

**A few entry points for discussing the debates in Australian Studies in an Indian Classroom, corresponding to the course on Australian Literature in M.A. (English) offered at Bankura University:**

1. *The historiographical debates and debates around the nationing project* – Australia – a hold-all signifier for contending histories – white settler and indigenous, penal and bourgeois royalist, Asian and European – and geographies and national identities:
  - a. What kind of a nation? – Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community”? But this has to be in the plural, for Australia today is a shared space. It is no white/Anglo-Celtic lebensraum nor does it entail any longer a single language, culture or any other collective monochrome. It *smoulders with alternatives* to what the first white settlers since the late nineteenth century thought to be *the last Anglo-Saxon outpost exiled in a forbidding geo-political neighbourhood*, and Donald Horne later rendered as “the [picture-postcard] lucky country”.
  - b. Many, among them Anglo-Saxon academics like *Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds*, have contended that *the Australian nation has been founded on a “radical act of racial exclusion”*; for a long time, the aboriginals and Asians were pretended out of existence in the dominant nationalist discourses on White Australia, a policy dismantled as late as 1963. Others, like Shirley Walker, think that the primary object of Australian nationalism and dominant historiography is not to understand or to interpret. It is to legitimise the violent, two centuries old history of hurt-space created through expulsions of the non-white and non-masculine from physical space and normative mindscapes.
  - c. So, we must look at *rainbow aspects of Australian nationalisms*. Profound unease about the British connection dyed the nascent years of the Federation. On the one hand, were flaunted the pride and glory of “British manhood” which Alfred Deakin (1856-1919), thrice Prime Minister in the first decade of the formation of Federation and a maker of its White Australia policy, declared to be the pivot of the nation. On the other hand, Australia was a white settler colony and Britain had no desire to acknowledge it as a co-player in the imperial game. What were they – the Australians must have wondered perched on the edge, second-handed in the game of empire – *civilizational co-partners or colonial country cousins*? Deakin, despite being an imperialist, was also a staunch Federationist vying, along with many other major politicians like Edmund Burton, for independence and autonomy from British supremacy and the destiny of being dubbed an imperial province/ hinterland. Louis Esson, who along with critic and writer Vance Palmer, dreamt of a national theatre in the early twentieth century, winced at the colonial cringe.
  - d. *A nation of minorities?: Lacunae in earlier visions of a national culture* had been a remarkable constant in seminal and fringed discussions on Australian nationalisms. The dream had always been in danger of turning sour, even for some of the dreamers, let alone critics. Vance Palmer (1885-1959) who virulently espoused the Lawson-Furphy tradition and 1890s as the “dreamtime of White Australia” and became a self-appointed and somewhat celebrated arbiter of national taste in literature, was increasingly divorced from the realities of post World War Australian society. All for manliness, work, space and the bush, he regarded women, intimacy/introspection, city, suburb, drawing-room, the British influence and ex-patriate writers as threatening his ideal literary world. The fiercely exclusionary bias in his literature and critique incidentally also banished the

majorly urban, bourgeois white Australia to which he belonged and which happened to comprise men *and* women; *Palmer's bush-fantasy was alien to the society he claimed to represent and guardian*. A much-quoted apparently normative critic thus turned out to be an estranged minority shoring up aborted dreams, later enshrined at the heart of Australian national iconography as the bush legend. His socialist, anti-suburban, anti-middle class dream of a sentient commune in Australia, had collapsed with the World Wars.

e. Henry Reynolds's black-armband history *Why Weren't We Told* (2000) highlights *a more conventional minority, the aborigines* pushed to the reserves and to the brink with their dreamtime, histories and sacred landscapes rendered invisible. So does Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's *The Dark Side of the Dream* (1990), which argues that White Australia is a schizoid nation and must hide its guilt and violence of repressing the other, majorly the aborigines, by seeking refuge in the Australian legend of the bushman/ranger – a peripheral, rustic, delinquent figure patrolling the hinterlands of the empty continent, nothing like the majority of the Australians. This chiefly literary stereotype of the inarticulate, misogynist, emotionally and intellectually challenged white male absents other marginals, like women and indigenous Australians, and becomes a surrogate subaltern safe for gaze, but in no way an ideal to be imitated by those who consume and produce the Australian legend, namely the middle class. With a jostle of so many contending versions, invented memories and dreams in despair, the question of Australian nations, identities and nationalisms is infinitely more complex than it appears. Small wonder then that David Brooks, the Australian writer, editor of *Southerly* and faculty in Australian Studies at the University of Sydney, observes that “The question of national identity is an oxymoron.” And we have not begun to speak of women and the Asian and East European diaspora.

2. *The war of representations*: Given the fiercely debated and irreducibly plural versions of Australian identities and nationalisms, *a war of representations* rages in literary adaptations of the Australian myths and sacred. Aboriginal myths or the Asian ones do not frame the aesthetic discourse; they are still mostly welcome as exotic curios. But the mainstream white Australian canon of the secular sacred – sacred in the sense of being inviolable, or of being presented as the numinous, the unrepresentable – are subject to routine subversions and sabotage. *The lost Anzac campaign of Gallipoli in Turkey in 1914* during the first World War is strangely hailed as the white Australian myth of origins, though it was an empire war fought in somebody else's homeland and the campaign ended in retreat. Its status as the ur-myth has been subverted in recent times, as many today do not identify with the war as the womb of their nation. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds has sabotaged the Anzac myth in their book *What's Wrong with Anzac?* (2010). So has David Brooks, by asking, “Which War? Whose?”

Other Australian legends include the above-mentioned bush and bushman, the shearer/drover, the rough and masculine gold-digger and his mutant version, the digger/soldier, and the refrains of egalitarianism, mateship and upward mobility for ‘all’, with ‘all’ quietly excluding the coloured races during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The Australian map, ‘cooe’ – apparently the mate-call of every bushman to his chum/cobber – the wildflower wattle are some of their other totems, often questioned and critiqued or parodied, as in Richard White and Melissa Harper's *Symbols of Australia: Uncovering the stories behind the myths* (2010). Bill Ashcroft explores the

idea of untamed space in an alien landscape, or what he terms to be the “horizontal sublime” as the new secular sacred of white Australians in his essay “The Sacred in Australian Culture”, while aboriginal self-published author Denis Kevan suggests in his poem that the sacrilege-addict white man has no sense of the sacred. The iconic Lawson has himself questioned the myth of the bush and invested it with irony in “The Drover’s Wife” (1892). It alludes to the bush ethic but casts the outback woman as reluctant pioneer and saviour of the masculine ideal, since her husband is absent and males other than her eldest son Tommy, whether a “gallows-faced swagman” or a “stray blackfellow”, are presented as vicious or contemptible. Barbara Baynton’s “The Chosen Vessel”, first published in the *Bulletin* as “The Tramp” (1896), could be read as a female response to Lawson’s story, and builds on a grim subversion of the bush ethic/legend, in which the shearer’s wife is raped and brutally murdered by a swagman. The Australian legend seems to canonically embed its critique.

*A brief note on Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton as ironical interpreters of the bush legend:*

The spatial vocabulary of white Australia had been tethered to land instead of the fluid littoral since at least the late nineteenth century, a period deeply invested in yellow peril i.e. Asian scare fiction and the Lawson-and-Furphy-promoted bush legends and ethic of male mateship, inarticulacy and exclusions – of women, the city, intimacy, aborigines and colour, and other solvents of patriotism. This vast hinterland, envisioned as empty, untamed and inviting settlement by pioneers, comprised the bush: Australia was spatially reconfigured as an ‘empty continent’ on the edge of Asia. And Lawson’s mass icon of the hinterland rover was hailed as “the workman, the tramp, the shearer – the true bushman – the inner Australian beyond civic or imported influences – the most Australian Australia”. ‘Empty space’, according to Greg Lockhart, is euphemism for ‘indigenous space’, the term signifies the silenced history of ‘partial genocide’ through imperial occupation. The bush legend canonically embeds its own subversion. Its critique has been performed in iconic short stories set in the bush, such as Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” (1892) or Barbara Baynton’s “The Chosen Vessel” (1896), both featuring the men as absent or vicious, and the women either as exhausted survivors of the legend, or dead victims of the violence the bushmen unleash.

As *The Dark Side of the Dream* insists, the myth of struggle-addict bushmen and pioneers or such stereotypes of Australian heroism had been far removed from the reality of national life in any tense:

For there is no doubt that the Australian stereotype is nothing like the majority of Australians, today or even in the past . . . the discrepancy has not arisen late, nor has it been not noticed. . . . At exactly this period [the 1890s], according to a study of the history of incarceration in Australia by Stephen Garton (1988), the population of lunatic asylums was dominated by male rural labourers and itinerant workers: arrested by the police for being classic examples of the Australian legend. . . . Those who produce and consume the Australian legend are normally middle-class urban dwellers. Their identity as Australians is not constructed by identification with the legend but on the contrary by a common pattern of

repudiation of it. The legend is offered as an object for the gaze, not as an ideal to be imitated. (172-173)

According to Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, the knowledge of this myth as non-real is an open secret and has been consistently performed in classic texts like Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" (1892) which alludes to the bush ethic but casts the outback woman as reluctant pioneer and saviour of the masculine ideal. Barbara Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel", first published in the *Bulletin* as "The Tramp" (1896), could be read as a sequel to Lawson's story. The Australian legend thus comes stitched to its own critique and embedded subversion, even in canonised short stories allegedly showcasing the bush legend.

*The city could be the new muse of Australian Studies*, at least rivalling the ubiquity of the tired bush, suggested Bruce Bennett in what was possibly his last paper titled "Australian Literature and Place"; he has detailed multiple dimensions of Canberra as a lair for poets and writers, re-invented as much architecturally in re-configured cityscapes as in fictional rainbow avatars of the drug capital, surreal city or the ideal, indifferent site of international espionage and invasion fantasy.

3. *Of Counter-narratives*: Besides subversion and sabotage, *counter-narratives* abound in Australian literature. The First Nations peoples of Australia have come up with their narratives and we could chant the usual canon of indigenous writings in English or in translation, like Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987). We hope to be able to engage with these texts in individual presentations. In class, I shall like to look at film-clippings, fiction and research on alternative epistemologies from the aboriginal angle. Kim Scott's *Benang* (1996) for example, signifies "from the heart" and blends memory, history and fantasy to project the Nyoongar culture into a dynamic present/ce despite the disabling history of oppressions, rather than a museumized relic for tourists and reconciliationists. Similarly, Rachel Parkins' musical comedy *Bran Nue Dae* released in Australia in 2010 refuses the victim mode and traditional postures of anguish to celebrate the ecstasies and life rhythms of an aboriginal boy in the northern pearling port of Broome which hosted many races and ancient trade relations with Asia to begin with. We shall also read in class selections from *Blacklines* (2003), an anthology of critical writings by indigenous Australians.

4. *Of the margins*: Marginalities are asymmetrical and the trap of equating all margins and their voices – following the pre-scripted perceptual habits of western academic industry – ought to be resisted. We shall investigate under another sub-head that other major periphery in Australia today, the multicultural Asian diaspora. As David Brooks astutely observes, the word multicultural is problematic; it suggests unilateral power. "It is perhaps a term that comes and can come only from the governor, not the subalterns", he says, "Can there *be*, for example, a 'multicultural' individual who has not relegated his/her culture in order to be so?" We shall discuss the Indian-Australian Meena Abdullah, Sri Lankan Yasmine Gooneratne and Laksiri Jayasuriya's perspectives on this issue, as reflected in their fiction, poems and academic papers. We also have Margaret Allen's papers in our course reader on the history of Australian perceptions of the Asian diaspora in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the gaze reversed.

5. *Australia's Asia*. And now we come to one of the most interesting sections of the course – the *transnational histories of Australia's engagement with Asia*, with a special focus on the Indian subcontinent. The Antipodes had always been caught in its history versus geography dilemma; the only history white settler Australia had dominantly wanted to inherit was that of the British empire, Europe and later, USA. Its geography however, was an unnerving mismatch to its elect racial memories, often a provocateur of nostalgia for someplace else. Though Julia Gillard's 2012 White Paper on Australia promises policies with an Asia pivot, it too is rather thin on the history. In this section, we get to retrieve some of the forgotten, or disappeared histories of Australian connections with the rest of Asia, and specially India.

First Australian novelist John Lang (1816-1864) had written a number of India-based short stories collated in the anthology *Wanderings in India* (1861); he was, incidentally, Rani Jhasi Bai's lawyer and editor-publisher of a periodical, *Mofussilite*, during his years in India. The politics of Ethel Anderson's incredible India presented in her stories and Louis Esson's 'Antique India' shall feature in our class discussions and interactive student seminars. I shall try to read with you in this Australian Studies course India's nuanced and lifelong influences on Alfred Deakin, and on the aspiring writer and nurse Mollie Skinner's portrayal of the truant blood-fearing, yet brilliant and loyal polyglot Anzac Tucker, for all purposes an Indian Australian comfortable with fluidities and ambiguities in her India-based fiction *Tucker in India* (1937). We shall study the chequered and plural, often eluded histories of Australia's engagements with Asia, in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska's introduction to the 2012 scholarly historical anthology on a normatively neglected territory of Australia's past, *Australia's Asia: From yellow peril to Asian century*. Besides historians' scholarly excavations, we shall look at the literary, socio-historical and philosophical implications of the engagements and of the settler instinct to disown those narratives in writer-academic Yasmine Gooneratne's paper "Fabricated Stereotypes: Asia in the Australian Imagination", Bruce Bennett's essays "National Images and Stereotypes: India through Australian Eyes" and excerpts from Rick Hosking and Amit Sarwal's edited anthology, *Wanderings in India: Australian Perceptions* (2012).

*To conclude:*

Why do Australian Studies? As a window into the world, a prism for fresh refractions on India Studies and for working towards non-exclusive epistemological frameworks to understand the interpenetration of cultures, their ruptures and possibilities (by mapping the impact of inter-cultural contacts with India as a pivot) and as a nuanced illustration of the post-colonial condition. Australian coins have the British monarch's head embossed on one side of it and the local landscape or an indigenous animal or aboriginal elder's head minted on the other. What do we make of this? That, all the possibilities of the potent hyphen – of collusion, complicity, resistance, radicalisation – mapped by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra in their article "What was post (-)colonialism?" (2005) have at last come true. Australia remains inflected by the colonial condition and yet desires to reconfigure its experiences and insights, hopes and dreams arising from the hitherto silenced recesses of its politics, past and tension of self-

identities. Caught in the marginality of the colonial time warp, it could yet contain a carnival of contradictory self-narratives, darkneses and re-assessments.

As students of Australian Studies would have realised, we have not stuck to known writers, faces or even a single discipline when it came to designing a tentative course or a list of resources and references for you in Australian Studies. It is inter-disciplinary, with excerpts from philosophy/theory, history and fiction and it cites journals, archives and films; so our proposed readings for the course are multimedial. I have wanted the plurality of Australian Studies to resonate in the teaching methods and texts, and we have focussed on the impact of dialogues and contacts between spaces and perspectives in dissent, issues, cultures and media. Our class presentations will follow, I hope, this tradition of re-interpreting, re-creating traditions.

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