

ABORIGINAL MOTHERS AND THE CHALLENGE OF SURVIVAL IN RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI'S NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Article I of the Charter on International Human Rights states one of the fundamental aims of the United Nations that is to achieve international co-operation in 'promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedom for all without distinction to race, sex, language or religion' thus strengthening the issue principle of non-discrimination. Discrimination, however has existed in the nooks and corners of every society, thereby denying the fundamental right of human beings to be treated equality. Narratives of pain and suffering have always indicated towards a story of discrimination applicable somewhere and have led to the victimization of the same. Aboriginal narratives from Australia have a similar story to tell and in doing so they have accounted how much of discrimination that have encountered on daily basis to have lead a life of pain. The stolen generation women narrate their experiences with a greater intensity in the experiences of pain as they were discriminated for their gender. For women of colour the discrimination doubles in frequency as their lack as women is magnified. This article will explore intolerance for women of color in an assimilated society which promises to provide them with equal opportunities as the whites. This article will further explore the failure in the concept of Multiculturalism in an assimilated society as the basic principles of human rights get violated in context of aboriginal women. Ruby Langford Ginibi, an Australian stolen generation author and survivor has expressed her disappointment at the assimilated society failure in accommodating her not only as a woman but as a black woman. Her narratives will be scrutinized to find supportive arguments in this regard.

Keywords: multiculturalism, human rights violation, discrimination, aboriginal

Multiculturalism is the promise of an assimilated society and by reading the term itself one can infer a tolerance and respect of another community which is distinct from your own as well as an acceptance of the other for peaceful co-existence. Stolen generation in Australia were promised newer dreams and hopes as a compensation of their painful history of decades with an assimilated society where they would be welcomed into a new future. However, survivors like Ruby Langford Ginibi narrate the existence of an alternate reality to that of the promises of the assimilating society. Intolerance is the principle of the assimilating society and discrimination the modus operandi.

Ginibi, in her narratives has expressed her anger over the constant diminishing position that women of colour were forced to occupy even after the period of reconciliation. She also believed that when one was an aboriginal woman, she had to experience discrimination endowed through hierarchies of gender positioning. Color and gender together confine women from dreaming high, demanding more and finding equality for themselves. She pronounces the hypocrisy behind all the state institutions formed for the protection of aborigines but intending to marginalize all natives, especially the women. Her narratives give a panorama of the constant survival challenges that women of color encounter. In her narrative *My Bundjalung People* (1988) she highlights her disgust of the patronizing Australian assimilating society:

Can you imagine what it's for a Koori woman, raped and beaten, to have to go for help to the same organizations who stole her kids originally and the same lot who killed her brothers ... Whether she is drunk or not, they believe she is drunk. It's always the stereotypes a woman has to deal with before anything else, even before she can get help (Ginibi 50).

Ginibi belonged to the Koori tribe in Australia who stayed in and out of Bush all through their lives. Ginibi and many single mothers like her were the victims of the state policies and were constantly kept in vigilance for decades as they were aborigines. Ginibi was herself a stolen¹ kid and had also witnessed the promises of reconciliation. As Koori (her tribe) and a woman in the assimilating Australian society she has led a lifetime of punishment for being what she was, a black woman and a single mother. Ginibi's voice of dissent and her resistance was not only voiced in her activism for aboriginal rights but also forms the core themes in her narratives where she detests and vehemently criticizes the stereotyping of native women. Focusing on the Koori community she narrates her anger for the injustice inflicted on all indigenous women who were victims of colonial racism and sexism simultaneously. The double oppression of these women through the various state policies and organizations was what Ginibi identified in her own condition as well. Her book *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is the identification of the oppression in the various state authorities and institutions.

The policy of assimilation ensured that once the mixed-race aborigine had adopted and adapted himself to the white ways, he is no longer able to go back to his aboriginal connections. In accordance with this aim the mixed-race Aborigines were not allowed to associate with people from outside the mission, even though they were their relatives. By doing so the government wanted to ensure the Aborigines are not contaminated by tribal connections. If they associate with their people then they could again start the rituals and practices of aboriginal life which whites used to consider as uncivilized. This was part of the civilizing mission which worked on

¹ Stolen refers to the mixed race children from Australian colonies who were considered government wards under the colonial Protection Laws made for the Aborigines. These laws were intended at depriving their black mothers/ parents of all rights over them.

the assumption that the elimination of Aboriginality from the mixed race identity was essential in making them part of the white society. Aborigines were not allowed to have visitors under this Act:

It shall not be lawful for any person other than an aboriginal to enter or remain, or to be within the boundaries of a reserve for any purpose, whatsoever, unless he is a superintendent or a person acting under his direction, or a person authorized in that behalf (Aborigines Protection Act, 1905).

The policy of Assimilation was curated in such a manner that aborigines were accepted only on the paper on the physical space. Beyond that territory assimilation called for losing the aboriginal identity and connections, forgetting the aboriginal mother tongue and speaking English alone and living like a white-washed aborigine.

The policy of assimilation which enforced separatism from aboriginal identity, instrumented in the loss of a lot of aboriginal culture. Mixed-race aborigines had little or no connection with the traditional dance and songs. Every tribal community had its own songs and dances for different occasions. Most of the tribal dance form dies within the community as it could not be passed to the next generation.

John Moriarty, another stolen kid in his narrative *Saltwater Fella* (2000) had strongly felt about his Aboriginal identity. He wanted to upkeep his heritage and culture and that is the reason he is so much against the assimilation of Aborigines. He feels that assimilation had resulted in a loss of the Aboriginal cultural rituals, the dances and the songs and also weakened the people's connection with their sacred land. He says that it is not possible to 'resurrect some of those lost songs and ceremonies, but what you can do is give those people an identity that will allow them to stand with their heads held high and not be seen as inferior' (Moriarty 177). Mission raised aborigines are mostly unaware of the song and dance culture of their communities as the only culture they have been exposed to is the European culture. Most of the mixed race aborigines connect with European music and dance better than the aboriginal practices. The death of aboriginal dance and song within the aborigine was also the death of a part of their aboriginal identity.

Mixed race aborigines were not allowed to practice their traditional rituals even at home as they were considered white officially. The only change came with self-determination where people were allowed to keep their cultural practices at home and learn the European ways to sustain in the world. "It allowed people in the outback areas both to be themselves and to integrate into society-to learn the culture from the elders, but also to go to school to learn about the white system and how to cope with the future in modern economic system" (Moriarty, 188).

The policy of Assimilation was crouched on the principle of segregation which Ruby Langford Ginibi condemns in her autobiographical writing *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. The aim of assimilation was a form of cultural genocide which conspired the deprivation of Aborigines from their cultural roots and community life which the whites saw as a threat to their policies. Assimilation policy fostered loneliness among the Aboriginals who preferred to lead community lives.

But it got that way that after a while that I was dying to see another black face like mine, someone to pass the time of the day and yarn with, and if some relatives showed up for an occasional visit, when you went out to welcome them you could see your neighbors' curtains move and many eyes upon you. After a

while I felt guilty about having visitors. I wondered who'd dobbing me in to the commission if the visitors stayed overnight (*Don't Take Your Love to Town* 176).

The assimilation policy was not like the integration policy which accepted people of any nationality, race and colour to retain their cultural identity. Assimilation demanded that in order to be Australian one had to shed off his/her unique cultural identity and get the unique European-Australian identity. They didn't spare the original inhabitants of the land from this policy. The aim was to remove the strain of any other identity from Australian consciousness including the color of the native population:

My family and I were to live in Sadlier Green Valley for about eight years. The government's policy of assimilation by absorption meant splitting up the Aboriginal communities, and I understand what this policy means as I had four daughters and only one married an Aboriginal. My grandchildren are blond and blue or hazel-eyed, and within two or three hundred years there won't be Aboriginals in suburbia. So as far as the government is concerned, assimilation by absorption is working well, and in the end there will be no Aboriginal problem whatever. (*Don't Take Your Love to Town* 176).

The assimilation policy did not work - Aboriginal people did not want to lose their traditional way of life and become white and British. The white community did not want to accept Aboriginal people into their society - racism was very much evident in Australia. Many people still thought like the early settlers - Aboriginal people were from an inferior race that was bound to die out.

Assimilation was another government policy that was presented as a measure 'for the good' of the Indigenous people, but became just another way of destroying Aboriginal culture. It was a faulty policy like many of the Aboriginal protection acts which intended to discriminate against the non-whites in Australia. In the beginning stages the Policy of Assimilation intended to merge all communities such as immigrants and indigenous people but later on functioned solely against Aborigines. They were forced to move into cities and adapt the lifestyle of the whites. They were lured with housing facilities, education for their kids and many more promises of equal rights. Ginibi is very disappointed once she discovers that the house given to her by government is to make her white, to deprive her of freedom in a more civilized but hypocritical way as she had to leave her Aboriginal identity to survive there. Her son is bullied by white kids for which he thinks of dropping his studies. It was a policy to absorb black into the white majority Australia so that black completely disappears. All blacks were not put together but were deprived of their community lives. This policy promoted isolation amongst the Aboriginals. Aboriginal kids also suffered isolation. The assimilation policies made towns similar to reserves and Ginibi feels that the only difference was that they saw very few of black people.

Where have all my people gone? Where our family clans gone! It felt like our tribal heritage had gone too. All the people's rules and laws gone! Our traditions gone! Our corroborees gone! Our warriors gone! Torn apart and lost in the white man's world of power, greed and gain! (*My Bundjalung People* 9).

This shows how Aboriginal people were haunted by the sense of loss. This irreparable loss caused due to prejudiced laws and policies, has completely devastated the Aboriginals by robbing them of everything and wiping out everything that they had. Our children were stolen away to be trained in servitude to the whites. Most Australians don't know a thing about what governments of the past have done to the Aboriginal people of the country. It was a social engineering to turn us into Europeans with black skins-that was the idea of the assimilationist

policies of the 1940's introduced by Paul Hasluck. It was also cultural genocide, the destruction of Aboriginal identity, and we have been fighting against the system ever since.

Still, people don't want to know about this shameful history or about what's happening in the present (*My Bundjalung People* 41).

This is the absorption of Aboriginality into the white Australia that Ginibi seems concerned about. Aboriginality which is the first and actual identity of Australia seems to be overpowered by the European whiteness. This is the whiteness that Aboriginality is fighting against for years so as to retain its Aboriginal individuality. Much of the white population seems to be unaware of this injustice done in the name of the Policy of Assimilation. This shameful neglect of history will build a baseless future.

We came in great drove to the big city to find work and try and build a future? What future? Well you might ask! We've been fighting the government's system for land rights for over two hundred years, though our cries have been falling on deaf ears. I wonder how long the oppressed people can take this kind of treatment without hitting back? I wonder! (*My Bundjalung People* 41).

Ginibi believes in hitting back, taking action against the white laws and in revenge. That is the reason she encourages her son Jeff to fight against the racist kids, once he resorts back, he is no longer troubled by them. She feels upset that she had to encourage her son to take up violence but convinces herself that it is the best way to protect oneself in the discriminatory world. "And the laws of this place are white man's laws. So are the rules that he devised to control all of us without any consideration to anyone else's laws and customs. Or concern for anyone else's idea of justice and fair play (*My Bundjalung People* 42).

Ginibi vehemently opposes the chauvinism in the white laws functional in Australia disregarding the Aboriginal people's interests. She questions the credibility of such a system which conspires against its own people by neglecting them in the decision making process. Justice of any kind for the Aboriginals is out of question in a self-centered system such as this. She questions not only the Policies but also the other Australians who have silently witnessed the sufferings and the marginalisation of Aborigines. Ginibi believes Aboriginals can come on par with the rest of the Australians when non-Aboriginals also understand the marginalisation that Aborigines have faced.

The stolen generation children could never full belong to the white patterns of living. The white society never accepted them nor gave them rights that were entitled to their white citizens. They could not go back to their aboriginal people as they were removed from there for long. These children had no place to go to. The spaces they acquired were the hybrid spaces which denied them most of the rights available to each group. They were lesser of each to be part of either. They were restricted but not represented, they were assimilated but not associated. The stolen generations, owing to their hybrid identity acquired a hybrid spaces which never gave them either custody or freedom. They had the spaces but not a place of their own. As Rita Huggins rightly puts it:

We were once the proud custodians of our land and now our way of life became controlled by insensitive people who knew nothing about us but thought they knew everything. They even chose how and where we could live. We had to stay in one place while the whiteman could roam free. (Huggins, 12).

Stories of pain and suffering have always been told, motherhood and challenges has been the focal point in many narratives by women, but the experience of the women of color is more

intense, more terrifying and the challenges posed are nerve-wrecking. Aboriginal mothers, who were mostly single mothers have found the additional threat of their children getting abducted by the government. The colonial government threatened the lives of aborigines with their constant and unwanted intrusion into the aboriginal lives. This constant threat becomes the voice in their narratives where they express their resistance, their deepest fears and their inability to cope with the loss endowed by the very laws that promised their protection.

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