding, biological, social, psychological and spiritual. Murgah Muggui spins a fantasy of feminine entrancement tempting the victim to discard his marital responsibilities which leads to his unfortunate end. The eight legs of the spider represent the infinite possibilities of feminine or earthly power for change, as well as the four directions and four seasons; "The Spider" reminds us that female spiders of many species devour the male during sexual intercourse. The old woman, apart form representing decay and inevitable death, also reminds us of the role of women in the initiation of men into deep mysteries of death.

As Johanna Lambert says, the old woman represents the mysteries of death, and shows how temptation and denial of duty may lead to death. Since the tales served as instruction, it was an education as well as a code of conduct for Aboriginal men to be strongwilled in order to escape dangers of temptation and to be loyal to one's family and community. The example of a woman, who killed her sexual mates, turning into a spider after death may also have been intended to teach Aboriginal people, especially children, some understanding of nature and behavioural details about various animals and birds. Apart from this, the concept of death and rebirth reminds an Indian reader of the Hindu conception of rebirth on the basis of karma, that is to say rebirth depending on the sins of a person in the previous birth. It not only warns men of the dangers but also instructs women how not to be "sexually devouring". This story reminds us, in contrast, of Jackie Huggins' argument in *Sister Girl* (1998) that what Aboriginal women want is the right to say no to white men, unlike white feminists who demand the right to say yes. Here is a
woman who attracts men into her web of temptation, whereas the contemporary situation presents Aboriginal women on whom are imposed sexual atrocities by white men.

While we are on the subject of stereotypical images, we may also note that some legends do reinforce positive concepts of womanhood and motherhood. While some of the tales stand witness to the reassertion of the concept of womanhood as caring, protecting and enduring, there are also instances of reinforcing the concept of motherhood in tales like "The Bunbundoolooeys". This tale is about a pigeon that forgets her son and goes in search of food. When she comes back exhausted after a long time and looks for her long lost son, not only does he not recognise her, but he even hurls a stone at her. She dies and her son proceeds with his own life. This story is a clear indication of the responsibilities of a mother, and how a woman may be rejected and punished if she does not fulfill her duties. Mother as a rejuvenating figure is, on the other hand, depicted in stories like "Dinewan the Man Changes into Dinewan the Emu". Apart from voicing society's expectations of a mother, these stories also pronounce the punishment for not living up to them. In a society in which a child is taken care of by the whole community and where the kinship structure provides security for a child, it is interesting to note how motherhood is still considered very responsible. For instance, Ellis and Barwick observe that in traditional Aboriginal society, a woman's success rested specifically on her experience as a mother and full ritual status was available only after the birth of the second child (Brock 1989). This is relevant in the colonised situation of Aboriginal women, who were deprived of motherhood and whose childhood was spent in missionary dormitories and white households as domestics. In the light of the fact that
many contemporary Aboriginal texts choose the stolen generation as their subject, this story becomes particularly relevant.

Another striking feature of these tales is the recurrent reference to cannibalism. Against the background of the white assumption that Aboriginal people were cannibals, Aboriginal oral literature's reference to cannibalism becomes significant. It is not of the white assumption alone that we become aware of, but also the Aboriginal assumption of white cannibalism. The tale "The Rain Bird" has Boogoo-doo-ga-da, an old woman with her four hundred dingo dogs, as the protagonist. She is a cannibal who lures Aboriginals with the hope of finding food and then, with the help of her dogs she kills and eats them. One particular sentence raises questions about the context of the story: "she would be sure to meet some black fellows". Does it hint that she is not a black? Is this an oblique reference to white cannibalism? Or can it be that the image of a witch taken from the Aboriginal tales is given a white touch after white invasion? Can it also be a reference to the British queen with her followers, who tempted Aboriginals with promises of food and destroyed them? The above questions become more pertinent because these tales were collected and transcribed by white scholars and editors. On the other hand, this story reminds us of "White Lady", who was a famous Koori shaman of the nineteenth century, and whose power was said to emanate from a long red ochre painted staff. On one occasion she is supposed to have made a shamanistic journey to the moon and returned with the tail of what she called a "lunar kangaroo" (Nyoongah 1994: 179-80).

In her interpretation of "The Rain Bird", Johanna Lambert points out that this theme of cannibalism suggests symbolic understanding and utilisation of this practice. The symbolic death and re-birth transform dangerous and antisocial qualities, and the
corrupt excesses of Boogoo-doo-ga-da give birth to their opposite, a force of purification that brings cleansing rains. We are reminded of the story "The Spider" for its image of an old woman who lives alone, away from the tribe. While the woman in "The Spider" carries weapons which are forbidden for Aboriginal women, the woman in "The Rain Bird" has a pack of hounds with her which help her in killing people. It is also interesting that the woman in this story turns into a rain bird which predicts rain and which is welcomed and chased away so that it will cry as a sign of rain. It reminds one of the Phoenix which rises out of its own ashes but with a different significance.

Thus, these two stories with strong women protagonists compel the reader to compare them. In a society which perceives spirituality in women and recognises old women as wise on account of their age and experience, the portrayal of women who live on their own as witches, whether they have abandoned the tribe or the tribe has excommunicated them, is interesting. Another striking issue here is man and woman becoming the binaries and man becoming the victim of woman. Aboriginal women were not confined to "four walls" like western women; though they did not venture into the deep forests like men, they did go to gather food with digging sticks and dilly bags. But, surprisingly, the women portrayed in these two stories do not seem to target Aboriginal women. Food and sex being the two temptations in these stories, probably these two stories hint at the dangers hidden in the journey towards two basic necessities of life. For instance, temptation for water is the subject of the story "The Water Monster and the Water Lily". Another crucial issue in these two stories is cannibalism: whether we take the killing of men by women literally or metaphorically, it does bring in the subjects of death and food.
Cannibalism indeed is an important issue in Aboriginal oral literature. For instance, "Eagle-hawk and the Woodpeckers" (Reed 1998: 64-67) has one man and three women for characters, and all of them are cannibals. The story "The Cat Killer" (Reed 1998: 100-103) has Kinie-ger, which has the body and limbs of a man and the head of a cat. He is a voracious eater although no one would have held that against him, for both man and animals must live on flesh as well as vegetable food, says the story. In his introduction to *Aboriginal Stories of Australia* A.W. Reed says that the book may be regarded as a typical sampling of the beliefs of Aboriginals in every part of Australia, which hints that these stories represent the common belief in cannibalism of Aboriginal people across Australia.

As some of the Aboriginal tales themselves raise the issue of cannibalism, white anthropologists and historians also have given different versions of and opinions about instances of cannibalism among Aborigines. Ronaldt and Catherine H. Berndt present the opinions of some of the white anthropologists about cannibalism among Aboriginal people, one of the most debated issues in this field of study. They say, "The Australian Aborigines are not, generally speaking, cannibals who kill other human beings for the specific purpose of eating them. Nevertheless, if the available accounts are to be relied on, burial cannibalism in one form or another is (or was) fairly common" (Berndt and Berndt 1992: 467).

Let us also look at some of the other important anthropological and historical studies of cannibalism to which the Berndts refer in their book *The World of the First Australians*. The Berndts say that the Australian Aborigines are not, generally speaking, cannibals who kill people for specific purpose of eating them. They go on to say that
burial cannibalism in one form or another was fairly common among Aboriginal people and they bring in the versions of different scholars who have made similar or varying statements about cannibalism among Aborigines. W.E. Roth (1897) discusses burial cannibalism among Aboriginals, the practice of eating select parts of the dead bodies of their own people in different contexts and the argument of A.P. Elkin (1954) also reiterates this. While Lumholtz (1889) and McConnel (1937) also mention cannibalism of corpses, Howitt (1904) reports people being killed and eaten by way of punishment. Howitt draws a distinction between eating one's own dead, "ritual burial cannibalism" and eating the flesh of slain enemies, associated with revenge. Spencer (1914) refers to different practices of cannibalism in tribes like the Mara and Aranda and a number of other tribes from South Arnhem Land, Roper River and north-eastern and central regions. Woods (1879), Basedow (1925) and Bates (1938) suggest infanticide. The Berndts rightly point out that the possibility of cannibalism existed but that many instances may have been exaggerated and embroidered (Berndt and Berndt 1992: 467-70).

Having looked at some of the important issues raised by the available oral literature, let us now proceed to written Aboriginal literature in English. Mudrooroo Narogin rightly observes, "ABORIGINAL LITERATURE BEGINS AS A CRY FROM THE HEART directed at the white man. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood" (Narogin 1990: 1). The first complete published Aboriginal work in English appeared in 1929 was David Unaipon's Native Legends. Unaipon produced not only sermons and religious treatises but also a vast eclectic body of stories with Aboriginal themes mostly published in mission magazines. He felt that the white man must not leave the aborigine alone and that with a gradual
process of introduction of Christianity and all the best of (western) civilisation, the aborigine could come up fully developed (Hergenhan 37). With such statements in the background and his association with the church, one would think that David Unaipon was pro-colonisation and that his book would not have allowed any protest or criticism a voice. But, though the book was only a collection of Aboriginal legends, it was not devoid of political motivation. According to Jody Brown, "Although he [David Unaipon] supported the concept of assimilation, his writing should still be considered political, as it was intended to change white attitudes towards Aboriginal people" (Bird and Haskell 23). Thus, David Unaipon’s book paved the way for Aboriginal literature in English with its political overtones. Still, after the publication of this book, it was not until 1964 that another Aboriginal book came out in English, when Oodgeroo Noonuccal published the first book of Aboriginal poetry, *We are Going*.

That the first book of contemporary Aboriginal literature in English was a collection of poetry itself speaks for the significant place that poetry occupies in Aboriginal literature. Adam Shoemaker describes Aboriginal poetry as "poetry of politics". He says, "Verse is not only the most popular genre of Aboriginal creative expression in English; it also clearly illustrates the wide spectrum of Black Australian attitudes to the practice of writing and to the social purpose and utility of literature" (Shoemaker 179). Poetry is the most effective and popular genre of Aboriginal literature. Aboriginal poetry is significant for its oneness with the Aboriginal movement and for its rejection of the art for art's sake approach. It embraces the purpose of utility with political significance. What Oodgeroo Noonuccal said in her personal interview with Adam Shoemaker holds a mirror up to the spirit of and expectations from Aboriginal
poetry: "I would rather see Aborigines write a book called *Kargun* [Fogarty 1980] than pick up a shotgun" (Shoemaker 179).

The Aboriginal storytelling tradition imparts authenticity and spontaneity to Aboriginal poetry in expressing contemporary concerns and situations. In this context, it is necessary to examine the concept of authenticity against the background of Aboriginal consciousness and experience being defined and debated in numerous ways. This is a debate addressed in later chapters of this thesis. It is interesting that the dilemma of writers especially like Sally Morgan raises the question as to how far they can call themselves Aborigines and their experience as Aboriginal experience. For they are urban and urbanised Aboriginal people whose life can hardly be compared without serious qualification with the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. But, at the same time, it does represent the contemporary Aboriginal experience in different forms. For instance, in Sally Morgan’s case it is the experience of an urban, educated Aboriginal woman who grows up with an identity that does not belong to her, as is clearly evident, and who goes in search of the roots of her lineage once she becomes aware of this fundamental discrepancy. In Roberta Sykes’ case, it is the experience of a black woman who thinks of herself as an Aboriginal woman and still her people, the community she associates herself with, deny her claim. A look at the identities and associations of Aboriginal women writers presents us with different experiences and situations. Yet it is only fair to say that all of them are facets of Aboriginal experience in a colonised society where native identity is tampered with by the colonisers. This issue will be discussed in the later chapters of our study in some detail. In her article "Commitment and Constraint: Contemporary Koori Writing" Joan Newman discusses Adam Shoemaker’s charge
(Black Words White Page) that David Unaipon’s work has a schizophrenic quality. In this context, she argues that Unaipon was writing for a non-indigenous audience and that his generic strategies were designed so as to accommodate these readers. In continuation of this argument, she ironically questions: did he thoroughly contaminate his Aboriginal authenticity? Indeed, she also says that a different question has to be asked here, as to what is authentically Aboriginal for a Koori who uses the printed word in English.

She refers to Mudrooroo Narogin’s distinction between Aboriginal writers and writers of Aboriginality, with Aboriginality as a political position (rather than a racial heritage) with continually shifting boundaries. She also refers to the Anthropological school of the 1940s and 1950s which saw the only authentic Aboriginal culture as tribal and traditional and says that the work of these scholars manifests a desire to regard authentic indigenous writers as those who are least influenced by western genre, language use and belief. She goes to the extent of stating that "one of the truths we should now question is the narrow definition of contemporary Koori society as a primarily oral culture, for while indigenous expression is confined to ideas of orality the range of possible avenues of expression will remain limited" (Newman 91). This question of authenticity in Aboriginal Literature is related to the larger question of the non-Aboriginal, dominant section of society determining the concept of "Aboriginality" and deciding whether one is "sufficiently" Aboriginal or "not really" Aboriginal. Still, Anne Brewster's argument seems reasonably convincing: "Issues of truth and authenticity, however, don't have to be so daunting. They can be seen as socially specific and politically strategic rather than as epistemologically problematic" (Brewster 1995: 36).
We can, next, perceive different styles and approaches in Aboriginal poetry as we move from one poet to the next. This poetry expresses both individual and collective grievances and concerns of Aboriginal people in a colonial situation. These grievances extend from early massacres to forced contemporary urbanisation and they bring out the Aboriginal predicament in all its suffering and turmoil. Activism goes hand in hand with Aboriginal literature, and poetry in particular is used as a form of political activism. It works as an outlet for Aboriginal writers' grief, agony and anguish about individual and community predicament. Apart from giving vent to bitter experiences, however, it also celebrates nature and life. It celebrates the time when nature was bounteous and uninterfered with by whites. It celebrates bush life, which was in harmony with nature. For instance, Oodgeroo Noonuccal juxtaposes images like the boomerang and the atomic bomb, and huts and apartments, to emphasise the difference between Aboriginal life and contemporary urbanised life. It not only brings out the harmony between humans and nature in pre-colonial days but also throws light on the devastating quality of the imposed colonised lifestyle. Although Aboriginal poetry comes up with different individual motives and commitments, in general it agrees with the view that art is not for art's sake, or chiefly a tool for entertainment, but that it should have a function. Aboriginal poetry performs the function of generating awareness among Aboriginal people, of working as the medium of activism of the Aboriginal movement, and of speaking simultaneously to Aboriginal people as well as to whites. This poetry becomes a force in pronouncing the Aboriginal stand on colonisation as well as in the assertion of Aboriginal identity.

After the first collection of Aboriginal poetry *We are Going* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1964, Aboriginal poets started writing and publishing extensively. The
1988 collection of Aboriginal poetry *Inside Black Australia*, edited by Kevin Gilbert, represented almost forty Aboriginal poets. Among the Aboriginal poets whose poetry contributed crucial milestones to Aboriginal literature are, to name only a few, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Lionel Fogarty, Mudrooroo Narogin, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Lisa Bellear, Alf Taylor and Anita Heiss. These poets' special contribution can be defined. For instance, Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry collections like *We Are Going* (1964), *The Dawn is at Hand* (1966) and *My People* (1970) foreshadow the emancipation of Aborigines, the struggle for citizenship rights and eventually the land rights struggle. She was at the forefront of all these movements and her poetry grew with them. Apart from the importance of message over aesthetics, Oodgeroo shows a community approach to literature and to poetics. Other Aboriginal writers do not exist in isolation either, but as members of a community. Some, like Lionel Fogarty, use surrealistic techniques to get at the very stuff underlying Aboriginality residing in the condensed and concentrated obsessions of the unconscious, or the individual dreaming.

Aboriginal theatre can especially be perceived as a continuance of traditional oral literature. Borrowing or taking inspiration from corroborees and other rituals, Aboriginal theatre is strongly rooted in Aboriginal literary and cultural tradition. Jack Davis says, for instance, "the Nyoongah language was always full of humour and music. Theatre in a bush arena is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime. There was and is great opportunity for theatre to draw upon the rich Aboriginal oral literature" (Chesson 197). References to spirits or creation stories and other aspects of traditional culture mark Aboriginal theatre. It blends these with the contemporary situations and themes. Although it borrows from Aboriginal
oral literature and has its roots there, Aboriginal theatre is not merely nostalgic, but emerges instead as an authentic contemporary Aboriginal voice. Use of distinctive syntax, vocabulary and words of Aboriginal English are other features that make Aboriginal theatre thoroughly Aboriginal and distinct and different from white Australian theatre. Like other genres of Aboriginal literature, this theatre also is known for its touch of humour, which is a part and parcel of Aboriginal life and literature. As Anne Brewster says, "Humour and laughter often function in this way in Aboriginal culture to parody the systems of authority that have oppressed Aboriginal people. Additionally, humour is a means of coping with the pain and anguish of the past... (Brewster 1996: 23). Humour works much more effectively and ironically in theatre because of the advantages that the conversational mode of discourse and body language lend to the theatre. For instance, to quote from Jack Davis' play *The Dreamers*,

Eli: Look at this - busted eye, broken nose, busted eardrum,

[pointing to his head] thirteen stitches! You know who done all that? Not Wetjalas, but Nyoongahs, me own fiickin' people!

Peter: Man, yer wrong, the system done that to yuh, but yuh can't see it.

Roy: How d'yuuh expect him to see it, 'es only got one eye, so 'e reckons.

(Davis et al 1989: 16)

This touch of humour which lights the colonised Aboriginal world of darkness reminds one of other works such as the autobiography of Glenys Ward, *Wandering Girl*, where the protagonist thinks that if she had been in the company of her fellow dormitory girls she would have seen only the lighter aspect of the incident and laughed at it.
The first Aboriginal play to be performed was *The Cherry Pickers*, written by Kevin Gilbert in 1968 but published only in 1988. The most important initiative in the evolution of an indigenous theatre was the establishment in Sidney of the Eora Centre for Aboriginal Visual and Performing Arts in 1984 by Robert Merritt. Wesley Enoch, with his production of *Seven Stages of Grieving*, adapted more experimental forms of drama and won widespread critical acclaim. Dramatists like Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, Jane Harrison, Eva Johnson, Julie Janson, Bob Maza and others have created and are creating most effective forms of drama, with experiments in theme and technique. Although all of them very powerfully voice the colonised Aboriginal predicament, it is Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1998) that strikes hardest with its technique and directness. Articulating the agony of the stolen children, *Stolen* gives voice to the vacillations, traumas, turmoils, frustrations, helplessness and rootlessness of the stolen generation which resulted in sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men and the phenomenon of unwed Aboriginal mothers.

Aboriginal drama has faced and is facing dilemmas and debates concerning issues such as this regarding its audience: Who is the intended audience? For instance, Jackie Huggins says, "To me that is *My Place*’s greatest weakness-requiring little translation (to a white audience), therefore it reeks of whitewashing in the ultimate sense" (Huggins 1993: 460). Aboriginal writers have come up with arguments about readership in their writings and discussions, some saying that their writings are for both blacks and whites, some others that Aboriginal literature should not be completely comprehensible to white readers and audiences. Of course, this issue becomes much more important when it comes to Aboriginal theatre, for it is basically written for performance and its success
depends on audience participation. Aboriginal drama extensively uses Aboriginal words, connotations and situations, and extensively borrows from traditional Aboriginal culture. For instance, while discussing white audience and Aboriginality in Aboriginal theatre, John Scott says:

Kevin Gilbert grapples with this dilemma in *The Cherry Pickers*. In a play striving for linguistic credibility, the author is placed in the unenviable situation of elevating the Aboriginal English to make a socio-political point at the expense of the play's naturalism and plausibility (i.e., in the character of Zeena). This problem is increasingly apparent in contemporary black drama, which must strive to make its message clear to both black and white Australians and yet clearly maintain its Aboriginality. (Scott 111)

Mudrooroo, in his article "Our World a Stage", also discusses Aboriginal playwrights' attempts to address both black and white audiences by using a combination of Aboriginal English and European theatre convention. He brilliantly analyses the dilemma of an Aboriginal dramatist who has to convey the indigenous predicament and thought but in the western mode when he says, "Indigenous dramatists are schizophrenic in that they must seek to please both non-Indigenous and Indigenous audiences. It is impossible for them to avoid this if they seek to have their works performed in the conventional theatre with its white middle class audience" (Mudrooroo 1997: 158). This clearly shows that, by and large, the target audience of Aboriginal theatre is not merely blacks but whites as well.
Joan Newman’s analysis of the use of Aboriginal English in Aboriginal literature explores a very interesting aspect of the language. She says that the use of various forms of Aboriginal English may limit the readership of even the indigenous readers, for however familiar they are with indigenous idiom in speech they are more likely to be able to read printed texts in standard English than those written in versions of Aboriginal language use especially when dialogue is spelt phonetically (Newman 1996: 83-91). This becomes all the more interesting when read in the light of the argument about post-colonial drama and its strategies in Post-Colonial Drama: theory, practice and politics by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins. This book argues that use of Aboriginal English in Aboriginal theatre forces the "other" to take note of native culture; defines natives by contradicting the coloniser’s definition of the colonised; and demands that the non-Indigenous audience put in some effort to understand native culture. In its (at least token) effort to retrieve the lost Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal theatre reminds the indigenous audience and readers themselves of native culture and language. This is also an attempt to evoke awareness of their own (lost) languages among the Aboriginal people.

Loss of language is one of the crucial losses that Aboriginal people have suffered, for it most acutely symbolises loss of identity, culture, oral history and community. Helen Gilbert and Joan Tompkins quote from Jack Davis’ play Barungin (Smell the Wind, 1988) in which an old woman laments that the wetjalas have killed her language. In an attempt to rejuvenate the language killed by the coloniser and to introduce it to the colonising sections as well as unaware colonised sections of Australian society, Aboriginal playwrights extensively use Aboriginal English as well as words from Aboriginal languages. Elsewhere one has seen that a writer like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o may refuse to
write in English and start writing in his language Gikũyu as a mark of resistance towards the coloniser's language and culture. Access to Aboriginal languages is far from easy for today's writers and readers; for most of these languages are quite lost. The only way of recording, remembering and reminding them of these languages through literature seems to be to "nativise" English, especially in Aboriginal theatre. Gilbert and Tompkins make an interesting observation on the use of Aboriginal language in Jack Davis' *The Dreamers*:

Only those viewers who are fluent in the Nyoongah language will recognise that non-indigenous audience is being constructed as different from the Nyoongah speakers. Similarly, humour frequently functions in precisely this manner since it is the cultural codes of language as much as its specific semantic content that allow some listeners, and not others, to access irony, double entendre, certain nuances, and other potentially ludic meanings. (Gilbert and Tompkins 172)

This example effectively shows how the distanced people distance the distancing people. This use of Aboriginal English functions as a kind of education for non-Indigenous people as well as unaware Indigenous people. Indeed, this issue will assume importance in our study of autobiographies. For just as the playwrights use dramatic devices to educate audiences, the writers of the autobiographies use Aboriginal and western literary devices to achieve the same ends.

While use of Aboriginal English tries to educate both the coloniser and the colonised, what is the message of Jack Davis' plays? What do they argue for? Gerry Turcotte rightly observes,
Davis' drama does not argue for a return to pre-contact experience. The plays acknowledge the inevitability of interaction, and argue instead for a revitalised understanding of hybridity rather than a reactionary vision of assimilation. This argument for hybridisation-displayed at the level of both theme and form-suggests the potential for Aboriginal culture to enrich and modify white experience, rather than painting the more usual picture of Aboriginal culture being subsumed and ultimately destroyed by the majority culture. (Turcotte 1994: 7-8)

It is a similar kind of hybridity that we come across in the contemporary Aboriginal song, which, in fact, attempts to subvert the colonial forms of art. This is discussed in some detail later with reference to Aboriginal song.

Aboriginal literature explores and is largely based on the historical theme of colonisation and its after effects. The Aboriginal novel, which in most cases is autobiographical, is also concerned with the same subjects. The first Aboriginal novel Wild Cat Falling by Mudrooroo Narogin, published in 1965, uses the prison motif. It was followed by his Long Live Sandawara in 1979 and Archie Weller's The Day of the Dog in 1981. Sam Watson's trilogy, starting with Kadaitcha Sung (1990), is remarkable for its experiment with magical realism and for its blend of magic and power, history and horror. John McLaren's Sweet Water-Stolen Land (1993) is another remarkable novel. Still, it has to be said that Aboriginal fiction has not yet made as powerful an impact as Aboriginal poetry, autobiography and drama. Similarly, we seem to come across more women writers than men in Aboriginal literature. It is also a fact that women writers mostly write autobiographies and poetry, but not much fiction or drama. And such novels
written by women as are available also tend to be autobiographical in nature, like most Aboriginal literature.

*Karobran*, an autobiographical novel by Monica Clare, is the first published novel by an Aboriginal woman (published posthumously). Two part-Aboriginal children separated from their father are the central characters in this novel, of whom Isabelle is one. The merciless child-welfare authorities are exposed in this novel. It not only depicts Isabelle’s untiring search for her father, whom she never finds, but it also seems to assert that black culture survives in spite of all forces counter to it and remains inherently determined in its respect for nature and community consciousness. Another important Aboriginal novel, Faith Bandler's *Wacvie* (1977), is also based on the writer's family history. In her introduction to this novel about her father, she says:

There were other reasons why the book had to be written. The slave trade of Australia has never been included in school curricula. I have found that most Australians do not believe that slave labour was used to develop the sugar cane industry. Those who were enslaved did not have the opportunity to tell their story. The story has been only told by historians with a detachment from the thought and feelings of the people concerned.... All other characters in this book are composites of real people but the main events are true. (Bandler n.p.)

A similar concern to tell stories that were not told runs through Aboriginal autobiography as well. One could reasonably extend this concern to all of Aboriginal literature, as to any literature of the marginalised. In this novel about her father Waevie Mussingkon, Faith Bandler concentrates on the culture, activities, rituals and fears of
Aboriginal women who are by and large the major focus of this book. It also looks at the relationship between black female domestics and their white counterparts. This novel, ostensibly about her father, also provides Faith Bandler a context for the presentation of the traumatic situation of Aboriginal women in white colonies.

While the above two novels are family histories, Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (2000) depicts a different dimension of Aboriginal women's life. An educated, urban and self-reliant woman suddenly comes to know about her Aboriginal identity. That becomes the starting point for the dilemmas, traumas and turmoils to which she is then subjected. To her utter amazement and disappointment, she is not completely accepted by Aboriginal people whereas her daughter, who is born of the protagonist's black husband, is. With a blend of supernatural elements and Aboriginal beliefs, this novel succeeds in recreating the contemporary Aboriginal world.

Contemporary Aboriginal literature does not, indeed, appear only in written form. Aboriginal songs also are quite popular as powerful expressions of Aboriginal thought and feeling. Contemporary Aboriginal songs, as live performances and sound and video recordings, relate to the pre-invasion orality of native cultures. The traditional song-man and song-woman are invoked to describe the activities of contemporary songwriters, who are considered the new song-men and song-women. As Beniuk puts it, the contemporary Aboriginal song is both a continuation and a reinvention of traditional Aboriginal culture. It refutes suggestions of cultural stasis and transforms the colonisers' imposed musical culture into a contemporary Aboriginal culture (Beniuk 69-87).

My argument on contemporary Aboriginal song has been obtained from and greatly influenced by David Beniuk's article "Contemporary Aboriginal Song in a Postcolonial Context". *nr*, 31, Summer 1995. 69-87.
Like their writers of fiction, Aboriginal songwriters too have appropriated and recontextualised white musical genres. They have, of course, also adapted them to black musical forms. Mimicking the forms with which the colonisers are comfortable, they have also introduced an alternative context, that is native oral history, that subverts the legitimisation of colonisation through official versions of history. As Joan Newman rightly observes,

European writers who publish Aboriginal legends in English are not seen as compromising their European identity. On the contrary, the appropriation of the material of others has been part of their power. Yet the usage of European genres by indigenous writers has rarely been seen as a subversive act, the claiming of a textual space. Rather, it has been interpreted as an indication of the superiority of European models or—more recently—a contamination of the authentically Aboriginal. In either case, the written word continues to be seen as the legitimate inscription of the "West", so that just as the traditional Aboriginal oral narrative may be seen as a bastardised form when encountered in print, so, too, contemporary Aboriginal writing can meet with similar prejudice. (Newman 1996: 85)

It is not just by rejuvenating the indigenous music but also by its use in protest against the colonisers and by addition of aspects of white music to Aboriginal music that Aboriginal songs subvert the message of western music. The songs, in fact, have their own purpose. For instance, Yothu Yindi is a political group that sings about the concerns
of Indigenous Australians. Bob Randall’s "Brown Sick Baby", for instance, reads as follows:

Between her sobs I heard her say,
"Police bin take-im my baby away.
From white man boss that baby I have,
Why he let them take baby away?
Yaaawee,Yaahaawawee,

My brown skin baby they take 'im away." (Beniuk 73-74)

This song most poignantly reflects the predicament of the Aborigines. The Aboriginal movement and literature have been constantly concerned with the issue that this song raises. This song, in brief, says that Aboriginal women had children from white men, mostly their "bosses"; that children born to Aboriginal women and white men were taken away and the white bosses/fathers did not object to this. The "brown skinned baby" opens the whole discussion of the issue of half-castes as well as predominance of considerations of colour and the threat to part-Aboriginal children. These songs, thus, emphasise the issues that dominate Aboriginal literature written in English.

Aboriginal songwriters Kev Carmody and Archie Roach have both appropriated the "male singer/songwriter 'genre'"(Beniuk 74) which has emerged in contemporary western music. It represents both a deconstruction of the notion of "good singing" and a construction of the singer/songwriter's "authenticity". Even as they appropriate this "genre", Carmody and Roach draw upon their contemporary Aboriginal discourses and their post-colonial Aboriginal meta-texts. They seem to combine strategically the genre of the singer/songwriter with the Aboriginal tradition of the song man to produce contemporary Aboriginal songs. Aboriginal beliefs about death, burial and nature are referred to by way of criticism of colonisation. Carmody has also been active in print, writing of "Illusions such as Equality, Democracy and Capitalism and Christianity" and
calling for a separate Aboriginal nation. He proclaims, "Our own financial system, flag, laws, language and education system could be implemented and Black Australians could be accepted as a nation of communities" (Carmody 4). Ruby Hunter is one of the Aboriginal women singers and songwriters who is supposed to have contributed to a fundamental change in views regarding women in the thinking of the Australian music industry. David Beniuk argues, "theory, or no theory, we can see in the practice of contemporary Aboriginal song generally a struggle to find spaces for contemporary voices to generate a continuity and a method of achieving this is through the continuation of oral traditions" (Beniuk 87).

According to Beniuk, "the performance of these traditional songs is recontextualised by their placement on, for instance, a Western stage or a compact disc. They therefore represent a textual hybridity, a response to colonisation as well as the continuation of a tradition" (Beniuk 86). Mudrooroo recognises formation of a hybrid music that may be seen as Australian as well as Indigenous. But he also attacks the post-colonial academics who have coined the term hybridity to refer to such things as contemporary Indigenous culture. He states that defining culture as pure or hybrid seems to be a trap into which postcolonialists have fallen (Mudrooroo 1997: 108). Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins rightly observe:

Indigenous song/music recalls pre-contact methods of communication, affirms the continued validity of oral traditions, and helps to break the bonds of conventional (western) representation. As part of a slightly different strategy, hybrid song/music often function to protect the domination of the coloniser's linguistic/musical tradition by liberally
interspersing it with the words, forms, or music structures of a less well-recognised and validated system of communication. (Gilbert and Tompkins 194)

In his prologue to *Australian Literature: An Historical Introduction* (1989) John McLaren says: "The history of Literature in Australia is a story of how writers struggled against the alienation, by denying it, by learning to accept it and by attempting to transcend it" (McLaren xix). Against this background, it is also necessary to look at women's writing in Australia, as the present study specifically deals with Australian Aboriginal women's writing, where gender also plays an important role. Kay Schaffer, in her book *Women and the Bush* (1988), says that the Australian tradition is blind to women and that the Australian national identity is related to the masculinisation of a national culture. Miriam Dixson, in her *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present* (1976), states that there is a profound unconscious contempt for women which pervades the Australian ethos. She elaborates this view by saying that Australia has a literary tradition which produces a profound sense of sexual loneliness and an awkwardness or fear about the flesh of women. In *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975), Anne Summers analyses the position of women in Australian society as a colonised sex.

We can thus see that women writers have started questioning the very concepts of womanhood and wifehood that concern both mainstream and Aboriginal societies. In the same way, the stereotypical glorification of childhood gets dismantled in Australian women's writing. Indeed, it is almost an essential part of these works for very good reasons: a girl child's world of loneliness, frustration and abuse, for instance, are exposed
and explored in these writings as a particularly significant subject in the light of colonial history of treatment of children. This applies more to autobiographies of women. This may occur in a mainstream writer as well. For instance, Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) unveils the traumatic childhood and adolescence of a girl who struggles to free herself from the domestic turmoils and gender abuse. Childhood is an important aspect of Aboriginal women’s writing and their lives for reasons beyond a white girl child’s experience. Aboriginal childhood, especially for a girl child, is all the more traumatic as we have seen in the reference to dormitory existence and the stolen children scenario. Such special factors of all significant stages of Aboriginal women’s life will be discussed in detail in the later chapters. Coming back to white women writers, writers like Henry Handell Richardson (Ethel Florence Lindsay Richardson), known for her novels like the trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930), Eleanor Dark who made a mark with her novel *The Timeless Land* (1941) and Christina Stead, whose novels like *Man Who Loved Children* (1940), *For Love Alone* (1944) and *The Little Hotel* (1973) have contributed tremendously to women’s writing in Australia, and have tackled themes of enormous significance which characterise Australian history, culture and ideologies as well as the lives and visions of women. Novelists like Jean Bedford, Janine Burke, Han Mckemmish, Kate Grenville and Barbara Hanrahan reveal real concern with the female voice and they tell hitherto untold stories-readings of social legends, of history, or simply of individual experience.

Apart from white writers like Patrick White, Xavier Herbert and Les A. Murray who dealt with Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal characters in their own way, there are also white women writers whose themes were centered round Aboriginal issues and
characters. Novels like Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961) and Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* (1974) carry on the tradition of Catherine Susanna Prichard whose novel *Coonardoo: the well in the shadow* (1929) had dealt with Aboriginal exploitation. Although men have published works with Aboriginal issues at the centre, women's works had linked black and female oppression and perceive similarities in the oppression experienced by blacks and had dealt with the devastating oppression of black women. Glen Tamaseddi and Nene Gare's works aim to delineate the history of women and to draw out more clearly the forgotten struggles of women's lives. Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1955) is another novel which deals with Aboriginal issues.

It is true that white writers, especially women writers, have, indeed, dealt with Aboriginal themes and characters. But their treatment of these issues has always been limited, if not also controversial. One of the major allegations against such writing is that Aboriginal people have remained stereotypes in it. It is believed that it fails to explore the pathetic tales of Aboriginal massacres and has been written from a white coloniser's perspective. Hence, Aborigines, specifically Aboriginal women, resist identification with the national type. Most Aboriginal societies are supposed to be matriarchal societies and every family has a strong mother figure, unlike the white societies. This contributes to a lot of difference between the concerns and problems of Aboriginal women and white women. For instance, in her article "Aboriginal women, politics and land" Peggy Brock says, "Unlike western societies, where gender has been a marker of empowerment (male) and subordination (female), gender in Aboriginal societies defines different fields of influence and empowerment. This gender-specific authority is protected by maintaining a separation between male and female spheres" (Brock 2001: 9). White women writers
may have written about Aboriginal women. But one wonders if they identified themselves with Aboriginal women at all. We must also wonder whether Aboriginal women accept the portrayal of their characters in white women's writing. Do they identify themselves with white women? Can some of the issues that the white feminists consider or analyse concern Aboriginal women at all? Do Aboriginal women accept these as their issues? How much has the bias of gender contributed or failed to contribute to colonisation, subjugation and discrimination? It seems, also, in part, that Aboriginal women write in protest against the image of Black women in white writings. In Jackie Huggins' words,

> It is also apparent that Aboriginal women are viewed as the "other" based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual but less cerebral, more interesting perhaps but less intellectual, more passive but less critical, more emotional but less analytical, more exotic but less articulate, more withdrawn but less direct, more cultured but less stimulating, more oppressed but less political. (Huggins 1998: 36)

Some of these issues will be discussed in the second chapter of the present study titled "Protest as Watchword".

Against this brief historical background, we may now be able to look at the following issues and the questions emanating from them: What was the condition of Aboriginal women before 1788, the advent of the British in Australia? What are the sources for any study of this question and how reliable are they? What caused a change from traditional status to the contemporary predicament and image of Aboriginal women? What is the present status of Aboriginal women in Aboriginal society and in
white Australian society? Is there an awakening among Aboriginal women inspired by white culture about their condition in their own Aboriginal societies? Has the condition of Aboriginal women improved or worsened after 1788? Why and how? Particular questions about Aboriginal women's writing come next.

For instance, what is the purpose of Aboriginal women in writing for publication—to propagate their ideas, to express their fears and problems, to awaken society, to revolt against existing literary or social norms? When we read the autobiographies chosen for the focus of the present study, it becomes clear that their consciousness emanates from the authors' being women, black women, Aborigines and being exploited and oppressed. But which of these factors influence the writers most and dominate or mould their writings? What is the role of Aboriginal culture in the construction or composition of Aboriginal women's image and their autobiographies? How far do they fairly or usefully project matriarchal Aboriginal society, the culture of the bush, Aboriginal art and music, the conventional Aboriginal images of Aboriginal women and two hundred years of servitude on the fringes of white society?

An attempt is made in the present study to explore and discuss the above issues and questions. But there are some serious limitations to a study of this kind. For instance, my being an outsider to Australian and Aboriginal Australian society and the difficulty in obtaining both published and archival material. Lack of sufficient secondary or critical material may also limit to an extent the analysis of the works examined. The general questions on Aboriginal women's autobiographies raised by others as well as by the present study have included the following: Why does this research project focus on Aboriginal women's autobiographies? It is always interesting to study the voices of
women and the marginalised sections of any society, for they have been silenced violently or otherwise effectively for ages in most cultures; their oral composition and writings echo their cries of agony and voice their otherwise silent protest. When it is women belonging to the marginalised sections, more violence may be used to silence them, and a double burden of oppression is thrust on them. Hence their cries are much more heartrending. This is one of the reasons why my research is centred around the self of Aboriginal woman as it is expressed in her autobiography. And my being an Indian, a woman and a witness to innumerable cases of exploitation and subjugation of disadvantaged groups on the basis of race, caste, class, colour, religion, region and gender, and infinite number of movements against this treatment in the past and in the present which may extend into the future—these are factors in which some sort of identification is possible. There is, however, another reason particularly worth mentioning here—that even when oppressed men's writing has drawn much attention, as yet oppressed women's writing seems to have received very little attention.

The next basic question concerns the choice of autobiographies. It is a fact that most Aboriginal literature, like any other marginalised literature in its beginning, is autobiographical. Any work of Aboriginal literature may have done for a study of the expression of the self. But what interested me particularly in women's autobiographies was, how and how far this self that is expressed informs an overt claim to expression? When the veil of fiction is lifted from autobiography, what shape does this expression take? How much of the self does it express? How "auto" are these autobiographies? How much of the narrative relates the experience, and how much of it is expression of reaction to the experience? How much of this response is intellectual and how much
emotional? If it is the experience of the writer at some point of her life that is being voiced, is there no difference between her self then and her self at the time of writing? And which of these selves do these autobiographies deal with? How appropriate is it to call such narratives autobiographies? How does one deal with their "authenticity" with the play of "selective memory"? How do we discover the silences in an autobiography and judge their role or function in the narrative? For instance, in her autobiographical novel *Karobran* (1978), Monica Clare leaves out some of the crucial details of her life such as her first marriage, her divorce, and separation of her child by legal action. There is no doubt that this is an important link in her life. Why do we suddenly see the young girl Isabelle become a mature woman? Against the background of such questions, it is quite obvious that one cannot obtain from one study a "complete" picture of the self or life in an autobiography. But in spite of these limitations, the form of autobiography does succeed in giving the scope to the writer to express her "self that is denied to fiction or fictionalised accounts of a life.

Although the emphasis of this study is not so much on the genre, let us take a bird's eye view of the theoretical context in which Aboriginal women's autobiographies may be situated. This, in no way, is an ambitious effort to summarise or quote the whole lot of discussions and arguments on autobiography that have so far been published. Autobiography is an area which is much explored and debated. But, there are still some to be discussed and explored. Various developments and movements in different fields have either added to the already existing debates on autobiographies or questioned them. Autobiography, which tries to express, represent, define and discuss one's own self, has
been widely experimented with in form, content, style and subject. Let us look at some of the immediately relevant theories of autobiography.

James Moffett’s (1968) observation that autobiography usually involves the writer looking back through a distance of time that permits him to disengage his present self from his former self and to understand now what he did not understand then, surely has substance and merit. He goes on to say that thus, the story is about growth and self-knowledge. No doubt Aboriginal women’s autobiographies look back at the former self but in this attempt, they look at the society, state and their community as well. Self-knowledge is coupled with community knowledge. Aboriginal women writers have also experimented with the form of autobiography. Content becomes, in some cases, more important than form. They also tend to alternate from form to form - chronicles, reports, diaries and autobiographies according to the context and need, though it is difficult at times to identify the exact difference between these. Sometimes all these forms occur in the same text. This modification or transformation of conventional form gives rise to several interesting points worth discussing. These are discussed in detail in the chapter of this study titled "Protest as Watchword". Moving between forms, facts, experience and interpretation, these autobiographies create a new world, refusing to fit into the frame of western theory and practice.

As Cockshut (1984) rightly observes, it is only when the question of point of view becomes crucial for the reader that an awareness of autobiography as a separate form emerges. It is exactly this point of view which is crucial in Australian Aboriginal women's autobiographies, which voice the concerns of the writers who are subjected to multiple subjugation on the basis of race, class and gender. It is in this context that Anne
Brewster's view of Aboriginal women's autobiographies as "autobiographical narratives" rather than "autobiographies" comes in. She admits that though she has settled for the term "autobiographical", she recognises that these texts examine the author's own life within the context of those of other family members and that these texts are both autobiographical and biographical (Brewster 1996).

James Olney, who has made a significant contribution to an understanding of autobiography, says, "They seem different things, study of the self and study of the world, yet the two cannot be ultimately separated, as subject and object join and merge in consciousness" (Olney 1972: 14). This statement is an appropriate description of the blend of individual and community in these autobiographies. It is true that, as the genre suggests, they are, chiefly, or most obviously, means for expression of the self. But that is not, certainly, all. It is not liberation of the self alone but an effort towards the liberation of the race as well that forms an objective for individual writers in an identifiably oppressed society. All experience becomes one and one's experience represents all experience. These writers hail from different social, political and economic backgrounds, but they have one thing in common, their Aboriginality—their culture, their past and present and the big question about the future. Inheriting rich Aboriginal culture and suffocating in a discriminatory society, their common concerns naturally are with the loss of the past, suffering in the present and the threat in the future to their identity.

It will be all the more interesting to note the opinion of a critic who looks at the genre from a gender perspective. According to Estelle Jelinck (1980), women's autobiographies differ from those of male writers in form and content and that they tend to emphasise the personal much more than the public. Australian Aboriginal women's
autobiographies prove that they are different from men's autobiographies. But the
difference is not so much about being personal and ignoring the public. For, most of the
time these writers use "we" or even if they speak as "I", it reaches the readers as "we"
by implication. A majority of these writers emphasise the political aspect of Aboriginal
life and describe their involvement in the Aboriginal movement. Although private life is
not completely missing from these books, it seems the writers' community consciousness
makes them give significant attention to the collective experience.

In their effort to be faithful and goal-oriented, Aboriginal women's
autobiographies remind us of "testimonio" (Beverley 91-114), in which the narrator
represents a social class or a group and speaks for or in the name of a community or a
group. This gives voice to a previously "voiceless", anonymous, collective popular
democratic subject, the people. As Aboriginals, as women and most importantly, as
Aboriginal women, these writers come out and address their people as well as the
oppressing section of the society. These autobiographies, therefore, carry a
representational value and basically perform a representational function. There may be
several Aboriginal communities and hundreds of dialects in Australia. But their
autobiographies in English represent the struggle of a displaced people and culture at a
general level as well.

We may also think here of "autoethnographies" (Lionnett 1989), a form in which
writers' interest and focus are not so much the retrieval of a repressed dimension of the
personal self, but the rewriting of their ethnic history, the re-creation of a collective
identity through the performance of language. Like Bernice Johnson Reagon’s "cultural
autobiography" (1982), Aboriginal women's autobiographies become locations to keep
crucial and culturally specific memories to reclaim a history and construct a community of strength and diversity. The fundamental questions about autobiography that Doris Sommer raises in her article “Not Just a Personal Story: Women’s Testimonios and the Plural Self” are particularly relevant to these autobiographies:

Is [autobiography] the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography? (Brodzki and Schenck 111)

The autobiographies we have selected for study express nostalgia for the past, the period prior to the colonisation, that colonisation against which they naturally, perhaps even inevitably, protest. This nostalgia helps them in their lament over the loss of Indigenous culture and also becomes one of the devices of post-colonial protests that echo against imperialism, if not always attempting glorification of native culture. As post-colonial autobiographies, they reflect the writer's responsibility and desire to change the genre as well as the relations of power in society. Not only nostalgia but also a sharp focus on the conspiracy of silence over the predicament of women in Aboriginal societies, contributes to the emphasis on the sufferings of women in Australian society. Usually, this happens indirectly. A sense of loss about traditional Aboriginal societies that permeates Aboriginal women’s autobiographies succeeds also in pronouncing the notion that everything about Aboriginal societies is bright, green, plentiful and cheerful.

2 The term "post-colonial" in the context of Australian Aboriginal Literature is discussed in detail in the chapter titled "Conflicting Identities".
Thus these autobiographies operate as a forum for the writers to argue their case against injustice, deprivation and humiliation, even as they reassess their past and present culture. As Jackie Huggins rightly articulates in *Sister Girl*, “I believe writing was so important to me because it was a liberating experience. Issues of race, class and gender began to appear much clearer” (Huggins 1998: 108).

Mudrooroo Narogin claims that autobiographical narratives fix history in a static sense rather than fluidly ranging towards future concerns. He goes to the extent of calling them "death books" (Narogin 1990). And he adds that he finds writing fiction more liberating because it allows the writer to go forward rather than backward. But he also admits that the account of a life or autobiography has a place in traditional Aboriginal literature and so the genre is not completely a western importation. Thus, Mudrooroo Narogin appears uncertain in his assessment, especially about using the genre as a political weapon. Aboriginal women have adapted autobiography to use it as a weapon against, among other things, racial discrimination and political subjugation. If the same kind of criticism is used against his own autobiographical novels, Mudrooroo Narogin’s own novels can be dismissed on the basis of his adapting not one but two western genres, novel and autobiography, and for being self-obsessed throughout. If autobiographies are death books, his autobiographical books are also death books, although perhaps with some difference. Yet the major difference between Aboriginal women's autobiographies and the autobiographical novels of male writers like Mudrooroo Narogin is that women writers refuse to make self-obsession either the central theme or the chief objective of their works. They do not write just about their selves but also about the community and about their selves as members of that community. In her
article "Race, Gender and Identity: My Place as Autobiography" Joan Newman says that
My Place is primarily concerned with the meanings of selfhood in terms of relationships,
particularly those of family, and even more particularly those that can be traced through
the matriarchal line. She says,

> The depiction of selfhood in relational terms, emphasising one's
> interdependence with others, is considered to be a characteristic of
> women's autobiography, rarely to be found in works written by men. It
> may also be interpreted as a characteristic of Aboriginal autobiography in
> which the idea of joint ownership of a narrative is a more common
> understanding than ideas of single, originating authorship. (Bird and
> Haskell 71)

In a way, Anne Brewster also reiterates this opinion while discussing Don't Take
Your Love to Town. She rightly points out that the genre of autobiography is gendered
and the specificity of this female experience means that the narrative is different from the
male tradition of autobiography. Brewster quotes Susan Stanford Friedman's article on
"Women's Autobiographical Selves" in which the writer argues that where men's
autobiographies construct a notion of the solitary and privileged individual, women's
autobiographies invoke not so much personal and individual histories as collective
cultural histories (Brewster 1996: 37). That way the women writers, taking liberty with
genres and structures, achieve, if not an ideal, at least a significantly different purpose,
and perhaps in this respect their works are more powerful (or differently significant and
useful) as political weapons than the works of men.
These autobiographies may be seen as chapters in a collective memory of common experience. For example, among the writers, Rita Huggins and her brothers and sisters were removed from their parents and placed in the dormitory on Barambah Reserve. Ella Simon, Ruby Langford, Delia Walker, Evelyn Crawford and Eileen Morgan in New South Wales were not separated from their kin by the dormitory system; and yet they were confined to reserves and missions; Mabel Edmund and her parents worked on cattle stations. The assimilation policy made different kinds of impact on these women's lives, although eventually they all, almost invariably, became domestic servants working for middle-class white men and women (Moreton-Robinson 10).

Most Aboriginal writers are, themselves, mixed blood children—a fact that symbolises the Aboriginal situation. To be specific, most of them are dormitory children. The "Stolen Generation", which was exposed to western education so as to be converted into "good" domestics and "good" Christians, has significantly used that minimal education to express itself and to recollect and retell its untold stories. That most Aboriginal writers of today belong to the stolen generation is an important historical and political fact. This is one of the themes that recurrently appears in Aboriginal literature and shapes the personal narratives and influences the tone of the writers. Most of the texts discussed in our study, for instance, were written by writers who were urbanised, educated, self-reliant and actively involved in the Aboriginal movement, with a background of removal from Aboriginal societies and the care of parents, and of dormitory life and domestic servanthood. As Jack Davis rightly puts it, in his interview with Adam Shoemaker "The Real Australian Story", the stories in Australia have "all been told. But a lot haven't been told enough—and quite a lot haven't been told properly.
Everything's been said but I think there's a lot we still have to learn" (Turcotte 1994: 47).

The second chapter of this study, titled "Protest as Watchword," examines how this protest shapes Aboriginal women's autobiographies. This protest against racial discrimination, and incidents and accidents consequent to this, is voiced sometimes directly and sometimes subtly and indirectly, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. In any case, it is true that basically these autobiographies function as vehicles to convey the writers' vehement protest and resistance. How they attempt to deconstruct the history and Aboriginal identity created by the whites and to reconstruct the history and Aboriginal identity forms the main argument of the chapter, apart from a glance at the subtle ways in which they are conveyed.

The third chapter titled "Multiple Voices of the Writer" presents the writers as women, Aborigines and Aboriginal women. Although, of course, it is not easy to differentiate between these voices, it is not impossible to identify them either as they reach the readers sometimes separately and sometimes simultaneously in these autobiographies. Concerns and interests may shift and the tone may change from work to work but the Aboriginal woman's consciousness never ceases to dominate all these autobiographies. This fact leads to the recognition that these writers inhabit spontaneous multiple identities.

The fourth chapter titled "Conflicting Identities" deals with these multiple identities and shifting priorities and viewpoints. Apart from their identities as Aborigines, women and Aboriginal women, the writers we study also have other identities (or facets) depending on their colour, religion, region, background and individual qualities and
capabilities. These differences or identities raise conflict, within the writer, between the
text and the self, and the self of the writer and the readers/critics. How this conflict gives
rise to important questions about the whole Aboriginal issue and Aboriginal literature
will be examined in this chapter.

It would not be out of place to mention here that while we deal with several
autobiographies, some of them may be analysed at length and in detail, and others may
not. This does not at all mean that some are given prominence and others not or that some
are more important than others. The difference arises from the controversies that the texts
have raised and the attention they have received. On account of the white interference in
some texts, the length of the book, the specific features of the genre, the particular issues
that are raised and the concerns of the writer, some texts may be more frequently quoted
and discussed.

The concluding chapter will make an effort to draw parallels with some of the
issues that are raised about identity in Aboriginal men's autobiographies. It will also try
to suggest parallels with and raise similar issues and concerns that become the
preoccupation of Indian dalit and tribal literatures. Rather than drawing parallels in every
chapter with Indian dalit literature, comparative suggestions will be confined to the
concluding chapter and there will be suggestions or possibilities for future study.

The autobiographies that form the primary sources for the present study are:
Margaret Tucker's *If Everyone Cared* (1971), Ella Simon's *Through My Eyes* (1978),
Monica Clare's *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (1978), Shirley Smith's *Mum
Shirl: An Autobiography* (1981), Elsie Roughsey’s *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old
and the New* (1984), Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Ida West's *Pride Against

The documentation has been done according to MLA Handbook 4th edition. I have retained the upper and lower cases in titles of books, articles etc., as they appear in the original.