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Reclaiming Voice and Space: Aboriginal Self-Assertion in Jack Davis's *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*

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Abstract

Australian drama has undergone significant transformation since the colonial era, with the rise of Aboriginal theatre marking a crucial phase in reclaiming cultural identity and historical narrative. This theatre arose as a form of resistance and protest, using Indigenous cultural narrative to challenge the dominant white settler discourse that has long suppressed the Aboriginal voices in Australia. Jack Davis, a celebrated Nyoongah playwright from Western Australia, stands as a commanding voice in this movement. His plays focus on both white and Aboriginal audiences, underlining the need for self-definition, cultural assertion, and historical reparation. Understanding the fact that his works are written in the language of the white settlers, Davis strategically incorporates Indigenous music, myths, and language to destabilise colonial norms and celebrate Aboriginal identity. His theatre becomes a space where repressed histories and lived realities are enunciated with authenticity and urgency. This paper examines the key themes in Davis's plays *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*, both of which reflect the enduring struggles of Aboriginal people to assert their place in a society that continues to challenge their existence.

Keywords: Australian theatre, Aboriginal Drama, Political theatre, Postcolonial drama

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Aboriginality is the legacy of traditional Black Australian culture. It is a movement of some dejected human beings towards liberty, self-dignity and a secure future. It has its growth and story beginning as a reaction against the White Australian society trying to dignify its past. These reactions are sometimes portrayed as strong, rebellious and sometimes outside of the law by the mighty. It has become a combination of the past heritage and the renewal of the present Black Australian identity. The white oppression has only triggered the concept and growth of the idea of Aboriginality. It comprises of the Aboriginal past, Black Australian land, sense of pride and dignity, rebellion and dissatisfaction. The political scene also has witnessed havoc in the form of demonstrations against the establishments which claim to be those for the Aboriginals. Aboriginal literature not only shows the bitter experiences but also their feeling of togetherness with their people, land and their past, reinforcing their shared past of oppression and sometimes celebration. Aboriginality has many facets: endurance, pride, protest, poverty, sorrow, anger and humour. Aboriginal writers across Australia have explored all these important facets in their works and have attempted to define history from their own experiences and facts.

Jack Davis, poet and dramatist, was among the first Aboriginal writers to make a strong impact as a leading figure in contemporary Aboriginal writing. Even though he was popular as a poet, he made his greatest and notable contributions in the field of drama. Davis was born in Perth in 1917 and brought up in Yarloop and the Moore River Native Settlement. He spent several years living on the Brookton Aboriginal Reserve where he first began to learn the language and the culture of his people, the Nyoongarah of the South West of Western Australia. The emergence of Aboriginal writers like Davis in the field of art and theatre has tried to seize the opportunities of education and access to the ideas of the civilisation and to retain their Aboriginal identity. Remarkably, these stalwarts have chosen to be with the system to change and revive it, offering their service to their people and in the institutions they are creating. The Aboriginal society has always been rich in creative achievements in the arts, and this creativity has continued uninterrupted in the places where their traditional way has been maintained.

Davis is an important member of the Aboriginal intelligentsia: as a poet, playwright, administrator and political activist, he serves the future of his people. The plays he has written form his own aboriginal experience, interspersed with the episodes of history of the black-white confrontation in Western Australia. These episodes have not only shaped the Aboriginal conditions but also have left their marks on the understanding and knowledge of the white Australian spectators.

To understand the theatre of Davis, one must look into the context of the history, which one finds echoing in the dramatic texts, pointing towards the umbrella term Aboriginalism, which deals with the construction of Aboriginal Australia, its past and its heritage from the white man's perspective for centuries. One can easily find its extent leading towards what Said called

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“Orientalism”. Both deal with regimes associated with European imperialism and White hegemony.

Bain Atwood understands Australian history and explains in his *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*:

Other commentators have noted that memory has become more and more central to personal and collective identity. Whatever the reasons, history has become a growing preoccupation of the increasingly important realm of the arts and the media—often referred to as the culture industry. But it has also been intrinsic to debates about the nature of the nation and national identity, which have once again become central to politics in many states. (12)

Aboriginal writers, especially theatre practitioners, found it very complicated to write their history and to repeal the history and Aboriginal perspective from the white’s point of view. It took them years of literary history and outrage to establish their own identity, and they are still trying for the authorship of their history. Till then, the history and literature of the Aboriginals were the monopoly of the Whites, as they never considered Aboriginal writers and scholars as experts to write and establish their history.

Kullark was first performed at the Titan Theatre, Perth, by the Theatre-in-Education team of the National Theatre Company on 21 February 1979. *Kullark* represents real Aboriginal experiences in post-colonial Australia under the whites.

The play has two different plots interwoven with one another. The first plot depicts the present life of native Australian Alec, and the other one deals with the history of colonisation. The history begins with the British settlement in Australia. The British Captain Stirling, the founder of Swan River Colony and Frazer meet the Aboriginal Yagan’s family. They find the aborigines friendly and establish the colony near Swan River.

The next scene presents a friendly relationship between Will, a white settler and Yagan, an aborigine. They exchange fish and flour. The relationship continues until Jenkins, another officer, threatens Yagan with a Gunshot. Over time, Will and his wife Alice come to know that Yagan has killed two whites for killing Yagan’s brother. Yagan soon escapes from prison and comes to Will’s home. The government announces a pound reward for the person who catches Yagan. Yagan is shot dead by a little boy, William Keats, who pretends to befriend Yagan. Soon, the British brought the area under their control and threatened the natives with their guns.

After colonisation, the races began to mix because of interracial marriages between natives and settlers. Soon, half-Aboriginal children began to increase. The half-black people struggle to establish a single identity throughout the play. Act II revolves around the history of the life of Alec’s father, Thomas, who is arrested and forced to live in a settlement area, just because he is multiracial. Thomas tries to escape from prison four times but is caught by the police and put into prison for six months for each escape. Finally, the day comes when he is released and is ordered

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to live with his wife and children in his desired area. Russel Ward explains in his article *Black and White Australians*:

The records show that, though Aborigines behaved quite as violently towards each other as do other humans, Aboriginal tribes had never learnt to fight either defensive or offensive wars. The tribes never did make war on each other, at least in the sense that that word is used by most other peoples of the earth. Consequently, they were quite unable to make war upon the white invaders who came to stay in 1788. (165)

Thomas's son Alec becomes an Army officer and builds his own identity as an aboriginal Australian citizen, and begins to despise whites for the hatred which he received when he was a child. Alec becomes a drunkard and retires from the Army, and marries Rosie. Alec and Rosie beget Jamie, who is their son. In the first act, Jamie returns from abroad after higher studies. Jamie and Alec quarrel over Alec's drinking habit, and the play ends with their realisation of their limits of freedom and free existence in their own home.

Yagan is targeted and killed by the coloniser because they think him to be a threat to their colonial exercise of power. Epitomises the colonised Aboriginal community. Thomas represents the quality of agency and mimicry. He both serves the white and despises them as well. This reveals his hesitant nature, which is an outcome of his mind torn between his experience with colonisation and identification of his Aboriginal self. Alec shows his mimetic attitude by drinking British drinks and shows his resistance through the appropriation of the English language. Jamie exemplifies a kind of hybrid existence by swaying between two different lifestyles.

Kullark was written as 'a protest against the omission of Aborigines from the 1979 150th year of colonial celebrations' (of settlement in Western Australia). The immediate aim of the protest was the use and misuse of history in the construction of the narrative regarding the celebration, and also against the white intelligentsia who do not contest the distortion or deliberate forgetfulness of a whole community in the history of colonisation.

Kullark has covered the 150-year history of Aboriginal Australia. It begins in the present, with the Aboriginal family whose lives are still profoundly affected by that history, and then it moves back in time, representing three phases in Aboriginal White history: the time of settlement, in the 1930's and the immediate post-war period after 1945. This has the form of a historical chronicle.

What makes *Kullark* unique is the four slices of time being presented by the same set of Aboriginal actors, dramatising different generations of the same family Yorlahs. The roles of Yagan and Jamie are performed by the same Aboriginal actor, and so with the case of Thomas and Alec, Mary and Rosie. This device is used to refer to time as recurrent and repetitive, asserting the self-identity of each individual connected to his/her traditional Aboriginal past. Davis presents a set of parallels and oppositions between the past and the present, showing the different perspectives of different ages as perceived by the Aboriginal and the White settler. The parallels also mirror the

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continuity of the Aboriginal situations even after years. The Aboriginal situation and the perspective of Yagan are different from that of Thomas, Alec and Jamie, who are placed in different time zones.

The execution of Yagan, who fought against the white injustice, is paralleled with the protest of Thomas, then to Alec's service without acknowledgement in the Australian Army and then subsequently followed by the route of Jamie's education into the White Society. Each Aborigine has their way of survival as a reaction to the colonial presence in their lives, directly or indirectly. The situation repeats in different forms, and the Aboriginal responds with different perspectives, but the only thing that is persistent is that the progress of the Aboriginal community, with special reference to the Nyoongah community, is minimal. It cannot be labelled development or modernisation, but one sees a new variation from the basic pattern of their existence. The past is not forgotten nor is it followed, but it is used as a source of wisdom.

The main action takes place against a backdrop of a group of people living independently within their culture, welcoming strangers and at the same time finding resources to protect their interests. The white settlers, as portrayed in *Kullark*, were indifferent and careless to the native's attitudes and their lifestyles. The lives of aborigines, their traditions were given no value by the white settlers. The situation does not change much even in Jamie's time. The struggle and the protest are still present, but in a different form. It becomes more of a passive assimilation into the established system.

The Dreamers had been produced as a reaction to the drab and sombre modern life of the Aborigines, with muddled understandings of their past. It portrays the contemporary metropolitan experience of Aborigines, specifically which of the *Nyoongah* community, living in the Western part of South Australia. It also tends to celebrate the survival myth and resistance against marginalisation. *The Dreamers* was first performed in February 1973 in Western Australia. Davis himself explains in "An Interview" with Adam Shoemaker (1982)

The Dreamers in 1973 was more or less political- it had political overtones, especially in terms of local government. But this one is more or less a psychological play which deals with part-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people in an urban setting, but still it applies to any ethnic group throughout the play today. It could happen to Aboriginal people or Indian people, or Eskimo people; it happens to non-Aboriginal people also. We all suffer the same thing. (112).

The title of the play "*The Dreamers*" holds a key-unlocking a world of Dreamtime stories lurking in the recesses of the black Aboriginal past, executed through the aged Aboriginal Worru, who is the main protagonist. *The Dreamers* has its inspirational origin, especially from a late encounter between Worru and Davis in urban Perth. Worru was the first person to introduce Davis to his Aboriginal heritage, and perhaps the urge behind making him the leading voice. In the 1982 production, Davis himself played the role of Uncle Worru.

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The play opens in summer, closes in winter, opens with a speech of Worru and ends with an epitaph over his death by Dolly; opens with a youthful battle for water and soap and closes with an unknown fear of a spirit that renders Worru lifeless. *The Dreamers* has portrayed a critical juncture of Aboriginal theatre where the then contemporary uneasiness of measuring the indigenous lifestyles with that of the whites widens significantly, commenting on the lack of conviction and trust in disclosing one's own indigenous identity.

Davis authenticates realism in everyday life. The pleasure of Aboriginal audiences is the pleasure of recognition, seeing them on stage. And at the same time, the messages are directed and pointed towards the white spectators to introspect their stance regarding the history of Australia written by the Whites. The voice of dissent of every aborigine is reflected in the songs written in the play *The Dreamers*.

I will let you dream-dream, an old friend
Of a child and a man in September
Of hills and stars and the river blend
Alas, that is all to remember. (The Dreamers 139)

The other side in Davis's dramatisation is his use of Aboriginal myths and language as a living tradition which his characters can draw on with ease. Characters at key moments in the action recite Aboriginal myths that often seem extraneous to the action but which are regarded as important and heartrending by the Aboriginal characters and the Aboriginal spectators. Myth and tradition are dramatised as a mysterious set of effects whose meaning is not revealed to White members of the audience, and which even Aborigines do not seem fully to understand.

The same effect can be seen in Davis's use of Aboriginal language. The characters use fragments of Nyoongah, which Davis himself explain is not a pure Aboriginal language, but rather a combination of fourteen different languages from the southwest of Western Australia. This composite 'impure' language survives in words and phrases embedded in vernacular English; here it now functions as a secret code that excuses members of the White audience, giving them the salutary experience of not quite understanding what is going on. This is a technique that Davis uses continuously, and it is his most important dramatic device.

Worru chants his feather foot song; the audience sees the figure of the Dancer, an Aborigine dressed in the traditional garb of the feather foot, who is invisible to Worru. Worru seems to be so uncomprehending of this tradition that he sings his death, while Shane has an uneasy premonition that something is wrong, but continues to play cards. Traditional Aboriginal beliefs, as signified by the 'feather foot' tradition and the image of the Dancer, provide a fundamental dimension of the act, yet no one in the play or the audience is able to understand or grasp it fully. The audience sees the Dancer, experiencing the importance of this key, as well as the fact that its full significance is withheld from them. At the same time, they see that this kind of knowledge is not available easily to all Aborigines simply because they are Aboriginal. Aboriginal culture survives as a vital

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force amongst contemporary Aborigines, and yet it also has to be recreated with difficulty, effort and respect by all Aborigines, who learn it, as they have always done, from older members of their families. It is that knowledge which has been represented by Uncle Worru.

Davis's work is didactic and every play was written with the clear aim of communicating Aboriginal meanings to the dominant White society, but its most important points are conveyed modestly, but deceitfully. Davis's dramatic strategy is training for White audiences to help them listen better. Aboriginality exists in the multilayered complexity of his work, not as a fixed body of beliefs and knowledge which have been injured or lost, but as a fluid set of meanings in process. After 200 years of hostility from the dominant society, Aboriginal people have found ways for themselves and their culture to survive, and that survival is the theme that Davis most often emphasises.

In many respects, *The Dreamers* and *Kullark* are spectacular works. The use of the Nyoongah language challenges the White Australian reader or member of the audience. For one of the few times in Australian literature, it makes her or him feel an outsider on the continent, which, after all, has been occupied by Europeans for only two hundred years. As a result of this, and because of the strong awareness of Aboriginal history and traditional oral literature in which it is steeped, *The Dreamers* is one of the most culturally independent and autonomous Black Australian theatrical statements to date.

Both *Kullark* and *The Dreamers* are, in quite different ways, a celebration of resistance and assertion. The former shows the reverse side of the Western Australian commemoration of its sesquicentenary, which also represented 150 years of oppression and exploitation of Aborigines. The latter is a celebration of what it is to be an urban Aboriginal, despite hypocrisy, untruths, and the constant pressure of the surrounding European world. Maryrose Casey writes in *Bold, Black, and Brilliant: Aboriginal Australian Drama*:

Performance, as an embodied encounter between people of different cultures, occupies a current position within the processes of recognition and misrecognition of the other. In the context of colonised peoples, dramas written for performance in effect act as a map for representations and communication. In Australia, performance has been a pivotal point of encounter between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. (155)

In *Kullark*, Davis presents the progression of the lives of the Aborigines, which never reached a satisfactory destination of growth and acceptability. In *The Dreamers*, the writer portrays the meaninglessness of some contemporary Aboriginal lives. *Kullark* is a review of the present plight of the Nyoongars seen in the historical perspective, whereas *The Dreamers* makes the audience see the Nyoongars as they are. The realistic portrayal of the lives of Nyoongars will lead a black as well as white spectator to reflect on the knowledge of history they have obtained from white voices and texts. The reappearing of the drums and the parallel images of the past make the

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statement of what the Aborigines dreamt of their nation, what it offered and what it turned to be for them.

Despite unemployment and a high level of misbehaviour among Nyoongar youth, many positive elements could foreshadow a more rewarding and satisfying future. One which is not forgotten, that could not be destroyed even in the face of such disaster as the Moore River settlement, that maintained its significance through times of oppression and trouble, is the awareness of Aboriginal identity. It defines the unique position of people of Aboriginal descent in the wider heterogeneous Australian society, recognising their place in that wider society but also their distinctive, long-standing ties with the country itself.

Jack Davis's dream is of an Aboriginal heritage-not in terms of the past as such, but as a symbolic stance for the present, a refuge, a home (Kullark) within which people can be positively identified, acknowledged, providing emotional security, a sense of belonging, and meaning to life without any discrimination and judgment being passed. Pride in being Aboriginal is lastingly inscribed in his writing and staged in his plays, indicating firm roots which go deeply within the total Australian scene, far beyond the recent past, into its very beginnings

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