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Modern Picaresque and Peter Carey's *True History of Kelly Gang*

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Abstract:

The picaresque novel, as it developed during the sixteenth century Spain, influenced also modern and post-modern novels, although it may not contain all the elements of the traditional picaresque genre. This study analyzes the use of picaresque form in *True History of Kelly Gang* (2000) by Peter Carey in an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the form in a modern novel, at the same time tries to understand the reason of emerging this literary genre from the third world, Australia in particular. The characteristics of *True History of Kelly Gang* exhibited many of the qualities of the traditional picaresque. Ned Kelly, the protagonist, is a rogue who moves through a series of adventures, which satirize the society he lives in. However, the difference between this modern picaresque and its prototype lies in the purpose of the novel. Ned, unlike the traditional picaro, is searching for a fate which will include both full self-realization and self-development. Further, the analysis of the novel supported the assumption that picaresque form is a flexible and resourceful vehicle which provides certain advantages to the contemporary author in his portrayal of complicated modern life.

Keywords: Modern Picaresque, Peter Carey, *True History of Kelly Gang*.

Peter Carey, along with David Malouf, Rafe Gravelle and Frank Moorhouse brought Australian fiction to the threshold to world literature. Though, Carey's works are not as canonical as Patrick White, but he has gained popularity by winning Booker Prize twice, one for *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and other for *True History of Kelly Gang* (2000) the next year of publication. Throughout his literary career he fictionalized Australia from a variety of perspective and allegorical distances. The mirror holds up to twentieth century Australian society and culture and its international context never simply reflect, it distorts and designates to allow Carey's reader to see the country for the first time, its culture and its myth. Douglas Ivison reviewed in the journal of Australian Studies: "Carey's narrative voice is a remarkable achievement that is simultaneously poetic and authentic, vernacular and idiomatic without being condescending or sentimental, ungrammatical and randomly punctuated yet highly readable" (Douglas 144). His fiction explores the experiences lurking in the cracks of normality and is inhabited by hybrid characters living in-between space or on the margins. His is a practical experience for him; Carey himself is from hybrid background with born of European. He acquires a marginalized social identity by "transplanted in South hemisphere" at present he leads a life of Diaspora in USA.

Carey's recent novel *True History of Kelly Gang*, like other Carey's novel is the amalgamation of varied characteristics- history, mythology and Australian culture. It is a classic novel with a reservoir of many literary genre and style cutting across very sharply, giving a real representation of the nineteenth century Australia. The novel shares eighteenth century's traditional picaresque elements as well as parody, pastiche, fragmentation, identity crises which are recognized as modern literary phenomenon. For the limitation of the paper, the discussion is restricted to the elements of modern picaresque in the novel also at same time tries to evaluate modern picaresque as a literary genre. The analysis of the novel supported the idea that picaresque form is a flexible and resourceful vehicle which offers certain definite advantages to the contemporary author in his portrayal of modern life.

Picaresque novel, an earliest literary endeavour, originated in sixteenth century Spain and flourished throughout Europe in seventeenth and eighteenth century. The picaresque novel is generally seen as an early modern innovation, a new cultural form that emerged in golden age in Spain and took a significant role in the development of novel. Picaresque novel emerges in British soil as a respective genre by the hands of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Pamela* by Richardson set as milestone as well as model for picaresque novel. It in time, throughout centuries has undergone various changes and development but still has never completely disappeared from neither English nor world literature. Coming into the twentieth century, after a short period in which it seems to fade away because of non productive literature in this particular genre. New texts were written in the first decade after Second World War that shows not only the revival of rogue tale but also a programmatic employment of the genre as a reaction against the mannerism of modernist culture.

Like characteristic variations of picaresque novel, there are different reasons of emerging in different times. Indeed, in order to understand the historic context that leads to paradigmatic development of this picaresque novel throughout centuries, it is essential to talk into consideration the socioeconomic and religious factors and its impact on life. The popularity of picaresque novel coincides with the emergence of financial capitalist economy of Western Europe. This transition that led from feudal societies ruled by heredity aristocracy to the emergence of powerful national state endowed with more sophisticated administration run by well-educated bureaucrats (Fernandez 1). The feudal societies relied on the values of honors and personal fidelities on the exchange of for reward. These principles regulated socio-economic relation with in a strict hierarchy. The picaresque thematizes this new relationship of individual with the society. It is worthy to mention here the valid proposition of Fernandaz who claims that "it examines the values that regulated these relations and exposes the contradiction between the official rhetoric and the ethos of self-interest that actually sustain social interaction" (2). The revival of picaresque of World War Second in novels written by the representative of "angry generation" (John Braine's *Room at the Top*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*) and non-angry writers

Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, John Wain's *Hurry on Down*. Some literary works are the reinterpretation of rogue tale in Postcolonial context, as for example Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of the Suburbia*.

True History of Kelly Gang exhibits many qualities of traditional picaresque novel. Ned Kelly, the protagonist of the novel is a rogue, a highwayman, a bushranger and a convict. He is an "insular an isolated being who is frequently an orphan who must function in an environment for which he is not prepared" (Woodcock 137). Like a true picaro his life is series of misfortunes. He loses his father at the age of twelve and is abandoned by his mother to become an apprentice of notorious bushranger Harry Power. Kelly is arrested and sentence to three years in prison for reception of a stolen horse although Kelly claims that his friend Wild Wright unknowingly sold him the stolen horse without Kelly's knowledge. Ned Kelly's father Red Kelly had numerous encounters with the colonial police force resulting in his imprisonment and mysterious death. After his father's death Ned Kelly got the knowledge of the land, hideouts and strategies for bush ranging. Though he tried to eke out an honest living, he was falsely charged with stealing a horse. But the fact is that his friend Wild Wright sold him stolen horse without his knowledge. This led to his arrest and imprisonment for three years. Here he has a glimpse of the cruelty of the state. He gradually descended into crime and cruelty in later period. The vileness and situation of the society led him into this world. Constable Alex Fitzpatrick, a local police officer tried to entice Kelly's sister and wants to betray her. Kelly could not stand this dishonor. So Ned shoots him in the hand in self-defense. This led to his another arrest. After that Kelly was arrested several times. His request to listen to his views was thrown to the winds. Offense, be it minor or major ultimately landed him to prison; the officers perpetrated oppression on him. They got inhuman treatment from the officers. Police Commissioner Standish answered "he would gaol my mother if he so chose and all my brothers & uncles & cousins and he did not care if we should breed like rabbits for he would lockup the mothers & babies too" (Carey 120). The final section is really pathetic. It shows how the local schoolmaster Thomas Curnow ultimately betrays Ned. In the encounter between police and Kelly Gang, Ned was severely wounded and captured. Other members were killed. There is no mention of survivors. Possibly, these point to the fact that authority wants to suppress its heinous actions.

Ellen Quinn, the mother of Ned Kelly, is a resemblance to Defoe's picaro protagonist Moll Flanders. She twice widowed and once abandoned. She was around many suitors beside her husband. After the death of her husband, Red Kelly she takes seriously the role of paterfamilias. Her defense of her eldest, Edward "Ned" Kelly, remains firm throughout ups and downs of Quinn-Kelly clan relationships involving crime, treachery, jail terms, and the deaths of daughters Ellen and Annie. He returns her loyalty with gifts of food, livestock, and a new shelter at Eleven Mile Creek, the family homestead. The seduction of Ellen by Bill Frost and George King "like yellow dingoes on a chained up bitch" jolts Ned to action in defense of a woman he perceives as a victim rather than seductress (Carey, 239). At a critical point in her animosity toward police

officers, she holds a.45 on Constable Alexander Fitzzy Fitzpatrick, a drunken two-timer. With folk clarity, She Charges, "You spiled my girl you b-----d," her reference to Fitzzy's deflowering of 15-year old Kate Kelly at the same time he conducts affairs with two other women. Ned confirms that Ellen bewails "every loss and hurt she ever suffered it would wrench your guts" (Carey 234). For stirring Fitzzy's wrath at the Kellys, Ellen declares herself "as big a fool as any mother could ever be," but she ends her farewell to Ned and Dan with a touch of feminine grace: "My soul's within you" (239,240). She has sentenced three years hard labor for try to kill Constable Fitzpatrick. Mary Hearn, the next important female character witnesses the predations of disguised Irish Lord Hill. At the stable of her father, the blacksmith of Templecrone, the men burst in wearing rebels against disguises and tie down the lord's horse, a black named Mercury. With jests aimed at the lord's pomposity, the men deck Mercury in hat and red cloak before disemboweling the animal with a pointed stick, an emblem of male phallic torture of the weak and defenseless. Mary notes, "There were a portion of its gut attached like to a crochet needle" (Carey, 2000, 289). The men continue berating the agonized horse for stealing Ireland from the Irish. By morning, the horse carcass bears the evidence of a protracted maiming. The discovery of the white blaze from Mercury's head results in the hanging at Donegal of Michael Connor, a tenant farmer, and five others. Mary uses the story as proof that terrorism brings more misery on a subject people.

The novel is written in realistic tradition like any other picaresque novel. The famous Jerilderie letter was one of the main sources of inspiration to the novelist which he came across in mid 1960, in which historical Ned Kelly recorded his own account of his action. Carey describes it as "an extraordinary document, the passionate voice of man who writing to explain his life, save his life, his reputation" (Woodcock 139). He was impressed by its 'howl of pain' against injustice, but even more enthralled by the style: "all the time there is this original *voice* – uneducated but intelligent, funny and then angry, and with a line of Irish invective that would have made Paul Keating envious. It was Kelly's language that drew me to this story" (140). Carey keeps specific elements of the Jerilderie Letter, adapting sections to fit his own accounts of episodic structure of the novel. But whereas the actual Jerilderie Letter was addressed to a contemporary newspaper audience, and possibly to the future, Carey changes the intended audience of his invented version. This narrative may be addressed to the daughter he will never meet, but Ned writes in the belief that he will meet her, and be able to re-read what he has written (Carey 202).

This tour-de-force of storytelling, Carey's great gift, is a postmodern historical novel, a quasi-autobiography, narrated in the Australian vernacular with primitive grammar and punctuation, a dazzling act of ventriloquism, in a style inspired by an extraordinary fragment of Kelly's prose known as the Jerilderie letter. (McCrum, *The Guardian*)

The theme of Carey is concerned within *True History of Kelly Gang* which are complex, and any attempt to state them will be even more incomplete since Ned speculates at one time or another on nearly every aspect of human life. However, his main concern, the object of Ned's quest, is to find an individual (at the initial of his life) and collective material profit, romantic

love. On an impersonal basis, it is brotherhood and community with all men. In the typical picaresque genre, it assumes that the picaro cannot love does not mean that he has no emotions for his fellows. Traditional picaro has a capacity for empathy born of his struggles; in this way, he gains the knowledge of the ways of the world. He is capable of limited companionship without strong obligations. It is because he feels he must retain his freedom if he has to win in his fight for survival. On this regards McCullough (1968) argues that the picaresque hero should not be scrutinized too closely. He asserts “The interest of the author is in the shifts of his hero to maintain himself rather than in the man himself, and more particularly, the assertion is centered upon the world in which the adventurer moves” (*Representatives English Novelists*).

True History of the Kelly Gang uses these forms of picaresque and epistolary genre : Ned’s ‘parcels’ are letters addressed to his daughter, so that his story is told in epistolary fashion, while the plot of the novel follows his adventures chronologically from childhood, blending the picaresque with the autobiographical *bildungsroman*. The novel comprises thirteen chapters in the form of parcel, traces the chronological development of the protagonist, Ned Kelly. There are short summery at the beginning of each and every chapters. Using all these genre modes, *True History of the Kelly Gang* not only re-writes a national icon; it effectively re-writes the founding elements of the English novel tradition. As well as professing to be an authentic *True History of the Kelly Gang* takes the form of ‘parcels’ of documents, each with a bibliographical description of contents, paper and condition, such as might be done by a manuscript collection in a library, to add to the flavor of authenticity. Ned speaks directly, with a fervour that embodies his reckless character, and this creates a sense of narrative urgency enhanced through minimal punctuation, as in the headlong opening: “I lost my father at 12yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silence my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false” (7).

This novel resembles Modern picaresque novels of the 1950s have retained many characteristic of the traditional model, but they also display an important difference. It is similar to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* has protagonists who play a multiplicity of different roles in accordance with the picaresque tradition. In each novel there is a lack of continuity and stability as well as a rootlessness and aversion to commitments and role constraints that clearly mark the hero as a modern vision of the picaro. At the same time, the protagonist is involved in a search for identity and a personally meaningful existence that sets him apart from the traditional picaro and links him to the hero of the Bildungsroman. In the Bildungsroman however, the teleological process of self-development is fulfilled, while for the modern picaro it remains an unattainable aim. Parallel to the picaro's failure to achieve self-realization the narrative ending is unresolved, though the basic premise of the Bildungsroman i.e. the belief in the existence and desirability of personal identity remains intact. This Bildungsroman is used by many modern novelists as a modern literary device.

Even though plot, causality, continuity and structure of the novel are called into question and the reader is often at a loss in his attempt to make sense of the events, Carey as a postmodern writer does not renounce all literary traditions rather, he reverts to the literary genre of the picaresque novel with Ned Kelly, one of the few integrating figures of the Australian history. In the critical depiction of society and a hazily contoured protagonist, Carey uses picaresque convention to express the ambiguity seen by contemporary writers both in reality and the experiencing self.

The picaresque novel, by contrast, has neither a closed nor a happy ending. By his not finding a positive task in the world, as the hero of the *Bildungsroman* does, the picaro's wish for integration into acknowledgement by society is unfulfilled. He remains an outsider. Despite its display of disillusionment and ambivalence, the relatively open ending of the picaresque reflects the conditions of the world as made by man, rather than suggesting a denial or rejection of any divine order. This "open ending" is one of the modernist literary phenomenon used by modern and postmodern writers.

Prior to modernism in literature, the majority of authors wrote in the third person perspective, often utilizing an omniscient narrator. Modernist authors, however, preferred to write from a first person perspective to get a more personal view of the story and tap into the character's thoughts. Many modernist novels switch between the perspectives of various characters in order to get different viewpoints. This also serves as a commentary of the subjective nature of perspective and reality. Though the major part of the novel is narrated by first person narrator, at outset of the novel, it is third person omniscient external narrator with flashback technique or "analepses" (according to Gerard Genette, it is the insertion of previous events in the reporting of subsequent one), to avoid the traditional linear narrative strategy.

The protocols of the picaresque that are followed and highlighted in this novel are: character, plot, story, point of view, style and ending each with particularities as defined by Ulrich Wrick. It is obvious that the novel does not display all the protocols; genres are always transgressed over time. While the traditional picaro revealed positive traits only by contrast to a negative society and the modern picaro was able to offset the negative society to a much larger extent by his positive qualities of role denial and search for identity, Kelly resembles the traditional picaro again in this respect. He prefers a life of accommodation to the negative values of his environment over a critical assessment of the existing conditions. Different from the traditional picaresque, however, the modern novel lacks the religious framework that generates meaning and order and promises redemption despite all peripeties of fortune and all corruption in this world. Carey's picaro lives in a contingent, meaningless world where the individual that has lost both his religious orientation and his self is faced with the choice between either a system of absolute submission and control or total void and indifference.

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