



## UNDERSTANDING ALBERT NAMATJIRA AS 'MAN OF TWO CULTURES' UNDER THE LIGHT OF HIS POEM "*ABORIGINAL MAN*"

**K.Samaikya**, Research Scholar,  
Acharya Nagarjuna University,  
Department of English  
Guntur.  
samaikya.k2009@gmail.com

### Abstract

*'Aboriginal' accurately means residing or existing in a land from the ancient times; living in a place prior to the arrival of intruders or colonists. Albert Namatjira is a famous aboriginal painter of Australia, who was the first native artist to get national and international reputation during the colonial rule of whites. His life, however, was blemished by racism, misfortune and depression. The poem Aboriginal Man is better implicated against the backdrop of colonial devastation of aboriginal cultural institutions and traditions. A biographical approach gives the poem deeper signification through the poet, who goes to hold the reflection of colonialism through his life and experiences. Though he won applause and commercial success; he was constantly threatened by Australian racism. The person, who had first shown all Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, the heart of their continent through his paintings, was a man of two cultures as widely different as it is possible to imagine and never fully accepted by either of the cultures. The struggle Namatjira goes through unable to identify himself fully as aboriginal and not being partially part of the western culture falls into main concern of the poem.*

*The aim of my paper is to show how Namatjira though being an aboriginal has failed to get into any of the two cultures, one his native and other. He got fame as an artist who adopted European style of painting but he was treated like my other aboriginal when it came to his nativity. He could neither completely become a westerner nor a complete aboriginal.*

**Key Words:** Racism, identity, colonist, aboriginalism

### Introduction:

The word 'Aboriginal' means first and earliest known indigenous. It soon became exploited and laboring as the common name refer to all indigenous Australians. A collection identity as indigenous Australians is recognized and exists along with the name of indigenous languages which are commonly used to identify groups based on regional geography and other affiliations, these include: Noongar (Southern Western South Australia); Koori (New South Wales), Yolngu (Eastern Arnhem Land), Murri (Queensland), Yapa (Western Central Northern territory), Palawah (Tasmania); and Anangu (Northern South Australia).

Indigenous Australians are progenies of the first human inhabitants of the Australian continent and its nearby island. They make 2.5% of Australia's population. The "indigenous Australians" incorporates many various communities and societies. It is estimated that prior to the arrival of British settlers the population was estimated approximately to be one million. The arrival of British colonists all but destroyed the indigenous Australian culture, reducing the population through diseases and removing them from their homelands. Whatever efforts to assimilate them have further destroyed their culture. Today however many are proud of



their heritage, and there has been somewhat of a revival of indigenous art, music, poetry, dance and sports. However, in many ways, the aboriginal people remain as an example of the suffering of one folkloric group caused by another.

The indigenous Australian population is a mostly urban demographic, but an extensive number live in remote payments frequently positioned on the site of former church missions the health and commercial complications facing both groups are generous. Both the remote and urban population has hostile ratings on social indicators. In 2004 the Prime Minister John Howard initiated contracts with aboriginal communities, where substantial financial benefits are available in return for communities such as ensuring children wash regularly and attend school. This sees a political shift from 'self-determination' for aboriginal communities to 'mutual obligation'.

Aboriginal Namatjira, with original name Elea Namatjira was an Australian artist. He is perhaps Australia's best known Aboriginal painter, with his work forming one of the foundations of contemporary Indigenous Australian art. While his work is the product of his life and experience, his paintings are not in the highly style of traditional aboriginal art. At the age of 13, he was exposed to traditional culture as a member of the 'Arrernte' community. At the age of 18, he married Rubina, who is out of his community by which he violated law of his people. When it came to his paintings he was influenced by the Australian natural beauty which reflected in his paintings. This is the significance of Albert being an Aboriginal he has the capacity to grasp the western style and succeeded in displaying it in his paintings.

He started painting in a distinctly unique style. His landscapes typically emphasized the distinctive Australian flora in the foreground with very old, stately and majestic white gum trees surrounded by twisted scrub. His work had a high quality of illumination. His colors were similar to the others that his ancestors had used to depict the same landscape but his style was appreciated by Europeans because it met the aesthetics of western art. Queen Elizabeth-II became one of his notable fans and he was awarded the Queen's coronation medal in 1953. He became popular, critically acclaimed wealthy. Namatjira's next works were colorful and varied depictions of the Australian landscapes. Some of his first landscapes are '*Central Australian Landscape*' (1936), '*Ajantzi waterhole*' (1937), '*Red Bluff*' (1938), '*Central Australian Gorge*' (1940), '*Flowering shrubs*'.

Due to his wealth, Namatjira soon found himself the subject of humpbugging, a ritualized form of begging. As his income grew he was expected to share everything with his people who led him to work more. He tried to build a house in Alice Springs which was rejected. In 1957 the government exempted Namatjira and his wife from restrictive legislation that applied to Aboriginals in the Northern Territory. This entitled them to vote, build a house and buy alcohol. Although Albert and Rubina were legally allowed to drink alcohol, his Aboriginal family and friends were not. The nomadic Arrernte culture expected him to share everything he owned, even after they ceased being itinerants.



It was then against the law to supply alcohol to an aboriginal person. He was sentenced to six months in prison for supplying an Aboriginal with liquor. It was this contradiction that has brought Namatjira into conflict with the law. He dies soon of heart disease complicated by pneumonia on 8<sup>th</sup> august in Alice Springs.

At the time of his death, Namatjira had painted a total of around two thousand paintings and has short biographical films made about him. His unique style of painting however was denounced soon after his death by some critics as being a product of his assimilation into western culture rather than his own connection to his subject matter or his natural style. This view has been largely abounded and Albert Namatjira is hailed as one of the greatest Australian artists and a pioneer of Aboriginal rights.

### **The Poem**

The word 'Aboriginal' literally means 'inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times; living in a place along before the arrival of intruders/ colonists'. Aborigine in Latin means 'from beginning'. The 'pride' and 'joy' of the first stanza of the poem originates from the Aborigines direct and unmediated relationship with his nature. A model of perfect being, the aboriginal man is framed for his natural ways and disregard for what others think of him. The second stanza advances how colonists tried to tame him by imposing their rules and setting their standard of conduct and achievement. The nature's man was following the law of his clan by sharing his resources with white intruders. He also falls prey to western acclaim and publicity his art draws.

The poem helps to read some good discussions of aboriginal cultures of Australia. The poem is a strong plea for the restitution of aboriginal cultural traditions and institutions in modern Australia. The poet himself being an aboriginal is very proud of his lineage as he has direct and unmediated relationship with nature. His fame grew fast and he has disregard for what others of him. But all the honor and tributes paid to the aboriginal man was in vain because the white colonists still treated him basing on his nativity. The poem reveals the real intention of the colonists as marked by their flattery and kindness. The colonists exploited his art to the fullest as it draws publicity and also called him a genius but finally left him with a broken heart. The whole thought of colonization and slavery has been minimized to a capsule in this poem. Namatjira has evoked in his readers a sense of duty to fight for their rights and they would continue to live as aborigines with their cultures and in the land of their ancestors.

If we try to focus on the background of the aboriginal's indigenous people's life it can be identified that they were not given their due respect/ value due to domination of white people. If the title is taken into consideration it mainly focuses on Aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira who is a representative figure of many people of his community. He can be a universalized picture of aboriginals. What makes Namatjira different is because in failure to given a life of comfort ability than any other is due to his fame. But it was resulted in failure because though he was recognized special when it came to his nativity he was treated none the less of other. He got fame only because he adopted western style of painting.



What made him “Man of Two Cultures” is his life which had shades of western as well as indigenous life. The painter who showed indigenous and non-indigenous the heart of their continent through his paintings has remained in the line drawn between aboriginals and colonists. His life became a litany of injury, hospitalization. Imprisonment and despair despite fame and success. His life was always haunted by the laws and restrictions of his community and also colonists these laws enforced upon him lead to his fall. He had a struggling life unable to identify himself with any section. The poem cannot merely just be seen as autobiographical poem but it is a confession of an aboriginal man, who is a victim of fame as well as ill-treatment. The struggle he goes through unable to identify himself fully as aboriginal falls into main concern of the poem.

### **Conclusion:**

The main point I would like to bring out with the help of this poem is not only to show tragic trauma of one single person but to show how that one single person has failed to cope up with the conditions and how he was rejected by two cultures. He could neither become a complete aboriginal nor a westerner.

The well-known aboriginal painter who has got national and international fame was marred by racism, misfortune and depression. The better understanding of the poem can be done against the backdrop of colonial destruction of aboriginal cultural traditional and institutions. He was constantly confronted by Australian racism. If he had been likely any other aboriginal the story would have been different but at the outcast he was rewarded for adopting European style of art but when it came to his nativity he became one among the many. This raises the question if he were treated to be like indigenous man then what is the use of his name and fame? The two incidents of his rejection to build a house at Alice Springs and his imprisonment marks the colonial superiority and injustice. They never fully accepted him to into their culture though they provided him with some privileges. It is a typical colonist mature. But what about his community? They rejected the individuality of a person. They were mere followers of the traditions of sharing everything.

A person's freedom was given lowest significance. It is because of their rituals and laws he has to come into conflict with laws of colonists. He could never become part of any culture. He was a westerner at fame and privileges and he was a aboriginal to his nativity community. He was between them unable to get into any one side. This made him special and “Man of Two Cultures”.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Berndt, Ronald Murray. *Brend, Catherine Helen. The World of the First Australians: Aboriginal Traditional Life: Past and Present. Aboriginal Studies press, Canberra 1990. Print.*
2. Bowman, D.M.J.S. *The impact of Aboriginal landscape burning on the Australian 1998 New Phytologist, 1998 - Wiley Online Library. Web.*
3. Merlan, Francesca. *Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics, and Aborigines in a North Australian Town. University of Hawaii Press, 1998. Print.*



4. Michael, Davis. *Writing Heritage: The Depiction of Indigenous Heritage in European-Australian Writings*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007. Print.
5. Namatjira, Albert. *The Aboriginal Man, My people: a Kath Walker collection 1970* John Wiley & Sons Inc. Australia. Print.
6. Rose, Deborah Bird. *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* Cambridge University Press 1992. Print.
7. Swain, Tony. *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*. Cambridge University Press 1993. Print.