

## LEGALIZING GENOCIDE: A SELECT STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

**Soumya Sangita Sahoo**

Ph.d Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
The English and Foreign Languages University,  
Hyderabad, India.

### **Abstract**

Australia is one of those first world countries with third world conditions within it, making it a fourth world nation. Colonization of Australia imported both the European criminals as well as the judiciary system from the mother land to its foster land. In the absence of any written code of law Australia was declared “terra nullius”. Which meant that the land which has not yet come into possession and thereby establishing European flag on its shores. For the Europeans this not only enforced their rule on the land but also on the aborigines. Since colonization aborigines have been subjected to discrimination of various kinds. Women being the subaltern and doubly marginalized (to use Spivak’s terms) had to suffer the most. Australian aboriginal autobiographies written by women have recorded not only the suffering of the aboriginal women but also have held the various laws and policies to be faulty and discriminatory. The aim of the paper is to locate the discrimination and violence carried on women through the various laws and policies of the government as depicted in the select autobiographies. The paper further intends to find the paradoxical nature of its protection policies as depicted in the chosen texts.

**Keywords:-** Australia, aborigines, marginalization, discrimination, protection policies

The paper analyses three aboriginal life writings written by stolen generation<sup>1</sup> women in Australia. The paper intends to read the colonial politics of apprenticing mixed-race<sup>2</sup> children and the capitalistic endeavor of the colonial expansion. For the investigation of the same the colonial Protection Policies<sup>3</sup> in Australia are read parallel to the texts. This paper addresses several questions such as what were the Protection policies and why were they implemented into aboriginal lives? Who were the stolen generation and how the women of these generation were the victims of the colonial legal machinery? How does the condition of Australian Aboriginal women exhibit surprisingly unique history of colonial oppression as meted out through these policies? These questions form the core interest of this paper. As suggested by the title of this paper the genocidal nature of Australian colonization which affected the lives of Aboriginals and as I would like to emphasize, the lives of aboriginal women so specifically, through the narratives by them, is specifically dealt with.

Australia witnessed a unique history of European colonization, where it rescued the overpopulated Industrial Europe since the early nineteenth century. The deported Europeans comprised of mainly two groups of people- the first being the criminals and the other being the jail authorities. The criminals who were transported were never to be returned to their mother land(as fictionalized in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*).The main objective was to restore the purity of Europe by transporting its criminal population to Australia which by them was not affected by the process of colonization. This initial transportation carried the dichotomous binary relations of the superior and inferior to the newly colonized land. This was to install forever on the land a relation where the white Europeans will occupy the authoritarian position of the dominant and the natives will have to occupy the powerless position of the dominated.

At the time of colonization the colonizers declared the land “terra nullius”, which meant the land which has not yet come into possession, thereby disregarding the native inhabitation of the land for almost forty thousand years. *Terra Nullius* was the first of the European laws and the absence of a comprehensible and written code of law among aborigines led to the further imposition of many such European laws on them. This imposition was validated by the Enlightenment mission taken up by the Europeans which emphasized the White Man's burden of civilizing the ‘noble savage’. This self-imposed responsibility of the European government prevalent in Australia was carried forward in the form of the various protection policies passed by the government to protect and civilize the aborigines.

The various protection policies in colonial Australia encouraged the ideological and coercive assimilation<sup>4</sup> of its ever increasing mixed-race population. At the heart of the policy was the threat that the increasing rate of the mixed race population might just overtake the

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<sup>1</sup> Stolen Generation refers to the Australian aboriginals of mixed-race(having blood of the white and the aboriginal race) who were removed from their families under the various Aborigines Protection Act by the colonial government.

<sup>2</sup> Mixed-race refers to the children born due to the colonial miscegenation i.e. the children who had both white and native blood.

<sup>3</sup> Protection Policies or the Aboriginal Protection Acts were the various colonial endeavors to protect the aborigines in Australia who were found to be ‘a dying race’ then. Aboriginal Australia witnessed the highest aboriginal mortality. These Acts and Policies intended to preserve the aborigines.

<sup>4</sup> The Policy of Assimilation encouraged all aborigines and part-aborigines to be part of the common Australian identity and acquire the same manner of living and enjoy the same rights and privileges as the other Australians. The discouraged the propagation and practice of any individual customs and traditions which were not part of the Australian identity.

existing white majority. Cecil Cook, the Chief Protector of Northern Territory, speaks of his fear, “unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black”. The ‘aboriginal problem’, as it was addressed by the Whites then, was becoming a national problem thereby creating administrative and ideological problems in the effective governance.

Assimilation was seen as the most appropriate solution to the entire Aboriginal problem. Studies show that colonial Australia witnessed the highest rate of aboriginal mortality due to diseases, unhygienic living conditions and others. The colonial government through its various policies, especially the Protection Policies, pledged to preserve the so-called “dying race”. The protection policies took away the rights of the aborigines to regulate their lives, natives, especially the mixed-race, were made the official wards of the state. The most prominent protection policies were the Aborigines Protection Act 1897, 1905 and 1909 which will be discussed in this paper.

These three Acts are utilized and critiqued by many aborigines in their narratives depicting colonial oppression. These protection policies and acts legalized the removal of the aboriginal children of mixed race into government orphanages called Homes<sup>5</sup>. The colonial intervention in Australia led to the birth of a hybrid race of children owing to the miscegenation<sup>6</sup> between the white men and aboriginal women. These hybrid race of children, as they were referred to, were wanted by both the races due to their racial admixture, they were officially wanted by the whites as it was believed that the percentage of white blood in them makes them racially and intellectually superior to the fully black natives (this assumption was the root cause of the mass genocidal removal of mixed-race aboriginal children from their natural native surroundings). There are several definitions of genocide, but this paper utilizes the concept of ‘the forceful transfer of the children of one group to another’, in this case the stolen generation.

These mixed-race children who were removed in accordance with the protection and preservation criteria (preservation criteria needs special mention because aborigines have been categorized in the flora and fauna species) in the Protection Acts, were called the stolen generation. The term stolen generation was first used by historian Peter Read for his magazine *The Stolen Generation* (1981). They were the stolen race as they were removed from their native surroundings in the pretext of providing them education and better living conditions, none of which they actually received. On the other hand they were made vulnerable to harsh living conditions first in the dormitory and missions and later at the service of white authorities, they were rather made to lead depriving lives. They were subjected to physical discomforts, economic deprivation, unhealthy and scanty food provisions and harsh punishments. They were used as cheap source of labor and were apprenticed to white families at an early age. Their movements were restricted; they were confined to government made missions and stations. A part of their identity that is the Aboriginal identity was denied to them and they were made to believe that they are whites meant to serve the other whites. They no longer belonged to the Aboriginal community, they belonged to the white government, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, the foster

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<sup>5</sup> Homes in this context refer to orphanages run by the White Australian government in accordance with the various Aboriginal Protection Acts. They not only sheltered the aboriginal children but also looked after their education.

<sup>6</sup> *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* defines miscegenation as the sexual union between two races especially the whites with the Negros.

families, the White employers, the Station masters, everyone, but their aboriginal families. Stolen generation females faced more vulnerable situations due to the sexual exploitation they encountered while at the dormitories, or at the missions/stations and also at the work place in white households.

The contradictory nature of the protection policies was beyond comprehension as, firstly, they claimed to protect children by removing from their natural surroundings. Secondly, they claimed to provide them with education when schooling was nothing more than a training to enhance their skills as a laborer and nothing more. As a result their years of schooling taught them, what they called three R's- reading, writing, arithmetic, with that spoken English and knowledge of the Bible-which was believed to be instrumental in civilizing the aborigines. The aim and ambitions of colonial employment of the natives have been the theme of discussion in several of the aboriginal narratives. For this paper I have tried to incorporate three narratives written by aboriginal stolen generation women to substantiate for the complexity and politics of colonial apprenticeship especially in the case of women.

As already discussed European education didn't contribute to the academic growth of the aboriginal children, rather it pushed them further away from their traditions and customs as well. The education was in no way made to help them face the world, rather tried to fit them in the lower rungs of the European society. In addition to three R's the girls were taught 'European etiquette' so that they didn't cause trouble to the white families which hired them. They were given lessons on morality, chastity for girls, principles of non-stealing, hygiene and cleanliness and many more. Special tips were given on house-keeping and they were trained in sewing and cooking. Their natural talents like singing, dancing and painting were never nurtured only their culinary skills. The focus was providing training and not actually educating for improving life conditions.

Article no 11 of the Aborigines Protection Act, 1909 emphasizes the employment of every neglected child and refers to it as suitable to the interest and benefit of the child. It gives the Aborigines Board the full authority over the wages earned by the child and it further says, "every child so apprenticed shall be under the supervision of the board. Any such child so apprenticed shall be liable to be proceeded against and punished for absconding, or for other misconduct, in the same way as any child apprenticed by his father with such child's consent. (Aborigines Protection Act, 1909).

According to this act none of the half-caste Aborigines had any say in getting apprenticed by the Aborigines Board. The act never talked about the rights of the employee rather emphasized his/her duties. Many children employed as such have been reported to have run away, inspite of it being a punishable offense. The most contradictory element is one hand when it legalized child-labor at the other they deemed it as an act beneficiary to the child as would have been thought by any father. It was very pathetic that no father will try to apprentice his child to inhuman treatment at the age of fourteen.

Rita Huggins in her autobiography *Auntie Rita* describes her feelings of being removed from her family, "we were like spare parts for cars, things to be used when needed, replaced when necessary"(Huggins,36). Half-caste aboriginal girls were mostly apprenticed as domestic helps to white households. Rita Huggins was given the job of a nanny to look after the children in a white household. She remarks, "we were always given the children to look after, bath them, change and wash nappies, but were not allowed to discipline them in any way"( Huggins, 37). Any form of authority was denied to the apprenticed aboriginal girls. At the age of fourteen they were not only entrusted with a lot of responsibility but at the same time expected to behave as

adults. Rita Huggins was full of remorse for all the Aboriginal children as well as for herself whose childhood and innocence was snatched away from them. “White folks had the God-given right that we would work for them and the experience of years spent in that servitude took away a lot of our childhood and adolescence: playing, knocking around with kids of our own age. We were made to act like grown-ups and to have responsibilities before our time. Child slave labor in many ways”( Huggins, 38).

Most of the Aborigines never received any wages other than food and clothing and those who received wages were very low. Food was always meager and was never enough for a growing up teen. Margaret Tucker in her auto biography *If Everyone Cared* mentions the denial of milk in her tea at the white house where she worked. She recounts her painful memory of wearing ‘hessian bags’ for clothes at one occasion and the masters discarded old pants at the other. The only time she remembers having boots on her feet was when her parents came visiting her. These children could not spend on anything as they had no wages for that expense.

The wages which they deserved was in most cases was withheld with the Aborigines Protection department and was never returned to them. “Alice was paid five shilling per week in Mr. Larson’s house and additional pocket money by Mrs. Larson. While at Mrs. Campbell she used to get two shillings a week. The pocket money she used to receive needs special mention because most of the Aborigines never get pocket-money however hardworking and honest they might be”( Nannup,93).

Many a times the meager wages those were given to the half-caste Aborigines were withheld as punishment. They had to compensate for breaking things or for talking back. Ruth Hegarthy’s in her autobiographical narrative *Is that you, Ruthie?* mentions the plight of paying for tickets to movies for herself as well for her mistress as a punishment for talking back to her mistress. Very soon she had no money to pay for necessary things like toiletries and notepads for writing letters. The mistress even never bought any clothes for her for which she used to receive coupons from the Native Affairs Department.

Apprenticed aborigines never had either the agency or the opportunity of complaining against anything done to them. The Native Welfare department never bothered to investigate the conditions under which the Aborigines might be surviving with their white masters. Again it was a matter of shame recounting the torture one went through at the white masters place. “One of the rules of being a dormitory girl was that you never complained loud, you accept your fate in silence”(Hegarthy,103). Once apprenticed these children were not allowed to keep any contact with their families or other Aborigines working with them. Many of the aboriginal girls who were already young mothers had to leave their children at the dormitories and the government ensured that they paid the upkeep charges. Most of the Aborigines were not allowed any holidays either. The Aborigines protection Act 1905 clearly stated that the every apprenticed child was liable to leave or absence from work only for a stipulated period of time.

The houses where Aboriginal children were apprenticed were referred as situations, the reason might be that they were left vulnerable to varied situations at the working place. Girls were more vulnerable as they could be assaulted in the houses they worked for. Young girls even came back pregnant to the dormitories from their working place, most of them maintaining silence on that aspect of their lives.

The aboriginal apprenticeship in colonial Australia was embedded in the chief colonial motive of generating cheap and viable labor. The legalization of child labor in the guise of child and aboriginal protection served no purpose other than breaking aboriginal families. Protection was limited to the clauses and sections of the law books. They were no doubt separated from

their families, they lost their friends in the dormitory. They were given responsibilities which were too severe for the young fourteen years kids. In addition to all that they were not paid wages, not allowed to study further, made to work like machines. They were worst fed and given old and discarded clothes to wear. They were separated from their children. The jobs were in no way self-fulfilling and demeaned the status of the Aborigines even further.

I conclude this paper with the observation that the colonial protection policies with its faulty clauses made sure that aborigines are trained but are neither educated nor made capable of finding jobs worthy of their talents. The European education system and the Protection policies with the employment clauses there in conspired and worked in coalition to keep half-caste aborigines in the lowest rungs of the white society. The girls belonging to the stolen generation, thereby, occupied the most discriminated and vulnerable position in Australian colonial society. Their aboriginal identity in the European colony along with the less privileged gender position made them the triply marginalized section of colonial Australia.

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