CHAPTER 13

THE EXOTIC OTHER

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOMAS KENEALLY'S

THE CHANT OF JIMMIE BLACKSMITH
Here is the legend of Jimmy's axe
that scarred the country with ochre red blood;
as red as the flaming hair on his head
or as the fire that writhed in his cold eyes,
green like the trees and the grass of his home and the swift
parrots that flew through his skies.
Here is the story of a cruel axe.
Sometimes its ringing singing tones would roll
across the wheat-heavy hills on which he worked,
as he crowned the land with wooden fence-posts.
In the year this Federal country was born,
toasted in champagne and praised in loud song,
Jimmy, lost in these new lands,
with his axe held in half-caste brown hands
came stumbling and bumbling, sullen and wild;
came like Ned Kelly, maiming and killing
women and children old men and babies
with his brother, who laughed like the Devil,
and like storm-filled rivers blood was spilling
until at last they shot him dead.
Shot-gun pellets tore through his head
ripped to shred his dreams of war
then Jimmy and his axe were no more.
Yet,
did his wife,
as white as he would have liked to be;
white liked the flour those squatters never gave him
and for which he took up his bloody axe
to smash the white eggshell complacency.
His wife as white as the day he was born;
she as white as the baby that was not his--
all so white on that gruesome awesome night...
Did she mourn?  --Archie Weller. ¹

The story of Jimmy has been very important in the history of the aborigines
and their struggle for survival in the terrairma of Australia. In recent years, some
major Australian writers have explored this character of historical importance by
either supporting his rebel attitude or portraying this figure as the racial outsider caught between two cultures, scrabbling for some identity and space in a society of no man's land.

One of the most successful modern Australian writers, Thomas Keneally has also portrayed this character from an actual incident and weaves a powerful and significant fiction. In 1900, the disparate Australian states were rapidly but uneasily moving towards federation. The recurrent concern with only --the blacks and the whites created furore in the history of Australia because the half-castes were not taken into consideration. Keneally has blended history, psychological insight and an epic adventure with great skill. In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Keneally basically tried to portray the pangs and agony that germinated in the hearts of these half-castes of Australia.

Keneally tried to simplify the formation of a complex portrayal of the dominant race or the whites and the subjugated people, who lived together in this country. Gradually, the game of power arose when one of these people refused to submit easily. The one with better equipments of control won the game. It was not only a question of losing the battle or subduing oneself --but the complexity was essentially of existence. The phenomenon of Darwin --"survival of the fittest" -- was the fundamental issue of co-existence.

Things would have pacified or could have been negotiated, however existential can't be solved like mathematical problems. Gradually with the passage of time, co-existence became a distant and much more complicated prospect. These complications arise from the proximity of people from different cultures --in this case the whites, the half-castes, and the blacks or the Aborigines.

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* portrays this reality of survival with a tinge of violence and violation, racial dispossession and the diminution of individual purpose and dignity. The novel deals with the story of Jimmie Blacksmith, who is the son of an Aboriginal mother and a white father. A missionary shows him what it means to be white - already he is only too aware of what it means to be black. Exploited by his white employers and betrayed by his white wife, Jimmie is unable to take any more. He must find a way to express his anger.
Keneally’s novel is set in rural New South Wales at the turn of the century. It is a compelling and fascinating evocation of an Aboriginal man’s struggle to succeed in early twentieth century Australia. There is a vivid portrayal of themes of confrontation with tragic outcomes – like racism, sexuality, violence, oppression and exploitation, and above all the marginalisation of a minority.

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is about an Aboriginal man who takes revenge on white society after several years of exploitation and injustice. Keneally’s stunning indictment of the racism that the whites developed towards the non-whites, is a vibrant and powerful example of the marginalisation of races. It points to some essential characteristics of Australian society through the plight of those who are denied admission to it. It also explores the effect of a society that is rigid, and impermeable to human responses. It reveals the futility and waste of being born as a half-caste.

Jimmie Blacksmith is largely a figure of an ordinary, yet remarkable person compelled by circumstances into an extraordinary role. He has evolved clear and precise goals that he pursues with determined energy. He passes through the white society, encountering a diversity of situations and characters that Keneally puts forward as representative of the Australian society. Jimmie is compelled into direct collision with his society and his actions become stark and violent. His fate is immediately determined by a rigid and unyielding society, based upon conceptual notions of racial stereotypes and it forces Jimmie to conform to them. It appears that he is a doomed figure and represents an image of erosion of human purpose.

Although Keneally has adopted a true governor’s story told by Frank Clune. His representation is very unique in its own way. Anthony Thwaite, a literary critic says that his adoption may be:

"...(M)ore that just the bones of the story. But the altercation that he made is very realistic and mind-blowing". [Thwaite: p. 3]
Keneally made several prominent changes in it, namely—racial, narrative, psychological and thematic.

In the first place Joe, a half-caste and Jimmie's full brother, becomes Morton, a full blood and Jimmie's half-brother. This results in an increase in Jimmie's isolation from both the black and the white world. This shows him to be excluded from tribal beliefs as he is from the community, which espouses white values. He uneasily dismisses the black religion and seeks a purposeful life in the alternative values of possession for he gets aware of a desire to improve himself. Jimmie is more conscious and has insights to all his actions. Keneally elaborates the use of Mort and Tabidgi to enshrine the tribal beliefs and customs from which Jimmie is partly distanced yet by which he is still partly entrapped. It is as though Keneally associates Jimmie's racial dislocation with a moral awareness. Jimmie thinks that the whites are never called upon to examine their motives. Jimmie is therefore portrayed as:

"...(S)ufficiently self-conscious, disadvantaged, dislocated, and imposed upon to be made coherently desperate". [Clune: p. 325]

Inevitably, there are numerous narrative changes from Frank Clune's version to Keneally's one, but two are important enough to be mentioned. The first one is the capture of Jimmy Governor, who was taken in while sleeping by a fire, not in a convent. Keneally's version of the capture allows him to encapsulate the earlier religious parallels in the book, and to insinuate into the rebirth ceremonies of Easter and tribal initiation, later from initiation to guilt. The novel opens with Jimmie's initiation tooth, and later he draws a parallel between the initiation wound and the wound he receives from the marksman.

The other narrative change is the incident of McCreadie. Keneally introduces the protracted incident of McCreadie because it exposes the Blacksmith's psychology over a considerable time and in close detail. Until McCreadie enters, the story has been basically episodic with no sustained and close study of a changing relationship. Psychologically it allows for a richer presentation of the tension between Mort and Jimmie as they flee, and provides a
ready method of exposing Jimmie's need for some self-image to conform to. But McCreadie also acts as a spokesperson for the wider historical view of the Aboriginals in Australia. The events of Jimmie Blacksmith's career, the historical facts supplied by McCreadie, the abuses of Senior Constable Farrell, the cautions and doubts in Mr. Neville's rejected letter to a church paper, and the exuberant optimism of officially egalitarian Australia— are the chief elements that Keneally presents as modern Australia's birthright.

The third set of changes Keneally makes on the original Clune story is concerned with the motives of the characters. These are designed to make Jimmie more attractive and to undercut his opponents. The motives of Jimmie's killing in the original version are obscure, although the trial records seem to indicate that the most substantial reason was retaliation for ridicule both of himself and of Ethel about their marriage. Whatever might have provoked the original killings, Keneally's Jimmie Blacksmith is much more severely provoked and is made much more dignified in his response to that provocation. Veronica Brady, a literary journalist says about Keneally's attempt:

"There is no element of the original story which Keneally undercuts. ... His altercations become almost a satire of self-aggrandizement." [Brady: p.79]  

So, it can said that in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, Keneally draws attention to the wider significance of Jimmie's conflict with the white society, derived from the historical context, that is from the irony of impending Federation and a constitution that will institutionalise the racial assumptions determining Jimmie's fate. Keneally is insistent on the social and historical context, and through the sharp patterning of encounters with Healy, Lewis and Newby, on the representatives of several events that takes place in due course of time. At the same time, he endeavours to hold in balance the portrayal of Jimmie himself and his existence for others only as a racial stereotype.

The opening chapters establish firmly the pattern of black and white worlds, a pattern that with tight symmetry shows Jimmie poised between the communal
values of tribal society and the white values of the "holy state" of possession. His tribal initiation complete, Jimmie returns to the Nevilles to be caned for truancy and to imbibe the ideals of white marriage, land ownership and becoming 'Mr. Blacksmith'. While Mungindi man is trying all sorts of possibilities in a quest of pursuing a new identity:

"Most men who weren't old men become a little sceptical of the tribal cosmogony, even if they were not very clear-headed about it as Jimmie. The very height of tribal manhood for some was this gulping of cheap wine in pub yards. That activity itself was a tortured questing after a new world picture for Mungindi man."[Keneally: p 7].

Jimmie sets his goal at Muswellbrook and evolves the conceptual notion that certain criteria are necessary to be known as not black anymore:

"Jimmie's criteria were: home, hearth, wife, land. Those who possessed these had beatitude unchallengeable. Other men had accidental, random life. Nothing better."[Keneally: p. 15.].

Against these ideals are the images of Verona, where:

"...Whites voices could be heard as burlap door-flaps were flung open. Shrieking welcomes were sung to the wet phallus, powerful demolishers of tribes."[Keneally: p.20.].

From the very outset there is a juxtaposition of the white man's brutality and lust with the white woman's veneer of rectitude and with the despoliation of the black world through its women. Adrift from tribal society that is itself tormented and broken, Jimmie struggles for admission to white society through its acquisitive and morally indeterminate values. He embarks with his goals clear, willing to pursue them with dedication and with a hatred for his race, for its vulnerability that leaves his purpose uncluttered by ambivalence.

Jimmie's conflict with the white society does not spring at the base from any attribute or characteristic he may have; but from the fact of birth, casually begotten on Dulcie, the mother of Jimmie, by some anonymous white man. Jimmie is confronted by a series of white characters, which require him to fail in his goals in order to confirm their expectations of his race, ward off the discomfort of his improbable diligence and integrity by undermining his efforts.
Healy, the illiterate Irish, protects his self-esteem by petty cheating after the insult of the completed fencing and by denying Jimmie a lift in the town, which leads to Jimmie feeling stunned at Healy's need to degrade him. So he targets the vulnerable part of Healy --his wife:

"What he had done, without understanding it, was to elect her to the stature of ideal land-owner's wife. It was not simply a matter of her being full and ripe: he could not have been so potently stirred by aspects so directly sexual. But combine these with her impassive air, her peculiar way of sitting still in the dray and breathing out into the morning a vapour of worship and submission for her husband --and you had some thing that appealed to all Jimmie's lusts. In a second she had become a symbol, a state of blessedness, far more than a woman. It could almost be said that he did not choose her as a woman at all, rather as an archetype."[Keneally: p. 21].

There is sexual attraction as well as an image of the values of "home, hearth, wife, land" held before him by the Nevilles, which were denied to him by the white world. The Scottish Lewis, with his "ferocious book-keeping", finds fault with all Jimmie's labors and is uneasy and resentful in the face of Mort's disconcerting laughter; not only because merriment seems irreconcilable with work, but also because it hints at a secret joke and the inexplicable in those whom he would find explicable and known. At the Hayes's sheep station similar assumptions are reflected in the cook and his commendation of Jimmie's use of indefinite articles. The adenoidal, unprepossessing Gilda, Jimmie hopes, can be transformed into his image of an archetype:

"...She had bad sinuses, and a terror of being sent back to the home from the wayward. Nor was she Mrs. Healy. But a start had to be made somewhere with white women. And Jimmie could not help thinking that under pressure of his coming success she might be converted into some sort of Mrs. Healy."[Keneally: pp. 50-51].

He is still assured and sustained by his belief that a white wife must advance his cause even as he suspects that marriage will simply multiply their individual rejections by society. The pattern of white attitudes culminates in the Newby scenes and Jimmie suspects it to be a plot against him:
"As if they had all conspired, Mr. Newby –like Healy and Lewis – seemed to have made a sport out of waiting for Jimmie Blacksmith to behave in what he would have considered character." [Keneally: p. 51].

This leaves him adrift between the ideal and actuality, between the goal and self-abasement. Each encounter with the white world in the pattern of formulating self-images reinforces the others.

The novel proceeds to this point through a delicate balance. Keneally makes it clear that Jimmie's experience is determined by the need of white characters to see him according to their assumptions. It is also clear that the identity of Jimmie, except that so far he is more zealous than others of his race, is irrelevant. It is not a personal response to Jimmie but a lashing out against a being, who threatens to undermine white preconceptions. Keneally thus balances the portrayal of a character against a sequence of events not shaped by a response to that individual being. John Beston, a literary critic, argues that Keneally's attitude towards Jimmie is "flippant; one senses the eagerness with which he draws the hero's neck to the noose".  

There is a sense of Jimmie being merely an actor in the novel that permits no impingement of himself, so that in part the inevitability of the rebellion derives from the pressure of events working on him rather than a shifting, developing awareness of himself in relation to them. Keneally's reliance on event rather than embodiment of feeling and motive to suggest growing pressure on Jimmie, is characteristic of the first part of the novel and leaves the implications of some sequences regrettably shadowy. For instance, the sequence with Farrell foreshadows some later events but relies more on statement than on portrayal of reaction. At Brentwood, Jimmie yielded all his earnings to his kin according to tribal values, and as he heard the drunken, lurching songs that followed, was consumed with hatred for all but Mort. That hatred underpins the events involving Harry Edwards, where Jimmie is a "comic abo":

"... (A) registered accredited, uniform black man; more deeply, more damagingly black than ever." [Keneally: p.35].
The vulnerability of his race contributes to his vindictiveness and his willing compliance in the arrest of Edwards—but this compliance as well as his feeling justified by the body of the white boy and his reaction to Edwards death are kept at a distance. Keneally observes:

"Jimmie felt justified, once more knowing the emotion indecent and one might run beyond his control; but justified. Atrocious death, the boy's and even his own, had always lain latent in Verona. Now he had somehow struck back at it."[Keneally: p. 42].17

The prevarication of this incident recurs in the climactic scene at the Newbys' when, despite the disturbing immediacy and starkness of the violence itself, Keneally intrusively asserts:

"In our world, the delusions that killers let into their bloodstreams are the stuff of newsprint and videotape. A reader should be spared. Enough to say: Jimmie admitted to his body a drunken judgmental majesty, a sense that sharp-edged stars impelled him. He was in the lizard's gut once more."[Keneally: p.78].18

It is in Jimmie's struggle to bear the knowledge of his deeds that Keneally's control becomes firmer and makes Jimmie more convincing. It is in this section too where Keneally is less confined by given facts of truth, so that he is being able to move beyond the externality of the historical evidences. Caught between the "tenuous elation and solid desolation between self-knowledge and delirium", Jimmie fights to maintain a sense of mission and mandate in order to ward off the horror of his actions and he becomes fugitive as much from memory as from his outraged pursuers. For instance, the old man from whom he takes the blanket makes him feel apologetic and subordinate and the encounter demands of him a gentleness he can no longer afford, knowing that he must continue killing "if his soul were not to freeze about the cold fact of the Newby killings".20

While Mort tries to fit their deeds into the tribal meaning, his song of Tullam man resonates gently and innocently. Jimmie's relationship with Mort becomes an objective correlative of his ability to come to terms with his deeds. Through the presence of McCreadie, Keneally explores this correlation between
Mort and Jimmie, by portraying the choice left with Jimmie of either liberating or corrupting Mort:

"Mort must either be incriminated for fear of losing him or lost of fear of incriminating him. While Jimmie could not have said it in such abominably neat terms, he could feel the actual prongs of the question turning in his flesh."[Keneally: p. 88].

This choice repeatedly thrust upon him by McCreadie and made urgent by Jimmie's own tenuous grip on himself. Jimmie's deception of Mort is both a shunning of isolation and a clinging to innocence, the faint hope that they might be "the two gay fugitives of the caricature" that the newspapers keep hackneying about. There is a seminal awareness of the separation between Jimmie and Mort, and that is finally realised through the ceremonial grounds scene, where Keneally describes them as:

"... (R)aiders and out darers and adjurers but also pilgrims, bearers of onus seekers for justification, desirers for exorcism."[Keneally: p. 147].

Amid the graffiti, the scattered and broken tjuringa, the desecration that connotes a history of violence, Mort's pain cannot be shared by Jimmie. He is forced to accept the lonely racial displacement and final isolation that Mort has kept at bay for him. Because he is lost somewhere between white and black worlds, he can discover no racial or cultural pattern to lend meaning to his plight.

The course of Jimmie's reconciliation with the past, which allows him ultimately the dignity of self-awareness and acceptance, is against the continuing ironies of newspaper articles. In his essay, Brian Kiernan, 'Fable or Novel? The Development of Thomas Keneally', describes that the ambiguity of his motivation and his likening the pursuit to a "novitiate" for the Boer War act as an ironic counterpart of Jimmie's violence. He argues further that Dowie manifests, like Jimmie:

"... a similar urge to release his psycho-sexual frustrations in violence and he is partly motivated by the Humiliation of discovering what he shares with his father. ..."[Kiernan: p. 490].
The later part of the novel springs from Keneally's readiness to extend beyond the given historical material through the relationship of Jimmie and Mort and the growing self-awareness of Jimmie. As Jimmie becomes more real, the struggle to engender a sense of the historical moment becomes more intrusive. For instance, as he swims the river Manning, Jimmie's wound strengthens him and he feels:

"...absolved, justified and even enriched by the swim and the wound, that harsh edge of reality he had losing by evading armies." [Keneally: p. 164] 26

After the struggle to deliver Mort, it brings back the immediacy of his own role. The wound allows respite in fever and the memory of the pain of the tooth excision during his initiation:

"He passed two nights and a day in the fever, and woke to the numbness of dispossession. What his body craved was honey.

He found a wild nest, a bubo of mud in a tree-fork. At the base of the tree he built a fire and then broke the nest open with a bough.

Inside were the orderly combs which wedged down his throat in dripping lumps, honey, wax, pupae, God knows what other debris.

As earlier a racial pattern denied to him He marched and dreamed on foot that he was carrying live coals in his mouth, provider of warmth to someone --Dulcie, old Wilf, Jackie, Gilda, Miss Graf? Doing for that someone a scalding duty." [Keneally: p.165]. 27

He dreams and yearns to believe that there was a purpose in his deeds and a signification recognisable to other.

Jimmie is searching out a context, a framework within which his actions can take form and assume meaning. The novel here is open and exploratory, reaching into Jimmie's experience from different directions that reinforce each other rather than compress and narrow as earlier in the novel. When he reaches the convent he toys with the notion of surrendering to the sick nun as if to declare his repentance:

"He let himself out. From the dark end of the hall he sighted the sick nun, tonight lying blank-faced on a sofa. Another nun, whose back was to him, occasionally wiped her face with a damp cloth. Jimmie coveted the moisture in the cloth but had no compulsion to surrender. ...

...He adjusted his bed and went to his tall ecclesiastical bed.
He slept and his wound pained on. As any rebirth wound could be expected to.

When he was conscious and remembered how he got the wound, he fell into worse delirium." [Keneally: p.172-173] 28

This connotes an awareness of change, growth, of light filtering through the moving darkness to clarity it with the vision he has.

As earlier a racial pattern was denied to him, Jimmie finds a pattern that can give shape to his experience. In delirium he moves again through the past that Mrs. Healy's body, Mort's innocence, the body of the white boy, Farrell and Dulcie, --they all merge into the pattern that is like "the heart of tribal secrets" 29 and so sacred to him. Jimmie discovers some small area of freedom by his act of acceptance and understanding of the fact that his psychological space has been ultimately achieved. This space of freedom was more important to him than that physical space where he had to restrain his own movements due to racial prejudices.

The irony of Neville's letter, the baptism of the new nation with Jimmie's trial, the transparent linking of Federation and Jimmie's rebellion, the hint of the coming century --all focus and contribute to the slickness of the ending, where the ironies seem to penetrate into the consciousness of the new nation. Jimmie finally convinces to himself the limitations and a distance that the historical framework formulates. The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith evokes a society that prefers the categorisation of individuals on the basis of racial assumptions. Jimmie's goals that are filtered in him at Neville, his collision with the society, the stereotypical image of the Aborigines --all suggest that the novel tries to portray the natives in a very crude but exotic manner.

Keneally develops the theme of racial discrimination in such a manner that the subtlety of victimisation and marginalisation get traversed. His representation of this historical figure was merely an attempt to create an impression of softness towards the harsh realities that the Aborigines undergo everyday. The tender portrayal of Jimmie is only a sign of a conceptual notion about the natives of this
country --the notion that does not go far beyond than an image of exoticism. Though the brutal reality has always been represented by an outlook of a white person, but the essence of torturous torments has never been exactly portrayed. Keneally does the portrayal with such an exactitude that the "unprivileged mass of Australia undergoes". Their pain is far beyond than one can even think of. They are not only what Keneally portrays or other white writers portray, these Aborigines are:

"...(M)erely not species to be marketed as exotic commodity or something that derives foreign sympathy but to be apart of the country". [Huggan: p.181] 

In his book, The Postcolonial Exotic, Graham Huggan argues that these natives or the mixed race have fed an illusion to this world that they can to projected as exotic objects. They "...are controlled by others even as they act out their fantasies of independence; they are vulnerable to exploitation..." as they are compulsively made a cultural part of the country.

The natives and the mixed ones of Australia felt themselves to be always deprived in the powerful hands of the domineering whites. They have never been portrayed as they are in reality. The whites took an advantage of their positions and did whatsoever they felt like. The portrayal of the dominance of the whites has always been represented in a different form. The brutal truth was not only concealed but also changed according to the desires of the whites. Even the voices of the suppressed are framed within the parameters of the white regime.

Keneally portrays an example of this suppression of voices in the novel. He is supremely aware of the dangers of a post-colonial classification of the white intelligentsia with the repressed and subjugated Aborigine. Through the portrayal of the character of a white schoolmaster, McCreadie, shows his self-aware. When on the run, Jimmie and Mort encounter the schoolmaster and perhaps to allay their fears, he shows them a cartoon from the newspaper, Bulletin:

*It was a caricature of two plump Aborigines camped in a forest setting, feeding police bloodhounds with legs of mutton. One of the Aborigine was*
telling a satiated police-dog. "Go back to yer boss an' tell 'im yer ain't seen nothing!" Both natives were smiling, and the one not bribing the bloodhounds was reading a newspaper which bannered the news: Blacksmith Brothers still at large after two months. [Keneally: p. 136] 33

Keneally offers the reader an image of postmodernist verve of the Blacksmith brothers reading a newspaper, where they are sketched as cartoons. This self-reflexive irony allows the Aborigines to value the intelligent skill of a man. McCreadie is able with a single gesture to question the dominant colonial ideology, to demonstrate the fact that he is able to empathise with the Jimmie and Mort, and their predicament.

The voice in the cartoon purports to be the voice of the Aborigine and thus mocking the futile authority of the white police and speaks in the dialect that the Aborigines use. Thus Keneally throughout the novel supports the voices of the Aborigines. He emphasises on the instability of post-colonial identity, where the homogeneity of the authorial voice is gradually eroded through a process of fragmentation and multiplicity.

When finally Jimmie is hanged, the novel has already given up its claim to a single authentic voice, so that the silencing of the suppressed is lost within the polyphony of opposition and negation. The Aboriginal voice might be silenced within a postmodern disintegration of the meta-narrative, but the sheer violence of Jimmie's crime and the crime against all Aborigines demands that the 'chant' be heard even though it has no one left to sing it.

Before these marginalised groups started depicting their own voices and conditions, they had already been in the framework of the literature that Australia produced. Since 1788, the whites had been projecting them as subjugated and submissive people. But Thomas Keneally as a white writer from Australia depicts the brutal reality that the Aborigines underwent. In The Chants of Jimmie Blacksmith, he represents the reality of historical truth. Morgan in her My Place also deals with enunciating the truth, but not in a form of 'chant' that Keneally made obvious in the voices of the Blacksmiths. As Veronica Brady in her essay
on Thomas Keneally, 'The Most Frightening Rebellion: The Recent Novels of Thomas Keneally', says:

"...Keneally's work is interesting. I think, not only for its own sake but also for what it implies for an understanding of what seems to be happening to the Aborigines in Australia today." [Brady: p. 74].