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## **UNIT 21 AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL NOVELISTS**

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### **Structure**

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### **21.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After a study of this unit, you should be able to  
Discuss the development of Australian multicultural writing  
Assess the achievement of Australian multicultural novelists  
Discuss the writing of women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora

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### **21.1 INTRODUCTION: AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL WRITING: AN OVERVIEW**

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In the previous unit, we discussed multiculturalism with reference to Australia, and in the next unit we will be focusing on the writing of the multicultural novelist, Yasmine Gooneratne. In the present unit, we will take a look at Australian multicultural writing in general and multicultural novelists in particular, and then proceed to briefly discuss the writings of women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora. As we have already seen in the previous unit, ‘Multicultural writing’ is only one of a number of different terms used to designate writing by Australians from backgrounds other than the English and Irish mainstream; others include migrant writing, non-Anglo-Celtic writing, ethnic writing, NESB (Non English Speaking Background) writing, ethnic minority writing. All of these terms have, for various reasons, proved problematic: ‘migrant’ does not accurately cover the experience and work of second- generation writers; ‘ethnic’ and ‘multicultural’ have been taken to suggest that only ethnic minorities can lay claim to ethnicity and multiculturalism (the mainstream being somehow ethnically and culturally neutral). One objection, sometimes voiced by the very writers for whom these terms were coined, is that they have the potential to ‘pigeon-hole’ them, confine them to ‘ethnic ghettos’ and thus impose arbitrary limits on their writing and its audience appeal. On the other hand, the fact that these categories (especially ‘multicultural writing’) have survived seems a clear indication that the reasons why they were invented in the first place have not gone away: writers from non-Anglo backgrounds are still under-represented in, and often considered to stand outside of the national literary tradition, and a considerable number of people (‘ordinary’ readers as well as students and researchers) take a special interest in writing informed by a diverse cultural experience and find these labels useful, in spite of their limitations. It should be noted, however, that most Aboriginal writers prefer not to be included in the category of ‘multicultural writing’, which, they argue, still carries the ‘immigrant’ connotation

and thus does not recognise their special status as the indigenous people, and original inhabitants, of the land.

Multiculturalism has been government policy in Australia since the early 1970s, when it was recognised that the earlier expectation that migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds quickly assimilate into the mainstream culture was both unrealistic and undesirable. Exactly what multiculturalism means, and what its implications are, or should be, for the national culture have been subjects of lively, sometimes heated debate ever since. The nature of multicultural writing and its relationship to the overall category of Australian literature have become important issues in this debate.

The history of multicultural additions to the national literature closely reflects trends in Australian immigration since World War II. Apart from the number of non-Anglo writers who had made their home in Australia before this time, the first writers identified as multicultural belonged to the (predominantly European) migrant groups who arrived in the country in large numbers in the 1940s and 1950s: Greeks, Italians, Balts, Poles, Jews, to name just some of the larger groups. In more recent decades, Australian-born and -educated descendants of these migrants, conversant with the languages and cultures of both their parents and the Australian mainstream, have added a further dimension to the multicultural literary tradition as they in truly contrapuntal fashion explore transformations and tensions in both immigrant and host communities in response to the experience of multicultural cohabitation.

At the same time, they are joined by writers belonging to more recent migrant groups, coming from places such as Vietnam, the Middle East, India, China and South-East Asia and adding even greater diversity to a previously European-dominated literary culture. Australian literature has thus become something of a movable cultural feast: constantly enriched by new arrivals, at the same time as the 'conversation' between different literary and cultural traditions (including, of course, the Anglo-Celtic mainstream) gains depth and produces a national literature increasingly marked by hybrid or 'creolised' cultural forms. Although there can be little doubt that Australian culture is still dominated by the cultural traditions brought to the country by British and Irish immigrants, the nature of that domination has changed: Australian literature today reflects an engagement with other cultures which would have been unthinkable in the period preceding the waves of non-British migration in the last half century.

Major changes in Australian immigration policy in the twentieth century greatly influenced Australia's national identity. Racial discrimination in immigration was decreased in 1947 and finally discarded in the 1970s. The end of Asians' physical exclusion from immigration to Australia had implied the need for Asian migrants, old and new, to find a place in a society that excluded them until very recently. Although Australia's connections with countries of the South-Pacific are still largely driven by commercial and security factors, individual initiatives and links between educational institutions have contributed to enhanced literary and cultural interaction. It was observed that Australia's literary and cultural engagements with Asia, especially, South-East Asia, in the contemporary period have occurred in two 'waves' (Bennett, Strauss and Wallace-Crabbe 353 - 54). Our current knowledge of Australia's multicultural heritage would not have been possible without the important contribution of Lolo Houbein, Serge Liberman, George Kanarakis, Con Castan, Sneja Gunew, Jan Mahyuddin, Marian Boreland, Rodney Noonan and Sonia Mycak.

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## 21.2 MULTICULTURAL NOVELISTS IN AUSTRALIA

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The first of the waves was a spate of novels and films in the late 1970s and 1980s by Australians who had visited countries in Asia either as tourists or in their professional roles as journalists, diplomats or government officials. Some of the celebrated examples of such novels are C. J. Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), Robert Drewe's *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979), Blanche d'Alpuget's *Monkeys in the Dark* (1980) and *Turtle Beach* (1981).

The second wave of cultural engagement with Asia is marked by the emergence of a group of first-generation Asian-Australian writers. Leading authors in this category are novelists Yasmine Gooneratne (Sri Lanka), Don 'o Kim (Korea), Dewi Anggraeni (Indonesia), Satendra Nandan (Fiji), Adib Khan (Bangladesh) and Arlene Chai (Philippines). Another popular writer who engages with questions of hybridity, personal and national identity is Brian Castro, the author of novels *Birds of Passage* (1983), *Stepper* (1997), *The Bath Fugues*, *Shanghai Dancing* (2003), *Street to Street* (2012) and *Blindness and Rage* (2017). His works have succeeded in exploding concealed notions of identity and centrality. El-Hage is a Lebanese-Australian novelist whose novels *The Last Migration* (2002), *The Myrtle Tree* (2007) and *One Day in April* (2011) have won critical acclaim. Marek Battero, Polish-Australian writer, is another multilingual author worth mentioning. *The Slap* (2008) by Christof Tsiolkas, the Greek-Australian writer, is a poignant account of immigrant experiences of identity as a prism of broken identity formation in Australian culture. In this context the works *The Island* (1984) by Antigone Kefala and Abid Khan's *Spiral Road* (2007) is worth mentioning. It is an undeniable fact that multicultural novelists in Australia have given accounts of difficult (sometimes comical) cross-cultural encounters.

Multiculturalism does not mean the same thing in all places or at all times. According to Jon Stratton, in Australia 'multiculturalism was constructed as a policy intimately connected with the cultural problems allied to migrant settlement.' Unlike the American version of multiculturalism, he argues, it is concerned with cultural pluralism, but does not address the question of race. Stratton also argues that official multiculturalism, which is essentially a 'top-down' policy aimed at managing cultural diversity, should not be confused with everyday multiculturalism, or 'the lived experience of cultural diversity' (206). While official multiculturalism constructs the nation according to a model of centre and periphery, everyday multiculturalism is characterised by constant evolution and creolisation in which neither mainstream nor minority cultures and ethnicities remain stable or discrete. The very notion of culture thus takes on different values according to circumstances.

In the context of multicultural arts, Sneja Gunew has argued that there is ongoing tension and confusion between two ways of defining culture: on the one hand the 'many elements which symbolically organise life, such as food, language, religion, and rite-of-passage ceremonies' (22), on the other, artistic productions granted the status of 'high art'. Ethnic minority artists have commonly found themselves associated with community rather than mainstream and high arts, their work assumed to derive more directly from their cultural 'roots' than that of other artists. In the case of writers, the assumption is that their writing will deal with issues of migration and cultural heritage in a straight-forward manner, without the stylistic and structural sophistication associated with, for example, European modernism or postmodernism.

The debate between critics and writers who argued for the ongoing need to encourage and promote ethnic minority writing in Australia and others who accused them of critical distortion and bad faith came to a head in 1991 with the publication of Robert Dessaix's essay 'Nice work if you can get it' in the *The Australian Book Review*. Dessaix does not accept the view that migrant or multicultural writers are marginalised because the category 'Australian literature' has been too narrowly defined to include non-Anglo cultural perspectives; the reason this writing is overlooked, he argues, is that 'it's often not very good' (1991:26), and for the obvious reason that the writers' English is not good enough to produce texts of sufficient complexity and sophistication. He even offers the provocative advice that 'many so-called multicultural writers would do better to take up ceramics, market-gardening, photography, or perhaps even to return to their countries of origin' (26). The real target for his criticism, however, is not the writers themselves but rather what he calls 'the multicultural professionals' (22), those academics and critics who, he argues, make a career out of promoting these so-called marginalised writers and attacking the mainstream literary establishment for being culturally exclusive.

Malaysian-born Australian historian Wang Gungwu has drawn a picture of Australia as a hybrid nation as he perceived it from Asia when he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong: 'What may emerge as the basis of Australian national identity is a consensus that Australia is not part of Asia, nor Europe, nor America, but a country with some of the best modern features of those three continents' (Gungwu 240). The controversy over multicultural writing has been muted in recent years, at the same time as the principles and policies of multiculturalism have been under pressure in a prevailingly conservative political climate. In the 'everyday' life of Australian literature, however, multiculturalism is alive and well, as ever more ethnic minority writers are appearing on the scene, slowly transforming the national literature. The high levels of education and literacy among many recent migrant groups mean that more first-generation migrants engage in literary activities than was the case in the post-war wave of migration.

During the mid to late eighties Walter Adamson (1911 - 2010) seemed the most recognisable 'multicultural writer' in Australia. A German author born three years before the First World War, Adamson emigrated in 1939. After teaching English as second language in La Paz, Bolivia, he returned to Australia in 1953 and became a full-time writer in 1969. Adamson is best-known for *The Institution*, a novel first written and published in German. Its English translation by Sonja Delander appeared in 1976. Adamson was an accomplished and subtle humourist in his writings of immigrant settlement in Australia. His poetry and prose were published frequently in German and Australian newspapers, journals and collections. His obituarist, Alex Skovron wrote that Adamson's "style was marked by a lightness of touch guided by a probing intellect, an alert ear, astute eye, and an accent distinctly individual".

(*Age* (29 January 2011): 8)

David Malouf (1934 -) is a second generation Australian-born novelist of Lebanese background, who lived both in Australia and in Europe. He is arguably Australia's greatest contemporary prose writer. His works are published in over twenty languages. In a context of world literature too Malouf undoubtedly ranks as one of the most outstanding of contemporary novelists. He has written many novels, several volumes of poetry, three collections of short stories, and a play, *Blood Relations*. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2008. Malouf says, on

being a writer: “I totally reject the idea of being representative in any way. This whole idea of role models. It’s a terrible idea. I don’t like the idea of being some kind of representative consciousness of the country. You do what you do, the way you do it, out of a kind of necessity. I can’t see how that would be useful to anyone else”.

Serge Liberman (1942 - 2017) was the son of Polish Jewish refugees, born in Russia during the flight from Nazi-Germany’s invasion. In 1951 he settled in Melbourne where he combined a medical practice with writing and editorial activities. A prolific contributor to Australian Judaica, he wrote a prose reminiscent of the nineteenth century European style. In 1984 Liberman became a corresponding editor of *Outrider*. Liberman’s sinewy, intensely evocative and poignant style, unique in Australian letters, takes us deep into particular lives but always with reference to universal issues of fate, free will, and the moral landscapes of good and evil. His post-Holocaust humanism is passionately committed to the power of storytelling, and enters with special power art’s plea for love, compassion, inner freedom, and redemption. In the words of Arnold Zable, “a unique and pioneering voice in post-war Australian literature, Serge Liberman’s stories are informed by ancient longings, empathy for the traumatised outsider, a yearning for lost worlds, and compassion for those seeking to adjust to new worlds”.

### Check your progress 1

1. Discuss the two waves of engagement with multiculturalism by Australian novelists .

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## 21.3 MULTICULTURAL WRITING AND THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Imaginative engagement with the Asia-Pacific region was limited in Australia’s literary past. When Asia was a subject, it was usually to mark distance and difference. There are honourable exceptions like *The Far Road* (1962), George Johnston’s novel of the Chinese civil war through an Australian journalist’s eyes which remains one of the best of its kind and *The Year of the Peacock* (1965), a set of stories written collaboratively by Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew which evokes Hindu and Muslim Indian lives in Australia with freshness and dignity. But generally, Asia and Asians have been exoticised or demonised in Australian writing, when they have been visible at all. Even in sensitive and well-intentioned hands, ‘otherness’ has been the predominant trope. Robin Gerster writes well about the larger attitudinal context for this in ‘Representations of Asia’, his chapter in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2009, edited by Peter Pierce). ‘In the contemporary era,’ says Gerster, ‘a peculiar combination of suspicious insularity and neo-colonial assertiveness and self-centredness has marked the way Australia sees its region and itself in relation to it’.

However, that landscape has changed with the advent of writing produced in Australia by writers of Asian background. Such work is characteristically transnational in its sensibility, exploring human mobility and mutability in its sophisticated new-century dynamism. It doesn’t necessarily foreground any Australianness. The characters in the novel *The Lost Dog* (2007) by Michelle de Kretser, for example, bring multi-ethnic lineages to their interactions in Melbourne. Nam Le’s ‘Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’ (2006) triangulates Vietnam, Australia and the Iowa Writing Workshop in a powerful story of refugee father and differently

filial son. *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga, set in India, mentions Australia in passing. *Look Who's Morphing* (2009) by Tom Cho brings play and fantasy into a polymorphous Asian-Australian space.

At the same time other writers are shaping their work in response to their contact with Asian cultures in art, literature and philosophy, often through residencies in situ. The question of whether a literary work can or should be interpreted in terms of its author's ethnic identity or biography requires consideration of how that authorial position is represented in the text – whether it's relevant or not, whether different meanings are generated by reading that way. Where Asian-Australian writing, hyphenated, might be a category determined by background, Australian Asian writing could suggest an experiential and imaginative alternative, allowing a looser set of permutations and interactions. This need not mean that the politics of writing is thrown overboard. The politics returns in the writer's insistence on imaginative scope and capacity.

Language remains the challenge of bilingual migrant writers. Acquiring the skill to transform a native speech into a foreign tongue is still grossly underrated. Histories of literature show it could be done, but such skills remain the exception (Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, André Brink, Jack Kerouac, Milan Kundera etc.). Similar, equally unusual instances exist in other arts. Ludwig van Beethoven was in his late twenties when he lost his hearing. 'Overcoming' the challenge of the medium by finding a way to realise it in a different way is both an inherent contradiction and the ultimate artistic triumph. Banumbir Wongar and Walter Adamson managed to side-step this dilemma in their own way. But there is a limit how often it can be repeated in traditional artistic genres. Apart from the works of Adamson and Wongar, most other multicultural writing retains degrees of limitations in the structural scope and artistic quality of the work.

In an increasingly globalised world, multicultural literary traditions play important roles as mediators between local (or national) and global cultural forces. Multicultural Australian writing represents the global within the local; it responds to pressures and change within Australian society and culture, but is also, and increasingly, in tune with global developments such as rapid international communication and travel, postcolonial and diasporic literary traditions and transnational popular culture.

### **Check your progress 2**

Explain how the engagement with the Asia-Pacific region by Australian novelists changed over the decades.

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## **21.4 SRI LANKAN WOMEN WRITERS OF DIASPORA**

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In the next two units, we will be discussing in detail the writing of Yasmine Gooneratne, one of the most outstanding women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora. In this section, we will try to locate the writing of Yasmine Gooneratne within the body of work produced by women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora. The major part of Sri Lankan literature was written in the Sinhala language, but there is a considerable number of works in other languages used in Sri Lanka over the millennia, including Pali, Tamil and English. Sri Lanka has an adult literacy rate of 91.9% and

has a long story telling tradition. What is perhaps special about literature in Sri Lanka is the extent to which the oral tradition has complemented a vast body of literature spanning many genres in written form. The influence of Jathaka stories, i.e. narratives of the past lives of Siddhartha Gautama has been powerful to such an extent that both prose and poetry in the country have drawn heavily from Buddhist parables. Sri Lanka is blessed with a rich repository of narratives and narrative styles in the written and oral traditions as well as a population that is culturally ready to receive such narratives. In more recent times, events and processes whose human impact has been more immediate, including the three-decade-long armed conflict that rent the island, have found expression in literary works in all languages.

Sri Lankan writing in English came of age only in the 1980s (Das 1576). English is a dominant language in the country, but it has not acquired a place of respectability and acceptance in the literature of the land. English is still considered to be the language of the elite and insufficient in literary nuances to depict the indigenous experiences typical of the land. In his essay “Sri Lankan Literature in English”, Rajiva Wijesinha has observed thus: “Immediately after independence, there was a downgrading of those few who had in fact written in English in the early years of the century. They were seen as being antinational. Hence, both the aping of English writers and also a sometimes-subtle critique of the anglicized elite, in favour of what was termed as more authentic writings in the indigenous languages” (305).

#### **21.4.1 Sri Lankan Women Writers**

In 1928, Rosalind Mendis became the first woman from Sri Lanka to have ever written a novel, *The Mystery of a Tragedy*. Over the last five decades, Sri Lanka has witnessed a surge in creative writing in English by women authors, after what has been termed as ‘a half-a-century-long drought’. The impact of their writing has been so tremendous that Carl Muller, a critic and award-winning Sri Lankan writer, has observed thus: “Women have become the standard bearers of Sri Lankan writing in English in the past fifty years” (<http://southasia.oneworld.net/peoplespeak/womenwritersinsrilankacomeofage>). The themes and concerns chosen by Sri Lankan women have changed over the years. Instead of limiting themselves to domesticity or particular womanly experiences, now their works are based on a broad spectrum of themes which explore a gamut of social and political experiences.

Vijitha Yapa, a popular publisher of English language books in Sri Lanka, sees a “new generation of women writers exploring social issues through novels, short stories, drama and verse. Publishers now have a wide array of choices from women writers instead of a few limited manuscripts. Quite a few of our publications of women’s work have won state literary and other awards”. The Sri Lankan Civil War, those displaced by war, the killings, the sufferings of parents who have lost their children in the fighting, and many other aspects of the conflict are portrayed in women’s works these days. Social problems like female migration, drugs and women being used in the insidious business of storing and distributing narcotics, and violence against women and children also find an outlet in them.

Sunetra Rajakarunanayake, a prolific, award-winning bilingual writer and translator, Sicila Cooray, a poet, Eva Ranaweera, a bilingual writer, Punyakante Wijenaik, one of the foremost novelists and short story writers, Kumari Jayawardena, one of the pioneers of the feminist

movement in Sri Lanka, Nira Konjit Wickramasinghe, a popular writer of novels such as *Sweet Savage Love* and *Dark Fires*, Thisuri Wanniarachchi, who writes about the post-war scenario in Sri Lanka, are some of the prominent writers from Sri Lanka who have gained international attention. “Women no longer feel pangs of guilt over devoting time to writing”, says Yasmine Gooneratne, Professor Emeritus, Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. “So what makes them write? Their sensitivity to what is happening around them, their understanding of pressing social issues and their attitude to life which is different from that of the men”, says, Yasmine Gooneratne (*The Tribune*, “Spectrum”, Sunday, August 23, 2009).

#### **21.4.2 Women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora**

The hybridity of experience and expression of the diaspora writers make them outsiders to the reality of Sri Lankans residing inside the country. There has always been a tendency among Sri Lankans to reject the writings of their diaspora writers as faulty and superficial (Das 1578). However women writers from the global Sri Lankan diaspora who represent Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher ethnicities have made significant contribution to literature. They include Yasmine Gooneratne, Sri Lankan-Australian writer, Dharini Abeysekera, Sri Lankan-American writer, Nayomi Munaweera, Sri Lankan-American writer and artist, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Sri Lankan-Canadian author, Seni Seneviratne, Sri Lankan-British writer and Arany Uthayakumar, Canadian-born Sri Lankan writer and Chandani Lokuge, Sri Lankan- Australian author.

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### **21.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit we have attempted to gain an overview of the achievements of Australian multicultural novelists. Some important points that we have raised in this unit are:

- Although there can be little doubt that Australian culture is still dominated by the cultural traditions brought to the country by British and Irish immigrants, the nature of that domination has changed: Australian literature today reflects an engagement with other cultures which would have been unthinkable in the period preceding the waves of non-British migration in the last half century.
- Australia’s literary and cultural engagements with Asia, especially, South-East Asia, in the contemporary period have occurred in two ‘waves’ (Bennett, Strauss and Wallace-Crabbe 353 - 54).
- Multicultural Australian writing represents the global within the local; it responds to pressures and change within Australian society and culture, but is also, and increasingly, in tune with global developments such as rapid international communication and travel, postcolonial and diasporic literary traditions and transnational popular culture.

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