Chapter - IV

The Existential Consciousness

(The Dreamers)

The very title of the play signifies its relevance to Aboriginal life. The concept of ‘dreaming’ in terms of the Aboriginal life is very different from the popular lexical meaning. The general belief that the dreams are nothing but an act of the subconscious is in direct contrast to the Aboriginal concept of ‘dreaming’. It is a lived reality of the Aborigines where each stage in life is not only celebrated but where the whole universe (living and non-living) is interconnected in an organic whole. It connects the past, present and future as well in the form of a cycle. The life on earth is connected with the creative spirit which gives meaning and existence to all that exists. It is this that forms the basis of Aboriginal Dreaming. The word ‘Dreaming’ in the context of the Australian Aborigines is an all-comprehending dimension of consciousness in which all aspects of existence are included.

The play highlights how Aboriginal dreaming gives Aboriginal life purposeful existence. Aboriginal spirituality is a very unique concept which guides every action of an aborigine. The laws set forth by the Dreamtime guide the lives of the Aborigines even in the present day. Their spirituality or Dreaming does not lie outside in their ceremonies, rituals or totems (as often misunderstood by the alien onlooker) but in their very existence. Rituals and ceremonies are only external manifestations of the inner spirit of Aboriginality. This spirituality in its true essence has helped the Aborigines to accommodate
themselves through the different phases of change even in extreme conditions. So religion and life are not separate from each other. They constitute a single reality and it is ‘lived’ reality. It is present in all their decisions and actions. This might also be the reason for their preference for tradition. Special people are designated the responsibility of passing on the traditional knowledge from generation to generation as discussed in the Chapter titled 'Conxtextualising The Brutal Violence'. Mudrooroo in his work *Us Mob* explains Aboriginal Dreaming thus:

> Things began. How or when no-one knows. But there is a state of life that, though differently, contained all that now exists. Strife divided it into different parts. The parts remained connected by a common source (The Dreaming) but were made distinct, separate and in some cases opposed. The mysterious transformation *(demnginoi)* led to the fact, constitution and appearances of all the entities now recognized a totems *(mir, ngakumal)*. Thye are distinct from men, but as brothers (fathers, sister, friends) to them because of connections through places of marvel *(ngoiguminggi and dambit)*. Powers immanent in those places are still available to men. The Dreaming that was still is: *(demnginoi)* still happens. Because of that many remarkable events now occur. Child spirits enter the corporeal world, and survive it. Pure spirits and creature-spirits that ‘did not start anywhere’ but ‘found themselves’ persist and many
intervene in men’s lives. Men of mystical ability draw
special powers from the existent Dreaming. They do so
not by thought (bemkanin), which is ‘like dream in the
head’, but by dream (nin) itself.”(36)

The momentum for the play is set right at the very beginning of the play with the
image of a tribal family ‘silhouetted against the first light of dawn.’ Worru
reflects upon his youthful days at the Moore River Settlement. Worru is
presented as an elderly aborigine who has experienced what it is to be
Aboriginal in all its shades and tones. Uncle Worru is one of the greatest
characters Jack Davis has ever created. He draws his inspiration in creating this
classic and legacy just as Jack Davis’ other aged Aboriginal
characters. He stands as a symbol of Aboriginal knowledge, wisdom and
experience. It is through these characters the strength and might of Aboriginal
culture is brought out. Characters like Worru suggest that reclaiming roots of
one’s own culture is the anchor of one’s hope in the future. The onus rests on the
present generation to design a bright future by being strongly anchored in their
culture and holding on to whatever little is left with them in the present.
Shoemaker talking about the Aboriginal dramatists in Black Words Whites Pages
observes:

Until now, Aboriginal dramatists have taken their inspiration
almost entirely from the direct observation and recollection of
personal experiences.
To a great extent, characters are based upon individuals the playwright has known, or are at the least dramatic impressions of men and women coping with situations which are typically (if not always exclusively Aboriginal.

To the extent that Black Australian dramatists are writing for their own people, the degree of faithfulness to their perceived reality is the criterion by which many blacks judge the works. In fact, sometimes the arbitrary division between stage and personal experience breaks down entirely. (236)

Worru is now living in the suburbs of a city in South-Western Australia, experiencing the change in not only the environment around but also in Aboriginal lifestyle and attitude to life. The same is the case with Granny Doll in another Davis play *Barungin*. Worru fondly recalls his life at the settlement/reserve. As he walked down the railway track where the camp place used to be, the voices, the laughter, the singing and everything has come back ‘surging’ to him. The use of the term ‘surge’ suggests his innate desire to get back to his roots and his ardent love for his Aboriginality and all that is related to it, good or bad. In this desire Davis weaves the Aboriginal spiritual aspect of DREAMTIME where the past, present and the future are all linked inseparably with each other. Everything comes from the dream time. The campsite was near his ‘old homestead.’ He recalls his community living there. He remembers how Billy Kimberley used to corroboree there on weekends just for a tin of tobacco
sticks that he would share with his friends. He recalls the way his mates got ‘church married’ and had damper.

Now we who were there
who were young,
are now old and live in suburbia,
and by longing is an echo
a re-occurring dream,
coming back along the track
from where the campfires used to gleam. (74)

The image of the ‘re-occurring dream’ and the longing for the place where ‘the campfire used to gleam’ suggest Worru’s longing to return to his past and his home. Worru has a dream, that too a recurring dream. A dream which brings to the surface his inherent desire to get back to his roots, it still remains a dream that keeps recurring. The play examines and scrutinizes this recurring dream and the possibility of the extent to which it could be turned into reality basing its analysis on the present Aboriginal plight. The dream also co-relates to the Aboriginal concept of dreaming where the past, present and the future are all intertwined. The play is set in the present but traces the impact of colonization and suggests how one can go forward with hope, into the future.

The use of the term ‘campfire’ is noteworthy. Worru says that the camp place is ‘not far from the old homestead.’ The old homestead here refers to Worru’s original dwelling place before he was shifted to the settlement. The very fact that Worru talks of it fondly is to be observed closely. In this is hidden
the secret of Aboriginal existence. In the reserve the Aborigines were able to still retain their Aboriginality to a greater extent than in the town. Worru had managed to find solace and draw strength from what remained. The situation also throws light on the deterioration of the living conditions of the Aborigines with time during the colonial period. Upon reaching the hospital to pick up Uncle Worru, Dolly realizes that he has been waiting all morning for her to come and take him home. Uncle Worru is happy to leave the hospital. He is determined not to come there ever. Next time if he is sick he would rather visit a Nyoongah doctor.

Worru is presented dressed in a second hand suit, with a Whites handkerchief, socks and shoes. Jack Davis depicts Worru ‘sitting awkwardly on a hospital bed’. This awkwardness and unease of Worru is symbolic of the Aboriginal condition in a Whites dominated Australia. The interpolation of English and Nyoongah language in Worru’s speech and the ease with which he does it is a good example of how the ancient and modern streams of life are merging in the cultural context of historical rendezvous. It also suggests that a balance in life can be achieved in the present only by retaining one’s roots. Upon Dolly asking him where he has got his new dress from, he replies that the ‘sister’ in the hospital has given them to him and that she has got them from the Red Cross. The abject poverty of the Aborigines and the settlers’ policy of assimilation have been subtly juxtaposed in the scene. For Dolly and Worru, the second hand suit, handkerchief, socks and boots are all new and impressive. However, one should not overlook the fact that they have all come from the
charity Red Cross. The careful description of Worru’s actions is worth a note. “He shows off a new Whites handkerchief,” “...flicks imaginary dust off his clothes with his handkerchief.” (81) The Whites handkerchief is symbolic of the Whites occupation of the Australian shore, ‘imaginary dust’ is suggestive of the condition of the Aborigines in their settler-occupied homeland. Using the ‘Whites handkerchief’ to brush away dust might be a suggestion by Jack Davis that in a land dominated by Whites, a change cannot be brought about and nothing could be done without the Whites’ help. But the gesture is richly ambivalent too. There is an undercurrent of satire against Whites’s claims of bringing civilization to Native inhabitants when Worru dusts himself with a Whites handkerchief he seems to be cleaning himself up with a new wisp of alien civilization in an ostensible manner. At the same time it subtly suggests the dual existence of Worru in two worlds. Though he longs to get back to his roots, Worru can be seen trying to compromise with his present. He mourns:

You have turned our land into a desolate place.

We stumble along with a half Whites mind,

Where are we?

What are we?

Not a recognised race.

There is a desert ahead and a desert behind. (109)

He insists on walking back home from hospital, claiming that he is good and wants to stretch his legs. He hates the needles and refuses to meet the nurse before he leaves fearing more shots. Dolly tells him that she had been very nice
to him and convinces him that he is done with the needles and that the nurse would only offer him final advice on his medicine and his checkups. Worru’s wanting to go to a Nyoongah doctor if he falls sick again rather than coming to the hospital for treatment is a testimony for the Aboriginal knowledge and Worru’s innate faith in the knowledge of his culture and roots. Thus Jack Davis juxtaposes the meaning of knowledge in the two worlds. For Worru, final solace lies only in his culture, indicated by his ardent yearning to reclaim it.

Once home, Uncle Worru is asked for yarns. The stories that Worru narrates play a crucial role in unfolding the central aspects of the Aboriginal life. The first story narrates how the railways were introduced by the settler and how the Aborigines were afraid of it. The story also throws light on their innocence. Worru tells the story of Cornell and Milbart, who lived in Wagin. One day they decide to go to the Katanning Show and board the train to get there. Cornell was so frightened of the train’s noise and movement that he pushed Milbart to the other corner in order to balance the train to prevent from tipping over.

The second story that Worru shares is that of the Christmas tree/pine trees. Worru tells them that the Whites believe that when one dies the dead spirit stays on the pine trees till it is time for them to go over the sea to what the Wejalas call Rottnest. He also tells them that if they go to Mogumber old settlement they would find a lot of pine trees there. He adds that the trees are so strong that they do not allow not only any other tree to grow around them but would not as well allow anyone to come near them either. The only person who can manage to go near one of these pine trees and manage to survive well is the
strong *boola* man, the traditional magic man, as he is the only one as strong as the trees themselves, because of magical powers. The whole family is enthralled by Worru’s narration. The narrative conveys the Aboriginal belief about the spirits of the dead living in the pine trees to be reborn again as a child spirit passing on wisdom from generation to generation. From this it is apparent that this is one of the aspects that have come down from the ancient to the modern.

When the stories get too ‘morbid,’ Peter switches on some music and starts dancing to it. Eli requests Worru to show them some real traditional dancing. Worru offers to show them the one that he and Nindal danced for the Prince of New South Wales. Dance and song are an integral part of their cultural identity and are sacred. But the Aborigines are forced to stage them on the Master’s orders. For the Whites, it is mere dance, devoid of its sacred aspects. Jack Davis describes it as *a drunken stumbling version of a half-remembered tribal dance*. Worru continues dancing till his feet tangle and he falls heavily. This is again symbolic of an old Aboriginal man trying to relive his past. But his present situation is paralyzing him, thrusting on him the bestial reality of the present. Worru’s physical condition thus becomes symbolic of the damage caused by the imposition of the Whites Australian cultural environment upon the aborigine. This also challenges the ‘illusion’ of freedom given to the Aborigines in the present. Peter is a younger aborigine and Peter’s dance is contrasted with Worru’s; and Worru’s dance in turn is contrasted with that of an intricately painted Dancer who dances to the heavy rhythmic didgeridoo and clap sticks, pounding his feet into the stage against a dramatic red sky. Dolly returns home
only to realize that the men in the house are not only irresponsible and fit for nothing but are spoiled to such an extent that they have used the kids’ dinner money on wine and do not regret it in the least. To her utter shock she realizes that Uncle Worru is drunk within two hours he is out from the hospital.

At another time, Dolly and Worru recall the good old days in the bush and another shock awaits Dolly. As Worru tells her the stories of the past, he describes how he used to carry her when stung by bees, the way babies born to Nyoongah women who were forced to work for the Whites men, and the way the babies were strangled and buried by black trackers in the pine plantations. Worru tells Dolly that their home was alright during the day but at night after sunset there were evil spirits coming out of the pine plantations with round faces, red hair, and red eyes just like the Wejalas, screaming, shouting and singing. These evil spirits were many in number as corresponding with the number of babies strangled. Dolly represents the next generation. But her utter shock at such stories suggests that her generation is unaware of the plight of their own people in their immediate past.

They are suddenly interrupted by Meena, Shane and their Whites friend Darren. While playing outside Shane suddenly pushes Darren through the door and throws the ball at him. Darren, as he catches the ball, falls and yells. As Worru and Dolly are engrossed in their past, they had failed to notice their arrival. Darren’s yell interrupts their absorption and sends a shiver down their spine. Worru asks Darren if he is a Wetjala or Nyoongah. Meena tells Worru that one does not see Nyoongah with red hair. Worru is aware of half-castes being
born with red hair like the Whites. But Shane is not aware of this. Worru remarks that he mistook Darren for an evil spirit. ‘The Aborigines’ memories of the traumatic years at the hands of the Whites are still fresh. Darren’s red hair would have reminded Worru of the half-caste children strangled by the black trackers among the pine trees.

Darren has never seen an Aboriginal person before. The two worlds – the Whites and Black, in Australia do not meet. The original dwellers of the soil are still non-existent for the greater Whites Australia. When Worru calls Darren, he walks ‘gingerly’ towards him. He stares at Worru as he looks very different from the people he knows. As Worru pretends to sleep, Darren stares at Worru from a very close range only to be frightened by Worru with his roar and ineffectual grab. Worru tries to teach Darren the Nyoongah names for eyes, nose, forehead, ending with the Nyoongah name for the brain, adding that he has good brains. He is ‘Cackling with delight’ as he says this. This could be interpreted as an allusion to Whites, the Whites’s belief that the Aborigines are of low intellectual capacity. Worru appears to be suggesting that the Aborigines are as normal as the Whites. There is recurring mention of this Whites view in all of Jack Davis plays. It is utterly ironical that in a country claiming to be multicultural, a Whites kid sees an Aboriginal man for the first time and finds him ‘strange’. Darren asks, “Hey, that old man, is he for real?” (96) To Darren, Worru is a curiosity. He asks Shane and Meena what language he was speaking as tries to figure out what Worru had said. Another fact that comes to light is that Meena and Shane’s
generation though aware of existence of their language, are not competent even in the basics of the language of their ancestors.

The strength of Aboriginal roots is effectively depicted by Jack Davis. Worru enquires if Darren had ever seen a *Nyoongah* before. Dolly pities Darren for his ignorance. On the other hand, Shane and Meena are not saddened that Darren is ignorant of the fact that the Aborigines are the first dwellers of Australia or that their number is so low now that they are hardly seen anywhere. Uncle Worru constantly raves in his sleep about his life in the bush. That is a paradise lost to him and he has never regained his paradise in the present. There is a traumatic disjunction of the present from the past and Worru represents the struggle of an enervated culture struggling to stand erect in the presence of a threatening alien culture. When Dolly realizes that Uncle Worru’s sickness is not under control and that there is a gradual exhaustion in his physical strength with increasing cough, she reposes faith in traditional knowledge and offers to go and consult a Nyoongah doctor. When Eli is informed that Uncle Worru would be taken to a *Nyoongah* doctor for treatment he is thoroughly frustrated as he is influenced by the Enlightenment beliefs of the Whites and so does not believe in indigenous knowledge. He feels that the *Nyoongah* doctors are worthless and that Worru must instead be taken to the hospital where he was treated for the last couple of months. Roy tries telling him about a few experiences he had when the *Nyoongah* doctors did miraculous work.

ROY: *Nyoongahs* never went to *Wejala* doctors in them days. They were frightened of ’em.
ELI: Yeah, that’s why so many of ’em fuckin’ died. (123)

Worru is very sick and has to be brought to the hospital once again. Robert helps Dolly with the procedures. Worru enquires who the black ‘fella’ is. Dolly says that he is one of Elaine’s boys and asks him if he remembers Elaine’s family staying with them at Grass Valley. He fondly recalls the time and laments, “Can’t go back to Northam, no Nyoongahs” with utter discontent of not being able to go back as he not only lost home but people as well at Grass Valley. The urge to get back to the bush and the awareness of the stark reality that it is not possible is a recurrent image in all of Jack Davis’ plays. It is only the past, with their rich culture in it, that can give solace in the present.

Meena and Shane are determined not to go to bed till they find out how Worru is. Shane sees feather feet in Worru’s room and Roy has become silent after returning from Worru’s room seeing it. A feather feet here again become a symbol of Aboriginality and its beliefs returning.

The scene announces Worru’s death in the hospital. The dancer sings the song of the death of Aborigines at the hands of the Whites making the announcement of Worru’s death implying the death of the Aboriginal past. Worru symbolizes the glorious past of the Aborigines which gives the present solace. The whole scene is rich in symbolism. ‘Stark and Whites the hospital ward’ represents the stark White settlers. ‘The morning sunlight gleaming,’ represents the dominance of the White settlers. Worru was against going to the hospital for treatment as he believes that only a Nyoongah medicine man can cure him. He vainly tries resisting going to the hospital and is taken there
against his will by Dolly and Robert where he meets his death. This is where the irony of Aboriginal plight lies. The Aborigines are torn between two worlds, one that they would like to return to but cannot and the other that they are living in which is not completely comprehensible to them.

As Dolly looks at Worru she instantly knows what she has to cherish in her memory. Worru here becomes a symbol of Aboriginal pride. An epitome of good Aboriginal culture which held within its womb all that is to be known to lead a life of peace and harmony, both within oneself and with all that is around. She recalls her childhood days when Worru was a young man. He was strong and wise. To her eyes filled with excitement to be in the company of Worru and her heart filled with pride for all the good qualities he had, ‘he looked like a king in the sun’. As a child she would accompany him hunting. Worru knew the art of gathering the gifts of nature to support a happy life. He would catch the scent of his hunt and was swift and skilled in getting it. They slept on bed made of reeds as Uncle Worru narrated ‘the tales of Nyoongah deeds.’ Sometimes he would amuse her by singing a song, drawing a design, making a needle out of a bone or by sharpening his spear on a stone.

She exclaims:

But you are back in the moodgah now

Back on the path of your Dreaming. (139)

She then directs the audience to dream, to dream of a child and her old friend who is a man in September suggesting that this man is a friend of nature. He knew well the abundance that nature has to offer and the value of living in
harmony with it. The Aboriginal belief of the past, present and future all intertwined in their dreaming is skillfully brought out by the author.

The climax contrasts their beautiful past in the bush with their present misery in the last lines of Dolly culminating in their present plight, “Alas, that is all to remember.” (Davis 139) signifying there is no return no matter how much they long for it. It is a place that they can never return to. Their lives have been so drastically changed since the arrival of the Whites man that even if they would love to get back to the bush, they must simply accept their helplessness to do so. In this lies their cultural anguish. The ending aptly suggests that Worru’s dreaming is still possible and is one in which solace can be found. Change is the only thing that is constant in life.

Though not exactly as it was in the past, the essence of their culture can still be retained. This is Worru’s and Dolly’s dreaming to go back to the roots, the very root of Aboriginal living and culture. Thus the play leaves a dream for Nyoongahs to ruminate upon.

Another aspect of the play is the portrayal of deprivation and abject poverty the Aborigines are reduced to at the hands of the Whites colonizers. Meena and Shane fighting over hot water that their mother had boiled for them to have a bath, over sharing the soap, over sharing a comb, over maintaining tidiness, in short, all the things that the children of the house are fighting over to share are the basic amenities of any decent household but which in the case of Aboriginal household, have become scarce and something to be shared and
fought for. Several other things mentioned in the play like ‘battered saucepan’, ‘balding mop’, Shane commenting that Eli looks ‘like a fuzzy mop’ etc reveal the dire straits of the Aborigines living in the suburbs of the town even in the present day and the poor quality of their life despite Australia’s prosperity and technological advancement. There are further indications to substantiate his impression such as the language that they use reveals. Dolly feels that the ‘camp’ was much better than the place they now live in without either hot water or locks on the doors. Dolly’s cousin Eli states that the prison is a better place as everyone there is at least assured of three square meals a day and a hot shower. Eli’s is a statement of condemnation. Australia is commonly assumed to be a land of hope and promise. But it has turned out to be opposite to the Aboriginal population, the original dwellers of the Australian land. A number of Aborigines in the present day are not able to go back to their homelands because the people they have known – Nyoongahs have been removed from their ancestral lands and were sent to reserves and settlements by the Whites man. The uprooting of a whole population from a place to which they have deep psychological attachment is virtually rendering them homeless and alienated in their own world psychologically and culturally. Worru even in his sleep raves about his life in the bush and his desire to go back to Northam but despairs as all people known to him are no longer there.

The play opens with a familiar household routine, Dolly preparing breakfast and Roy reading the newspaper and Eli penciling selections of the racing page. The attitude with which Roy and Eli read the news might appear to
be a very common routine in any household but for a subtle suggestion of a lack of seriousness and exposure to the world around them. Roy browses through the newspaper not because he is genuinely interested in what is happening in the world around him but to while away his time. The same is the case with Eli. He is more interested in the horse race than in what is happening in the society around him. A responsible citizen of any society/country would like to know about the condition of the society they are living in. They would also like to know about what is happening around the world. But the situation here is to the contrary. The men in the house take no interest in what is happening in the world. Shoemaker in *Black Words Whites Page* quotes Newfong while talking about male Aboriginal character in another play. This theory of Newfong is useful, to an extent, in understanding the male characters in Davis’ plays.

Newfong’s theory is, to say the least contentious, in that it suggests a profound psychological and political ploy to suppress Aboriginal men.\(^{27}\) The theory is particularly intriguing in view of the female leadership of numerous Black Australian lobby groups and services, as well as some government departments. But Newfong goes too far to ascribe to these women positions of power by default…

…It is difficult to maintain as Newfong does, that politicians ‘find it easier to deal with black women because “the’re only women anyhow”. They find intelligent black men much more of
a threat.’ 28 While it is valid for him to note the way in which sexism can reinforce racism, his implication that the only effective black Australian spokespeople are males is contradicted by achievements of numerous Aboriginal women. It is arguable that the real reasons for the frail self-image of the Aboriginal men like Sweet William are that he has been prevented as a father from providing for his wife and children by unemployment, the institutional bias of Aboriginal reserve managers and the prejudice of Whites Australians. (243)

Dolly suggests to her husband that he go to the Road Board and check if he can manage to find a job as she has discovered recently that they have started hiring Nyoongah for driving the garbage truck, only to discover from Meena’s remark that it is not a Nyoongah but an Indian. Dolly says that it is still a black who is hired and that it is a significant change in the lives of the blacks to be hired for work, even if it is just driving the garbage truck. But for Roy it is not an issue of colour, but that of the Nyoongah being hired. The attitude of Roy reveals how Australia is still a deeply racist country, the racism even more pronounced when directed against the Aborigines. The fact that the ‘Indian bloke’ is hired to drive the garbage truck is an issue of concern. From Eli’s comment about how they do alright by selling ‘bottles an’ things, ‘sides their wages’ one realizes that they work for such meagre wages that they cannot even provide basic needs to their families.
Meena’s response to Roy’s remark and Dolly’s demands a mention. Meena ‘imperiously’ tries to explain how the Indians are not very different from the Aborigines as the Aborigines have also come from India and how the land that is now called Australia has been isolated etc only to be interrupted by Dolly wittily calling her Miss *Wetjala* and asking her to get going to school. The use of the term ‘imperiously’ to show the attitude that Meena adopts while talking about history as her people are not educated in the modern sense of the term and Dolly calling her Miss *Wetjala* because of this shows how modern education is considered to be a privilege. Education in the modern sense of the term is that offered by the Whites man. Dolly calling Meena Miss *Wetjala* shows how anyone who is Whites is taken to be educated and knowledgeable. The concept of knowledge, here is that of the Whites. The dialogues also bring to the surface the acceptance of these two popular notions by the Aborigines thus privileging not only the Whites’ education system but the Whites as well.

It is ironical that Meena has to do a project on Aborigines. She is not aware of her culture and has to struggle just like her Whites counterparts in order to do it. Shane studying the geography of England instead of that of Australia is equally ironical. In the course of her project Meena becomes conscious that the Aborigines have been in Australia for the last forty thousand years and they were three hundred thousand in number when Captain Cook landed on Australian soil. Over this discovery, she exclaims that she has ‘just worked out something amazing:’ (101) When Shane remarks that they would have had a lot of damper, Meena remarks that “flour is Whites man’s food.”(102) The incident shows how
for the third generation of Aborigines after colonization, assimilation has worked well from a colonizer point of view. Shoemaker in his work titled *Black Words Whites Page* authenticates, “From a population, estimated to be in the vicinity of 300000 in 1788, only about 60000 remained in 1930, and this was a generous estimate, according to those such as Stanner” (18) He adds, “the analogy is an instructive one, for in 1930 the reigning popular view of Aborigines was that they were somehow sub-human, both intellectually and culturally inferior to the Whites”(19)

One also realizes that the elders in the house, Dolly and Roy could not even attempt to count when Shane asked them how many Kangaroos they would have shot and wants to know how many dampers they would have eaten in forty thousand years if they had counted an average of three dampers a day. It is Meena’s readings from the book that tells Shane that the Aborigines did not shoot the Kangaroos and that they used grass seeds, Jam seeds, wattle seeds etc and that “flour is Whites man’s food.”(102).Dolly and Roy have already made peace with their reality and so are not interested in the facts and figures Meena is giving them. This incident in the drama shows that one of the primary aims of Aboriginal writers in their works is to present that part of their history which has been purposefully eliminated from the Whites’ historiography. Shoemaker in his work titled *Black Words White Page* quotes Gilbert, “Ask Whites or black Australian kids to name a heroic Red Indian chief or a famous Indian tribe and most will be able to do so because of comics and films. Ask them to name an
Aboriginal hero or a famous Aboriginal tribe and they will not be able to do so because Aboriginal history is either unknown or negative. 8”(129)

Equally ironical is the situation when Dolly reminds Roy to say grace and Shane asks innocently if their family says grace only when they eat Kangaroo. When Shane asks Worru to close his eyes, Worru retorts that he cannot eat with his eyes closed. Roy titters as he says grace and tells Shane that it is a pity that he has forgotten the ‘fella up there’ (103). The struggle of embracing the settlers’ religion is another recurring image in the plays of Jack Davis.

The irresponsibility of the three men in the house is highlighted when they not only use all the money that Dolly has given to them to get some lunch for the kids when they get back from school to buy alcohol but also try to grab some from Uncle Worru for extra bottles. In addition, as anticipated by Shane and Meena, Eli and Roy spend their social service cheques too on alcohol. One also notices that Eli has learnt the art of begging so well that he is earning quite some money from it. Eli prefers begging to working.

They are also quite often drunk or land into trouble. As Eli enters the house happy about his day’s income through begging singing ‘Onward Christian Soldier, marching on,’ he is taken aback when he realizes the content of the song. He wonders as how one can be a Christian and a soldier at the same time. As Christianity is supposed to be a religion of love, peace, kindness and forgiveness he ponders as how a soldier who is a Christian can wage a war? Jack Davis is paradoxically stating that the settlers who are claiming to be Christians
and trying to incorporate the spirit of Christianity into the Aboriginal way of life and who firmly believe that the Christian way of live is the most noble way of leading one’s life are in reality not true to the spirit of Christianity. If the supposed ‘Christian Soldiers’ were true to the spirit of Christianity they would have been very kind-hearted and loving, would not have killed Aborigines in such a ruthless fashion. One can never embrace or leave a religion like other earthly things. Similarly no one can thrust a religion upon another. Religion is an actual state of mind. The spirit of a religion has to be lived not just in word. When those espousing a religion do not live by it the onlooker loses trust in that religion.

Eli recalls his grandfather warning him to be wary of the Wetjala. Eli belongs to a broken generation in contrast to Uncle Worru who is deep rooted in his culture and is aware that it is in their culture that they can find consolation.

Ay? ’ow can you be a soldier an’ a Christian? Lot a rot; soldiers used to chunk Christians to the lions. I’m a Christian, Freo Prison Christian. Ain’t nobody gonna chuck me to the lions. The Wetjala’s a lion, he eats. Aw, he eats, he eats everything: land, trees, rivers, forests, even people, ’especially people. I ’remember old grandfather Kooroop used to say: Don’t trust the Wetjala, he’s a real widartji. He’ll kill you for sport and Eat your brains and kidney fat. (121)
Though Eli appears to be a drunkard muttering whatever comes to his debilitated and bemused by alcohol, his observations reveal the true genuine frustration of helpless Nyoongahs without the invigorating memories of Nyoongah past. But careful observation reveals a multifaceted character. A closer examination of his character discloses the fact that he is a soul filled with sensitivity and sensibility. His careless indifferent attitude suggesting the dregs of a debilitated soul is a mask.

Eli has a black patch on his eye and when Worru asks him how he got it, tells him that when he was outside the shopping mall that day and getting fifty cents a bite, a Whites hippy gave him two dollars. The other Nyoongah fellows came rushing for a share and he ended up getting hurt. The black patch on his eye is less uncomfortable than the scar on his mind. Many Nyoongahs are dehumanised and brutalized by poverty and misery to the extent of seeking share and hurting a fellow Nyoongah to get their share. More than the physical hurt the manner in which the Nyoongahs lost self respect and decency and fellow feeling owing to penury depressed and disheartened Eli.

As already mentioned, the Aboriginal men are cornered to beg because they are rarely employed by the Whites. This aspect is brought out by Jack Davis through Eli’s character by the way Eli pretends as a man with cataract in the eye by wearing a black eye patch.

Though he sees Meena studying, he turns on the radio. In spite of Meena’s request, Eli turns on the radio so loud that Meena has to get out in-order
to be able to concentrate on her project. Eli’s apparent insensivity and irresponsibility are manifestations of profound frustration lurking in the collective consciousness of the Nyoongah community.

Peter narrates how he managed to save little money from his bus fare.

PETER: Aunty Pegge gave it to me for a bus fare.

ROY: I thought you said you came home on the bus this morning.

PETER: I did! But when the driver asked for my fare I made out I lost it. He was going to put me off at the next stop but this old Wetjala lady paid my fare. (89)

Skillful characterization is the mark of this scene. There is a subtle suggestion against stereotyping the characters, whether the Aborigines’ slyness in saving an extra penny or the Wetjala’s indifference towards the Aborigines. The Whites people are also prisoners of a system of exploitation in which the tendency to discriminate often transcends the individual choice. Even well meaning Whites people have to fit themselves into a community of Whites exploiting the coloured Nyoongah. Very rarely they can allow their individual sense of justice to surface in their behavior in society. The Wetjala woman buying the ticket for Peter is an instance of it. Given an opportunity an individual may choose to be good and kind but, being part of a communal situation of the Whites habitually discriminating against the coloured Nyoongahs she cannot often have the personal choice of showing kindness and concern. The Whites woman in the context helps a Nyoongah(Peter) and gives expression to tenderness in human
relationships which the Whites people are really capable of in their relationships among themselves. Probably other Whites people won’t appreciate if she is so kind when seen by them.

There are Wetjallas who are genuinely interested in helping the Aborigines. There are also Aborigines like Peter who have good awareness about the system that they are living in. This is one feature that recurs in all Davis’ plays. Peter is not as bitter as his elders, Roy and Eli, towards the system that they are living in. It is not made clear whether this is because he is more of an optimist or that his generation is not fully aware of the atrocities and injustices perpetrated upon the Aborigines in the past by the Whites.

In another scene, Dolly asks Peter if any of Aunty Peggy’s sons are home. He says that her relatives from Northam are visiting her. When Roy remarks that he hopes they do not come down asking for money to buy petrol to get back home, Eli quickly responds that he cannot give them any as he has nothing. Dolly also requests Peter to help her pick up Uncle Worru from the hospital only to get a negative response.

The scene acts as a reflection of Act I Scene VII, with Dolly taking charge of all aspects of the family and the men at home becoming addicted to alcohol and of no use at all. Returning from school Meena and Shane realise that Uncle Worru is lying in a chair in the kitchen, drunk. They immediately rush to help him into bed and make some tea for him. They are thoroughly upset when they recognize that none of the men at home bothered to take care of Uncle
Worru and have left him all alone at home with Dolly away from home and they at school.

Eli’s character is contrasted with that of Robert his cousin. Robert, well educated, works as a legal aid officer but at the same time is strongly rooted in his beliefs and values. He is very helpful and respects others’ feelings and beliefs. He is kind enough to give a ride to Uncle Worru to visit the boolya man in Pinjarra for treatment. When Eli suggests that it would help in no way and that he should be taken to hospital Dolly tells him that the hospitals are of no use at all as they would just keep him there without giving him proper treatment. Besides, Worru hates hospitals. Robert retorts:

   Can’t you see the old bloke believes in it? It’s
   Not going to do him any harm. It’s faith healing, purely
   A case of mind over matter, auto-suggestion… (126)

This is an important aspect of Aboriginal life and culture. The essence of their culture, be it dreaming, the rainbow serpent, dance, totems, healing, does not make sense to an outsider. There is irony in that all these things do not make sense to a generation of Aborigines either. They are, therefore steeped in pessimism. The absence of the element of belief in their own culture paves the way for the death of a rich culture. Roy and Eli represent most of the modern Aborigines who have lost not only faith in their culture but have also lost hope for betterment of their situation. Robert represents the mature response of an educated Nyoongah keenly aware of the changing social environment and time-tested values of Nyoongah community. Robert compares Worru’s faith in
traditional medicines to Noah’s faith in God’s warning about the Deluge. He means the impossible may become possible because of faith. Worru may be cured by Nyoongah medicines because mind acts on matter. But Elli in his typical haste says that Noah’s carrying animals of all species in his Arc cannot be an impossible task. He compares the transportation of animals by Noah with that of the Whites people bringing large number of sheep in big ships to Fremantle. His purpose is to dismiss the importance of faith either in the case of Noah or Worru. But Robert cites the example of Noah to highlight the truth that faith wins. Eli compares only transportation of sheep by the Whites and the carrying of animals in his arc by Noah. It is obvious Eli has missed the point of faith completely. Robert shares faith with Worru – not in respect of Nyoongah medicines or western medicines but in respect of the future of Nyoongah community if they adapt themselves to modern life, retaining the core of traditional Nyoongah values.

Jack Davis depicts the depravity of some members of younger generation among Nyoongahs by means of presenting a scene in which Eli resorts to avoidable mischief in an apparently trivial game of cards. Roy and Dolly are very careful when they bet money. Dolly neither loses nor gains. Roy loses even the dollar that he has borrowed from Dolly. Robert beats Eli continuously. Eli loses even the last five dollars that he has borrowed from Robert. The scene again serves to reveal character. Eli tries to cheat and when Robert figures this out and challenges him for stooping to cheat in a trivial game of cards. The argument gradually turns into a fight. They do not notice when Shane comes
panicking to announce that Worru has fallen terribly sick. It is Dolly who rushes to Worru.

Roy is indifferent when Dolly asks him to enquire where Peter was all night. He supports Peter’s argument that he is grown up and can take care of himself. There is a mention from time to time that he is in and out of jail many times. At the same time, Roy is very impatient with Meena being out late. There might be two reasons for this attitude. Either Roy is gender biased or it is his concern for the plight of Aboriginal girls. One can observe that Meena respects Dolly but is indifferent to Roy’s remarks. Everyone in the family respects Dolly for her integrity and strength of character. She is the epitome of female Aboriginal strength and commands respect by virtue of her personality.

Dolly distributes household responsibilities. She gives some money to Peter asking him to get some meat and bread and have it cooked for the kids’ lunch. She asks Roy and Eli to clean the house. When Roy asks her for money for tobacco she asks him to find a job so that he could indulge himself. She adds:

DOLLY: You got enough here for papers; it won’t urt
to pick up a few butts, an’ it won’t be the first
time.

Roy: An’ i woun’ be the bloody last. (79)

As in all fine dramatic art, circumstances spin passions and passions mould characters in Jack Davies too. Roy collects cigarette butts for tobacco as he cannot afford to buy cigarettes. Yet he and Eli are not inclined to work hard and patiently to earn. Moreover, many Nyoogahs are also badly addicted to alcohol.
Eli suggests that they buy a bottle of alcohol with the money that Dolly has left to buy lunch. Though initially Roy says it is shameful of them to do so he gives in when Eli convinces him that they can manage getting money to buy lunch. Peter then tells them how the barman in a store has denied him liquor as he thought that Peter had beaten up a Whites man on Friday night. Upon knowing whom Peter has kicked, Eli feels that the man deserves such a beating as he is always after Nyoongah women, bothering them all the while.

Peter, Dolly and Roy’s eighteen year old son, when questioned where he was all night tells them that he has been at Aunty Peggy’s all night. When he is asked how he has managed to get back he tells them that Aunty Peggy has given him money for the bus fare. When Eli confesses the he thought Peter must have been behind bars Peter asks Eli if he was afraid that he had taken Eli’s favorite cell. Upon hearing this Roy jokes that Eli has ‘got his name scratched in all of ‘em.’(78). Eli adds to this by saying that the Sergeant has infact thought of putting a brass name plate on the door for him.

ELI: Yeah, Sergeant thought about puttin’ a brass name plate on the door or me; Elijah William Zakariah Wallitch.

ROY: Jacky, you mean.

ELI: Yeah, Elijah William Zakariah Wallitch, Jacky.

[They laugh] (78)
This suggests the number of times that Eli has been to the prison and how common it is for an aborigine to be behind bars, so common that they have become very casual about it. Shoemaker in *Black Words Whites Page* elucidates,

In 1971, the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment in Australia as a whole was 1000/100000, which was over fourteen times higher than the national average for all groups of 70/100000. ^19 O’Shane concluded that ‘there is something very seriously wrong with the Australian criminal justice system’. ^20 The fact that so many Aboriginal authors have been in jail at some stage of their lives is one indication of how widespread this institutionalised anti-Aboriginal bias has been. (241)

Name is the primary identity for any individual. Changing of Aboriginal names by the settlers is part of the implementation of the settlers’ policy of assimilation by uprooting all aspects of Aboriginal identity. The Aborigines’ way of laughing it off is their way of coping with the day to day reality of their lives. The situation highlights the innate strength of character of the Aborigines. Instead of being depressed about a situation that they cannot help they choose to laugh about it.

Roy, Eli, Peter and Worru discuss the condition of the Aboriginals inside and outside the ‘gaol.’ For Eli life in the ‘gaol’ is much better than at home.

ELI: Yuh can git a boot polish cocktail now and again.

ROY: You and your boot polish cocktail, bloody paint thinners. That’s what killing those stupid black bas-
tards down there, not what they’re gittin’ ’round the back.

Eli: Bullshit! I still reckon they knocked old Sandy off

and dumped him back in the cell. Look you blokes, I’m tElin’

yuh, Sandy was as tough as an old boomer. Slept under bridges,

ate ’ard tucker all ’is life. Heart failure, be buggered; number

nines killed ’im, that’s for sure. (83)

The consequences of colonization on Aboriginal men are explicit. The extent to

which the Aboriginals are addicted to alcohol, their miserable living condition,

their physical fitness, they way they are ill treated in the prison and their deaths

in custody are all apparent from afore mentioned instances.

But they are also aware of the hard realities there. One confronts the

number of custodian deaths of the Aborigines and the reasons for the deaths.

When Eli remarks that there is nothing that could be done to prove the atrocities

committed by Whites on the blacks as the Whites are too smart for the dumb

blacks, Peter objects saying that it is not because the Whites are too smart. It is

just that they are so many of them that the whole system is full of them and not

the Nyoongahs. In the name of protection and well being Nyoongahs are

prohibited from buying alcohol and the Whites are prohibited from selling it to

the Nyoongahs. Peter remarks that it is the Wetjala who sell alcohol to the

Nyoongahs. But it is only the Nyoongahs who receive the punishment for the

offence, while the Wetjala get away free. This is because in a system that is

dominated by the Wetjala, the chance for the Nyoongahs to get justice is very
low. Eli says that it is not the system and that one just need to ‘butter ‘em a bit. Play it smart.’ Eli also retorts:

ELI: Look at this – busted eye, broken nose, busted eardrum, [pointing to his head] thirteen stitches! You know who done all that? Not Wetjala, but Nyoongahs, me own fuckin’ people!

PETER: Man, yer wrong, the system done that to yuh, but yuh can’t see it. (84)

Peter understands that because of what they have lost of their culture, their stark poverty which is the consequence of western monopolization of economic means and the burden of history Nyoongahs fail to see that their condition is the failure of not the individuals living in the system but the colonial system. Colonial system is Wetjala centric and does not really care to give genuine protection to Nyoongahs. Whatever protection is given, whatever laws they make are for taming the Nyoongahs and making them obedient conformist mass of subjects. Their hard times during the time of colonization and the racism after independence and the unpreparedness left by the system upon them to face the present scenario they have to live in are all the aftermath of colonization. Policies and practices adopted by the Whites to complexly eliminate Aborigines.

Dolly is depicted worried when she sends Peter to the market to bring bacon for supper and he does not return. She hears from Eli that Peter has been taken by the manatj. When Roy enquires where Eli was when Peter was being taken by the police, Eli replies saying that he has kept himself off the road as he
did not want the police to see him as they do not like him. This again is a remainder of the number of times that Eli went to jail. Meena guesses that the car that Peter was in with the other young boys might be a stolen one and Dolly confirms that this might be true. This is yet another hint of the aborigine’s poverty, driving them to theft and jail. Roy remarks, “A night in the lock-up would do him good” (104) but Dolly is quick to rush to ‘gaol’ to free him. She compels a reluctant Roy to accompany asserting, “No son of mine is goin’ to gaol, not if I can help it.” (104) This shows the innate strength in the character of Dolly and the way she is determined to fight injustice and protect her people. She has the self confidence and commitment for such a fight. This becomes amply clear as the play proceeds. She has the insight to understand the society that they are living in. She knows of the number of times innocent blacks are picked up by the police and are put to trial. When Meena asks Jamie how he ended up in prison he informs them that he had not known that it was a stolen car when he accepted an offer of a ride home. The police had arrested him along with the others who were the actual culprits.

One can observe that it is Dolly, the feminine aspect of the play who is trying to put things in order in the house shouldering the responsibility of all the affairs of the house taking into consideration the well being and development of everyone. Jack Davis may not be a feminist in the sense of modern feminism but his women characters are stronger than men. They represent a certain cultural continuity and adaptability to new situations. All through in The Dreamers, Dolly plays a vital constructive role. When Meena needs clarification while
doing her project, Roy suggests that she ask Dolly. It is Dolly who is the bread winner of the house in spite of having grown up men at home who are of no help at all, it is she who takes care of the domestic affairs, be it bringing Uncle Worru from hospital and taking care of him or cooking for the family and tidying the house. She is the backbone of the family. She is the one who keeps the family intact in spite of all the odds. Jack Davis’ women characters like Dolly, Alice, Meena, Granny Doll, etc merit a special intensive study by research scholars separately.

Dolly and Worru fondly recall their dances and are saddened at the thought of how their culture has gradually disappeared. All that is left with them is just the memory of their rich past. But Dolly is quick to cheer Worru that it is good to have him with them and that he is going to live to be hundred. Dolly belongs to a generation which has enjoyed the good side of the Aboriginal life but her situation is influenced by the Aboriginal plight in the modern times which leaves her helpless to pass forth her culture to her kids. She is a strong woman who knows how to cope with the struggle of being born as such a generation, to make peace with life by holding on to the pleasant memories of the past but at the same time being pragmatic enough to live a happy life in the present. Only when one is unable to make peace with one’s situation/condition that one is saddened. But Dolly is strong from within. She knows that change is the only thing that is constant in the world and so she takes it in her stride. In her case character is destiny. Character works on destiny and decides the quality
of its course. If destiny is inevitably bitter her attitude sweetens it to the extent it can.

Shane enquires if Ross Mumblin, Meena’s boyfriend has a driving license. Meena is not sure of it and is not hesitant to say so. She says ‘I dunno, s’pose he has.’ Shane cautions Meena to check if the boy she is going out with is of their many relations. Shane says, ‘you we got hundred of ’em.’ In spite of fragmentation of Nyoongah community as a whole into small communities thrown away from one another the Nyoongahs have a strong sense of community. Shane’s reference to hundreds of them highlights this aspect of Nyoongah consciousness. Still the individual in Nyoongah community is bound to community by slender invisible threads of belonging to the community.

Dolly is worried about the company Meena keeps. She pleads with Meena not to waste her time hanging around with ‘those barefooted blackfellas’ instead find some decent company and adds that she had seen the youngest of the Yorlah girls in the car park the other day totally drunk. She further adds that it is not that she does not trust Meena but is just concerned about her facing the same plight as the many young Aboriginal girls, some younger than Meena, walking around with babies in their hands. Meena assures Dolly that she is not hanging out with any of those girls that her mother is thinking of. She wants to quit school and take up a job. Dolly asks her to remove any such ideas from her head insisting that she has to finish school, apply for an Aboriginal grant and get either a decent office job or become a nurse. This is one more instance of how Dolly’s experience and wisdom gives her a clarity of vision lacking in others. The
exchange also draws attention to the gap in the type of jobs that the Aborigines aspire for and what they manage to get due to their lack of ‘modern knowledge and educational qualifications.’

Meena is a very intelligent and clever girl. Dolly also cautions Meena against being away from home too late in the night and too often. Dolly belongs to a generation which has seen the good Aboriginal life of the past and the dark side of the same in the present. She is anxious about her daughter’s future. Meena, on the other hand, is a teenager from the next generation who is unaware of any of this. She is ignorant of the rich cultural and social heritage of the Aboriginal past and the prejudices and discrimination directed against them in the present day. She does not understand how important it is for girls, especially young Aboriginal girls, to be educated in order to assert themselves and have a decent living. Mudrooroo in *Us Mob* emphasizes:

As for women, from the first they were designated by the bastardised ‘Aboriginal’ words ‘gin’ or ‘lubra’. It was as if the position of the female Other (coupled with the Native other) became doubly removed: an unknown Other. It was as if the European Master could only see this ‘naked Eve’ through the Native language or through the male other, gazing at the male Native who then directed his gaze at the female Native. She was doubly opaque, almost a material object. Women did not exist except though the master text, and had to be mediated through maleness. It is easy to see that the European position of women
fastened on the black woman and rendered her able only to be seen designated through the male. If the black male was inferior, the black woman was doubly so. The Whites male gazed at the black man who gazed beyond at the black woman. (9)

The concluding scene of ACT I presents the stark reality of the Aborigines in the present day. Worru laments upon the current Aboriginal plight. The number of Aborigines had drastically come down resulting in the end of the tribes. The settlers have transgressed all the boundaries, be it regional, psychological, social or other. The Aboriginal communities of Australia are shattered in all aspects of their lives. The hope for equality and improved living is bleak. The use of ‘Not a recognised race’ stands as testimony to how Australia despite claims of being a multicultural nation is still racist at heart. De-recognition in their own homeland has brought about a crisis. Being uprooted from a place they have always belonged to and are part of has deepened their sense of loss. On one hand, Aboriginal families are removed from their culture as Aboriginal children were forcefully parted from their parents and put under missionaries in the name of assimilation. Aboriginal culture being an oral culture in which the entire community participated in all activities, could not be passed on. It is a lived experience. The whole system has been dominated by the settlers to such an extent that the damage cannot be repaired. Aborigines like Worru, are well aware of the tragic situation and the havoc the Whites racist policies have wreaked on the lives of the Aborigines. In their helplessness, they bewail:

We are tired of the benches,
Our beds in the park;
We welcome the sundown
That heralds the dark.
Whites lady methylate
Keep us warm and from crying,
Hold back the hate
And hasten the dying. (109)

The Dramatic art of Jack Davis is attuned to the theme and content of the play. While characterization displays the tapestry of emotions and psychological fabric of society, these insights are subtly accentuated by the traditional folk oral elements of song, music, legend, fable and linguistic idiom. All these aspects inevitably draw the attention of scholars who seek to find out how form reveals feeling in dramatic art.

-----