CHAPTER - IV

REIMAGINING THE ABORIGINAL PAST

*(Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World)*

Hobart in one of the popular poems “The Colonial Times” has urged Australia to be cautious about the fair claim that Australia is their land. Invading with misfortune followers and crime, the usurpation of Australia went on unabatedly till the Aboriginal were completely submitted to the social, cultural and psychological enslavement (Cited in N. Cato and Vivienne Rae-Ellis (1976) *Queen Trucanini*, Heinemann: London, 3). Mudrooroo’s third novel *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the End of the World* is representative novel of Aboriginal culture and identity. The novel has appropriately represented the themes of alienation, loneliness, loss of sense of history which are internalized in Aboriginal culture as a consequence of external colonialism. Succinctly representing the post colonial and post modern critical aspect, the novel offers an alternative methodology in redeeming Aboriginal culture. The novel subscribes to the Post colonial proposition of ‘reclaiming the past’ of Frantz Fanon’s clarion call in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a seminal work that promulgated the Post Colonial criticism. To reclaim the past, the author indulges in imaginative exploration to recuperate the rudiments of buried history with the objective of constructing shared diversified history. Taking the episode of Australia’s officially recorded history, Mudrooroo
explores the tragedy of Tasmania’s frontier history. The Epic tragedy of Tasmania warfare is imaginatively reworked to demystify the concocted cultural fallacies about the lives of Aboriginals. Emphasizing, this as one of the novel’s main objective Mudrooroo inadvertently expresses Buddhist vision of harmonious co-existence. Mudrooroo displays historical fantasy in constructing the relationship between the characters George Augustus Robinson, Wooreddy and Trugernanna. The cross cultural triangle between the characters provides a greater canvass for the narrative plausibility. The discourse of Mudrooroo proves that he is an omniscient narrator. He embraces a form of narrative violence for repossessing the space of narration.

The significant aspect of the novel is that Mudrooroo represents Australian history from the perspective of Aboriginal characters. He centres the Aboriginal characters and demystifies the so called civilizing mission of White cultures. Against the backdrop of the colonial usurpation of Tasmania in 1830, Mudrooroo depicts the human suffering and death. Marking the symbolic death of the last Aboriginal male of Bruny Island and Woorrady, Mudrooroo presents the systematic program of British colonial genocide and centres the narration on the incidents between 1829 and 1842. The resonance of the Aboriginal genocide is felt in the lives of the indigenous people and remains as a genuine reflection of the tragedy of
contemporary Aboriginal belonging. Speaking through the Aboriginal characters Mudrooroo’s creative journey into the past becomes a new means of remembering and reimagining the forgotten past. Parodying the official accounts of history, the novel explores how the ancient life of the indigenous people was regarded as obsolete. Doctor Wooreddy parodies the reports of George Augustus Robinson about the lives of Indigenous people of Tasmania. Opening the novel in a symbolic mode, Mudrooroo combines the past with the present. With a strong authorial voice, he mediates over geographical, social and cultural facts. This contemplation leads to examine the Aboriginal lives at the backdrop of seascape. The detailed elucidation of the literary and cultural representation of sea is illustrated in the middle of the chapter. This becomes an ontological encounter with the borders of the past and present, living and the dead. Wooreddy’s response to the sea is fearful and is considered as seasoned and intellectual. He is considered as a travelling character and is possibly compared with the historical character that represented highest form of morality, theology and philosophy. Mudrooroo establishes a symbolic aboriginal cultural representation in his name and connotes an ambivalent nature of colonized non resistant aboriginals.

Mudrooroo brings in the usual Shakespeare’s Prospero and Caliban conflict in presenting Wooreddy and his band of followers attempt to
master the alien language. Through the old ways of inhabiting and acquiring language, Wooreddy proves that history cannot be regenerated. History proves that old ways and languages are doomed to disappear. The evolution and the formation of new culture and language indicate the end of the world and the beginning of new life. It is from this perspective; Mudrooroo presents Dr. Wooreddy as an Aboriginal Spiritual leader. He becomes the representative of self realization. He adopts the strategies to come to terms with the contemporaneity and utilizes any means related to knowledge. He understands that every form of Aboriginal culture is related to knowledge that possibly creates power. He develops a summation of the state of affairs and a calculating attitude to combat loneliness. In this process, he becomes a catalyst for subversion and an embodiment of cultural adaptation.

Another significant character George Augustus Robinson as a true historical character is portrayed as an opportunistic paragon of virtue. He is defined with several names which naturally inculcates curiosity in knowing the history of naming. This brings in the form of social narrative and questions the power of colonial discourse in defining and redefining aboriginal identity. The practice of ‘naming’ becomes a social discourse to understand colonial culture. This also becomes the existential discourse for the colonized. Though, it is considered as a trivializing method, reclaiming
the name becomes a definite proud proclamation of identity. Mudrooroo in addressing the social discourse of naming the aboriginals, he makes even Wooreddy as a victim of colonial nicknaming. Wooreddy’s character is based on the last surviving male of Bruny Island Tribe. Trugernanna is also constructed as a disguise of historical figure of Tasmanian Aboriginal. Thus these three characters become the spectroscopic reflection of the imagined history and literature. This becomes Mudrooroo’s genuine attempt to subscribe to the propositions of New Historicism. For New historicism, the ‘self’ is predetermined by cultural location and is cut off from absolute possibilities. Stephen Greenblatt in his seminal work *Renaissance Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) has examined the promotion and journey of the ‘Self’ from Elizabethan times. The evolution and shaping of the self becomes an advanced and celebrated concept of cultural semiology of the self. Mudrooroo proves that it is the culture that constitutes the self and constraints the self. The self of the aboriginals is predetermined by the colonial culture.

From the perspective of Feminism, the novel conveys an entirely different view of Aboriginal Feminism. The rape of Trugernanna does not become the subject of history. Mudrooroo proves his insensitivity to the pain of woman. Unfortunately, this has failed to catch the attention of critics like Shoemaker to expose the imbalance in representing the
Aboriginal Masculine and Feminine world. They were projected as lacking self power and determination. They were made to accept numbness and pain in life and this is presented as a form of survival instinct. The narration of the pain suffered by Trugernanna is marginalized by Mudrooroo and offers the impression that the story of Aboriginal Women’s exploitation is secondary to Aboriginal patriarchal discourse. This misogynistic view of the world offers a perspective that Aboriginal women’s feminism as a representative Fourth World Feminism is an essential critical insight to examine the imbalanced Mudrooroo’s attempt of Aboriginal reality.

Mudrooroo offers a defense against the invisibility of Aboriginals by invoking the significance of land as an essence of people’s identity. He draws solace from the land and confirms the Aboriginal identity related to the land. Illustrating the Derridian notion that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, Mudrooroo adopts writing as an ultimate form of subversive discourse. Though ‘writing’ is an alien form of Aboriginal culture, in the light of Derridian deconstruction, Mudrooroo confirms that Writing is the site of change. Now the form of Aboriginal subversion finds its complete sagacity as the characters speak from the discourse of power. Mudrooroo undoubtedly dismantles the structures of power and attributes his ideological confirmation to the decentrality of Aboriginal culture. Despite
the brief critical understanding developed and crafted in tune with the contemporary critical terrain, a further detailed elaboration is done leading to centrifugal understanding of the novel bringing in the relevance of Northrop Frye’s Archetypal literary and critical representation.

The emergence of Colonialism in Australia was in 1788 but it is viewed as a new way of life that has fatally blown the Aboriginal people. The collapse of Indigenous society and much of the cultural knowledge that had been passed from generation to generation in the oral tradition was lost. The future became indeterminate in terms of the Aboriginal ancestral vision of how it might unfold and develop. Left without a sense of history and divested of the power to represent themselves on their own terms, Indigenous people suffered from an abject loneliness, what Cornel West calls the “problematic of invisibility and namelessness” (West, 27).

The atrophy, alienation and loneliness that accompany the loss of a sense of history, identity and belonging in the colonial situation are precisely the themes in Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World. The book explores a number of the same interests as its predecessor, Long Live Sandawara. Not the least of these is the eradication of Aboriginal voices from Australia’s ‘official’ historical and anthropological records. Doctor Wooreddy explores the need to redeem the loss of culture (power) and to reclaim the past by reasserting a valid, self-
directed view of Aboriginal belonging in the annals of Australia’s foundation narrative. The novel extends the notion of a history shared – that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike have inherited the colonial past and continue to live within the sphere of its influence, however diverse and inequitable that influence might be. Whilst it contests the pedigree and priority of pre-existing versions of what happened in Australia’s past, the text does so, however, in a fatalistically resigned way that manages to keep both sides of the story alive. As the author has his Aboriginal protagonist tellingly remark: “in the long run, learning to survive meant accepting that the ghosts [white invaders] were here to stay and learning to live amongst them, or at least next to them until – until the ending of the world!.” (Mudrooroo, 19)

*Doctor Wooreddy* is a fictionalized dramatization of previously documented accounts of post-invasion and deals, in particular, with a catastrophic episode of Australia’s ‘officially’ recorded history. As David Kerr argues the book explores the tragedy of Tasmania’s frontier warfare “through the lives of four characters, Wooreddy, Ummarrah, Trugernanna and Walyer, each representing a major stance taken by Aboriginals in response to their fate” under colonial rule. Kerr draws comparisons between *Doctor Wooreddy* and Robert Drewe’s *The Savage Crows*, as
“works of literature and as imaginative reworkings of history.” (David Kerr, 60)

There is a paramount importance in the author’s historical fantasy about the relationship between the figures George Augustus Robinson, Wooreddy and Trugernanna. Tasmania provides an explosive geographical and historical setting for the cross-cultural narrative triangle which proves to be a source of the most elusive commodity – politically creative inspiration. The three characters rarely cease to be of interest to Mudrooroo as his project develops and appear in no less than five of his novels. Given this fact, Doctor Wooreddy may be seen as a form of ‘mother’ text from which a whole host of stories and serial characters germinate. The novel is further distinguished by a sense of ironic restlessness to suggest that the violence which marked Australia’s colonial beginnings stains, not only its past, but also its present and its future. As the narrator perceives it, “the land had been soiled by the blood of its [Aboriginal] owners [...] In such a way, the ghosts and humans shared the land” (Mudrooroo, 109) and they continue to do so.

Mudrooroo’s first-contact discourse represents the white invaders as less-than-human – as ‘ghosts’ (or num) and the Aboriginal peoples as ‘human’ (As in Mudrooro’s text, in Queen Trucanini, Cato and Rae-Ellis, take num to mean white man, or ghost -Cato and Rae-Ellis, 79). An
omniscient narrator dominates a story that turns on the notion of innocence versus betrayal, a recurring theme in Mudrooroo’s oeuvre. The grand European historical narrative on the other hand, is treated by the author as myth – a series of unknowable and ultimately undecidable (in)human events that are ‘authoritatively’ expressed as ‘facts’. In her essay, “The Terrors of *Terra Nullius*: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality”, Penny van Toorn argues that “Johnson recontextualizes and re-activates these myths so that they articulate the suppressed moral dimension of white colonial history” (95). This suggests that, by writing over pre-existing white texts, the author embraces a form of narrative violence in order to create what might be called, following Homi Bhabha, “a phantasmic space of [re]possession” (Bhabha, 44) that offers another perspective on the integration of Aboriginal peoples into dominant white culture. To write over the writing of others invokes the concept of the palimpsest which, Françoise Kral suggests, “requires a certain violence through which the surface layer [of a page] is scraped off and removed and to make room for a different version of past events” (Kral, 7). Penny Van Toorn reads *Doctor Wooreddy* as a Colonial Gothic text that reverses the tendency of practitioners of the mode to conscript “ Aboriginal people into the role of white society’s ‘darker self’” (Penny Van Toorn, 95). In her view, *Doctor Wooreddy* overturns this position and “brings to light the ‘darker side’ of white colonial history” (Penny Van Toorn, 95) to reveal
the ephemeral nature of its narratives. For Penny van Toorn, such stories – much like ghosts – are constructed as discourses of fear with little basis in reality.

Justin MacGregor’s critique of the novel stresses the violence of colonial discourse and demonstrates how Mudrooroo shows that the “the language of the colonizer is a weapon used to repress alternative cultures, interpretations and perceptions” (Justin MacGregor, 113). Much like Kerr, MacGregor sees the decay of Indigenous language as a metaphor for the ending of a way of life for Aboriginal peoples. MacGregor determines in particular that Mudrooroo’s counter-discourse reveals the problems associated with cross-cultural communication – “the socially determined nature of western historical discourse [and of] discussing a culture in another culture’s language” (Justin MacGregor, 55-61).

Penny Van Toorn, Kerr and MacGregor emphasize the significance of the way in which Mudrooroo represents Australian history from the perspective of his Aboriginal characters. For all of these critics Doctor Wooreddy describes a journey that fluctuates between cultures – a counter narrative in which white ‘players’ are relegated to the wings and black characters take centre stage. Nevertheless, as Kerr also points out, Doctor Wooreddy is “in large measure constructed from information contained in the diaries of history’s George Augustus Robinson” (David Kerr, 59).
There are numerous points of contact in the novel with the life and times (crimes) of Robinson, whose so-called ‘civilizing’ mission achieved nothing towards improving the position of aboriginals.

In other words, as we have seen with Sandawara, Mudrooroo continued to rely heavily on white narrative sources when constructing what MacGregor calls, the author’s “reversal of the colonial contact novel” (Justin MacGregor, 114). Of course, for any writer of fiction, there is no untainted, or pure, point of origin. Yet one is led to wonder whether, by repeatedly returning to mock the dominant view of the same pre-existing state of affairs, Mudrooroo is unconsciousely preserving the very discourses he wishes to undermine. Simon Dentith in his polemical work Parody (2000) reflects on such dangers when he writes:

given the pervasiveness of parody in language use, most forms are going to be shot through with more or less mocking or derisive imitations or anticipations of the other’s words. [...] The parodic paradox, by which parody creates new utterances out of the utterances that it seeks to mock, means that it preserves as much as it destroys – or rather, it preserves in the moment that it destroys – and thus the parasite becomes the occasion for itself to act as host. (189).
Mudrooroo sets *Doctor Wooreddy* in Tasmania in the 1830s against the background of disorder, uncertainty and the clamoring of early white colonialists struggling to seize Aboriginal land. This is some twenty-five years after the European invasion of Tasmania which, until 1855, was known as Van Diemen’s Land – a geographical location of socially condoned (and contained) human suffering and death. The author deliberately re-styles rather than re-writes the earlier interpretations of a synchronised program of systematic British colonial genocide and focuses on events that took place between 1829 and 1842. As mentioned earlier, the year 1829 identifies the appointment of George Augustus Robinson as Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines, while 1842 marks the symbolic death of the last Bruny Island, Aboriginal male, Woorrady. Using the flimsiest of veils, Mudrooroo renames Woorrady, ‘Doctor Wooreddy’ while George Augustus Robinson is left to ‘play himself’ in a confrontational narrative space where previous accounts of the British invasion of Tasmania are recycled and retold. In the process, the author exposes history’s manufactured praxis showing that all we can truly ‘know’ of the past are the manifestations of its effects in the present – that is, the effects of what happened rather than what and how the actual events took place. Whilst it may focus on a particular point in history, much like *Sandawara* before it, *Doctor Wooreddy*’s message of imposed social contamination and Aboriginal cultural genocide has resonance today in
terms of how the lives of Indigenous peoples have evolved since the imposition of European laws and language.

*Doctor Wooreddy* emerged at a critical phase in Australia’s white history and is readable as a satirical act of remembrance – a multi-layered, politically subversive tale that uses events of the past to imaginatively reflect the tragedy of contemporary Aboriginal belonging. Published just five years before the ‘celebration’ of two hundred years of colonial occupation, this was a time of renewed interest in the preservation of Aboriginal cultural heritage, languages and traditions. 1983 was also the year in which the inaugural meeting of the United Nations’ Working Group on Indigenous People was held. Ironically, this is the same year in which Australia’s Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs rejected the idea of a treaty, contending that the Aboriginal peoples were not a sovereign entity and thus could not enter into a legal contract with the Commonwealth (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Briefing Paper).

The report of the United Nations’ Working Group took up questions of identity and self-determination that, arguably, had the effect of re-kindling interest in the Australian Aboriginal ‘case’ both at home and abroad. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson acknowledges this possibility when he observes that “the
question of identity has been taken up explicitly by the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations” (Dodson, 5). In exemplary research paper ‘The Went worth Lecture- The End in the Beginning – Redifining Aboriginality’ he argues however, that:

alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourses in which we have continued to create our own representations and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorised versions. They are Aboriginalities that arise from our experience of ourselves and our communities. They draw creatively from the past, including the experience of colonization and false representation. But they are embedded in our entire history, a history which goes back a long time before colonization was even an issue. (Dodson, 9)

Speaking through his Aboriginal characters, Mudrooroo’s creative journey into the past challenges authorized versions of Indigenous identity in a way that echoes Dodson’s words and announces a shift from social realism to ‘fantasy’ in terms of the author’s literary trajectory. The novel paints a vastly different picture of how Indigenous peoples may have reacted to having their ancient way of life either completely destroyed or regarded as obsolete, in the wake of colonization. In the context of Mudrooroo’s treatment of his protagonist, Doctor Wooreddy, it also signals the new
prominence of the shaman/maban reality as a measure of the move towards ‘the magical’ that becomes ever more prominent in the author’s later novels.

For Mudrooroo the novel is “a tool of reflection” (46) – a cultural weapon with the power to foster a new means of remembering the past and of re-imagining a forgotten, but not completely lost, time. As a hybrid-self, Mudrooroo seems to take personal pleasure in the irony of appropriating a white, equally hybrid, and form of expression as the means by which to recall a time of unparalleled atrocity towards Australia’s Indigenous people. Told from a modern-day perspective, Doctor Wooreddy parodies what, until recently, were among the widely accepted ‘official’ accounts of the ‘civilizing’ of the Indigenous people of Tasmania – the reports of George Augustus Robinson. But there is more than parody at work here. There is also a parasitic act of re-imagination, one that feeds off the ‘real’ figure of Robinson as a way of exploring the possibility of the value of a previously unwritten discourse of belonging – how a dispossessed people cope(d) with the injustices of a once familiar world that had become forever strange.

The story of Wooreddy, Robinson and Trugernanna opens in symbolic mode, simultaneously uniting the past with the present and foreshadowing the novel’s ending. In a first chapter appropriately entitled,
“The Omen”, Wooreddy walks as a child on a lonely Bruny Island beach. A strong authorial voice mediates geographical, mythological, social and cultural ‘facts’ alike to represent the protagonist’s island home as a safe-haven from the life-threatening waters that encompass it. The narrator’s opening remarks announce that:

Wooreddy belonged to a rich island but the surrounding sea was dangerous and filled with dangerous scale fish. Not even women were allowed to gather these creatures. It was evil luck to see one. They were taboo, for unlike the denizens of the real world, they swam in a different medium and never needed to feel or touch the earth. To them the land was death just as to the Bruny Islanders the sea was death. (Mudrooroo, 1)

At once protected by the ocean and defenders of its grandeur, the ‘scale fish’ signify the dangers that lie beneath its often calm surface and, by extension, the possible hazards of what lies out of sight beyond its boundaries. The seascape is not merely a backdrop in Mudrooroo’s tale however. It is also a comment that, from Homer to Melville (and by implication to Mudrooroo), the sea has been a focus of literature since its inception. A fictional ‘character’ in its own right and the home of mayhem, monsters and mermaids, the sea is an integral part of what the myths and legends of art and culture are made of – the shaper of views, the source of
fantastic tales of survival against powerful, demonic creatures. Perhaps more importantly when considered in the context of his entire body of work, however, for Mudrooroo, the sea represents the carrier of colonial terror.

The author makes it clear from the beginning that, from his childhood, Wooreddy looks to the sea as the begetter of monsters rather than of human kind. The formlessness of the ocean is the allegorical source of the character’s perverse fascination with a future that has become hideous and unknown – with “things that lurked and threatened” (Mudrooroo, 2) and are synonymous with the supernatural. Speaking through his protagonist, Mudrooroo gives the name Ria Warrawah (In Queen Trucanini, Cato and Rae-Ellis describe ‘Ria’ or ‘Rae’ as a devil or spirit (7), while ‘Wurrewah’ are spirits of the dead. Cato and Rae-Ellis, 1976, 24). To this malevolent, ocean-ruling phantom Wooreddy find no adequate words in the English language. Wooreddy’s dreamed encounter with Ria Warrawah signifies a meeting of opposing ontological forces on the borderline between past and present, between the living and the dead – the contradictory circumstances of the historical and linguistic signs in which the anti-colonial writer is constantly enmeshed. Wooreddy conceives Ria Warrawah as an unwholesome manifestation beyond his understanding and control. He describes the phenomenon as “something
slimy, something eerily cold and not of this earth” (Mudrooroo, 3) to suggest a sub-human order, a backward rather than forward looking form of evolution and an all pervasive evil that, like a contagious disease, “seem[s] to infest and affect all existing things” (Mudrooroo, 2), Mudrooroo literalises this connection in his later work when he introduces an ‘immigrant’ female vampire character into his last three novels as a means of signifying the ‘savage’ nature of colonialism’s so-called civilising mission. Gerry Turcotte refers to these novels – *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999) and *The Promised Land* (2000) – as ‘The Vampire Trilogy’ in his “Vampiric Decolonization: Fanon, ‘Terrorism’ and Mudrooroo’s Vampire Trilogy”.

Throughout time, change has come from over-the-sea; that is, from ships carrying the ‘strangers’ who represent change itself. In a dream-like trance Wooreddy confronts the demons of the past in a scene that is symbolic of the beginnings of the first days of invasion and symptomatic of “a future hideous with uncertainty” (84). The character’s vision depicts a world taken hold of, shaken and turned upside down by *Ria Warrawah* who “manifested himself as a cloud and pulled an island along. He pulled it to Adventure Bay and left it there” (Mudrooroo, 1998. 3). These words appear to refer to the arrival of Captain James Cook at Adventure Bay. Drawing on the work of N.J.B. Plomley, Rae-Ellis notes that history’s
Woollady “told Robinson that his father saw Captain James Cook land at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island” (Rae-Ellis, 32). When the child awakens it is hardly surprising that he has “his back to the sea” (Mudrooroo, 4) – blotting out his view of the water as though fearful of the kind of change its image represents.

As an adult, however, Wooreddy’s response to his fear is more reasoned and intellectual. He calculates, for example, that the threat from the sea’s vast expanse “must be confronted side-on and not directly” (Mudrooroo, 3), from a point of irradiating force, if it is to be endured and overcome. This is just one example among many others in the novel, of the inversion of colonial representations of Aboriginal people as pathetic and dull-witted. Mudrooroo’s Doctor Wooreddy is a remarkably astute character or, as Craig Tapping aptly puts it, he is “a travelling encyclopedia” (Tapping, 57). The character is referred to as ‘the good doctor’ (It is perhaps worth noting given Mudrooroo’s Buddhist leanings that Buddha is also referred to as ‘the good doctor’). throughout the narrative and identified variously as an explorer, a philosopher, a man of science, a moralising theologian and a great lover. It would be possible to argue that Mudrooroo’s Dr. Wooreddy is Dr. Livingstone, Dr. Einstein, Dr. Schweitzer, Dr. Frankenstein, and Dr. Kildare, all rolled into one.
On a more whimsical note, readers also learn that Wooreddy’s name means ‘duck’. The character is a ‘living’ paradox – a tragic-comical figure caught in dire circumstances as he “waddled his way towards adulthood in an awful world that became less and less familiar” (Mudrooroo, 5). “Born between the day and the night” (Mudrooroo, 1), Wooreddy represents the ambivalent nature of colonial existence. Caught in destabilising circumstances that are beyond his control, he is the quintessential ‘sitting duck’. The character’s dilemma exemplifies the conflict of being forever between two worlds and of never fully belonging to either. Since Mudrooroo’s own genealogy is neither white nor black but lies in the space between, Wooreddy’s predicaments may be read as an articulation of the author’s own ‘divided’ position in the context of his hybrid identity and dual sense of belonging – both as a writer and as an individual. The apparent fusion of Mudrooroo and his imaginary character speaks, metaphorically at least, of the adverse material effects of the ideological construction of the signs of identity and difference as a consequence of colonisation. The ills of the likely inexplicable world which Doctor Wooreddy is called upon to explain and to cure (Mudrooroo, 3) also find resonance in Mudrooroo’s role as a black Australian writer; that is, as a prescriber of opposing words (spells) to counter the power of white discourse( num magic).
Mudrooroo is as equally ambivalent in his portrayal of Robinson as he is in his depiction of Wooreddy. The Great Conciliator’s preposterous ‘nature’ deteriorates to that of a ‘real’ monster as the narrative unfolds. Described early in the book as one who “bubbled under his stiff exterior [whereas others] radiated a coldness” (Mudrooroo, 50-51), the character may be interpreted as being less barbarous than his fellow colonisers. Moreover, for most of the narrative, Trugernanna and Wooreddy tend to dance at the edges of misplaced loyalty, believing that Robinson would “look after them [...] save them and lead them to the promised land” (Mudrooroo, 134), Mudrooroo’s later *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series grows out of the failure of both Robinson and Wooreddy (re-named Fada and Jangamuttuk respectively) to fulfill their promises to the Aboriginal peoples). Only in the closing stages of the novel do they come to the conclusion that “all they owed their friend, Conciliator, Commandant and Protector was death and destruction for the calamity he had brought on their people” (Mudrooroo, 184). Overall, the white intruders, including Robinson, are conceived in grotesque terms as those who crawl “like insects on the body of the devil” (Mudrooroo, 28 – as “agents of *Ria Warrawah*”, 49).

It is not incidental to the plot that what materialises from the clutches of *Ria Warrawah* are the ghost-like speakers of the English
language themselves, “pale souls that Ria Warrawah had captured” (Mudrooroo, 4). When the invaders “spoke […] the sounds were unlike any that had been heard” (Mudrooroo, 4), but before long, the Aboriginal characters acquire skills that become equal to or better than those of the uneducated British convicts and early colonisers. Wooreddy and his band of followers quickly master the alien language. Nevertheless, an anguished Wooreddy is convinced that the world he and his people now inhabit is irreversibly altered, that history cannot be regenerated and the old-ways and languages are doomed to disappear. The sights and sounds of a strange ‘language’ and culture herald the beginning of a new way of life and the ending of the world as Wooreddy and his people know it. In a scene which denotes the crucial part the English language plays in the affairs of the colonised world – how quickly it acquires a level of cultural status that begins to shape ideas of the self and sense of belonging for Indigenous people:

The good doctor noticed how many num words they spoke and suddenly realized that more and more num words had also entered his vocabulary. ‘Yes, there does not seem to be much of a choice,’ he spoke into the silence. ‘Things are so different now, right down to the words we speak’ […] the times had indeed changed. (Mudrooroo, 118)
Much like Sandawara before him, Wooreddy is portrayed as a Shaman or Aboriginal clever man and the spiritual leader of a small band of survivors. Unlike the warrior Sandawara however, Wooreddy, is represented as a passive scholar who believes there is little hope to be found in fighting against the violence and potency of colonialism. In Wooreddy’s view, “one disarmed oneself before an enemy of overwhelming strength and cast oneself upon his mercy” (Mudrooroo, 10). Wooreddy’s intellectual and spiritual preparation for the demands of future chiefdom means that, as an adult, he is the carrier of historical knowledge. From his childhood, Wooreddy remembers the stories told by his elders, who are personifications of the age-old wisdom of humanity, “the old men” (Mudrooroo, 1998. 3) in whose hands the historicity of the tribe is held. From their stories, he builds a history of learning and belief in the understanding that: “the older a man grew, the more he received and found. Sometimes the old ones had so much knowledge that they could make the very earth tremble. It was even rumoured they could fly to the sky-land while still alive”. (Mudrooroo, 24-25)

Mudrooroo literalizes the mythology of shamanistic magical ascent to the sky in the Master of the Ghost Dreaming series where his shape-shifting characters have the power to fly. Much like the author uses the novel as a tool of subversion; Wooreddy uses whatever information and
strategies he has at his disposal to try to come to terms with the new and unaccommodating situation that exists in a world forever-changed. As both a leader and a subjected subject, for Wooreddy, knowledge – produced by dreams or by any other means – is a powerful weapon. With knowledge and power the possibility of intervention comes, a chance to challenge the status quo, to stem if not to turn the advancing tide of change. “Selected and set apart” (Mudrooroo, 3) to become a leader of his people, Wooreddy’s social and cultural position cannot be claimed by just anyone. The ‘I’ of his narrated historical identity has substance – authority. He is not spoken for but rather speaks from his own point of view and, by implication, from the position of the people his character represents.

Wooreddy’s cunning summation of the state of affairs in early nineteenth-century Tasmania is that now “alone in a country of strangers” (Mudrooroo, 10) what one needs is allies (The theme of the colonised as the stranger in need of friends in a land made strange is even more prominent in the author’s later fiction and more particularly, in his vampire trilogy, which is discussed in Chapter IX). The character’s calculating attitude towards combating loneliness and alienation bears the signature of a particular form of trickster figure. Wooreddy not only represents folklore’s ambiguous shape-shifter, rule breaker and catalyst for subversion – he is also the embodiment of cultural adaptation in the quest
for survival. For Wooreddy finds an unlikely ally (perhaps an alter ego?) in the comical figure of Robinson, a man who is also undergoing a form of cultural transformation – however different that might be – in the alien environment in which he too finds himself.

Mudrooroo portrays Robinson as an opportunistic paragon of virtue. A tongue-in-cheek narrator represents the hypocritical, bible-bashing character as the immoral man-with-a-mission – one “destined by God to make the Aborigines the most interesting and profitable part of his life” (Mudrooroo, 32). In his essay “The Missionary in Aboriginal Fiction”, Emmanuel S. Nelson draws on the work of Albert Szymanski, when he observes that in the course of their ministrations, Australia’s colonial missionaries “attempted to violate the very heart of Indigenous culture. Often ill-trained, both in Christian theology and in cross-cultural interaction, they actively strove to disrupt traditional beliefs and rituals which they failed to understand.” (Nelson, 452)

Mudrooroo’s fictional Robinson fits this descriptive precisely. Much like the ‘true’ historical character, Robinson is portrayed as “a working-class Englishman with little education” (Nelson, 454) – an erstwhile bricklayer and self-proclaimed man of God who “had been only a few years in the colony and already was a man of substance” (Mudrooroo, 53). Writing some time later, Shoemaker also suggests that Doctor Wooreddy is
“preoccupied with ignorance” (Shoemaker, 47) – with parodying the coloniser’s refusal to learn from the colonised, an arrogance for which the figure of Robinson is a metaphor. Following Nelson, Shoemaker notes that those who first came to Australia with the intention of ‘civilising’ an ‘alien’ environment and its people were mostly unschooled. They were unaware and did not care whether a so-called ‘primitive’ culture might be “in many respects far more complex than that of their ‘educators.’” (Shoemaker, 48)

Despite his humble family background and lack of formal education, Robinson’s arrogance reflects an attitude favoured by the many of the British bureaucracy, by squatters and by convicts of the day. His hubris represents a discourse of assumed privilege underpinned by racial prejudice and he acts accordingly. For example, Robinson considers himself superior to Wooreddy and his small band of followers who “were to be ‘children’ to his ‘father’” (Mudrooroo, 33). Mudrooroo manages to invert this perception, however, for Wooreddy quickly and comically makes the assessment that the “self-assured, pompous little ghost [Robinson] before him could be used to help him to survive until the end of the world” (Mudrooroo, 31). Once again Mudrooroo overturns a stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ which reflects social attitudes towards Aboriginal people as child-like and in need of protection. In his
authorial discourse it is the black man who de-humanises the white man and Woorreddy who looks upon “Meeter Ro-bin-un as his very own num” (Mudrooroo 31) – as a strange kind of infantile pet animal to be given descriptive names, trained and exploited. It is worth noting here that the author reverses this position in his later work when he gives the role of ‘pet dog’ to his young Aboriginal protagonist in The Undying, the first volume of the vampire trilogy.

In a particularly telling scene which speaks of Mudrooroo’s career-long interest in the semiotics of naming, with deliberate, evaluative and satirical intonation, Robinson is variously defined as ‘Fader’, ‘Meeter Ro-bin-un’, ‘Ballawine’ (red ochre – because of his sun burnt skin), ‘Commandant’, ‘Conciliator’ and ‘Protector’. As Shoemaker observes each of Robinson’s titles “signifies a change in the missionary’s relationship with the Aboriginal Tasmanians, just as it highlights his altering self-perception” (Shoemaker, 62). In Mudrooroo’s fiction, however, names imposed descriptively upon the individual subject as a form of social narrative call into question the power of colonial discourses of representation to define and re-define Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity through associative naming patterns – or ‘nick-naming’.

The practice of ‘nicknaming’ is prevalent in today’s Australia among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, but it had a more
sinister intent in the early days of colonial settlement when nicknames became not only a rudimentary but also a trivializing method for identifying Indigenous people. Aboriginal family names became as expendable a sign of the peoples’ existential insignificance in the eyes of the colonisers as did their languages, spiritual beliefs and social values. As Marilyn Wood in the essay “Nineteenth Century Bureaucratic Constructions of Indigenous Identities in New South Wales” published in Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions & Possibilities (1998) ed. By Nicolas Petersen& Will Sanders observes:

The way in which ‘nicknames’ became the primary means of identifying some Aboriginal people is also evidence of the marginality and instability of many Aboriginal identities, as viewed from a British perspective. The names Frying Pan, Bimmito Boy, Black Stephen, Rifle and Tiger still conjure up an image of their bearers more than a century after their death. (Wood, 41)

The discriminatory application of epithets as a means of identification and belonging infused Indigenous people with social and cultural characteristics based on their race and the colour of their skin. Echoing Shoemaker, Wood argues that the practice was founded on ignorance and “probably reflected a British inability to grasp the nuances of Aboriginal kinship and naming systems” (Wood, 41). The denotative function that
accompanies a discourse of nick-naming in the colonial context, however, might also be seen as a political device that allows for what Himani Bannerji in *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays in Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (2000) calls the “social management of inequality” (Bannerji, 36). History shows that, predominantly, it is the Aboriginal people who have been forced to change. Only they have been required to divest themselves of family names and kinship systems in exchange for existence labels that reflect the lowering of their social status in line with the colonising perspective.

Mudrooroo’s use of a range of nicknames to identify his fictional George Augustus Robinson’s shifts in self-perception also has resonance in Mudrooroo’s own tendency to re-name himself. As noted in Chapter II, in the course of his literary career, the author has taken up a number of different names, which positively constitute evidence of identity in terms of Aboriginal cultural belonging. The author’s practice demonstrates how keenly aware he is of the power of the name not only as a personal descriptive but also as a source of political and social narrative about the individual subject. For him, his change of name to Mudrooroo Nyoongah strongly asserted his Aboriginality. In the course of an interview with journalist Terry O’Connor for example, he states “no one would ever not mistake me for an Aborigine with a name like Mudrooroo Nyoongah.
You’re making a definite statement of identity. If they read your name they won’t consider you some sort of Anglo” (O’Connor, 24). As O’Connor goes on to observe, it is a hard irony that “being ‘some sort of Anglo’ is exactly what [Mudrooroo] is now being accused of” (O’Connor, 24).

In Mudrooroo’s discourse of shared histories, Wooreddy does not escape the colonial practice of nicknaming. He is known variously, and at times in mystical ways throughout the narrative, as ‘Count Alpha’, ‘Poimatapunna’ (Keeper of the Fire), and ‘Phoenix’. Much like Robinson, Wooreddy is also a thinly veiled adaptation of an historical figure. The character is based on Woorrady, the last surviving male of the Bruny Island tribe, an Indigenous group decimated by colonial brutality and imported European diseases. In *Black Robinson*, Rae-Ellis notes that Woorrady is described in Robinson’s journals as a chief, a great hunter and a boat builder, attributes that Mudrooroo also ascribes to his fictitious character. Mudrooroo’s Trugernanna is also a thinly disguised reconstruction of an historical figure, the so-called last Tasmanian Aboriginal and ‘colonial emblem’ of extinction Trucanini (alias Lallah Rookh, Lydgugee) who died in 1876. The same historical character reappears as Ludjee in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. It is pertinent to observe that William Lanne, who was declared to be the last Tasmanian
Aboriginal male, died in Hobart in 1869. Wooreddy on the other hand, died aboard the ship *Adelaïde* in 1842 (Rae-Ellis. 215-16).

If Robinson is the fool and Wooreddy the thinker, then Trugernanna, contrary to dominant historical descriptives, is the survivor, the archetypal goddess of the sea, the wily temptress but also “a lover of ghosts” and a traitor to her people (Mudrooroo, 38). Mudrooroo’s strangely fashioned threesome, Robinson, Wooreddy and Trugernanna are imaginary spectres of both history and literature. In many ways a satirical parody of the English stereotype and of Robinson himself, Wooreddy is described as belonging “to a nation noted for their stiffness” (Mudrooroo, 27). He is also portrayed as someone who “refused to acknowledge his own stuffiness and indifference” towards his family. “He hardly ever spoke to them and often ignored his wife as well” (Mudrooroo, 32) – characteristics which Robinson also embodies. It is Wooreddy alone who maintains a detached view of the inconceivable, bestial world his people are entering. His is an ambiguously self-conscious, yet isolated, stance that seemingly allows him to choose, to absorb and to analyse from a safe distance, the signs of a destiny beyond the known history of his clan. Wooreddy’s detachment may also be seen as an authorial comment on the role of the artist as impartial observer – the servant of a number of different worlds
where, as Mudrooroo has it, “aesthetic considerations are second to the [political] message” (Mudrooroo, 39).

The scene that best represents the lack of compassion associated with Wooreddy’s ‘objective’ position is the multiple rape of the young Trugernanna by four white seamen – an abhorrent spectacle to which Wooreddy is a dispassionate witness. Conflating wisdom and knowledge in a parody of the European rationalist approach, “the good Doctor Wooreddy donned his cloak of numbness and observed the scene with all the detachment of a scientist” (Mudrooroo, 20). Wooreddy’s comfortably disconnected state of mind and body represents a form of knowing that demands analysis rather than feeling. The character’s pursuit of linguistic prowess separates him from the locus of the woman’s pain and sexual vulnerability. While the seamen rape her, Wooreddy coldly wonders “about the grammatical structure and idiosyncrasies of their language” (Mudrooroo, 20), the dire nature of her plight essentially meaningless to him.

Justin MacGregor refers to Mudrooroo’s “allegory between a woman’s rape and the violations language is capable inflicting” and argues that by using such a vicious event as a vehicle for his postcolonial attack on the methods and discourse of colonialism [Mudrooroo] subsumes the individual woman’s pain into a site of political conflict without concern for
the individual suffering […] By subsuming this pain, [Mudrooroo] reifies a woman for the purposes of his post-colonial discourse; it is almost as though he believes such pain can be addressed after colonialism has been criticised. (Justin MacGregor, “A Margin’s History: Mudrooroo Narogin’s Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World, Antipodes: A North American Journal of Australian Literature, December, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1992, 114)

Mudrooroo’s insensitivity to women’s pain and their representation as objects of male sexual gratification is well documented. Adam Shoemaker’s words are particularly fitting when he suggests that, in Doctor Wooreddy, “Trugannini is depicted as an overwhelmingly sexual being [and that] it is significant that she is seen in this way by Wooreddy and Robinson alike” (Shoemaker, 60). Problematically, Shoemaker sees Mudrooroo’s Trugernanna as a secondary contrivance that gives “a frisson to the sexual comedy of the book” (Shoemaker, 60). Shoemaker does not go on to develop this point of significance, however, despite its suggesting much about how the author chooses to represent the phallocentric social worlds of the two principal male characters. The extent to which the imbalance of power in sexual relations relates to the idea of possession is not explored or commented upon by Shoemaker, nor does he consider the
implications of the existence of such a concept across the racial divide in patriarchal states.

The rape of Trugernanna is a particularly grotesque moment in a book that, unlike Sandawara, avoids obscenity and vulgarity at the most harrowing of times, including many graphic scenes of infant drowning, of hanging and of gruesome murder. As one character sadly observes, “these things happen all the time” (Mudrooroo, 104). Wooreddy’s failure to go to Trugernanna’s aid, his “finding the rape a little tedious” (Mudrooroo, 21) suggests not only a form of cultural betrayal but also that, like death itself, the rape of Aboriginal women’s bodies had become an accepted way of life. Mudrooroo’s misogynist discourse may be read as representing a dual cultural apathy – the wont of both sides of the racial divide to treat females as expendable objects of desire and derision. bell hooks in ‘Out Law Culture: Resisting Representation’ (9194) observes that “white colonizers who raped and physically brutalized native women yet who recorded these deeds as the perks of victory acted as though women of color were objects, not the subjects of history” (hooks, 203) echoes Wooreddy’s patriarchal mind-set. The body of Trugernanna is represented as no more than an utterly defenceless stage for the display of colonial masculine discourses – a kind of ‘unowned land’ – a terra nullius perhaps – to be used and cultivated by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal male characters alike. The
white men experiment with her body as the black man looks on, devising his own theories to account for the actions of those who subjugate her.

In the words of the narrator, “the woman accepted her fate with a numbness worthy of Wooreddy” (Mudrooroo, 47). Trugernanna’s behaviour during the offence signifies her lack of power and self-determination – “she did nothing […] She remained still” (Mudrooroo, 22). The character’s passive acquiescence to her violators is a tangible expression of the power difference in play in deviant male sexual behaviour generally. Perhaps inadvertently, it is also a comment that female resistance is rarely an impediment to rape. Wooreddy’s cold evaluation of women’s ‘place’ strangely emulates that of the colonisers. His tendency is to view the female body as a site of conquest and of possession – as a territory for the begetting of offspring and as a source of labour. As he says, “after all, it had been the num who had raped her. He would never do such a thing! […] What was important about Trugernanna was that she was a survivor. This was what made her important to him – though she did have the body of a good provider!” (Mudrooroo, 22).

The meaning of the word ‘num’ is as multi-faceted and ambiguous as the place of women in Mudrooroo’s authorial discourse. On the one hand, Wooreddy’s ‘numbness’ is both a sign of his cold, scientific objectivity and a form of survival instinct. He has the ability to enter a
trance, or to become ‘numb’ in order to function in the face of adversity. Trugernanna’s passive response to the actions of her rapists on the other hand, may be read as speaking of a female psychological ‘numbness’ in the face of misfortune that is counter to male physical and narrative aggression. Wooreddy’s lack of retaliatory action and his assessment of Trugernanna’s place in the continuity of the male ‘story’ also suggests the presence of a racialised, patriarchal right of access to her identity. In an off-hand way, he ultimately concludes that, “it was a waste of time to try to divine anything about females” (Mudrooroo, 22), a stock-in-trade patriarchal/imperialistic response that abdicates responsibility and renders invisible anything that cannot be readily understood. As MacGregor contends, there is no hint of liability or compassion to be found in Mudrooroo’s narrative for the pain suffered by Trugernanna during the course of her rape. Problematically, this omission does little to relieve or reverse the mark of debasement associated with Aboriginal women in patriarchal colonial discourse. It is also a comment that ‘herstory’ continues to be marginalised and represented as inconsequential by male revisionist writers of Australia’s colonial history, such as Mudrooroo. Mudrooroo’s narrative calls attention to the complexities of the relationships evident between his principal characters Wooreddy, Robinson, and Trugeranna. Intentionally or otherwise, it also conveys the
notion that women’s pain at the hands of men is irreducible to race, culture or creed.

Besides its misogynistic tendencies Doctor Wooreddy nevertheless offers a form of defence against the invisibility of Aboriginal peoples in the narratives of belonging – the stories of past, present and future. Wooreddy’s understanding of the future is that it holds a way of life which must be asserted and acknowledged as ‘the new reality’, one in which all that is left of the past are humiliating piles of social and cultural debris. As he sees it, what remains is a vanished sense of belonging where ‘the land’ represents not simply a terrestrial body, but the essence of his people’s identity – past, present and future. Wooreddy makes it clear from the outset that as a “young man [he] belonged to Bruny Island … a rich island” (Mudrooroo, 1). The island does not belong to him. He belongs to and is possessed by it. The character’s concept of place and belonging undermines that of non-Aboriginals for whom the land, like any other material possession, is there to be owned and used.

For Wooreddy, it is the earth of his island home that gives him solace. It “had formed his body and given the hardness to his bones” (Mudrooroo, 19) and its force always had the power to draw him back. But Wooreddy’s worldview is transformed by colonial encounter and his homeland now appears as life threatening as the sea. When he walks on his
island he feels he no longer belongs – that he “was stepping on the ashes of the dead. His feet itched and shrank from the earth where once the veins had drawn sustenance. His earth was polluted and whether he sat, or lay or stood, his flesh crawled” (Mudrooroo, 49) in such a way that they had to leave.

In a key episode in the novel, Mudrooroo links “the surge of the sea, the breathing of Ria Warrawah” (Mudrooroo, 23) with the concept that history turns on human moments and their inherent contradictions. This notion is graphically represented in a scene where, washed out to sea, the character Mangana, the father of Trugernanna, is ‘delivered’ from drowning by the European invaders who rescue him aboard one of their ships. Having been so rescued, Mangana “now felt that he belonged, or at least owed his very life, to the ghosts and thus existed only on their whim. They had claimed his soul and sooner rather than later would take it if he could not create a nexus to prevent them from doing so” (Mudrooroo, 23). The rescue of Mangana by white sailors is a reversal of another rescue scene in which Trugernanna saves Robinson from drowning. Each of these scenes brings into focus the novel’s reconciliatory approach to the disintegration of Aboriginal society at the hands of colonial invaders. The colonised and the coloniser each in their different ways alienated and lost, grapple to locate the one in the other as, symbolically, the white man
claims the soul of the black man and in turn the black woman claims that of the white man. This scene foreshadows a similar ‘mixing’ of black and white bodies in Mudrooroo’s last published novel, *The Promised Land*, discussed in Chapter X.

In his comprehensive discussion of the novel, Shoemaker suggests that the symbolism of Mangana’s rescue “owes as much (if not more) to the union of male and female deities worshipped in Tantric Buddhism as it does to any Aboriginal spiritual beliefs” (Shoemaker, 59). Shoemaker goes on to observe that Mangana’s narrow escape from death “foreshadows the crucial scene in which Wooreddy comes to realise that the apparent antagonism between all the forces in the world is ultimately illusory” (Shoemaker, 58-59). Of course, Buddhism is not un-Australian. At one of its most esoteric moments, however – Wooreddy’s Aboriginal philosophical dreaming – the novel is arguably at its least ‘Aboriginal Australian’. The scene seems to derive its energy from Mudrooroo’s Buddhist nihilism, the doctrine that all material existence is subject to decay and that the physical world as we perceive it and react to it, is the product of our own desires.

In the closing pages of the novel, Wooreddy undergoes “a flash of enlightenment” (Mudrooroo, 197) and he learns that *Ria Warrawah* (representing negative life forces) and Great Ancestor (representing
positive life forces) come from a single source. We read that Wooreddy “did not feel threatened by the new truth, though he felt beyond his old life. *Ria Warrawah* and Great Ancestor came from a single source and somewhere was that source he had been seeking in his dream” (Mudrooroo, 197). Echoing one of the main goals of Buddhism, Wooreddy is struck by a sense of seeing things for the first time for what they are – of better understanding himself and the different sides of his human nature – the pure and the impure. Ironically, however, the character experiences his moment of illumination by the sea, the erstwhile source of all his past fears, the place where his dream and his story first began. In ancient Graeco-Roman mythology, the sea is a vast expanse of water that is regarded traditionally as the source of the generation of all life, whilst the belief that good and evil need each other in order to be whole, exists among the most diverse of races. Scientific narrative on the other hand, confirms that the origin of all life is the sea but that it contains within it all the seeds of its antitheses and therefore denotes both life and death simultaneously. The sea is also a symbol of woman or the mother in both her benevolent and her terrible aspects (J.E. Cirlot. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. 1971. 241-42). Wooreddy’s return to the sea as the giver of life may therefore be read as a metaphor for a return to the mother. Given the contradictory nature of the sea, however, it may also be viewed as the
symbolic source of his destruction – the place where the end of his world actually began with the coming of the British colonizers.

Mudrooroo uses his novel as an opportunity to create and develop a different sense of Indigenous belonging – to oppose the oppressor on his own linguistic territory by expressing an alternative version of a widely accepted view of historical reality. Problematically, however, the challenge mounted by the author in re-writing white Australian history and re-presenting it through the eyes of his Aboriginal characters, involves entry into the dominant artistic medium of the very culture whose written discourses of history and literature he opposes. Perhaps this explains why, when writing yet another myth, one that effectively demystifies, displaces then co-habits with the original, the author gives his characters, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, a certain dignity with one hand only to take it away with the other. That said, to tell Wooreddy’s story within a mode of representation that historically pre-defines who he is and where he belongs is to challenge the boundaries of power at its most manipulative point of reference – the ‘English’ book.

In her excellent essay “Fiction and the Rewriting of History: A Reading of Colin Johnson” (Westerly, Vol.30.1.March 55-60), Kateryna Arthur addresses the issue of writing as an alien form of Aboriginal cultural production. Referring in particular to Doctor Wooreddy, Arthur
notes that “the unequal struggle between black and white in Australia has been, to a large extent, the struggle between literacy and orality,” and goes on to argue that “artistic choices in this context are always political choices” (Arthur, 55). Mudrooroo crosses cultural and linguistic frontiers to create a particular kind of ‘lost’ world as a means of examining anew the one in which we now live and his resistant literary discourse is one such political choice. Whether portrayed in either dignified or undignified ways, his Aboriginal characters do not speak from a marginalised position of otherness. Rather, they speak from within the discourses of power but at the same time from outside the formal relations of dialogical exchange as dictated by the rule makers. To borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept, the characters “effectively and violently [slide] one discourse under another” (Spivak, 133) to produce a new set of meanings that transform the recorded history of a foreign power into a form of representation whose ‘truth’, like any other, is debatable.

The European concept of colonial history has engendered the mythology of ‘natural’ evolution and accumulation. However, during a 1993 interview with Adam Shoemaker in which Mudrooroo appears anxious to unveil the capricious nature of historical ‘truth’, the author suggests that official versions of Australia’s past and coming into being are as fickle and erratic as memory. For him, such narratives are the stuff of
dreams that humans need to allow, “More or less, advancement into the future” (Shoemaker, 39). Mudrooroo goes on to say that he believes in chance and that events “just happen. Then someone comes along with a mind and classifies or arranges it [sic] in dates or whatever they want to” (Shoemaker, 39-40). As noted earlier, *Doctor Wooreddy* is a satirical metafiction that parodies and inverts the so-called ‘truths’ of Australia’s colonial past, established in no small part by the writings of George Augustus Robinson. Robinson’s journalistic account of events is a dangerous form of poetics that has been revealed as neither real nor true but which, nevertheless, has had the effect of sending an influential message that further disenfranchised those already dislocated and detached from histories of their own. As one character says: “Num come: they see what they want; they take it. It is their way” (Mudrooroo, 11). Mudrooroo’s combative imaginary is grounded in the begetting of new ideas for the (re)production of the story of Australia’s colonial history. This is a process of ‘taking back’ that uses the tropes and designs of European literature against itself, repeating them in order to subvert them and thus reverse the imbalance of the relationship.

Nevertheless, whilst there may be no known principle for determining the truths of written history, its influence has not been without direction for the events that unfold in the future. The so-called
‘happenings’ of history since the invasion of Australia by white culture have resulted in camouflaging the horror of displacement, dispossession and the loss of a sense of self and belonging for Aboriginal people in their own land. Such ‘happenings’ have not come about by chance. Rather, they are the planned outcomes of institutionalized discourses that have relied on the past as being essentially unknowable and therefore unspeakable. If it exists at all the past ‘lives’ only by virtue of its having been written down as ‘truth’ by those who possess the power of ideological persuasion. And ideology is the ghost of illusion – stories with no authority outside of what they ‘really’ are – stories.

Europe’s claim to a ‘greater’ form of knowledge is founded on a set of historically shaped ontological fictions that require as a prerequisite for their ideological success, the stripping of the social and political armoury of other societies. In exchange, western discourses assign newly-fabricated cultural identities and subject positions in a dichotomous, hierarchical system of difference that continues to be widely celebrated. This is a system of signification which ranks, or values, peoples and cultures within power relations of race, class and gender according to authoritatively assigned binaries of ‘more’ or ‘less’ – white/black, developed/undeveloped, rich/poor, male/female. In postcolonial environments, the everyday practices determined by such subjugating signifiers have ‘evicted’ pre-
existing residents while, simultaneously, securely domesticating the incoming strangers on their own terms.

For exploited Australian Indigenes, home remains a foreign country, a topological ‘elsewhere’ held and controlled by intruders on whose terms they are obliged to deal in the present with the remains of the past. This equates to inescapable social and cultural impoverishment and is a harsh example of imperial hegemony at work. An uncertain state of certainty is the uncanny colonial experience – what Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs call “the anxiety of the uncanny” whereby the familiar and the unfamiliar combine and “the one seems always to inhabit the other” (Gelder and Jacobs, 23). This is a living paradox that takes breath from the coloniser’s determination to textually and discursively mediate European images of history invoked as the ultimate reality, one authorised by the power to describe, to repeat and to represent. In an environment made alien by Eurocentric gospels, the representative authority declares itself the paramount source of the so-called ‘truths’ forced upon a dispossessed community, the everyday ‘certainties’ it is coerced to believe in and to accept it must share, if it is to belong in the ‘new world’.

Mudrooroo’s *Doctor Wooreddy*, full as it is with the ghosts of history, two hundred years of conquest, the destruction of culture, language and a sense of belonging is an accomplished subversion of the mode of
representation from which it takes form. Salman Rushdie acknowledges that he makes an extraordinarily sweeping claim, but makes it nevertheless when he says that:

> Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist and so it can never be ‘finished’ or ‘perfect’. Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world. Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991. (1991).

Wooreddy’s story, like the conflict between words and worlds, is a kind of ‘report’, one that remains unfinished and incomplete. Wooreddy never ‘dies’ absolutely. In fact, when read in the context of Mudrooroo’s literary trajectory, the character’s ‘death’ is an immortal moment.

The novel ends in both horror and with a specter of hope. On the last page, Wooreddy’s body is returned to the earth, to a lonely beach but, symbolically, not to the home where his journey began. Wooreddy knows that “the promised land” to which he is being transported is, in reality, “the Island of the Dead” (Mudrooroo, 116). He therefore chooses to vanish, to “disappear before they could get to him and inflict further humiliation on him” (Mudrooroo, 207) – a strangely prophetic ‘choice’ that prophetically
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echoes the more recent, personal actions of his creator. Mudrooroo represents Wooreddy’s ‘exiting spirit’ as “a spark of light [that] shot up from the beach and flashed through the dark sky towards the evening star. As it did so, the clouds closed again and the world vanished” (Mudrooroo, 207). But this ending is anti-climactic and unsatisfactory. From the very first lines of Wooreddy’s story, readers are aware that, neither the sea nor the sky are his first concern, the (is)land is his ‘subject’ and his ‘object’, both the fictional character and the ‘promised land’ to which he truly belongs. Readers are left with the impression that, even in death, the spirit of Wooreddy lives on and that there is still much more he has to do and to say in the task of making Australia familiar with the ghosts of its (and perhaps the author’s?) past.

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