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Repositioning Bushranger as Human being in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*

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Abstract:

This paper begins with Peter Carey's opinion about novel – "novel is a celebration of human spirit". Carey further explains that the "writer has a responsibility to tell the truth, not to shy away from the world as it is; and at the same time the writer has a responsibility to celebrate the potential of the human spirit". This paper here attempts to create neither a hero nor a criminal but a human being through this novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) because Ned Kelly is nothing but a notorious criminal, a thief, and a murderer for police, but to his own people, the deprived class of ordinary Australian, the bushranger is a hero.

Keywords: Bushranger, Human spirit/ being, Colonial period in Australian history, New Historicism.

Peter Carey is one of the most renowned Australian living novelists who has been honoured twice with the Man Booker Prize first for *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988 and for *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2001 respectively. Peter Carey, who is highly influenced by Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges, makes extensive use of prolepses, magic realism and presents multiple truths in a discontinuous, disrupted and distorted narration. Many of his writings are grounded in Australian social cultural milieu and responded to that country's history. His novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* provides an insight into the colonial period in Australia, including the formation of the dominant Australian culture such as the importance of anti- authoritarianism and egalitarianism. This novel revises the colonial period from a contemporary perspective and is aprismatic narrative which speaks out of colonial history in different dimensions and manners.

True History of the Kelly Gang is a multifaceted historical novel in many perspectives. First, Peter Carey explores the life of Nineteenth Century outlaw Ned Kelly, a sort of Robin Hood who has been glorified by Australian nationalists. The novelist examines through Kelly's eyes a particular era of Australian history in the late 1800s a time when Irish immigrants brutally suffered in the hands of the British ruling class. Right from the beginning, we are thrown into the eyes of a three years old child whose life is caught in the middle of the struggle and scuffle of poverty. When Kelly's mother goes to the prison to meet and provide food for her husband who is wrongly caught by police and locked into jail. The trap says no cake shall go the prisoner but Kelly could understand his spicy smell for cake,

and he had a “handlebar moustache and his scalp was shining through his hair”. (8) His young mind is more affected by the insults rather than the poverty itself:

Tis not poverty I hate most
Nor the eternal grovelling
But the insults which grow on it
Which not even leeches can cure. (Carey 9)

He was forced to jump into a life of crime and corruption. Ned Kelly faces odd situations and circumstances, who was born in a poor Irish family in 1755, in Northeast, Victoria. The novel begins with Ned's incredible voice and vocal in the form of long letters known as “Jerilderie Letter” in San Francisco, which he wrote for his lovely and pretty daughter who is yet to be born on the request of Mary Hearn, his wife who motivates and encourages him to write his life story as the legacy for their future child. If God allows him, he will wish to see her daughter interpreting, understanding, and realizing of the injustice of law and police corruption, the poor Irish suffered from the hands of British rulers. At the beginning of the novel, Ned Kelly is twelve years old and he himself reveals the purpose of writing letters to his daughter in these opening lines: “I lost my father at twelve years of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences 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” (Carey 7).

The opening of this novel is quite similar to Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) in which Pip, an orphan child, protagonist, and narrator who dreamt to become a blacksmith like his brother-in-law Joe Gargery, but his future and fortune enforced him to become a London-based gentleman. But in Ned Kelly's case, everything happens against his desires and dreams. He wanted to lead a simple and honest life but after the death of his father, everything drives against him. He is manipulated and exploited by the elders throughout his life especially by his mother, Ellen who openly and overtly runs a she been or pub, and she attempts to make a number of suitors including Harry Power, a notorious bushranger. So that she can earn handsome money and feed up her twelve children. When Ellen's income begins to deteriorate, then she decides to sell off her son Kelly to Harry Power, a bushranger as his apprentice for 15 quid (pound). Ned Kelly, the narrator and protagonist of the novel expresses his inner longing and yearning about the respectful and dutiful relationship between mother and her son, but it is the material money which isolates from one blood relative to another. As he states: “The mother and the son stood separate in the middle of the home paddock the chooks all droopy and muddy the pigs...The son felt himself a mighty fool he had been bought and sold like carrion” (Carey 111).

These lines demonstrate the absence of freedom, choice, self-respect, and self-value of the human being in the postcolonial era where a man (including a woman) is sold and bought like carrion. After the distressed and devastated consequences of World War Second, men (including women) had no power and potential to initiate and do any work, and if they

willingly wished to do, what they could have done, that was the most vital question before them. The same question arises before Ned Kelly who is just fifteen years old and a helplessness child that has a bundle of responsibilities to redeem towards his family, society, and nation. As he expresses- “Foul fortune had brung us to our quarry’s door”(Carey140). It means that his life with Harry Power, as an apprentice is against his will and he is enforced to work with him because he is devoid of liberty. His first experience can be witnessed through these lines when Harry Power instigates Ned to kill Bill Frost, his mother’s lover at Harry’s home. He and his boss Harry want to kill him, while Ned’s hands were trembling, but he stands firmly and asked Frost, whether he wished to die or live: “This fearsome weapon he now pointed directly at Bill Frost’s temple and I were too apprehensive of the murder to feel v. much relieved. Holding the pistol in the left hand Harry Power took a hold of the fellow’s private parts with his right” (Carey 142).

He was not satisfied with the profession which he did and does. That’s why, after three years working with Harry, he returned home for his family’s settlement and tries to live an honest lifestyle. Kelly bought a horse from his friend Wild Wright without knowing anything it and after few days he was arrested and sentenced to three years jail because the horse he bought was a stolen horse. He returned home from jail and wishes to ‘enjoy the freedom of the air the absence of threats and quarrelling’. But it appears that his life is full of trials and tribulations. In Kelly’s words: “All my life I wanted were a home but I come back from Pentridge Gaol to find the land I had laboured on become a stranger’s territory... That injustice put me in a rage nothing would ease but danger I now craved it like another man might lust for the raw burn of poteen” (Carey 206).

It is here important to know about Red Kelly, Ned Kelly’s father was a former convict and was transported to Tasmania, and Kelly does not have any evidence and idea for what his father was convicted. He dies after the release of six months. Red Kelly met Ned’s mother, Ellen in the town called Donnybrook, and decided and determined to marry. Ellen’s family, the Quinns were habitual criminals who constantly drew the attention of the police. The Policeman often used to visit Kelly’s family. The corruption of police is evidence when Constable Flood seduced his sister Annie and warns her and family do not disclose. After some days his brother Dan and his mother were coming peacefully through Oxley Township with their horse. But Constable Flood dragged him to ‘the laundry of the police camp’ where cowardly Flood threatened to plunge his face into the boiling sheets. See the pinnacle of cruelty and torture of Constable Flood who unfairly commanded young brother life until “he pleaded for his life he scaled his arm he thrust his govt. revolver against Dan’s empty belly saying he would arrest him for stealing horses from pound” (Carey229). Alex Fitzpatrick, another constable who has wrongly used his power and position, and has made many illegal relationships. One day he came to Kelly’s home and tries to woo his younger sister Kate, prompting Ned to disclose that Fitzpatrick has a number of mistresses in other towns and has no intention of marrying Kate. After his mother Ellen threatens the Constable with violence, Fitzpatrick takes out his revolver on the family and Ned shoots him in the hand of self-defence. Although he dresses the wound and Fitzpatrick leaves while promising that no action will be taken, warrants for the arrest of Ned and his younger brother Dan are issued the

next day. Ned and his brother Dan flew away and hid out in the hills of the northeast Victoria. These two accidents prompted Kelly and his brother to join a Gang and teach a lesson to those police who only wore the mask of justice and equality. They joined by their friends Steve Hart and Joe Byrne (later this group came to be known as Kelly Gang). But Ned's mother and his sisters were arrested and imprisoned in Melbourne. They robbed banks and supported the poor in their lives. Ned is an active and smart fellow who does not wish to see the suffering of the poor as he has been suffering since his childhood and still struggling to make his life hassle free. His benevolence and generosity nature led him to become Robin Hood of Australia. In 1875, on some 'day of horror', Ned and his accomplices killed three policemen at the outskirts of Melbourne. Bank robberies and raids continued to take place until the vividly detailed final gunfight at Glenrowan in 1880. Ned and his companions were shot down while Ned himself states: "Clad in solid steel- plate armour one quarter of an inch thick" and a crude steel helmet like a bucket, got shot in his legs and is captured" (Carey 417).

At Stringybark Creek, Kelly Gang ambushed them, where Ned shot three out of four policemen. This event adds fuel to the growing surrounding folklore and they robbed banks and parts of the money they distribute to the lower-class settlements in Victoria who provided shelter to the Gang. During the raids, Ned meets an Irish young Catholic girl named Mary Hearn and "it for myself to remember what a joy it were to fall in love" (Carey244). The situation is very tense and turmoil that's why Kelly sent Mary Hearn to San Francisco with her son and unborn baby and he remains in Australia only because his mother was in jail.

The gang has slowly and gradually spread in the town Glenrowan where the gang has constructed plentiful plate- steel armour for protection. Thomas Curnow, a cripple local school master who encourages Kelly to narrate his entire life story after seeing the sample of his writing. Curnow's personality as Kelly reveals: "He had danced with the devil himself and he had flattered him and out-witted him as successfully as the hero of any fairy tale, and now he carried the proof, the trophy, the rank untidy nest of paper beneath his arm... his very skin shrank from their conceit and ignorance and yet he was a man already triumphant"(Carey411).

Thomas Curnow betrays the gang by informing that police train and the gang derailed the train so that history will view him as "hero". The gang is surrounded by the police and in a furious encounter, Kelly was seriously wounded and other three are shot dead. Abruptly, Ned's narrative stops, a second narrator is identified as "S.C", relates the tale of gunfight and Kelly's death by hanging. Kelly at last remarks in low tone "such is life" (Carey421).

Peter Carey is here referring to a magic realist state of mind- disintegrating perceptions, hallucinatory experiences, and uncertain realities. It is Ned's vision that seems to capture the entire oeuvre of magic realism because it refers to the central issue in magic realist narrative: the limits of perceptions, classification, definition, and description. As in Kelly's opinion: "Last night I seen my dear old mother in a dream who knows how such things happen her cell were so clear I could of drawn a map there was 2 grey prison blankets folded

neatly on the shelf a Bible and prayer book on a rickety white table. Mother sat waiting for me on her crib her palliasse was folded as required” (Carey401).

Kelly finally makes his statement with the words in Victoria or the druth of a dry season to grasshoppers of New South Wales.

I DO NOT WISH TO GIVE THE ORDER FULL FORCE
WITHOUT GIVING TIMELY WARNING BUT I AM A
WIDOW’S SON OUTLAWED AND MUST BE OBEYED.

Edward Kelly (Carey 395)

Carey is one of the first Australian writers who creates a world of absurd realities by blending of fantasy and dark humour and modern writers such as Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus and many more who minutely observed the devastating conditions of human beings after World War First and Second where men have no place, power, post, and position in the world. The way Carey reduces reality of the level of absurdity is entirely different and draws upon the multiple strands of Australian culture and mythology. The writing of Carey is rooted in Australian mythology and culture and dealt with a new perspective and outlook. As Bruce Woodcock observes, “ If faith was a gamble for Pascal, writing seems to be an incessant gamble for Peter Carey which is perhaps why he is such a constant exciting writer” (Woodcock 86).

I here undertake to explore how New Historicism works with this text. New Historicism begins with the assumption that “all texts are about a particular historical context and the social forms and exchange of power” (Nayar 201).New Historicism was developed in the 1980s by Stephen Greenblatt, a critic. *True History of the Kelly Gang* is set in a particular historical context in the second half of the nineteenth century in British Colony Victoria, Australia. Carey draws a paradigm of the society through his novel, in which Ned Kelly was born and brought up, and how he stoically struggles with unfavourable situations where power and injustice were prevailing. That’s why Ned’s father was convicted and Ned too had to suffer the injustice of the laws. As I think injustice of laws, inequality of caste, and misuse of power are the main reasons which provoked him to pick up the criminal as his profession and to fulfil his family’s needs and save his sisters’ prestige because character matters a lot, but not colour.

It may seem here that Ned Kelly is merely a criminal who deserved his punishment, and his status as a national hero is being questioned. Police constantly charged Kelly’s family with various crimes. It is important to note that during Ned’s short life of twenty-six years, his thirteen members of extended family record seventy-one arrests and twenty-six jail sentences. The fact is that Kelly was guilty of some of the crimes. Kelly and his gangs perceived themselves as victims of police persecution and harassment. Kelly’s supporters considered him as an embodiment of legitimate resistance to a corrupt police force. In Australian culture, Kelly is presented through various forms of popular culture; folksong, musical, films, novels, children’s book, comic strips, and paintings. The first Australian

feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) was released just five years after the Federation of the six English colonies as an Australian nation that played a remarkable and significant role in transforming the Kelly story from a colonial into a national narrative. At that time, a critic wrote for *The Bulletin*(2001): “There is a deal too much racket about the show- sometimes you cannot see the picture for the noise of the horses, trains, gunshot, and wild cries; but all the same, it is the sort of below drama that the lower orders crave for, and two- thirds of Australia will want to see it the two-thirds that believe that Ned Kelly was a greater man than George Washington”.

Kelly's immense contribution to the society holds a high place and position in the Australian culture and civilization. Most of the terms of the novel have been used and become popular in Australian culture such as ‘Kelly tourism’ means three towns Glenrowan, Kellyana, and Paraphernalia museums. ‘As game as Kelly Gang’ is used as an expression of bravery and courage. ‘Ned Kelly Beard’ describes a trend in ‘hipster fashion’. The remote and rural districts of Northeast Victoria are collectively called as Kelly country. And Kelly's final word ‘such is life’. World's first feature film was made after Ned Kelly as *The Story of Kelly Gang* in 1906. Historian Ian Jones suggests “bushranger stories still had an "indefinable appeal" for Australians in the early 20th century”. Ned Kelly, one of the most famous influential and historical figures who remain all- pervasive in Australian culture. As an academician and folklorist Graham Seal writes:

Ned Kelly has progressed from outlaw to national hero in a century and to international icon in a further 20 years. The still-enigmatic, slightly saturnine and ever-ambivalent bushranger is the undisputed, if not universally admired, the national symbol of Australia.

True History of the Kelly Gang is not only a historical novel but also a fair imagined historical impersonation. The presentation and the language used by Peter Carey are more powerful and impactful. Kelly's prose contains many grammatical errors and frequently employed abbreviations, nineteenth-century Irish vernacular, and archaic diction. As he reveals in these lines: “My mother knew I were no traitor but she were alone of all her sisters except the guilty Kate Llyod and of course it were Kate with husband Jack who had most reason to spread this slander so wholeheartedly. Soon all my aunts and uncles hated me but Uncle Jimmy Quinn and Uncle Pat Quinn was easily the most upset they insisted I should be flogged” (Carey181).

In conclusion, this novel encompasses a range of cultural, historical and mythological reflections. This paper has so far attempted to depict and describe the life of Ned Kelly, an Australian bushranger how his life changed from a notorious bushranger to a human being, and people called him as the national hero. The novel is set in the backdrop of politics, history, and myth pertaining from Irish to Australia (mostly in Australia). The projection of Ned Kelly as a patriotic and human being is an essentially linked to the politics and injustice of his country. Carey brings out history and myth together in the novel to reconstruct and reconceptualise the underlying ideological structures that are based on Australian belief. He proposes to draw a real and lively view of the society by bringing the images of Ned's family poverty and at that time poverty was prevailing and dominating the society. Thus *True History of the Kelly Gang* is a novel which accounts Kelly's life from impoverished

childhood to inevitable capture and execution. Kelly's story centres on the unfairness and corruption of the nineteenth-century Australian legal system, and the discrimination against the poor and the Irish. Throughout the novel, Ned's motivations are for justice, family, and a place to live. Kelly dies as a hero and human being to the people of the north-eastern Victoria, with the legend of his life left- grow over time. Therefore, Carey tries to reposition Kelly at the forefront of the Australian pantheon of hero and created a character that fights for justice and equality and dies as a human being.

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