CHAPTER 1

The Early Days of the Tribe
CHAPTER # 1

A SURVIVAL OF SILENCE:
THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA

Nude, smooth, and giant-huge,
the torsos of the gums
hold up the vast dark cave
as the great moon comes.

Shock-headed black-boy stands,
with rigid thrusting spear,
defiant and grotesque
against the glistening sphere.

In clenched, contorted birth
black banksias agonise;
out of the ferns and earth,
half-formed, beast-boulders rise;

because the Bush goes back,
back to a time unknown:
chaos that had not word
nor image carved on stone.

--- Roland Robinson.

The perception about the native people of Australia -- the Aborigines -- has an intrinsic assessment of truth and reality. Their difficult existence from the beginning of history to the present day condition has rarely been recognised with affirmation. Different people have portrayed them differently --some intensified them with exotic elements, some were amusingly scornful about them, and still others portrayed them as an inferior race. But the reality has something very different and revealing. If we probe into the world of the Aboriginal people, the perceptions about them will be very different from the portrayals by the dominant groups.

In 1606, a party of Dutch explorers undertook the first authenticated voyage to the continent when they sailed from Java to New Guinea and then southward to Australia. Later, in 1770 Captain James Cook started his charting
of the country and took possession of the surveyed area on behalf of the British Crown. He named the territory New South Wales. It was with this adventurous explorer that the natives of this country came in contact with the world.

At the time of the first contact with the European colonialists in the late eighteenth century, most Aborigines were hunter-gatherers, with a complex oral culture and spiritual values based upon reverence for the land and a belief in the Dreamtime. The Dreamtime\(^2\) is at once the ancient time of creation and the present day reality of dreaming. This realm of mythological essence had always been a part of the Aboriginal world.

The exact timing of the arrival of the Aborigines' ancestors has been a matter of dispute among archaeologists. The most common view is that their ancestors came from Southeast Asia more than 50,000 years ago. This means there have been more than 1250 generations in Australia. The 50,000 BP date\(^3\) is based on a few sites in northern Australia using thermo-luminescence. A large number of sites have been radiocarbon dated to around 40,000 BP, leading some researchers to doubt the accuracy of the thermo-luminescence\(^4\) technique. Thermo-luminescence dating of the Minimum site in the Northern Territory suggested a date of 120,000 BP. Though this result received wide press coverage, most archaeologists have seriously questioned it.

Whatever may be their date of origin in the land of Australia, the real fact is that the Aboriginal people lived through many climatic changes and adapted successfully to the different environments. There is much debate about the degree to which Aboriginal people modified their environment. One controversy revolves around the role of Aborigines in the extinction of the marsupial mega fauna. Some argue that natural climatic change killed the mega fauna\(^5\). Others claim that, because the mega fauna were large and slow, they were easy prey for Aboriginal hunters. A third possibility is that Aboriginal modification of the environment indirectly led to their extinction.

Aboriginal modification of the environment, particularly through the use of fire, is also controversial. It is well known that Aborigines used fire for a variety of purposes — to encourage the growth of edible plants and fodder for
prey, to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, to make travel easier, to eliminate pests, for ceremonial purposes, and just to clean up the country. There is disagreement, however, about the extent to which Aboriginal burning led to large-scale changes in vegetation patterns.

Despite their reputation as stone-age relics, there is evidence of substantial change in Aboriginal culture over time. Rock painting at several locations in northern Australia has been shown to consist of a sequence of different styles linked to different historical periods. Harry Lourandos proposed a theory that a period of hunter-gatherer intensification occurred between 5000 and 3000 BP. This intensification involved an increase in human manipulation of the environment (for example, the construction of fish traps in Victoria), population growth, an increase in trade between groups, a more elaborate social structure, and other cultural changes. A shift in stone tool technology, involving the development of smaller and more intricate points and scrapers, occurred around this time.

There were many different Aboriginal groups, each with their own individual culture, belief structure, and language (approximately 200 different languages at the time of European contact). These cultures overlapped to a greater or lesser extent, and evolved over time. Lifestyles varied a great deal, and the stereotyped image of a proud and naked hunter standing one-legged in the red sand of the central Australian desert --cannot be applied across the board. For example, in the present-day Victoria, there were two separate communities with an economy based on fish-farming in complex and extensive irrigated pond systems. One was on the Murray River in the state's north, the other in the south-west near Hamilton, which traded with other groups from as far away as the Melbourne area.

Several factors have lead to the brutal conditions of life that these indigenous people of Australia are living today. Most of their problems have been given utterances with the valorous and strong-minded people. They not only voiced their thoughts but also, felt for the harsh realities that these Aborigines had been undergoing since they came in contact with other races.
What is more important is the factor of the domination from the other races —especially the whites—that the Aboriginal people suffered. Everything took a different turn when the interaction between the white colonisers and the Aborigines began. The domination became so severe that the white people started developing miscegenation with the Aboriginal women. Due to this physical abuse, another group of people came into existence —the mixed ones. Soon the existential identity of the Aborigines came into question with the emergence of the third race.

Furthermore, the actions, the reactions to the actions and the interactions that took place due to these actions —were significant points in the portrayal of the Aborigines. It is obvious that according to the interactions their portrayal varied; more important is that their portrayals depended on whom they confronted and under what circumstances. Hence the whites portrayed them in a manner which was very different from the way they portrayed themselves. If we consider different perceptions of the society, the perception that the mixed race has about the Aboriginal people will definitely be different from that of the white people, but the Aborigines themselves will also have a different perception.

Identity construction and representation are closely linked for they both emerge out of a complex political matrix that determines the way in which individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity and/ or self-understanding. Basically, this whole process of identity construction may be seen within the framework of movement from one region to the other. Human tendencies to move into a new and different situation have always led to the concept of migration. Within this spectrum of migration, the construction of adoption and adaptation comes in, through an interaction with the immediate milieu. When this interaction crosses the boundaries of social limitation, take for instance, when a white marries an Aborigine, the question of exact representation of this third kind of people that emerge from the white and black interactions, comes into existence. Thus, the struggle for space and identity begins.
It's not just a struggle for space and identity, but along with it several forms of struggle proliferate, which subtly get converted into conflicts. And gradually starts a conflict on a larger scale. Conflicts of ethnicity, race, culture, and so on begin in a very subtle manner. And somewhere in this conflict, the identity for recognition of the inferior races, ethnicities, cultures, seems to get lost. Thus a battle for recognition and representation begins. After such a struggle, the Aboriginal people happen to get their own space and an identity of recognition. This identity gave them the right to voice their exact feelings and emotions for existing within a volatile environment.

Thus, the literature dealing with the Aboriginal people and their life came into existence with the passage of time. The representation of Aborigines through different perspectives of anthropology, sociology, politics, history and literature, is the main objective of this research. My thesis is basically going to focus on the portrayals of the Aborigines. Although the natives of Australia have been portrayed in different ways in varied fields of disciplines, my thesis will try to formulate the Aborigines within the framework of their representations in Australian literature. The significant focus is on how the Aboriginal people have been portrayed in the literary world by the whites, by the mixed race and their self-portrayals. As the world of Australian literature is very enormous and widespread, I have made my research revolve around the genre of novels—one by a white writer, another by the writer of a mixed origin, and lastly; a novel written by an Aboriginal writer.

The study of the anthropological background of the Aboriginal people has been attempted in the next chapter. Not only the anthropology, but also a historical investigation on how the Aborigines have been represented in Australian history have been studied carefully. Their combat to exist in a milieu where they can be respected is also probed into. Their mode of life and conditions, their beliefs and myths, their customs and traditions, their conventions and perceptions of life—have all been examined. The focus on the identity and existence of the Aboriginal people is portrayed with a sociological perspective. Moreover, their portrayals in the history of Australian literature
have been encapsulated into a very acronymous and abbreviated form. Henceforth, the first chapter that deals with these aspects is an exhaustive study of the Aboriginal people of Australia.

The second chapter begins the portrayal of the Aborigines by the skilful imagination of the literary world. It begins with the perceptions of the whites. Among the innumerable number of authors, I gave special preference to Thomas Keneally and his work *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. I feel that among all the white writers, Keneally has portrayed the Aboriginal people in a very different fresco. He thinks that the Aboriginal people are also human beings and have an existence in this world of humanity. As whites have always portrayed the picture of the natives in a very exotic manner—the main motive is, perhaps, to bring global attraction towards these natives of Australia. This exotic representation of the natives has always been the main trope of capitalism and consumerism. Their main intention is to bring them to a global eye through their form of representation. Thomas Keneally deals with his novel and the characters in the same manner but a very unique way in the spectrum of exoticism.

The character of the protagonist—Jimmie Blacksmith—is a victim of his circumstances and the sole blame for his aversion of the whole urban society that build up gradually with him. Within him, his environment made his existence claustrophobically painful and full of suffering. Keneally very skilfully portrays the protagonist with a germination of an emotional specimen, struggling for a space in a society he can be proud of. His quest continues with him and ends with him. The whole conglomeration of sentimental attachment for his own tribe to the temperamental affinity to his surrounding—have been very marvellously portrayed. Hence Keneally became my choice among all the white writers whoever have portrayed the life and world of the Aborigines.

Among all the authors that can be categorised in the nomenclature of writers belonging to a mixed race, Sally Morgan is the first one to come to one's mind. So I was not an exception. Her *My Place* is one of the oeuvres that came to my mind without any second thought. So the third chapter deals with Sally
Morgan and her work. This novel not only draws everyone's attention for being the word of a person belonging to the mixed world, but it also portrays the terrible conditions of their life for they had to confront both domination from the whites and injustice from the Aboriginal people.

Every single line seems to be tinged with sarcasm, ridicule and scorn. Morgan's portrayal of the characters shows that she is fed up with the scoffing black-white relationship. She perceives that in the battle of blacks and whites, she stands nowhere --probably her space has been eradicated. Her identity did not get the favor, either of the blacks or the whites. The female protagonist of the novel seems to have a lot of semblance with the life of Sally Morgan herself. The picturisation of the native life is so vivid and lively that one starts feeling very sentimental about the incidents that occur in the characters' lives. So I felt that this would be the best example to deal with as a viewpoint of someone belonging to the mixed race.

In the fourth chapter, the viewpoint of an Aborigine herself for the portrayal of the Aborigines has been dealt with. Several writers came into my mind --from Mudrooroo Narogin to Oodrooroo Nonnuccal, from Jack Davis to Neville Bonner --but among all I gave a preference to Alexis Wright. There are many reasons behind it. First and foremost, I felt that she is very close to nature and her works reveal a dichotomy between the white monolith and a native hegemony. Her work *Plains of Promise* reveals this in a manner that the reader gets engrossed in the text from the very first page to the last one. One feels as if all the incidents are occurring in front of one's eyes --this basically shows the vividness of Wright's creations. Wright's feeling for her own race can be said to be normal in accordance with the sentiments that most Aboriginal authors write of --but her portrayal of the conditions of life in *Plains of Promise* is very different from the others for it has the connotations of survival. For any native, her own representation would be based more on the grounds of marginalisation and victimisation. One significant skill of Alexis Wright is that she gets into the character so well that there is no discrepancy in the portrayal of the real and the imaginative world.
Although all the three authors have their individual way of portraying the life and conditions of the Aboriginal people, but a common thread runs through the works of all these writers. Apart from threading their stories with the relationship of the natives and whites, they deal with the quest of identity, the pursuit of space, and most importantly the exploration of their own ethnicities. The concepts of marginalisation and discrimination, whether through race, color, ethnicity, culture—have been the tone of these three novels. Whether it is Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, or Sally Morgan's *My Place*, or Wright's *Plains of Promise*—all have the fervor of human relationship, which is very complex and complicated for it exists in the domain of abstract notions. How they are framed depending upon their respective milieu, would be another aspect that is focused in the thesis.

Problems of racial discrimination, ethnic conflict, color demarcation, quest for identity, pursuit for a specific space, marginalisations and victimisations—all have been given due importance within the framework of the literature that portrays them in details. My thesis has been an attempt to study how the whites have seen the Aborigines; and how the mixed race or so-called 'half-caste' observes them; and how the Aborigines have portrayed themselves.

My concluding chapter deals with a critical analysis of the three novels and the three authors. With the help of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, I have been able to present the conditional features of the Aboriginal people today. This chapter evaluates theories of culture. The interdisciplinary relation between the literary world and the discipline of philosophy has also been dealt with. So the focus will be more on philosophical and socio-political portrayals of the Aboriginal people of Australia. An interesting point about this chapter is that it describes how the different perspectives of the three authors have been conglomerated into a whole unit. In other words, this chapter shows the formation of the whole idea of this thesis.

It is very natural for every reader to think of the formulations that evolved in the writers’ mind for such portrayals of reality. Even my thoughts
and inklings for such a study about the Aboriginal people of Australia have several reasons behind my hard effort. The seed was sown long back into my thoughts when I came across an article on the *Mabo* case. Gradually with the passage of time the seed germinated into a colossal idea. With the quintessential nurture and caring concern of my supervisor and through several interactions that took place, this grand idea came into this form thesis.

In the process of the encapsulation of the world of the Aboriginal people, there may be an emphasis at certain places on a particular discipline or a particular generic concept. I have tried to encompass everything that I surveyed and researched upon without any injustice of particularisation. Henceforth, this kind of research will definitely help in comprehending more clearly about the world and life of the natives of Australia. One also gets to know about the literature of Australia that discusses and evaluates about the Aboriginal world in this thesis. Moreover, anthropological, historical, socio-political and cultural studies have also been glimpsed upon within a literary context.