

INDO-AUSTRALIAN CONNECTIONS: EXPLORING TINAI TRADITIONS IN THE PLAYS OF JACK DAVIS

Executive Summary of the Minor Research Project

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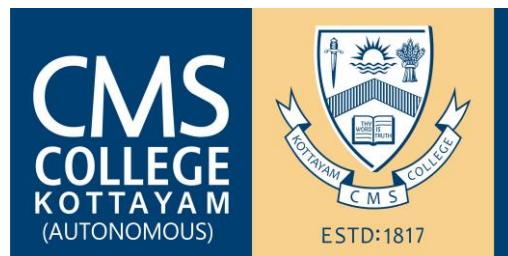
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Executive Summary for the Project Entitled “Indo-Australian Connections: Exploring Tinai Traditions in the Plays of Jack Davis”

In his book *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue and Progress* John Barry points out that the present ecological problems have arisen due to “the disengagement of people from a specific land base and rural way of life or modes” (81). He argues that with “no enduring link to the land, community is ‘rootless’ and individuals are vulnerable to the anomie and alienation of ‘mass society’” (81). Such concerns have been taken up by not just environmental and eco-activists, but also by theoretically oriented scholars in the academia who realise the importance of addressing ecological issues from different perspectives. The philosophically oriented academic community no longer stays alienated from such issues is proved through the burgeoning interdisciplinary studies that have taken it by storm. The need to develop theoretical frameworks for practical purposes has become a major preoccupation within the academic circles. Such tasks, however, cannot operate within isolated disciplinary structures. Any resolve to alleviate societal problems can function only within the context of interdisciplinarity. These notions have led to a blurring of boundaries between the various disciplines.

In recent times when the demarcating line between science and humanities have started diminishing, ecological issues have found their way into anthropology, psychology, philosophy, theology and literature. Scientific objectivity coupled with imaginative possibilities of literary and philosophical notions are found to have profound impact on the reconsidering environmental problems from a hitherto unexplored dimensions. Literature, particularly with the psychological impact on humans, finds a paramount place in engendering anxieties on social and ecological issues within the minds of its readers. This aspect of literary writings together with scientific knowledge proposes solutions to problems which have been harming the biosphere.

Thus, the realization that environmental problems have accelerated due to fragmented way of knowing the world, there is an increasing effort to tackle the problems through interdisciplinary studies. One such is an exegesis of literary texts using ecological concepts. The present project finds relevance under such circumstances and proposes to make an ecocritical reading of select plays of Jack Davis using the concept of *tinai*. Considering the commonalities which connect aboriginal Indian and Australian cultures, the present project attempts to substantiate the hypothesis that *tinai* traditions are significantly prominent in indigenous Australian writings, with special reference to the plays of Jack Davis.

Tinai was first mentioned in Tolkappiyam, an ancient Tamil treatise. It was a society that was intrinsically bound to the land. Ancient Tamils recognised five major kinds of *tinai*, namely, *kurinci* (montane), *mullai* (pastoral), *palai* (desertic), *marutam* (riverine plains) and *neytal* (littoral). These societies consisted of three important elements, *mutal* (base), *karu* (nature-cultural elements) and *uri* (human actions within *tiani*). Tinai societies were governed by certain principles such as indigenousness, traditionality, controlled diversity, integration, smallness of scale and value orientation (Selvamony 215-232).

While these aspects formed the basis of ancient Tamil culture, it can be argued that similar aspects were also found in Australian Aboriginal society. Just like in *tinai* society, the land too formed the basis of the social, cultural, religious and political life of indigenous Australia. The land-based values on which these institutions stand are faithfully recorded in their oral literatures, and contemporary Aboriginal writings which are a continuation of this great legacy reaffirm the indissoluble bond that the Aborigines have with the land. These writings are almost always region-specific. Jack Davis's writings too are no exception to this fact. Davis was an Aboriginal writer and playwright who belonged to the Nyoongah tribe of southwestern Australia and his plays are a faithful record of the traditions of the tribe and their relation to the land. The three plays chosen for analysis include *Kullark*, *The Dreamers*

and *Barungin*. The findings through this project reveal that each of these plays reflect aspects of ancient *tinai* society. The similarities are striking and may be traced to the common origins between the two indigenous cultures.

The present study finds relevance because it has been found that ecocritical readings of Australian texts have been scarce (Cranston and Zeller 12) and this is even true of Aboriginal texts, which by nature offer scope for such critical discourses. Very few researches have concentrated on the ecological and regional aspects in Aboriginal literature. Though much research has been done on delineating the possibilities of Indo-Australian migration from geographical and anthropological points of view, investigations through literary standpoints are significantly less. The project thus finds a scope for exploring possibility of reinforcing cultural connections between the two continents from hitherto unstudied links.

Works Cited

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