

**Cultural Memory of the Australian Wiradjuri Aboriginal Narratives in  
Tara June Winch's *The Yield***

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**M B Abika Adline Praicy**, Assistant Professor of English, (S &H), Loyola – ICAM College of Engineering and Technology, Nungambakkam, Chennai, Anna University, Chennai.

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**Abstract:**

Tara June Winch is a successful contemporary fiction writer from Australia. In her novel *The Yield*, she describes Indigenous cultural knowledge and Memory through the character Albert Gondiwindi. Since the colonial settlement has created a deep scar on the Aboriginal land, a Wiradjuri man, Albert Gondiwindi, during his last days before death, records the instances of all the cultural memories that he made with his ancestors during his Dreamtime. Dreamtime is a spiritual practice and a mode of communication that the Aboriginals have with their ancestors. Through narration, his ancestors teach him cultural practices, language, and cultural mores. The Aboriginal descendants learn about their cultural background, creation stories, customs, practices, and traditions. The Aboriginals transfer their cultural knowledge to their descendants through stories, songs, dances, paintings, and the like to prevent their extinction. Cultural Memory provides an understanding of past values and enables Aboriginal descendants to retain their customs in the ongoing colonial hybrid environment. With this notion, this paper intends to highlight the cultural memories that Albert's ancestors narrate.

**Keywords:** Cultural narratives, cultural Memory, *The yield*, Wiradjuri Aboriginals, Tara June Winch.

## **Introduction**

Albert Gondiwindi, a Wiradjuri Aboriginal man (Koori) who is diagnosed with cancer in his pancreas, starts to write his dictionary by recording all the instances that he experienced during his Dreamtime with his ancestors. On the verge of cultural extinction due to colonial settlement, he aims to create cultural awareness so that his forerunners know and retrieve their cultural background. Through the dictionary, Albert records the practices of Wiradjuri Aboriginals, their creation stories, language, tradition, customs, and practices.

## **Cultural Memory in Australian Aboriginal Narratives**

Primitive man is known to us by the stages of development he has passed through. Our knowledge of his art, religion, and attitude towards life. (Freud 15-16)

Cultural narratives help to build and understand the values, heritage, and cultural connections to the environment, community, and landscape. It helps to retrieve the past and assists in enabling the present. It describes the uniqueness of the community's history, sacred sites, and cultural elements. It creates cultural awareness, diversity, consciousness, and competency for the present generation. It serves as “[k]nowledge, awareness and skills aimed at providing services that promote and advance cultural diversity and recognizes the uniqueness of self and others in communities” (qtd. in “Crossing Cultural Borders” 121).

Cultural Memory similarly adjoins the former practices that are withdrawn due to cultural disconnectivity. As mentioned by Jan Assmann,

Cultural Memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural Memory are defined through identificatory determination in a positive ('we are this') or negative ('that is our opposite') sense. (Assmann, “Collective Memory” 130)

Holistically, the Aboriginal culture is ancient and rich in its practices. Its culture comprises myths, beliefs, traditions, and customs. Most Aboriginal practices and traditions have evolved from the elements of nature. Moreover, Aboriginal individuals are very concerned about the elements that live in nature. They pay reverence to their environment. All their practices and customs revolve around their landscape. According to the Aborigines, their land is everything to them. They depend on their land for their primary livelihood. As the indigenous writer Mudrooroo Narogin opines,

The land is the Aboriginal people's spiritual heritage and part of our being. The land is the basis of all relationships between Aboriginal humans and the physical environment. Land defined the clan, its culture, way of life, fundamental rights,

patterns of survival, and above all, its identity. The land was synonymous with Aboriginal existence. (Narogin 209)

Australia is home to more than five hundred different Aboriginal groups. Their cultural symbols and practices vary but share some basic identities and elements. Each Aboriginal group has different languages, customs, and traditions with significant factors. Storing Memory, infusing social and cultural frames, and sharing the dynamics of culture are certain acts among the indigenous. They keep mentoring their descendants within their groups about the events in the absolute past, their origin, activities, ceremonies, language, and other essential morals. As J. Milton Yinger points out, ethnic groups are "a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves' or others, to have a common origin and to share essential segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients" (Yinger 3).

The Aboriginal ancestors of the land predominantly aim to share their cultural behavior and mores with their descendants through folklore, singing, dancing, painting, and the like. The cultural behavior of the Aboriginals reflects their identity about the landscape to which they belong. As Jean-Michel Baer points out in his *Cultural Diversity*, "Culture is at the heart of each collective of people: it represents the soul of a people, a group, a country. That is why we must treat culture with due respect and care" (Baer 18). The ancestors transmit their cultural knowledge, such as habits and ideas, good and evil, cultural sites, and beliefs, to the next generation. As Ralph Linton mentions, "the culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits, which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation" (*Sociology et al.* 3). The Aboriginals also remain persistent in delivering their cultural values to the next generation. They are particular about continually circulating people passing on their traditional culture. They have "an inherent unique identity, the continuity of cultural practices that originate in traditional Aboriginal culture and the common sharing of these by all Aboriginal people in Australia" (qtd. in Hollinsworth 146). In the novel *The Yield*, Albert is often visited by his ancestors in his Dreamtime. In one instance in the novel, they confirm him to acknowledge their presence during the Dreamtime process. They ask him, "Are you experiencing me talking to you?" (*The Yield* 246).

Since Aboriginal history is erased due to cultural assimilation by the settlers, the Aboriginal ancestors intend to prevent their tradition and culture from experiencing cultural dysconnectivity. They retrieve their cultural Memory in order to construct their past through Dreamtime. As Jan Assmann opines, "Each society reconstructs the past within its contemporary framework of reference" (Assman 130). Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is a religious practice to communicate with their ancestral spirits. The Aborigines believe that dreaming binds them with their land and the past. Gillian Whitlock and David Carter, the editors of the book *Images of Australia*, state that "[t]he Dreaming paths mapped out by the spirit beings continue to determine the pattern of Aboriginal life, for the Dreaming is a

relationship between people and land which forms the basis of traditional society” (Whitlock 62).

In the novel, Albert's ancestors narrate his people's stories and their habitual food consumption practices. They say they are the Gondiwindi people involved in farming and agriculture. They walk around their farm with their “mutts and dingoes and chased the heifers until they became tired until it became a hunt and they would spear them ... They ate the fat, and the liver and the marrows” (31). Albert learns the duties of an Aboriginalman from his ancestors. He comprehends plantation techniques and irrigation and gains knowledge about Aboriginal cosmology. Albert, in his dictionary, remarks that his ancestors "taught [him] men's business; they taught [him] where to find food, the names and uses of all the plants and animals” (45). The indigenous people of the land feed on fish like “mussels ... [and] crayfish” (106). They rely on two water resources for fishing: "saltwater and freshwater, running water and still” (197). They teach him how to eat fish and clean it. They mentor him on how to identify and use plants and animals. When they guidefishing, they say: "If you eat the fish, it is important to know how to treat it after it has died for you” (45). Besides fish, their food consumption includes kangaroo and grass from the plains.

Albert's ancestors trained him where to find food and medicine from the sacred plants. They say the wood and the plant stem should be “shaved and mixed with breastmilk for use as an eyewash to treat conjunctivitis in babies” (196). He learns about cooking preparation and the tools used for cooking. The Aboriginals prepare their bread and cakes in the earth's oven. They make a pit on the ground and steam their food by raising a fire. They call the earth oven a *gulambula*. *Gulambula*, the pit is constructed with natural substances like clay, green leaves, grass, and wood.

"They dig a pit about a meter long and half a meter deep, making sure to get any clay out of the earth ... they filled the pit with firewood and then with the clay they collected, they rolled it into lumps and placed them on top of the firewood, as the wood burned the clay would dry and become very hot. ... The clay lumps were taken out with sticks

... a possum wrapped in paperback was laid, covered with more green vegetation, and finally The clay lumps were returned on top. ... When it was ready, they dug up the Dambulla, and we ate the steamed dinner. (*The Yield* 199)

The Aboriginals consume their traditional food, *murnong*, by steaming it in the *gulambula* (earth oven). *Murnong* is an edible yam that is meant as a replacement for hunting and fishing. These tubers are like carrots that grow under the ground.

The Aboriginals feed on moths, which they believe to be more nutritious. They call it *bugging*. Once, Albert's ancestors took him to the Alpine mountains to feast on the Bogong moths. The moths travel from the north to the cold mountains during the summer to escape the heat. When the Aborigines identify the moths, they burn a fire and sit around it. They then cook and feast on the moths.

Additionally, Albert's ancestors instilled their religious faith and cultural background in Albert by narrating creation stories about *Biyaami*, their God. They narrate stories about *Biyaami's* dwelling place. They say that *Biyaami* is a spirit that ruled the Gondiwindi. Their creation story incorporates all the elements on earth. The story follows: once *Biyaami* decides to create a beautiful place to live. He creates plateaus, mountains, deserts, sand, and seashores. Then, he plants shrubs, flowers, trees, and waterways like rivers, beaches, lakes, and oceans. *Biyaami* loves all his creation and settles "in a cave on a Kengal Rock with Mother Earth" (245). Hence, the Aboriginals of the land believe the earth is the channel of God. They have a generous attitude towards the environment and nature.

They further explain Kengal to Albert. Kengal is a precious granite rock where God dwells. Kengal is a source for waterbodies that serves as "a volcanic filtration system for the river. It is a natural spring filter, and it is four hundred million years old. ... it still filters the Water underground—half a kilometer underground" (133). Since the waterbodies are the source of life, they believe that *Biyaami*, their God, lives in Kengal. Their religious belief is an amalgamation of God and nature. They perceive that all things in nature are alive. When Albert asks about the single belief they follow, his ancestors reply that they neither worship *Biyaami* nor his son *Gurragala-gali*. They say *Biyaami* dies for *Gurragala-gali's* sake and that "[w]e worships the things He made, the earth" (246).

Conceiving both God and nature as one, the Aboriginals take a pilgrim walk to Kengal through the pastures to reach Kengal Rock. They believe that all nourishment for life comes from the *bill*, the river. They regard that "[e]verything comes back to the *bill* – all life and with it all time" (104). The ancestors also narrate the stories of the evil spirit *Marmoo*, who waits with jealousy to destroy and corrupt the creations of *Biyaami*. *Marmoo* releases strange insects that are small enough to plague the beautiful plants. Mother nature and *Biyaami* create a long-legged bird with white feathers, a lean body, and a sharp beak. The bird eats all the insects, and the plague leaves the earth.

Further, the novel highlights the teachings of Albert's ancestors about their songs and stories. Aboriginals in the Wiradjuri Language say *Babirra* for singing. They sing to find their way when they take up a journey. The Aboriginals say songlines as *Yarang gudhi-dhuray*, meaning songs with lines, and *birrang-dhuray-gudhi*, meaning a journey accompanied by a song.

Aboriginal practices include supernatural elements. They experience everything through dreaming, like Albert. In one instance, Albert's ancestors taught him to dance and took him to show "**the world, all over the world, everyplace – banal-nagara-nagara**" (35). They say their place is "made of impossible distances, places you can only reach by time travel" (34). They spiritually travel around the world by dancing. The following passage is the conversation between Albert and his ancestors while they travel in a divine state.

"flew into the sky, doing things that humans cannot do. ... my great-great-great-nanny was there, and she taught me about dying. We were flying, and she said, "No

one everdies." ... She took her claw, ripped a feather off my wing, and said, "This is not you. It is not you if I rip all the feathers off you." "What is me?" I said, and she said, "You is only electricity, and electricity cannot die ...." (35)

The Aboriginals predominantly believe that their forefathers lived as a part of their bodies. They believe that when they die, they become dust, which is absorbed by the natural elements, which then bind with water and enter their bodies. Albert's ancestors say that "dust to dust is just where we are resting – in the ground some places, in the water other places, burnt in ashes other places ... "They now soil, they now water, they now lightening" (35). The Aboriginal ancestors are combined, multiplied, and bound with all elements in nature to transmit the cultural Memory to their descendants. Their beliefs pertain to the system of knowledge that continues from one generation to the next "in a constant state of againness" (Taylor 21). Their practices embody a "form of knowing as well as a system for storing and transmitting knowledge" (Taylor 18).

### **Conclusion**

Holistically, the Aboriginals "believe that the earth—and all living things—are alive with their ancestors, with spirits" (*The Yield* 182). Their Aboriginal ancestors play a significant role in shaping the lives of their forebears. They live their lives according to the doctrines of their elders. The Aborigines pay respect to their ancestors just like Albert Gondiwindi did reverence to his ancestors' communicative Memory through Dreamtime. In the same way, even Albert documents all his Dreamtime experiences, shared history and knowledge, language, and the like with his following generations through a dictionary. Thus, the paper illuminates Albert's ancestors' narratives and cultural memories.

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