

The Theme of Ageing in a Postcolonial World in Australian Literature

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Abstract:

This paper explores the theme of ageing in Australian literature through a postcolonial lens, emphasizing how ageing is represented as both a personal and collective experience shaped by historical trauma, colonial legacies, and cultural survival. In works such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, and Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*, elderly characters function as custodians of memory, carriers of cultural resistance, and witnesses to the unsettled histories of colonization. For Indigenous characters, ageing is tied to resilience and cultural continuity, with elders preserving oral traditions and resisting the erasure of identity under colonial pressures. For non-Indigenous figures, ageing often reveals anxieties around belonging, inheritance, and the unsettled guilt of colonial dispossession. These narratives demonstrate that ageing is not simply a biological process but also a historical one, deeply entwined with the negotiation of identity and land. By portraying the elderly as cultural anchors and critical voices, Australian literature highlights how memory and survival remain central to the ongoing process of decolonization. Ageing thus becomes a metaphor for endurance, resistance, and the persistent influence of history, reminding us that the past continues to shape the present in a postcolonial world.

Keywords: *Ageing, Postcolonial Literature, Australian Fiction, Memory, Trauma, Decolonization.*

Introduction

Ageing as a theme in literature often reflects the struggles, desires, and complex realities of individuals as they encounter the inevitability of time, identity, and societal expectations. In postcolonial contexts, this theme becomes layered with

historical trauma, colonial legacies, and the redefinition of cultural and national identities. In Australian literature, the theme of ageing emerges within a society deeply affected by its colonial past, the displacement of Indigenous communities, and the multicultural fabric that now shapes the nation. Ageing in a postcolonial world is not only about the passage of time, but also about navigating the legacies of colonialism, racialization, and cultural preservation.

This paper explores how ageing is represented in Australian literature, with particular emphasis on the works of authors such as David Malouf, Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Through their novels, poetry, and stories, these writers engage with the multifaceted experience of ageing in a postcolonial world, addressing the effects of historical trauma, the construction of identity over time, and the challenges faced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in coming to terms with the past. By analysing these works, this paper will highlight how ageing, when viewed through the lens of postcolonialism, becomes a site of memory, resistance, and transformation.

1. The Postcolonial Context of Ageing in Australian Literature

Ageing in a postcolonial world is more than just the experience of growing old. It is shaped by the broader social and political context of colonization and its aftermath. In Australia, the effects of British colonization were not limited to physical displacement but extended into cultural erasure, systemic violence, and the rewriting of Indigenous histories. The trauma of colonization, which has been passed down through generations of Indigenous Australians, intersects with the experiences of ageing in complex ways.

For Indigenous Australians, ageing is intertwined with the process of cultural survival. Many Indigenous communities experienced not just the loss of land and language but also the erosion of traditional forms of knowledge and cultural transmission. The elderly, often the keepers of wisdom and history, found themselves in a society that devalued their knowledge in favor of a colonial system that undermined their way of life.

For non-Indigenous Australians, the experience of ageing is similarly shaped by the legacy of colonialism, especially in the context of national identity. Older generations who lived through periods of intense racial and cultural exclusion may find themselves reflecting on the ways in which Australia's identity has evolved and the continuing impact of colonial ideologies on the present.

2. The Elderly as Custodians of Memory: Indigenous Perspectives

In Australian literature, the elderly are often portrayed as the custodians of memory, particularly in Indigenous narratives. The theme of memory and the passing of knowledge is central to the lives of Indigenous elders, as they carry cultural and historical knowledge that connects the past with the present. However, this role has been complicated by the colonial legacy, where the imposition of Western education, values, and systems of knowledge has led to a marginalization of Indigenous elders and their teachings.

2.1. "Carpentaria" by Alexis Wright

Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006) provides a powerful example of how Indigenous ageing is depicted in postcolonial Australia. The novel is set in the remote town of Desperance and follows the lives of the Anangu people, focusing particularly on the character of Old People, elders who embody the wisdom and strength of the Indigenous community. The elderly in Wright's novel are not just repositories of traditional knowledge but also active participants in shaping the future of their people. The character of Norma, an elder who refuses to give up her land and identity, demonstrates the power of memory and tradition in resisting colonial oppression.

Through the lives of its elderly characters, *Carpentaria* presents the complex relationship between ageing, memory, and survival in a postcolonial world. The ageing process for these characters is not just a personal journey but a collective one, as they fight to maintain cultural continuity in the face of environmental destruction, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure. Wright's portrayal of Indigenous ageing emphasizes the resilience and strength of the elderly, who

serve as protectors of culture and tradition even as they face the challenges of age.

2.2. “Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence” by Doris Pilkington

Although not a work of fiction in the traditional sense, Doris Pilkington’s memoir *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) reflects on the experiences of her mother and her family as they were subjected to the Australian government’s policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families (the Stolen Generations). Pilkington’s narrative includes the perspective of her elderly mother, whose life was marked by the trauma of forced assimilation and cultural dislocation. The representation of ageing in this memoir is deeply tied to the intergenerational trauma caused by colonial policies, showing how the elderly carry the weight of lost histories and broken families.

The trauma of colonization is depicted through the eyes of the elderly, who are the surviving links to a pre-colonial world that has been irrevocably altered. Their ageing is marked by the loss of a cultural heritage that can never be fully reclaimed. Yet, in their narratives, there is also the potential for healing and resistance, as their memories of a once-strong Indigenous culture continue to shape the younger generations’ understanding of their identity and heritage.

3. Ageing and Identity in the Australian Settler Context

In settler colonial contexts, ageing is often portrayed in terms of reflecting on the passage of time and the transformations in national identity. For non-Indigenous Australians, the experience of growing older is intertwined with the nation’s evolving understanding of its own history. The postcolonial world challenges Australians to reconcile their national identity with the ongoing legacies of colonization.

3.1. “Remembering Babylon” by David Malouf

David Malouf’s novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993) takes a nuanced approach to the theme of ageing and memory, particularly in relation to the settler colonial experience. The novel tells the story of Gemmy, a British man who is raised by Aboriginal people and returns to the colonial settlement

as an adult. Through the character of Mr. Frazer, an elderly settler who reflects on the transformation of the land and the social order, Malouf examines how ageing intersects with the formation of national identity.

The elderly in *Remembering Babylon* serve as a link between the colonial past and the present, grappling with the social changes brought about by the expansion of European settlement and the displacement of Indigenous populations. Mr. Frazer's ageing process becomes a metaphor for the collective memory of colonialism and the erosion of traditional ways of life, as he attempts to reconcile his role in the colonization process with the evolving consciousness of the country's history. Ageing, in this context, is not merely about the individual's life but about the broader nation's process of coming to terms with its colonial legacy.

3.2. "The White Earth" by Andrew McGahan

Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004) explores themes of identity, family, and land through the eyes of an elderly man, Billy, who reflects on his life as a settler in the Australian outback. His ageing process is tied to the trauma of colonization, particularly the dispossession of Indigenous land. The novel examines the generational conflict between Billy and his son, who becomes increasingly aware of the injustices that have been perpetuated against Indigenous Australians.

The theme of ageing in *The White Earth* underscores the complexity of national identity in postcolonial Australia. For Billy, ageing means grappling with the weight of his own complicity in the colonial project. His reflections on his past illuminate the ways in which the legacies of colonization continue to affect both the elderly and younger generations. The novel suggests that ageing in a postcolonial world requires a deep reckoning with the past, as older generations confront the sins of their history while younger generations struggle to forge new paths forward.

4. Ageing, Resistance, and Cultural Survival

In postcolonial literature, ageing can also be seen as an act of resistance, as individuals and communities fight to preserve

their cultural traditions in the face of external pressures. The elderly often serve as the last bastion of cultural survival, passing on stories, traditions, and wisdom to younger generations. Their ageing becomes an act of resilience, as they navigate the changing socio-political landscape while attempting to hold onto their heritage.

In works such as *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright and *The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan, the elderly characters resist the erasure of their cultures by insisting on the value of memory, language, and traditions. These characters embody the survival of cultural knowledge and historical narratives in the face of colonialism, making their ageing process an act of defiance and strength.

Conclusion

Ageing in a postcolonial context is never just a matter of individual decline or personal reflection; rather, it becomes a process interwoven with cultural memory, historical trauma, and the struggle for survival. In Australian literature, ageing is frequently depicted as a communal experience, one that mirrors the broader negotiations between past and present, colonizer and colonized, survival and erasure. The elderly characters in these narratives embody more than just lived years – they become guardians of memory, carriers of trauma, and symbols of endurance in the face of profound historical dislocation.

For Indigenous communities, the depiction of ageing is often tied to the endurance of culture against colonial attempts at dispossession and assimilation. In Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, for instance, ageing figures such as the elder Normal Phantom stand as cultural anchors for their communities. They resist the destructive forces of mining corporations and colonial exploitation by preserving ancestral knowledge and oral traditions. Through their voices, the novel emphasizes how ageing within Indigenous contexts is inseparable from cultural survival and the ongoing work of decolonization. Elders embody continuity, not just of family ties but of collective memory, ensuring that the lessons of the past remain active in the present.

Conversely, in works such as David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, ageing among non-Indigenous characters often exposes anxieties about belonging and legitimacy in the postcolonial nation. The novel portrays settlers and their descendants grappling with the unsettling presence of Gemmy, a white man who has lived with Aboriginal people. Older characters in particular embody fears of cultural dislocation, revealing the fragility of settler identity in the face of Indigenous histories that cannot be erased. Ageing, in this context, highlights the limits of settler belonging and the lingering specter of colonial guilt.

Similarly, in Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*, ageing intersects with questions of inheritance, memory, and land ownership. The elderly figures in this novel symbolize the weight of colonial history, particularly through their attachment to land obtained through dispossession. Their decline mirrors the crumbling of settler narratives of entitlement, as younger generations confront the uncomfortable legacies of colonial violence. The novel suggests that ageing for these characters is not merely biological but historical, a process of reckoning with what is inherited and what must be re-examined.

Across these texts, ageing becomes a deeply political and cultural theme. Elders are not passive figures receding into irrelevance; rather, they are positioned as active participants in shaping memory, community, and identity. Ageing brings with it the responsibility of bearing witness, of ensuring that the stories of survival, displacement, or injustice are not forgotten. This is especially crucial in a postcolonial context, where forgetting serves the interests of the dominant culture, while remembering becomes an act of resistance.

Ultimately, Australian literature's portrayal of ageing underscores that the past is never fully past. Ageing in a postcolonial world reveals how memory persists, how trauma reverberates across generations, and how wisdom becomes a resource for decolonization and renewal. These narratives remind us that the elderly, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, stand at the intersection of history and identity, embodying the fragile yet enduring continuity of culture in a nation still grappling with its colonial legacies.

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