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THE INTERPLAY OF POSTCOLONIAL AND GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN ROHAN WILSON'S
NOVEL *THE ROVING PARTY*

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Abstract

The formation of colonies in different parts of the world by European powers began in the early sixteenth century. The imperial power of the Whites increased in the succeeding centuries. Colonisation of Australia, Africa, Asia and the American continent had one thing in common; the endless greed of the colonial nations for profit and power. Rohan Wilson's novel *The Roving Party*, narrows down the stories of brutality and massacres of the colonised, to the continent of Australia; especially to the southern Australian state of Tasmania. The Australian aboriginals were nearly exterminated from their own home land which was by the early nineteenth century annexed by the English colonial empire. The encounter between the native Australians and the English was one steeped in violence and bloodshed. For the white colonialists, native aboriginals were the "other". They were supposed to be some sub-human beings far different from the culturally civilised and superior Europeans. This novel can be read through the lenses of postcolonial as well as the Eurocentric concept of the Gothic. It is a story of how barbarism and savageness encountered the so called "civilised".

Keywords: Aboriginals, postcolonial, gothic, encounter, Eurocentric

Since the dawn of civilisation, a long array of invasions and conquests along with revolutions and rebellions has played a major role in moulding the modern world that we see today. The historical records offer us the story of violence, bloodshed and atrocities done in the name of colour, creed and religion. The early modern period which succeeded the medieval or dark ages witnessed the rise of imperialism and formation of colonies in the different parts of the world. Colonization can be considered as a historical phenomenon that stretches around the globe and across time.

The watershed events that shaped the modern world can be traced from the fifteenth century, when maritime routes began to be established and formulated by the leading nations. The discovery of the New World in 1492 by the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus unleashed a series of events which ultimately led to the extermination of the Aztec and Inca empires of Central America. When the Portuguese seafarer, Vasco da Gama found the sea route to India in 1498, it led to the subsequent development of the European trade with the Orient. The ruling powers of various European nations including Britain, France, and Spain commissioned sea faring

adventurers to build up trade with the East so as to fill the coffers of their mother countries. It is by the end of the eighteenth century that Britain succeeded in establishing its colony in the Australian continent. It had so far remained safe from the prying eyes of the explorers. We get a clear picture of the early colonisation in Australia from Stewart Bogle, who says that:

In 1770, during his first pacific voyage, Lieutenant James Cook claimed possession of the east coast of Australia for the British Crown. Upon his return to Britain, Cook's reports inspired the authorities to establish a penal colony in the newly claimed territory. The new colony was intended to alleviate overcrowding in British prisons, expand the British Empire, assert Britain's claim to the territory against other colonial powers, and establish a British base in the global south.

When we glance at the picture of Australian colonisation, the fate of the continent's southern island state Tasmania is conspicuous. It was Abel Tasman, the captain of a Dutch crew, who discovered the island and named it Van Diemen's Land for his patron, Anthony van Diemen. The Dutch having failed to recognise the vast resources offered by the land was soon enough overpowered by the British expedition led under Captain James Cook, who made detailed maps of the eastern coast of Australia. The turn of the eighteenth century witnessed the establishment of British colony in Australia and its southern island states. The Colony of Tasmania existed on the island of Tasmania from 1856 until 1901, when it federated together with the five other Australian colonies to form the Commonwealth of Australia. By the end of the 1830, the British Empire had annexed large parts of mainland Australia, and all of Tasmania. The original inhabitants of Australia were the dark skinned aborigines who had lived in harmony with nature for centuries preceding the British invasion.

The Roving Party, the 2011 novel by the Tasmanian author Rohan Wilson, is a re-imagining of the early colonial history of Tasmania, the vast island about 150 miles off the coast of southern Australia. Set in 1829, the novel brings before us the "Black War" that saw the brutal extermination of the

majority of the indigenous population of Tasmania. Mary Whipple states regarding the crucial years of Tasmanian history, which forms the background of the novel, "From September, 1829, until early 1831, the British government overseeing the rule of Tasmania as part of its Australian colony, engaged in establishing the shameful 'Black Line,' part of its Black War to remove all blacks in Tasmania." Like several other colonised nations, Tasmania also witnessed atrocities indescribable. The present day Tasmania, as a part of the Commonwealth of Australia, has undergone a transformation; from the once subjugated colony of the British Empire to the postcolonial nation state.

With an unimpressive history of oppression and exploitation lurking behind, the postcolonial nations have much to say regarding its past and the ineradicable traces of colonial encounter. John McLeod offers a description of the postcolonial as:

... 'Post colonialism' recognises both historical *continuity* and *change*. On the one hand, it acknowledges material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved. (3)

With a story set during the period of early colonial settlement in Tasmania, Wilson tries to provide us with an unbiased account of the killing and rampaging unleashed upon the most feared tribe of Plindermairhemener by the settlers. According to Lyndal Ryan, "The rapid colonisation transformed traditional kangaroo hunting grounds into farms with grazing livestock as well as fences, hedges and stone walls, while police and military patrols were increased to control the convict farm labourers". The agricultural lives led by the aborigines were thoroughly disturbed as new laws were imposed upon them controlling their free movement. The Historian James Boyce observes, "Any Aborigine could now be legally killed for doing

no more than crossing an unmarked border that the government did not even bother to define" (265). History finds representation in the novel in its explicit form. When we analyse the history of the colonised worldwide, we understand that most often, the stories of the subjugated remains untold. As Pramod K Nair states:

History has itself been a weapon of the colonial. Histories were written from specific racial, class, ethnic and political standpoints and appropriated for imperial purposes. On occasion such 'White histories' were used to catalogue native 'crimes' as evidences of the latter's barbaric nature. The depiction of native cultures as primitive in 'definitive' and 'authoritative' works of history- especially after history became a 'science' in the nineteenth century-enabled the colonial rulers to justify European presence.

But *The Roving Party* is much more than a mere historical novel which re-imagines a land's colonial past. Through the novel, the author tries to put forward a post colonial reading of the historical 'encounter' between the colonial settlers and aboriginal tribesmen in Tasmania. Here the encounter stands for not just a confrontation between two races, but moreover, it expresses the coloniser's fear of the unknown. As Claire McGrail Johnston states, "the word 'encounter' forms a connection between the postcolonial and the Gothic as the word indicates a meeting with something that has the capacity to disrupt or challenge: for example hauntings, experiences of otherness or the presentation of contentious issues" (2). The European concept of Gothic arose from the fears about the unknown. According to Gerry Turcotte:

The eighteenth century was an age of contradiction and perhaps even of disorientation; it was a period caught between an allegiance to secure and traditional values on the one hand, and a desire for novel and progressive ideas on the other. The Gothic was born out of, or perhaps into, this tension; moreover it is this instability, curiosity and sense of disjunction which was exported to the colonies where it was supplemented by a further sense of

spiritual and physical alienation in the so-called barren lands. (17)

In the colonies occupied by the Empire, the White settlers had to encounter a racial other, whom they regarded with suspicion and contempt. This disdain for the non-whites finds representation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century English novels. In the Victorian novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte gives a detailed description of Bertha Mason, the deranged first wife of Edward Rochester as:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (559)

It is interesting to note the colonial mindset operating through Bronte, as she gave such a sub-human depiction of Rochester's wife, who hailed from the Caribbean islands. West Indies had by then become a colony of Britain and its inhabitants were deemed to belong to a lower status compared to the English. We can observe the very same treatment meted out on the aboriginals of Australia and its islands by the White settlers who occupied the land as colonisers. In Australia, the original inhabitants were the dark skinned aboriginals who had lived in harmony with nature for centuries before the arrival of the English in the late eighteenth century. The feeling of uncanny, the strange and the ghastly occupied the minds of the early settlers. Gerry Turcotte further says about how the Whites conceived notions regarding Australia:

The idea of its existence was disputed, was even heretical for a time, and with the advent of the transportation of convicts its darkness seemed confirmed. The Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, Gothic *par excellence*, the dungeon of the world. It is perhaps for this reason that the Gothic as a

mode has been a consistent presence in Australia since European settlement. (1)

When we find gothic elements in a postcolonial novel, we can in fact read it through the lens of the theory, postcolonial gothic. It is a hybrid concept which as a theory has gained popularity in the recent years. For Julie Azzam, "Postcolonial gothic fiction arises in response to certain social, historical, or political conditions." She further states that:

Postcolonial gothic is one way in which literature can respond to increasing problematic questions of the postcolonial 'domestic terrain:' questions concerning legitimate origins; rightful inhabitants; usurpation and occupation; and nostalgia for an impossible nationalist politics are all understood in the postcolonial gothic as national questions that are asked of the everyday, domestic realm...If the gothic is the narrative mode by which Britain frightened itself about cultural degeneration, the loss of racial or cultural purity, the racial other, sexual subversion and the threat that colonial-era usurpation and violence might one day "return", then postcolonial gothic deploys the gothic as a mode of frightening itself with images of transgressive women who threaten to expose the dark underbelly of their own historical and political contexts.

Postcolonial works often have obscured in them, the undercurrents of gothic elements. Gena Wisker says that, "Postcolonial spaces...are inevitably Gothic, since they, like the geographies of place and of history, are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past" (402). This is very much true as the colonial history of any nation will always have beneath its explicit realm, numerous untold stories of oppression, subjugation and exploitation of the colonised by the colonial powers. We can understand the way in which the postcolonial and the gothic are interconnected. According to Michelle Giles:

Scholars agree that the literature of the postcolonial and the Gothic share similar foundations. Given the inherent similarities between postcolonial and Gothic

literature-challenges to boundaries of power and ownership, haunting of a repressed past, and embodiment of the frightening- writers from the colonised countries are increasingly finding the Gothic a fitting literary form to challenge dominant historical narratives and illustrate the anxieties of a country struggling for a postcolonial identity. (1)

Postcolonial gothic can be viewed as a cultural imagination, which was born out of the encounters of the Empire with the racial other. Ruth Van Den Akker asserts the way in which postcolonial is linked to the gothic as:

The postcolonial adds to the gothic a vocalisation of what has previously been silenced and marginalised. The postcolonial gothic then presents its readers not merely with an alternative to Western empiricism, but also disturbs Western hegemonic culture and de-marginalises the colonised experience. Because the postcolonial gothic draws out otherness, explores the liminal spaces, and engages with the supernatural, experiences and expressions that have previously been silenced are given prominence in the text.

The Roving Party can be considered as an intricate post colonial novel that utilises Gothic conventions to create a compelling sense of angst and disorder. The novel with its gruesome details can be considered as the portrayal of one of the darkest chapters in Australian history. Wilson adopts and challenges Western Gothic conventions to illustrate the haunting colonial past of Tasmania. He makes use of the gothic images of the savagery and barbaric nature of the aboriginal tribes, the representation of the ghostly and supernatural and numerous other tropes to convey the aboriginal Tasmanian's dissatisfaction towards the colonisers who oppressed and appropriated their lands. According to Jennifer Vega, "*The Roving Party* dredges up the mud at the bottom of collective memory, and brings the bloody past to the surface equanimity of the present. It is less a novel than an epic, tragic poem, imagining the doings of

Tasmanian pioneer John Batman as he hunts and slaughters Aboriginal Tasmanians in exchange for land and money.”

In this research paper, I have analysed the postcolonial aspects of the novel using the elements of Gothic convention. Gothic, which is essentially a creation of Eurocentric thought pattern has been utilised to question the barbaric way in which the psyche of the Whites conceived ideas regarding the racial Other. Anything non-white was considered as sub human, any way of life different from the European was considered to be uncivilised. Though it appears ironical that Wilson and other writers from former colonies made use of a Western narrative form to explore postcolonial issues, “it functions as a form of empowerment” according to the argument of Michelle Giles (3). Gothic is in fact a technique which allows these writers to give voice to the marginalised through a reinvention of the genre. Gena Wisker states that postcolonial Gothic, “reinhabits and reconfigures, it reinstates and newly imagines ways of being, seeing, and expressing from the points of view and using some of the forms of people whose experiences and expressions have...largely been unheard of and even discredited” (402). While the traditional English Gothic portrays the colonised as the Other, Postcolonial Gothic challenges the Western convention by portraying the colonisers as Other.

The element of supernatural intensifies the effect of Gothic imagery throughout the novel. As Rachael Weaver says, “The haunted landscape is central to the colonial Australian Gothic—ghosts and spectres, strange happenings and disappearances are witnessed there—but the territory itself is also experienced as sinister, even demonic.” The White settlers were victims of their own fears of the Other. What they could not comprehend was deemed as ghostly and supernatural. This situation was very much the similar to what occurred in the Caribbean and the African continent.

The Roving Party encompasses a multitude of supernatural elements rightly depicting the white colonisers’ fear of the Other. Small but mysterious elements shadow the story representing the ghosts of violent oppressive strategies leading to colonial

devastation. Manalargena, the chief of an aboriginal clan was viewed as a witch by the settlers. The demon that had bewitched Manalargena’s hand gave him the prophetic knowledge about what was yet to come. “In the doorway Katherine held her rounded belly. The headman waved a crooked finger at her. She carried what?...The headman studied her a moment and rubbed his plagued left arm. It was a mass of scars where he’d tried to bleed the demon out in his youth. Boy, he said. Strong boy. I know this” (ch.1). Black Bill was well aware of the supernatural powers possessed by the native chief. “But Black Bill looked away from him. The headman said, a boy. My demon tell me” (ch.1).

Taralta was an old member in the Plindermairhemener hunting party, with a scarred and churlish face. He says to Black Bill, “if you forgave the devil for eating your food, he would soon eat your children” (ch.1). These words later prove to come true for Black Bill, as his wife gave birth to a deformed child who succumbs to death in a short time. Bill, though he was an aboriginal himself, had his loyalties to John Batman, the white farmer. Bill’s merciless murder of innocent clansmen and children seem to have turned his fate against him. Elizabeth MacAndrew notes that in the Gothic, “When figures of the grotesque appear as non-human, supernatural beings, they still make the sense of human evil darker and less optimistic” (166).

Black Bill repeatedly had dreams about his unborn son even when he was away from his wife, in the dark and misty lands hunting down the aboriginals. The description of his dream gives us an insight into the impending tragedy in Bill’s life:

In the night Bill’s unborn son found him and ran a hand across his stubbled brown cheek. It woke Bill and he looked long into his son’s face before he recognised it. At once he felt the ache in his bones and the misery of being lifted from his frame. It was overwhelming and his throat thickened as he asked his son how he’d found him here in foreign country. I followed you, he said. Bill was weeping. He held his son’s shoulders close and in that grip he knew this was the right and true of the world, this warmth of bodies, this tightness of throat. Bill held his son and sobbed with sweet relief.

It was over. He was freed...Together they walked. (ch.9)

Bill's dream of a spectre, resembling his son yet unborn, is depicted as an omen, a tragedy about to happen appearing in the guise of bliss. It is evident that Black Bill's own deeds were responsible, for his wife having born him a deformed baby. Even the poor animals who lacked the power of reason did not escape his brutality. In chapter 9, Wilson explains, "Then he raised the fowling piece to his hip and fired into the head of an earthcoloured bitch...He approached close to a tall lean whippet and levelled the barrel near its neck. The fowler thundered and the dog burst in a bloody mess of fur and flesh as if detonated from the inside...Bill calmly repacked." According to MacAndrew, "The colonial Australian Gothic is intimately tied to the violence of settler life in Australia: colonials killing other colonials, Aboriginal people killing colonials and colonials killing Aboriginal people" (9). The harmonious living style of the aboriginals had become deeply affected with the British invasion in the Australian continent in the early nineteenth century.

In chapter 12 we can find the invincible nature of the clan chief man. Even when Black Bill open fired into the war party, the chief remained unaffected, "Only Manalargena remained standing and he did not turn or hide but rather he stared across that separation of forest at the Vandemonian. He raised aloft his waddy and called out, nina krakapaka laykara." The chief's attitude towards Bill was one filled with sympathy:

He was calling to Bill across the distance between the parties. He called him plague dog and speculated on the nature of the white sickness that Bill had so plainly contracted. He insisted that Bill would be killed as mercifully as any diseased animal if he came forth in surrender and would not suffer the punitive rituals of spearing or wounding reserved for transgressors of the law. (ch.12) It is evident that the Plindermaihemener clan, which was viewed with such disdain and abhorrence by the White settlers, had their own laws and norms. With the arrival of the colonisers, violence came to be the

zeitgeist of the period. As Rachael Weaver says in her article "The Colonial Australian Gothic",

Histories of violence are fundamental to the colonial Australian Gothic, from the brutality of the convict system to the countless stories of Aboriginal and settler violence and massacres published by writers like Ernest Favenc, William Sylvester Walker, Mary Gaunt and others. In some ways, the colonial Australian Gothic liberates and explores the horror of colonial frontier violence bringing it into vivid focus; in other ways, it sublimates and distances it, enclosing colonialism's violent past within its own frightening yet familiar narrative conventions.

The description of the clanswoman in chapter 23 creates in us the image of a black witch capable of conjuring spectres before her. Wilson portrays her, "naked but for a kangaroo mantle and the pouch and strings of shells hanging at her throat, her dry breasts draped like leather stockings, her gaze as level as a marksman's, she looked up at him with changeless brown eyes." The aboriginals had their own traditions and culture, which were paradigmatically different from that of the Western culture. But for the White settlers, the rituals and practises of different clans in Tasmania seemed to be pagan and barbaric. The woman is further described, "Beneath the mantle the skin of her torso was writ with chartings of power by means of glass or tektites or perhaps knives. Crook saw it for an omen and he scratched himself and stood further off" (ch.23).

It is evident that the rovers hardly gave any respect for the black woman's dignity, as they would have, had she been white:

In the eerie half light Black Bill emptied the contents of the woman's pouch into his hat and fingered through the few effects. Half a child's jawbone inset with milk teeth, a small spoon scored and tarnished, a nugget of iron glance for blacking about the eyes, and a claw shaped impactite. He took the glassy fragment and raised it before the flames. It was translucent and darkish

green, serrated along one edge. He placed the impactite into the breast pocket of his shirt and the rest he returned to his knapsack. The woman stared at him. (ch.23)

What could have been ordinary items for the aboriginals, proved to be astonishing for the rovers. Wilson successfully reverses the traditional gothic tropes of Victorian England, to question the oppressors' exploitation in the colonies they formed in the Australian continent. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out that, "the traditional English Gothic introduces the colonised as the disturbing agent or Other, while the Caribbean challenges this western convention by portraying the colonizer, or England, as the Other" (249).

Just like Manalargena and other aboriginals, the clanswoman also wanted Bill to understand his true blood. They were truly unable to decipher how blood could turn against the blood. In chapter 23, Wilson describes the situation as;

Bill watched that inscrutable face. She put her forefinger to her cheek then pointed at him once more, a gesture of knowing, of connection. He watched and waited. Then the clever woman began an oratory directed at the Vandemonian alone...The scars along her arms were raised and purple in the cold. Then she proffered for the Vandemonian the notion that he had given birth to himself, disgorged whole from his own mouth as it was supposed by some...She saw disease upon him, she said. Some devilry had passed behind his eye or burrowed through his mouth and infected him. Now he walked that evil over her country...The first notion of white men, she said, was to possess. Now Bill brought their notions into her country like a man bearing antridden firewood.

From her words, we can understand the irony of the situation. Even after the war that broke up between the clansmen and aboriginals, she tries to cajole Bill with all her might. As described in chapter 25, "The cleverwoman whispered something through the darkness but he was not listening...She claimed that Manalargena was conjuring beneath this moon and his retribution would be proffered blind and bloodslicked like the

battles of old. She held up her own bound hands as if to show how that act might be done." Here we get an insight on the play of the supernatural abilities known by Manalargena in making events turn to his favour. The skills of the aboriginals developed through years of practice in hunting and warring was well utilised to attack the rovers who had captured the women and children belonging to the Plindermairhemener clan. The well aimed throw of waddies and spears coupled with guerrilla warfare like hiding techniques of the clansmen creates an aura of supernatural powers in their hold. In Chapter 24 Wilson describes:

He was turning to follow Bill when a great spear flashed in flight from the trees, burying half its length in the damp earth at Batman's feet where it stood ticking side to side. He stepped back. The spear was ten foot at least and as thinshafted as an arrow. Batman cried out into the forest. Manalargena, he said. Puguleena toomla pawa. But it was just one spear that came...They watched but there were no clansmen to be seen. It was as if the haft had fallen from the snow clouds.

Even the enigmatic nature of the war cry produced by the clansmen has a touch of invincibility, "Above the moaning from the clanswomen could be heard another, more sinister sound. They listened, each man of that company, to a sound as of tigerwolves yowling. The war cry of the forest people. Christ, you hear that?" (ch.24). The war rages in full swing and the death along with casualties increase. "Spears came hurling in from throws of fifty yards and the thin shafts skittered on the rocks or sank into the earth... The headman, fiercely howling, launched his blackwood waddy, sent it spinning end over end, until it clattered off the stones at Crook's feet."

The repeated dreams that Black Bill had of his unborn son was ominous in foreboding the birth of a deformed child. In chapter 28, the deformed newborn is described as, "It made no sound but squirmed and contorted as he held it nearer the light and appraised the thing in its first few moments. It was glossy like a carcass peeled of skin. The head

was mishapen and lurid welts showed where eyes should have moved." The thoroughly devastated Bill and his wife Katherine took no time in realising that the plight of their child was caused by Manalargena himself, "He weighed a length of wood in his hand and poked at the coals with it and by the time night had fallen again on the forest he knew this evil was the headman's doings. He gripped the wood and pondered on his redress" (ch.28). It is this knowledge that made Bill and Katherine to embark on a journey through the wild to hunt down Manalargena and avenge their son's death.

The atrocities of the White men towards the black child they had captured were sexually abusive. Black Bill had in himself humane values which rarely got explicit. It is this tinge of morality that enabled Bill to save that black girl, after murdering the two Whites. It could be this deed of Bill, which made the girl follow the pair, as she had nowhere to go lost in the deep woods. But there was something in the girl that reminded Bill of the sinister nature of the rituals of the clan:

Shortly after the girl reappeared with something in her hands. As she approached they saw that it was a bullkelp waterbag...The girl squatted on the sands, placing the shapeless relic between them, but even before she'd buried her hand inside the pouch Bill was filled with the dire urge to stand and run. He got to his feet and when he looked at the girl she was extracting something darkly shrivelled from the bag. A slender desiccated hand, old beyond knowing...The two of them stood on the dune watching what the girl would do next and she seemed now to understand her error. She dropped the mummified hand and moved backwards. But as she shifted she upset the waterbag, spilling out a handful of leathered organs, a knot of black hair bound around in a cord and a mess of painted votive stones. (ch.28)

Black Bill, for having been brought up by the Whites, failed to understand the practices of the aboriginals for what they really were. He considered their rites and rituals as paganism, the cult who

never knew the Living God. Bill's inability to comprehend his own blood was closely related to the fears that Whites had for the Other. While the White settlers had conjectured the notion that anything other than white was eerie and evil, the aboriginal people of Tasmania believed the Whites to be a form a pestilence that infected their lands. Here we can well imbibe the position and mindset of the indigenous Australian tribes.

Wilson explores the viewpoint of the oppressed colonised regarding the White invasion and occupation of their territories. According to Sheri Ann Denison, "postcolonial gothic is a literature of resistance, one questioning the boundaries of history, gender, race and social class. However, while postcolonial gothic resists imperialist ideologies, it frequently leaves crises unresolved" (iii). In the novel, though Wilson makes use of supernatural images and ghostly shadows to represent the colonised, the ensuing conflict remains unsolved.

The Roving Party explores the White settlers' repressed fears of the unknown as they set out to colonise the land beyond the seas. The Whites failed to acknowledge neither the skin colour of the aboriginals, nor their life style. The prejudices that had for long remained dormant in the mindset of Europeans found expression; now that they had a firsthand access to the lives of the Other. The genocidal battles sanctioned by the Colonial Governor George Arthur, who represented the British crown, forms the background for the novel. Geordie Williamson states that, "The Roving Party re-creates with unblinking detail events from the "Black Wars" in Tasmania in the early 19th century, when hostilities between colonists and indigenous tribes reached their height." The settlers from England considered the presence of natives in their occupied lands as an ill omen, as their repressed fears regarding the dark and brutal evil forces that lurked behind the black skins of their adversaries began to haunt their imagination. Elizabeth MacAndrew gives words to these notions when she states, "Port Arthur has been a kind of primal site in Tasmania or Van Diemen's Land as it was called; a place where people disappear or are violently killed or become hopelessly deranged" (9).

The well dressed Europeans attributed the demeanour of the aboriginals to the barbarism inherent in them. The very description of the attire of the hunting party of Plindermairhemener men, given by Rohan Wilson in Chapter 1, as they encounter Black Bill creates in us a picture of savagery such as “Kangaroo mantles hung loosely off their frames to hide the costume pieces beneath, trousers old and torn and black with the blood of game they had taken and looted cotton shirts gone to rags”. The colonisers’ viewpoint regarding the uncouthness of the clansmen gets more evident when they are contrasted with the polished nature of Black Bill, the black man who was brought up in the English household of James Cox. In spite of belonging to the brotherhood of the aboriginals, Bill looked upon the clan with disdain, which is made clear when it says, “Black Bill clenched his teeth.” Manalargena, the aboriginal chief is described to be “stained with filth of war.” It is evident that the towering personality and mien of the chief enthralled the whites to a great extent. But the blood which claimed white superiority ran in their veins and instead of acknowledging the powerful figure of Manalargena, they began to form in their minds an intense contempt for everything non-white. Batman reveals his opinion about Manalargena, when asked by the boy as, “There isn’t a particle of manhood about that savage. Not more than a speck. His weapons of choice are a treachery patiently nursed and some knowledge of hides and snugs. He deserves a dog’s death and by God he will get it” (ch.11).

The skin colour of the aboriginals becomes a metaphor for their inclination towards bestiality as conceived by the colonisers. In the novel *The Roving Party*, John Batman, the white farmer, organises a group of nine including himself and Black Bill in order to kill as many aboriginals as they could, having been given a contract by the Governor. He comments about the nature of the aboriginals as, “Now the sort you shall encounter in the scrub hereabouts will not shake yer hand. My word. They are a people...” (ch.2). He further says that, “The Governor is paying us to instil a lesson in the obtuse skulls of these dark skins. But I tell you this right now. It maybe the blacks what do the instilling. It may be them affixing

our bodies to the trees as you would the common criminal of old” (ch.2). Here the dark skin colour of the aboriginals becomes a metaphor for brutality. This sheds light on the prejudiced mind of the White man based on skin colour. Anything that seemed different from white was assumed to be diabolical. The idea of dark skin colour’s association with evil has been deep rooted for centuries in the mind-set of the English, of which we can find reference, even in the works of Elizabethan playwrights.

In this novel, Rohan Wilson has made use of the images of monstrosity and barbarism, an indispensable characteristic of the Gothic, to establish how the colonisers conceived the existence of Black aboriginals in the territories they had annexed. According to Elizabeth MacAndrew, the dark imagery prevalent in the Gothic is a “symbolism of spiritual states, in which the highest spiritual aspirations bring with them the greatest evils. It shows within the outwardly everyday figures of ordinary people, strange, frightening, half-understood, but dramatically- sensed impulses” (45). The men of Plindermairhemener tribe are normal human beings with emotions and feelings. But for the White settlers, their dark skin colour attributes to them an evil demeanour.

The Englishmen always believed themselves to have a high sense of dignity, instilled in them since birth, for they have been born into a nation with centuries of traditional heritage. But little do they remember the early history of England, being invaded and plundered by different by numerous tribes of dark skinned men including the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. Having arrived and settled upon the shores of a new land with Indian Ocean to its west, the Pacific Ocean to the east and the southern Ocean to the south, the Englishmen had to encounter the aboriginal tribes who had inhabited the Australian continent and its islands for centuries. Wilson has made use of the White man’s prejudiced notions regarding the aboriginal tribes in Tasmania to pour light on the repressed fears of the unknown, harnessed in the psyche of the White settlers. For the White colonisers, Blacks are savages with hardly any human feelings, having more in common with the beasts. They are cannibals incapable of having any love or regard for fellow human beings. Wilson

explores this biased viewpoint of the Whites and employs dark and macabre images to question the unimaginable fears deep rooted in the Western mind-set towards the Other.

Post-colonial gothic, as a form of writing back to the empire, a subversive revision of imperial discourse, makes use of the gothic tropes such as the landscape and spatial representation of an area. Kathrin Bartha argues that, "in colonial gothic tradition, the experience of the colonizer was portrayed as Gothic; this mostly included a spectralisation of land and indigenous people."

Tasmania, formerly called the Van Diemen's Land forms the setting for Wilson's historical novel *The Roving Party*. Being once a part of the Australian colony of the British Empire, Tasmania was subjected to witness numerous genocides, between the aboriginals and the White settlers, during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The colonisers' psyche conceived, in the isolated continent on the other side of the world, a reflection of their own imaginations of something that was sinister and haunting.

For the White European settler, the air of Tasmania was essentially morbid and its natural habitat being hard to be tamed, reflected for them, the savageness of a race of people who were inherently different from them. Marcus Clarke, the White born Australian novelist, tries to give voice to the picture that the Europeans captured in their mind regarding Australia in his 1876 Preface to the posthumously published collected poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon. According to Clarke:

What is the dominant note of Australian scenery? That which is the dominant note of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry- weird Melancholy...The Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle, in their black gorges, a story of sullen despair. No tender sentiment is nourished in their shade. In other lands the dying year is mourned, the falling leaves drop lightly on his bier. In the Australian forests no leaves fall. The savage winds shout among the rock clefts. From the melancholy gums

strips of white bark hang and rustle. The very animal life of these frowning hills is either grotesque or ghostly...Flights of white cockatoos steam out, shrieking like evil souls. The sun suddenly sinks, and the mopokes burst out into horrible peals of semi-human laughter...From a corner of the silent forest rises a dismal chant and around a fire dance natives painted like.

There is no doubt that the aboriginals embraced the melancholic land with their soul. They had lived in close communion with nature for centuries. According to John Miles, "Aboriginals themselves, however, trace their creation back to the Dreamtime, an era long past when the earth was first formed." Miles further states in his article "Survival", an explanation given by an aboriginal man regarding the link with their home land, "Aboriginals have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aboriginals see themselves as part of nature...All things on earth we see as part human. It is true that people who belong to a particular area are really part of that area and if that area is destroyed they are also destroyed." The lands of the aboriginals were invaded by the end of eighteenth century, the resulting catastrophes to which the land bore witness. The novel provides us in a nutshell how the history of a land and its people got wiped out as a result of the violence meted out by the colonisers. Mary Whipple in her "Rohan Wilson-*The Roving Party*" gives the idea of how numerous clans of aborigines had hunted and farmed on 'their' lands at will for countless generations before the arrival of the British, on its shores. With the onset of the nineteenth century, the natives learned to hate the whites who appropriated their lands at will, destroyed their farms and habitat, and killed them and their families to take over their traditional lands. As she further states, "Author Wilson is at his best as the party moves through various geographic areas, describing in vibrant, intensively visual prose what they are all seeing as they go."

We get the first proper description of land, as the rovers first leave Batman's holdings undertaking the Governor's orders into action. In chapter 4, Wilson says that, "It was a stretch of forest

entirely hostile to folk of any nation, native or not. That beggarly clutch hung in rags and animal pelts and toting rusted fire arms walked that ground as if pilgrims guided by the word of a demented god." We can find the colonisers' mind set operating here, which makes an involuntary comparison of Van Diemen's Land with their homeland. Further on, the wildness of the land is emphasised as, "tree ferns made a vault overhead and the men crouched at their bases scraping leeches from their feet and waiting for food." Struggling with a land so different from Britain, Australian settlers and their descendants created what Judith Wright has termed the "double" of Australian literary representations of nature, its dualistic portrayal of the "reality" of newness and freedom" and "the reality of exile"(351-359). The settlers, who began their livelihood in an entirely new environment, had an ambiguous mixture of feelings toward their new inhabitation. But the emotion that dominated would have been dreariness arising from the wild and hostile green country stretching out before them. Graeme Turner, the Australian professor of Cultural Studies observes that, "Inverted in season, in mood and meaning, the Australian landscape as mirror to the soul reflects the grotesque and the desolate rather than the beautiful and the tranquil" (30).

The aboriginals, who had inhabited the land for centuries since the Creation of man, had become accustomed to its geographical structure. It had almost become imbibed into their collective psyche. Their land was a part of the cultural and social traditions cherished by them. But for the colonisers who had arrived from an entirely different continent, separated by the seas, the case was different. For them, Van Diemen's Land was something foreign, which could be used as a tool to improve their economics, something which they could freely exploit without having any guilt ridden conscience. According to Baines Alarcos and Maria Pilar, the natural landscape of Australia puts forward the idea of "traditional images of the Antipodes as a dark and evil place, an unconquered territory overbrimming with dangerous secrets" (11). The settlers who had set out from Britain to build up a new living and the convicts who were forcefully brought to the Australian colony had the

simultaneous sense of belonging and alienation, a condition of uncanny in the Freudian sense.

The rovers represented in the novel belonged to different spheres of life. There were Whites, convicts, the two black trackers who had come from mainland Australia and even the black man brought up as white, Black Bill. The two men of the Dharug clan, from Paramatta region near Sidney ought to have been familiar with the wilderness they confronted in Tasmania. But the interesting fact is the way in which Wilson articulates their experience in the country, in chapter 2, "A month ago the Dharug men had been walking the browned grasslands of New South Wales, but now their feet sank inch deep in the miserable damp of Van Diemen's Land. They had trod the August snow slurrries and the mud and river marshes and felt the thorns of the pines through their soles and they would not be shod by anyone."

Here we are given the White man's perspective on Van Diemen's Land. The "miserable dampness" gives away the disgust the settler had towards the natural environment the land. The uneasy relationship between the whites and their view of the "alien" landscape of Australia gets projected here. For the European settlers with their long cherished memories of their home, Van Diemen's Land resembled nothing but hell. The vast countryside of an unknown land provided no solace for the minds tormented by their own repressed fears. The rugged terrain and the chaotic forests that the rovers had to cross were not like the lush meadows of Britain which used to provide peace and happiness to their minds. The aboriginals' settlements roused in them images of savagery and uncouthness. As Wilson describes in chapter 9:

The camp was sited in a clearing fired and shaped out of the rainforest over generations. It was tended and the hand of the Plindermairhemener showed everywhere in its constructed: in the narrows they'd shaped forcoralling the kangaroo herds, in the island thicketts that would hide their spearsmen, in the handholds hacked into the trees for possum hunting. Their blood lay upon the tended land now and the Vandemonian walked around those marks

with his good boots crunching over the gum leaves, his eyes downcast.

It is well known that both hell and heaven can be created on earth, depending on the way in which human minds conceive the meaning of life. For a mind tormented with dislike and hatred for that which seemed different from them, the very space they occupy can appear to be degraded. The colonisers' fear for the wild and seemingly untameable landscape was met with massive razing of land to create a suburban landscape. According to Robin Boyd:

Despite the natural tendency of the country to overheat, despite the blistering outback legend and the constant search for relief even in the milder areas during the hottest weeks of summer, the object of the pioneering cult is to banish all shade from everyday life...It is almost unpleasant, measured against the European ideal. It is faintly frightening: not that it menaces, but simply because it is so unfamiliar, so strangely primeval: as different from the European or North American landscape as a tropical jungle. (45)

Majority of the land area was covered by thick forest, overgrown with creepers and huge trees. The aboriginals had a tradition of living in close harmony with the nature, which was unknown to the settlers. For the Whites, the snake was something to be dreaded and feared. Black Bill who was a clansman by birth had in him, respect towards the land they trod and its natural resources. It is this devotion to nature that makes him say, "We don't kill them" (ch.20). But Batman's reply that follow makes clear the stand of a true White man, "We? I most certainly do, my dusky friend." The whites' hatred for the alien nature can be understood as a reflection of a state of mind which is constantly at rebellion with the unknown.

There exists a congruous relationship between the cultural traditions of a people and the land of their birth. To get an in depth understanding of the history of a nation, we have to delve into the ritual and practices of its people in relation to the space in which they thrive. According to Jane

Campion, "landscape cannot be considered merely as a natural topography, but a cultural interpretation that has always taken on particular resonance in colonial and postcolonial contexts where the coloniser appropriates the land of the native tribes." By stressing on the geographic landscape of Tasmania, which according to the coloniser is alien or haunted, Rohan Wilson successfully portrays the attitude of the settlers toward the new land, although the novel does not employ the conventional gothic tones of terror, horror and anxiety.

The Whites had not only annexed their lands but had also begun to exploit the aboriginal women and children sexually. The Australian academic, Larissa Behrendt says that, "Massacres of indigenous people often took the form of mass shooting or driving groups of people off cliffs. There are also numerous accounts of colonists offering indigenous people food laced with arsenic and other poisons" (274). While exploring the archives of early colonial history of Australia, we can learn from the writing of Edward Wilson Argus, as quoted in Harris J, about the oppression inflicted upon the aboriginals:

In less than twenty years we have nearly swept them off the face of the earth. We have shot them down like dogs. In the guise of friendship we have issued corrosive sublimates in their damper and consigned whole tribes to the agonies of an excruciating death. We have made them drunkards, and infected them with diseases which have rotted the bones of their adults, and made such few children as are born amongst them a sorrow and a torture from the very instant of their birth. We have made them outcasts on their own land, and are rapidly consigning them to entire annihilation. (209)

It is interesting to note the paradox of the situation. The White settlers conceived the original inhabitants of its colonies as the racial Other, something as subhuman, that is to be annihilated from the face of earth. The repressed fears that haunted the psyche of the colonisers found

expression as they attributed savagery and brutality to the uncivilised aboriginals. Let us consider the flip side of the coin. The indigenous tribes of Tasmania had lived in harmony with the nature for centuries before the arrival of the Whites. The arrival of the colonisers had brought their usual life to a halt; the advent of epidemics and merciless abuse by the Whites was more than they could tolerate. Having their last bit of straw being tested, the retaliation against the oppressors got kick started.

In this novel, we can find Wilson inverting the Eurocentric Gothic genre to suit the needs of the time. According to Gerry Turcotte, "The generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience in as much as each emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space." Wilson has made use of Gothic conventions to put forward the view point according to which the coloniser is depicted as the metaphor for brutality and exploitation. Philip Holden contends that in the postcolonial Gothic, the Gothic elements are, "seen as directly addressing and calling into question colonialism, imperialism, humanism and legacies of the Enlightenment" (354). For Andrew McCann, "the Gothicizing of the settler-colony as a site of repression also anticipates the dynamics of an analytical process in which the critic unearths the 'repressed' of colonisation: collective guilt, the memory of violence and dispossession and the struggle for mastery in which the insecurity of the settler-colony is revealed" (399). The reversal of the Other is one way in which the postcolonial Gothic presents itself as a hybrid. According to Michelle Giles, "the writer in applying a Western narrative form creates a Gothic hybrid, in which the East and West combine, paralleling the struggle of a national identity." Though Wilson makes use of several Western Gothic conventions, he also challenges and inverts these conventions, creating a Gothic hybrid. In this novel, through the usage of various Gothic tropes, Wilson tries to assert the voice of the marginalised sections in Tasmania.

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