

Reconstruction of White Lies and National Identity in Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*

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Abstract

Australia has institutionalised and normalised settler colonial norms during the process of asserting its national identity. It has faced the challenges of constructing national identity within the context of colonialism, postcolonialism and neo-colonialism. Peter Carey's novel, *Illywhacker* attempts to reconstruct the national identity by deconstructing the colonial construction of identity. Through the central character and narrator, Carey fictionalises and recounts the colonial history which is constructed on lies. This is aptly expressed by Bruce Woodcock while exploring the multidimensional elements of *Illywhacker*:

Illywhacker examines twentieth-century Australian history with the savage humour and fantasy of the earlier fiction now placed within an epic framework . . . it both entertains and indicts as it investigates the construction of fundamental Australian mythologies, the visions, dreams and lies of the national psyche. In the process, it deconstructs the contemporary state of the nation. (53)

Here the critic highlights the major role played by the White lies of the colonizers during their colonization and nation building process and the deconstruction of them by the colonized. The novel attempts to deconstruct the idea of nation constructed by the colonizer. In this novel Carey attempts to unmask the beautiful lies of the colonizers.

Peter Carey is an Australian novelist and short story writer. *Illywhacker* tells the story of Herbert Badgery, a self-admitted liar, trickster, and confidence man, and through his life one hundred and fifty years of Australian history is also depicted. This novel portrays a particular phase of Australian culture and nationalism through the life of Herbert and the various roles played by him in his life. The novel portrays the three generational story of the Herbert family. The first generation is represented through Herbert Badgery, the protagonist of the novel, the confidence man, the second generation through the life story of his son Charles Badgery an entrepreneur who is a victim of capitalism and the third generation is represented through Hissao Badgery, Charles' son, whose struggle for survival in the neo-colonial age is depicted through the pet shop emporium. Herbert is a walking embodiment of the Australian national character, especially his inclination for stories and barefaced lies. Herbert tells lies constantly in order to survive and improve his life. Carey draws parallels between Herbert's life and Australia's development as a nation after its independence from England.

The novel *Illywhacker* brings to the forefront that the national identity of Australia is constructed on the lies narrated by the colonizers. In an interview, Carey reveals that his purpose of writing *Illywhacker* is "to expose lies and underlying assumptions of Australian culture that the country was empty when the white arrived" (Sexton 2). And also *Illywhacker* parodies colonial and postcolonial Australia as a history of "White lies" (Fletcher 123). This novel reinterprets Australian history with

a critical analysis of the ideological foundation of colonialism. Woodcock states: “it [Illywhacker] depicts a particular phase of Australian culture and nationalism, a search for identity which went wrong” (57). The novel addresses issues such as national identity, imperialism, colonialism, globalization and neo-colonialism.

Lies and lying in *Illywhacker* reflect the characteristic features of the narrator Herbert, as well as they play a major role in the analysis of Australia’s self construction. The epigraph of the novel, taken from Mark Twain, states: “Australian history is almost always picaresque, indeed it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the cheapest novelty the country has to offer . . . It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies” (Carey 1). Carey’s reference to Mark Twain in the epigraph discloses that Australian history is constructed on most beautiful lies. This passage ironically exposes the character of Herbert as an ‘illywhacker’ who actually claims to be a professional liar and later becomes involved in the reconstruction of the history of Australia.

One of the significant themes in the novel is the reconstruction of Australian myths and lies. Herbert represents a repressed Australian who constructs and deconstructs Australian myths and lies of the colonizer through his tricks. Lies and lying are significant in *Illywhacker* in two related ways, as the visible characteristics of the narrator Herbert, and as part of the analysis of the construction of Australian self. While in prison, Herbert studies history and comes across the fictional History of Australia by M. V. Anderson with its representation of the origin of the nation and with a disclaimer to the truth of the histories written by Australia’s ancestors:

Our forebears were all great liars. They lied about the lands they selected and the cattle they owned. They lied about their backgrounds and the parentage of their wives. However it is their first lie that is the most impressive for being so monumental, ie., that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated and by that simple device they were able to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience. It is in the context of this great foundation stone that we must begin our study of Australian history. (Carey 422)

This passage speaks about Australian history, which is made up of many beautiful lies. Here Carey makes it clear that Australian history is a constructed history.

Carey presents Herbert as an unreliable narrator. The novel discloses Herbert’s inclination to tell incredible stories. Herbert’s unreliable character can be compared to that of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Saleem is portrayed by Rushdie as an individual who has constructed his own version of Indian history. Saleem tells the wrong date of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination. He says:

Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages in a wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? I am so far gone in my desperate need for meaning that I’m prepared to distort everything - to re-write the whole history of my times in order to place myself in a central role. (Rushdie 198)

Rushdie makes use of history, myths, metaphors and fantasy for the construction of Indian history through the account of the protagonist Saleem and the other midnight’s

children. In *Midnight's Children*, history is constructed through a subjective point of view. Likewise, Carey's narrator Herbert, attempts to construct history from the existing materials at his disposal.

Carey, like many other postmodern writers portrays Herbert as an author as well as a story teller. Herbert thus assumes a double role as surrogate author and a person who juggles with lies during the process of constructing his own identity as well as national identity with the help of Leah. He writes a version of his experiences at prison titled as *Gaol Bird*. Herbert says: "When I was an author I was party to a book called *Gaol Bird* which claimed I was a prisoner in Grafton Gaol, but once I had read the tattooed messages on the screws' arms I knew that I must get myself transferred out there. *Gaol Bird* was a pack of lies" (Carey 378). Here Herbert admits that the book itself is a pack of lies. The novel takes another status when one reads chapter fifty four of Book III, a letter written as if interjected into one of Herbert's "little hoard of note books" (Carey 549). In that letter Leah accuses him for distorting and lying the account of their lives.

Lies, constructed history in the past, are constructing history in the present and will construct history in the future. One such lie is deconstructed by Carey in this novel. That is the concept of *terra nullius*, means 'no body's land'. This novel challenges the notion of *terra nullius*. Two sides to the theme of empty Australia is explored in this novel, the role of the Black Australians and the activities of the White settlers. When European colonizers first arrived in Australia they encountered an unfamiliar land occupied by people who they did not attempt to understand. They did not understand the peoples' culture and their land ownership system. Australia was deemed to be *terra nullius* and the land was claimed by the British. However Indigenous people fought for their land and their lives. The history of these battles, suppression, marginalization, torture and massacre is not often told to the outside world. Instead the colonizers spread some lies. These stories form a part of the untold history of Australia.

Searching for '*terra australis incognita*', the unknown southern land, was a great challenge for European navigators in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1770 Captain James Cook landed in Botany Bay, and claimed possession of the East Coast of Australia for Britain under the policy of *terra nullius*. The British saw the Aborigines as small in number, wandering nomadically with no fixed territory, and with no recognizable system of laws and customs, so they decided to apply the *terra nullius* policy. *Terra nullius* was a foundational principle of British colonial land policy in Australia. *Terra Nullius* is a Latin expression which means 'no body's land'. This doctrine was based on John Locke's seventeenth century notion of property ownership. It stated that since the natives had no investment in the soil, they had no claim to it. The British recognized this land as a land belonging to nobody, which gave them complete ownership over it and the right to treat the land as their own with no regard to the Aboriginal people. *Terra nullius*, the idea of an 'empty continent', was both a cultural and legal theory behind British land acquisition in Australia. Sigrung Meining, a critic observes that, "the British government had then declared Australia to be an uninhabited '*terra nullius*', thus making white settlement legally possible" (123). British settlers viewed the less densely populated Australian landscape as empty, they settled there and later legally made it their own place.

As more British settlers arrived in the continent, searching for land based wealth, the pressure for expansion of farms and estates were intensified. According to the colonial law, if an Aboriginal group existed at that location, which was identified

for settlement, the Aborigines had to leave the place. Most of the settlers felt no regret to force the Aborigines to move out. Britta Kuhlenberg observes:

In Australia the memory of terra nullius, a historical misconception, weighs on the national consciousness and the legitimate colonial invasion, by implying acts of violence, continues to haunt the Australian nation's self-perceptions and has led to the production of lies and myths supposed to cover-'silence'-historical injustices. (135)

In Anglo-Celtic perspective, it is only with English settlement and the ensuing colonizing efforts that Australia becomes a place. Australia was the only nation colonized by the British that was declared a terra nullius, and remained in the same position both legally and politically from 1788 to 1992.

The colonizers constructed stories regarding terra nullius during their colonization process. Later these constructed myths are deconstructed by the natives. In Illywhacker, Leah vividly questions the colonial lies regarding the land and asks Herbert:

You think you can put some shanty and that make it your place, but you can't, and it never will be . . . The land is stolen. The whole country is stolen. The whole nation is based on a lie which is that it was not already occupied when the British came here. If it is anybody's place, it is the blacks: Does it look like your place? Does it feel like your place? Can't you see, even the trees have nothing to do with you. (Carey 281)

Leah's argument is against the colonial notion of terra nullius and their forceful possession of the land. The nation was occupied by the natives, even before the colonizers arrived there. Actually the land was stolen from the natives. Here Carey directly confronts one of the central issues that have been debated over Australian history, the lie of terra nullius, and the land rights of indigenous people.

Leah neglects the Australian myths which support the lies of the colonizer. It is Leah who teaches Herbert that the history of Australia itself is a lie. She tells: "the raw optimistic tracks of its pioneers were made at the expense of another society" (Carey 514). On the contrary Herbert argues: "This is my country . . . even if it's not yours. But he also acknowledges privately that the landscape had always seemed alien to me, that it made me, in many lights, melancholy and homesick for something else" (Carey 308). This contradictory statement reveals that Herbert knows the reality that the land belongs to Aborigines but he prefers to believe in the lie. Herbert also believes in the potential of Australia as a place of self-transformation.

The colonial Australia has constructed a new history in favour of them. That is why on many occasions, Leah argues that for the colonialists and their postcolonial condition there is no history. While thinking about her own country Leah does not have a sense of belongingness. Leah has revealed that, "Australians do not belong to Australia: It's not a country where you can rest. It's a black man's country . . . we can only move around like tourists" (Carey 297). The colonial Australians have appropriated the land but that does not mean that it belongs to them. Again she argues that Australia is made at the expense of another society. She says: "they cut the arteries of an ancient culture before a new one had been born" (Carey 514). Here Carey affirms that the colonizers have destroyed an ancient culture to make a new.

Herbert has used various tricks, just to cope up with his identity crisis and other postcolonial circumstances. Herbert's ability to disappear is one such trick. In Book II of Illywhacker Herbert explains how Goon Tse Ying, the Chinaman, took care of Herbert in his childhood and taught him the skill of disappearing. He narrates, "I disappeared and the world disappeared from me. I did not escape from fear, but

went to the place where fear lives. I existed like waves from a tuning fork in chloroformed air. I could not see Goon Tse Ying. I was nowhere” (Carey 203). Herbert considers this skill as an important skill which is necessary for his survival.

Herbert dreams to make Australia as a self-determining autonomous nation producing its own culture. So he has a vision of independent Australian Aero plane business and manufacturing Australian product. One of his many schemes is the establishment of an Australian aircraft factory. The obstacles Herbert faces to establish an Australian aircraft industry is not just financial, but also cultural. One of the financiers of the industry, Cocky Abbot, argues that, “rather than manufacturing aircraft, they should import them, suggesting a British plane” (Carey 105). Herbert dismisses Cocky Abbot and his son as “Imaginary Englishmen . . . It was that happened in this country. The minute they began to make a quid they started to turn into Englishmen” (Carey 126). Herbert confronts the offensive ‘imaginary Englishmen’, Oswald Smith and Cocky Abbot the younger, with his king brown snake. The ‘imaginary Englishmen’ represent the colonial mentality and the king brown snake seems to be an emblem of the true untamable Australian.

In addition to rejecting British power and influence, Herbert wants Australia to be independent of all foreign influences. He argues against American ownership of Australian industry and the import of American products. While trying to sell a Ford, Herbert claims that his prospect really needs a summit, “An Australian car to which the man replies, An Australian car what a presumption. Are you sitting there telling me that we can make a better car than the Yanks?’ Herbert replies that one would be better off with a car of lesser quality if the money stayed here” (Carey 72-73). Here Carey pictures Herbert’s unsuccessful dream of having an Australian car. As a nationalist, Herbert defends against foreign involvement in Australian business. But against his dream Herbert and partner Leah, work for Nathan Schick, an American promoter, who takes most of the profit from their dance and magic performances. Antor points out that Leah’s Emu dance, an expression of Australian national identity, “is nothing but a means of making money for Schick, who is only interested in anything Australian as long as he can exploit it financially. He thus turns out to be a new colonizer in disguise” (162). Moreover, while Herbert is able to resist British power, he spends most of his adult life financially dependent on Americans, and later, the Japanese.

The delusory nature of Australian dreams and visions of identity are also examined particularly through Herbert’s legacy to Charles and Hissao. At last his vision also fails because of the neo-colonial influence of America and Japan. Herbert’s identity has been constructed through the different tricks played by him. Carey reveals that after playing so many tricks Herbert detaches himself from his real identity.

Herbert is a symbol of postcolonial Australian, who changes himself and adapts to each situation by assuming a role most suitable for the moment at hand. But his desire to be a family man, to be a successful builder, his identity as writer and his identity as a political activist become failure. All the personal incidents have some kind of relation with the national history of Australia. The significant dates in Herbert’s life coincide with periods of Australian history. Through the tricks and various roles played by Herbert, this novel reveals that Australia itself is a show, a product constructed from illusion and deception.

In this novel Carey turns the experiences of the Badgeries into an emblem of the nation. The Badger family members are trapped by their own aspirations and mythologies. Herbert’s desire to make a history and Leah’s sense of having no history represent the confused national identity. The end of the novel exhibits that Herbert has

been trapped in the American funded best pet shop in the world. The pet shop, prison and Australian motor industry are all expressive of the state of contemporary Australian society. The Australians are trapped by its history, confined in self created present and will stuck by these legacies in the future.

Illywhacker presents a message that the history of Australia is a web of lies, and Australian national identity is a construct in need of serious revision. In his analysis, Antor claims that Illywhacker “amounts to a potent criticism of widely accepted ideas about Australia and Australian history” (176). Bill Ashcroft interprets Illywhacker as “the wide canvas of Australian life, emphasizing those things which have been left out of the national myth . . . to identify the experiences of displacement and resistance” (199). Illywhacker is a nationalist revision of Australian history in that Carey projects the construction of national identity and deconstruction of myths and lies. In order to invent a new future, Australia needs to discard the lies of history.

Illywhacker portrays the colonizer’s myths of a utopian Australia and all its capitalistic tricks. Carey’s intention in Illywhacker is to expose Australian pretensions. Doreen Maitre suggests that, “the novel makes us aware of both the continuities and the discontinuities between the actual and the possible” (117). The novel shuttles between the actual and the possible worlds constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Also, Carey succeeds in his intention and successfully exposes Australian pretensions through the novel.

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