

## DRAFT

### New ways of Australian writing make possible new ways of seeing and understanding the nation and people

Sunil Govinnage

The purpose of this paper is to identify key features, underlying values and philosophies behind new ways of Australian writings. In this brief paper, I intend to examine new Australian writings covering the period from 1965 to 1995. In a recently published compendium of literature, a widely acclaimed Australian scholar and an academic Bruce Bennett observed an 'explosion' of "books categorised as 'literature' " during this period:

Using the books categorised as 'literature' in the *Annals of Australian Literature* (1992), it can be shown that the total number of books of Australian literature rose from an average of 85 per year in 1965-69 to 122 in 1970-79, and 183 in the decade 1980-89. A further quantum increase occurred during 1990-95, during which over 400 titles appeared each year. (Bennett, 1998:253).

Although Bennett's observation is on the 'whole of Australian literature', a significant component of this writings is by women, migrant and Aboriginal writers. However, for the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on a sample of writings, categorised as 'literature' and published since 1965 primarily by migrant writers in Australia. Although in a broader sense both Aboriginal and women's writings come under this category, my focus would be on the writings by first or second generation migrants from so called non-English speaking countries. These writings could be considered as a cross section of post-modernist work representing not only a new set of values but also the changing nature of Australia as a nation.

Migrant writers have contributed both in fiction and poetry. It is evident that migrants writers have also contributed significantly to poetry in recent times. Concerning new Australian poets, Dennis Haskell writes:

Contemporary anthologies include writers with surnames like 'Jaireth', 'Saravanamuttu', 'Sharah', 'Aslanides' and 'Walwicz'. Australian government's post-war immigration policies have transformed Australian society and this has filtered through into poetry, most often from those who migrated young or the children of migrants (Haskell, 1965:277).

Susan Lever who wrote on issues relating to 'Innovation and Ideology' in fiction published since 1965 has captured the themes and the contents of some of these new writings:

It has fallen to the children of migrants, particularly non-British migrants, to adapt the novel to the multiple experience of cultures. Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983) offers a model of the way in which postmodernist techniques suit the mixed identities of the migrants, particularly the physical different such as Castro's Chinese men.

Beth Yahp's novel *The Crocodile Fury* (1992) adapts the mythic storytelling of Malaysia to the contemporary novel, slipping between family history and fairytale, between Christian religion and an older pagan belief system... Fotini Epanomitis, similarly, tries to replicate the patterns of storytelling in a Greek village in her *The Mule's Foal* (1993); the implied audience is Australian but Epanomitis asks the

reader to make what she can of the connections. These writers try to foreground the differences of perspectives... (Lever, 1998:325).

One writer who has added a different perspective, at least as far as the form and the narrative style is concerned is Ania Walwicz. In her prose, Walwicz has developed a new narrative style that is close to James Joyce's 'stream of consciousness', but the content of her writings is about ethnic migrants in Australia:

they're not us they're them they're them they are else what you don't know what you don't know what they think they got their own ways they stick together you don't know what they're up to you never know with them you just don't know with them no we didn't ask them to come here they come and they come (Walwicz, 1982: 207).

Walwicz's work, which I have quoted from 'Wogs', presents an unorthodox narrative style which is not commonly visible in standard Australian writings. Sneja Gunew who has written extensively on women's as well as migrant writings in Australia observes:

Walwicz's 'Wogs' sets out the process of dehumanisation which results from prejudice. The litany of absurdities and contradictions escalates into comedy at the same time that it echos disconcertingly the arguments perennially mounted in newspaper attacks on migration. Here the marginalised other recreates the oppressor with devastating accuracy (Gunew, 1990:172).

Walwicz drifts from traditional Standard English prose by 'breaking rules' of the language to recreate the Other; "the oppressor". For example, the lack of punctuation makes it difficult for readers to know when to insert a pause in order to "make sense"-and this mires the way in which the English language creates difficulties for those who don't understand it.

Why it is necessary for migrant writers to break the standard rules "to find a form of new expression"? Kateryna Arthur who has written on 'Aboriginal and Immigrant Writing' provides a good explanation about this particular aspect of- migrant writings. Concerning Walwicz's unorthodox narrative style, Arthur observes:

By breaking the rules of fundamental grammar, the writing not only tells the stories that make up its content. It also confronts the reader continually with the story of the writing's struggle to find a form of expression that makes sense to an English-speaking audience while still displaying the marks of its 'home-language' (Arthur, 1988:124).

What type of an explanation could be provided to justify "the story of the writing's struggle"? In other words, what are the dominant themes of migrant experience that requires a new set of rules and a narrative style? In this regard, Sneja Gunew identifies three key features:

...In the first place, it involves the creation of a new identity, both private and public. Inevitably, this incorporates a clash between the old self forged in other social and physical context and, at times, in other languages...Other aspects of the migrant experience include the ...swing between the old culture and language at home, and the Australian codes which govern their public worlds. Finally, there is the tightrope experience of 'writing the other' which can either result in reinforcing stereotypes...(Gunew, 1990:169).

The feature of reinforcing stereotypes is evident in Walwicz's works particularly when she writes "they think they got their own ways they stick together..." etc in 'Wogs'. What about the other two key features; representation of 'new identities' and the 'swing between two cultures' as identified by Gunew. In David Martin's poem, Letter to a Friend in Israel (1964), the poet juxtaposes the new identity he had acquired after the arrival in his new country in response to a letter by a friend who is also a migrant. The friend has returned 'home' to Israel:

...  
What news  
Of Melbourne, Sam Well, Essendon's on top,  
Carlton lies second, and a lad's been jailed  
Who broke a bottle on the umpire's head.  
The wattle's coming out in Ferntree Gully,  
The pubs are coming down in Swanston Street...  
(Martin, 1964:192)

In this poem, Martin articulates his knowledge of the new culture and his new identity when he writes on the position of their favorite footy teams; 'Essendon' and 'Carlton'. In addition to the familiarity of this 'new game', the poet also writes on the blooming of 'wattles'; one type of native flowers in his country of domicile and the demolition of pubs in Swanston Street allowing space for urban sprawl. Despite this 'newly acquired familiarity' of his new environment and new identity, the migrant writers are subjected to alienation. Another migrant writer Jeltje in the Talking Migrant Blues expresses this alienation stemming from the unknown nature of this new environment:

A tree's not a tree  
And grass isn't grass.  
When you're a migrant,  
You see yourself looking at the trees  
And looking at the grass.  
When you're a migrant  
All you see is yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its limitation due to lack of poetic diction in this poem, it conveys the reason behind the detachment to his new environment and the problem of alienation.

In my own prose writings, I have also attempted to establish new identities embraced by migrants in Australia. In a short story called Black Australian, a Sri Lankan migrant is mistaken by a Dutchman for a 'Black Australian'; an Aboriginal person while visiting Amsterdam. At the beginning of the story, I attempted to portray my main protagonist and his artificially acquired new identity, an Australian Akubra Hat:

It was a cold night in Amsterdam. Winter had spared a nasty treatment to those who live in Europe. However, Siri felt a numbness which came with the wind and pierced through his dark brown skin like a sharp steel knife. He adjusted his Australian Akubra hat ...(Govinnage, 1989:1)

In the same story, as in David Martin's poem where the poet demonstrates his newly acquired knowledge of 'Aussie (rule) Footy', the protagonist of my story is an ardent supporter of the Western Australian football team, the West Coast Eagles. Despite his newly acquired identity or the familiarity

of new cultural codes he is harassed by fellow Australians for embracing this new identity:

Last year he was travelling to Melbourne in the middle of the 'Aussi Footy Season'. To show his faithfulness to the Western Australian football team, the West Coast Eagles, Siri was wearing the team's beanie and scarf. A group of young fellows at Melbourne airport looked at him and made a sarcastic remark:

"I didn't know that Eagles had supporters in India as well!" A boy remarked in a loud voice.

Siri thought he would have some fun at their expense. He replied: "Well mate. I am from Perth and Chris Lewis is my brother!" (Govinnage, 1989)

Despite these new identities acquired by migrants in their country of domicile, they seem to travel between two worlds or two cultures. Gunew also highlights this particular feature. There are several reasons for this detachment. First, the arrival in another country. Second, the need for switching between at least two languages. Third, storing of images from the old and the new country which is inevitable. These multiple perspectives and particularly the need for maintaining 'binary' images appears at the outset of Martin's poem Letter to a Friend in Israel (1964). Here the poet establishes the images and landmarks that he is familiar with at 'home', the real home where he was born; where he has his deeply rooted links:

Yes, I recall the Negev after drought,  
The loneliness, shirt sticking to the shoulder,  
The water tower glaring at the sky,  
The Arab sand that drifts under the door  
Like the eight plague of Egypt.  
(Martin, 1964:191)

In this poem, Martin not only brings in the foreign landscapes such as Negev but also utilises regional and local proverbs. These not only suggest 'foreign' names and cultural nuances but also brings new perspectives to Anglo-Celtic focussed Australian literary scene. These are essentially new ways of seeing and understanding things which can only be accomplished by migrant writers who brings 'binary' images to their work.

Another perspective brought by new writers is their ability to fuse old and new landscapes and images in their new home land. Malaysian born, the deceased poet, Ee Tiang Hong's Coming To is an example where an attempt has been made to fuse the old and new images and the landscapes as a unique feature encountered by migrant writers:

It was a blind corner,  
I remember, I couldn't think...

...

On terra firma, Austrais  
Don't ask me how I got out, Eddy,  
and Bruce, this isn't a suicide note,  
Heaven forbid! No sailing  
To Byzantium, either. Indeed,

Thankful just to have survived then  
around an edge of consciousness,  
new faces, fellow Australian.

And a country woman asking:  
'Where y' from'  
Her husband stands up tall  
by their four-wheel drive,  
looks me up and down:  
(Jesus! What on earth!)  
And so, uncertain, 'Perth'.  
I said, from down under.  
(Ee Tiang Hong, 1986:206:207)

Despite the personal and literary nuances hidden in this poem such as the reference to W. B Yeats's Byzantium in which the mythical Utopia exists promoting the art and spirits, the poet adds a new dimension of irony to the Australian culture when he writes; "And so, uncertain, 'Perth'/ I said, from down under".

Gunew summarises the hidden metaphor's in Ee's poem succinctly:

Ee's narrator speaks of the self metonymically as a car out of control and this constitutes a powerful evocation of the dislocation and panic many migrants feel particularly if they cannot initially relate to the new language and thereby translate their selves into these new codes. The ambiguity of the final phrase 'from down under' hints at a certain irony both the self as geographically located in the antipodes, but, as well, aware of a certain reduced status (Gunew, 1990:169-70).

Arthur sees this ambiguity as a part of the 'final problem confronted' by migrant writers and the recent development and the emergence of migrant writings as " ...strong signs" that may act as the "binary oppositions set up by traditional cultural explanations and definitions" of Australia (Arthur, 1988:128). In conclusion, it is important to recognise what these accounts of migrant experience can offer to Australian writings. As Gunew forcefully writes, migrant writings offer "not only evocations of dislocation and their struggle but also a redefinition of Australian literature which comes from injecting other cultures, with their new codes, their perspectives and realities, all contributing to the place 'we' call home" (Gunew, 1990:173).

## **Sunil Govinnage**

### **Brief biography**

Sunil is a Sri Lankan born Australian author who taught himself English at the age of 17.

His English works is available at [www.sunil.cjb.net](http://www.sunil.cjb.net)

Contact:

e-mail:

[sunilgovinnage@hotmail.com](mailto:sunilgovinnage@hotmail.com)

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3 Jeltje, *Talking Migrant Blues* (19??) quoted from *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia Pacific*

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