

ARTICULATING TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL OF STOLEN GENERATIONS IN SELECT ABORIGINAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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One of the darkest periods of Australian colonial history is the forced removal of Aboriginal women, and children from their families. The term ‘Stolen Generations’ was used for the first time by Peter Read in 1981, which refers to all those children who were compulsorily taken away from Aboriginal parents under the so called colonial ‘Protectionist Acts’, to mix them completely into the white communities and culture, under the assimilation policy. These acts caused the stolen generations immense pain of being uprooted from their families. During the colonial era the Aboriginal women and girls largely became victims of settlers’ gaze, the life stories of older Aboriginal women “illuminate much about what it was like to live in earlier days and how people experienced the world they knew”(Huggins 10)¹, and they bring to light this ugly facet of colonizers’ abuse of the native girls and women. With the narratives of autobiography, biography and diary “erased and marginalized human step out of the zone of silence into speaking”(K Singh 53)². Today, the contemporary society of Australia comprises white settlers, Aboriginal people, and diverse ethnic communities. The multicultural policy of colonizers in Australia directly influenced the life and culture of indigenous population: “The adoption of multicultural policy represents a significant departure of immigration policies that have embraced a homogenous “Anglo-ethnocentric” culture, to the exclusion and undermining of Australia’s Aboriginal and minority cultures”(Patra 68)³.

The Aboriginal autobiographies inform the newer generation how the self of Aboriginal people suffered under white rule and “this trauma of suffering and deprivation is cross-generational and reflected in the taking of children from families...”(Bansal 71)⁴. These autobiographies particularly strive to convey a certain message of truth that “till about two hundred and twenty five years ago, the island continent was the home to mainly the Aboriginals”(Dulta 92)⁵, and Australia was not a multicultural nation. Recently, Aboriginal autobiographies have become an effective supplement to the ancient oral tradition as Aborigines have their own scripture and history. Jackie Huggines asserts: “Aboriginal studies are now concerned with the transformation of an oral literature into written literature...”(Huggines 10)⁶. All autobiographies revisit the past, generally the colonial era, and contribute to re-write the history of generations that witnessed colonialism, history has “the power to revivify the wasted self-esteem...” (Boehmer116)⁷. The Aboriginal people “share their agony and predicament as they are caught between two worlds”(Kanwar 106)⁸, and these people are facing deep identity crisis. They have still not been integrated in the main stream society and show their own kinship and family structures which bind them together in all parts of contemporary societies of Australia. They share stories of earlier alienation, elimination and extermination, what divided them between two cultures, Chinua Achebe asserts in this context: “stories define us”(Boehmer 5)⁹. The inquires of Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, in 1997,

found that the Aboriginal women, children and their families were actively discouraged from contacting each other. Stolen children, in the missions, were taught to feel contempt for their own communities. The Bulletin, in 1880, reported on the situation in Queensland: "...there is wholesale massacre of human beings violation of woman. [I have] seen the brain of an infant dashed out against a tree after the mother had been murdered...left for the crows". (Edward194)¹⁰.

The present paper takes into account the pathetic narratives of stolen generations to discuss the trauma of inhuman treatment of women and children under colonial rule in Australia and how the survivors are living in Australia. It will also highlight the richness of their culture and spirituality in Winnie Larsen's *The Dusty Road* (2005), and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988).

Repression of Stolen Generations in Colonial Australia

The Dusty Road by Winnie Larsen largely exposes the dispossession and displacement of Aboriginals in colonial Australia, where the stolen generations and native families were treated as aliens in their own country without citizenship rights under White Australian Policy. Larsen shares the ups and downs of her life story and "One's life story is one's spiritual backbone" (*Friend* 24)¹¹. Her Noongar family worked hard in the farms for survival and they "were very poor people at this time" (15). The early life of Larsen's grandfather is full of struggle and suffering "who was a convict... transported from Ireland in 1863...worked at Jerramungup farm for 40 years (7). The poverty of the Indigenous people has been discussed by many Aboriginal writers in their life stories. This poverty, however, was not hereditary but was owing to the gap created by the colonizers after settlements. Her mother's hard work and struggle for survival "would put young people to shame" (14). Larsen describes the struggle and suffering of her mother who is emotional and carefully nurtures, looks after and guides her children. Larsen's family was constantly troubled by the British colonial forces in the camps and on the farm. Her life was not stable and rich at the farm, the whole family used to be transferred place to place. The settlers usurped the land of the Aboriginals under the doctrine *terra nullius* and ignored the claims of the natives. It caused the dislocation of Aborigines and they were exploited like servants, underpaid employees. Larsen highlights this issue, she demands her Aboriginals' rights taken by the white administration: "I was only wanting the citizens rights so that I could gain back the rights that white people had taken from us" (81). Larsen raises the issues of harassment, molestation and sexual exploitation of girls and women in colonial Australia. Colonizers used the Aboriginal women and girls for labor and sexual pleasure. They made women dependent or trapped them in domestic house work where they were largely exploited. Larsen's mother is very conscious about the safety of her daughters, she does not want to see her daughters in the hands of white people, she boldly brings up her children and advises them not to walk openly in the dark. Winnie Larsen describes the episode which reveals the fear of children: "We never knew why the government officials were coming... we would see the dust of the motor car coming on the dirt road...we run into the bush to hide until they theft" (43). The Aboriginal Act of 1905 had other controlling effects on the lives of the Aboriginal people. It also controlled employment of Aboriginals. Aboriginal women were sent out from the mission into 'service' and often became pregnant by white men. This kind of assimilation influenced the Aboriginal race, Jackie Huggines states: "Around the age of thirteen to fourteen years girls went to serve their apprenticeship as 'worthy housekeepers'. It was routine for girls to be placed in servitude as domestic servants by certain persons in authority (*Huggines* 15)¹². Larsen's three

aunties experienced the white's ill-treatment. They took them forcibly from the house. The evil deeds of the white administration appear once again in the chapter "Sister Marjory" where Larsen says, "The things that had been done to our people were terrible" (56), her aunty tells about three other young aunties who had been taken away forcibly by the white government people. Their grandmother, "ran into the sea crying and calling for the ship to stop" (56) but "the ship disappears with her three daughters on board" (56). Larsen severely attacks the colonial oppression, in Australia, which was against the dignity of Aboriginal women. Colonizers largely controlled the life of stolen women. She was deprived of basic education and right to freedom, her life was full of poverty and struggle. She was badly marginalized and exploited in the name of race, color and gender. Larsen brings out the fact in her autobiography that the Aboriginal women of stolen generation are not treated as human beings in missions, camps and domestic sphere of life, she says, "No white person heard the cry or felt the pain of what they made our people feel" (56) and "Pain like happiness has an infectious nature and it assumes many faces... (Sharma 119)¹³. Larsen paints the colonial hospital as a place of torture, which is beyond the reach of poor natives. During her illness, she was left alone in the dark ward of the hospital, especially constructed for the natives. She asserts: "The treatment at this hospital was just a continuation of aspro and keeping me warm. I remember being very frightened at night...I didn't improve" (48). She had several unpleasant experiences before reaching the hospital as no transport facility was provided to native patients. There were sleeper carriages with seats and beds, but Larsen found those were "for the white people only" (60). Only Indigenous people "with a Citizen's Rights or Exemption cards could use the sleepers" (60). The author draws the town as a villain when Larsen's family is transported to town, Larsen found many warning signs on different places alerting the Indigenous that "Natives Not Allowed"(14). The town has its own rules, power structures, racial considerations which all natives are expected to follow. The small children faced an alien World which made a big difference between bush life and town life and "No Natives Allowed" policy was followed strictly in Gnowangerup" (51). Aboriginal children faced racial discrimination when Larsen, her sisters and cousin wanted to swim in the Pool, the caretaker prevented them and warned "natives were not allowed" (52) near the area of Swimming Pool. The town that feeds on racism is like a parasite that subsumes the concerns of the Aborigines. All these children "felt embarrassed and hurt" (52) and Larsen adds "because we were a different colour we were not allowed the same privileges of the white people" (52). Children could not feel free in the town as they used to feel under bush life. They do not want to live in a world where racism dominates humanism, they remember the life of bush at Onegin. In the chapter, Dudinn, when Larsen decided to go to the reserve to pick her daughter Jannie, the police pulled up her and warned: "You can't go in there cause it's six months in jail for going in there. You got to come back and get a permit then you can pick your daughter up" (80). Larsen depicts in her autobiography that the colonizers brought disaster to the recourses of the Aboriginals land. The natural beauty of the bush, which used to endow spiritual strength to natives have no subsistence in contemporary Australia. The land, which preserved their culture and tradition from the dream time, has been lost to the white people and this is only their Aboriginal consciousness which keeps them alive and united for the struggle against all types of discrimination and motivates them to assert their Aboriginal identity. The Half-Caste Act of 1886 empowered the Whites to remove Aboriginal women and girls of mixed descent, known as 'half-caste' from the Aboriginal stations, the half-caste women and girls were not allowed to mix with the native people. Larsen recalls in her autobiography, "Mum was not allowed to mix with her own people" (42). Larsen's mother married to a quadroon caste man "who classed as

white”(73) and her mother “was a half –caste”(42), so she also owned The Citizen Rights Card, and “this card exempted her from the Native Welfare Act” (74). Larsen expresses her grief: “Citizens rights didn’t change the blood in her veins-she was still a Noongar” (74).

On the other hand, in her autobiography, *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, similar trauma is faced by Ruby Langford. As a stolen child, she suffers throughout her life to search for her Aboriginal heritage and identity. Her life, being an Aboriginal woman, is directly affected by the political, historical, social and economical policies of colonial authority. She narrates the story of her life and “telling one’s story creates a space for oneself”(Pandirajan 170)¹⁴, and by standing up to tell her story, Ruby Langford, too has carved this unique personal space. She shares the experience that her life has been permanently stuck between two edges in colonial Australia and her children also faced the same fate: “I was always in the thick of the city or at the edges of the country towns in missions and camps, there was no in between” (104). She not only deals with the demands of White society, which was her economical surviving place, but also “being moved about by other people’s needs” (105). Ruby, being alone, shows her intense desire to have “a belonging place” for herself and children so she roams about from place to place in search for shelter and work to feed her children. In her life, Ruby experiences difficulties of finding that “belonging place” as she could not occupy a proper place in city and bush life which had extreme cultural difference beyond her reach. The bush and city clearly stand for two cultures for Ruby which represent Aboriginal traditions and Western ways, respectively. When Ruby moves to Sydney, she is asked by a woman, where she came from, and Ruby’s answer is from the ‘bush. Ruby does not feel ashamed of her rural origin and Aboriginality. Her bush name and identity had been snatched in the city under colonialism, what she explains: “You can think of me as Ruby Wagtail Big Nose Anderson Rangitangi Heifer Andy Langford. How I got to be Ruby Langford. Originally from Bandjalung people” (2). This was the colonial policy that white people changed the names of stolen children and gave them white names so that they could assimilate them in White world, which shattered the life of these innocent children. The author discusses the issue of silence regarding women’s life: “Nothing about women’s matters ever got mentioned, even between the women” (23). It is quite evident in Ruby’s life that she herself fulfilled the responsibilities of children. Here, she criticizes the white man and his running away from the responsibilities of family. She raises her voice against the violence and wild behavior of white man as well as the treatment of Aboriginal women, she describes the value of unity to her children. She educates her children according to her own traditional ways: “My children were always brought up to be close... I taught them a long time ago that ‘united we stand, divided we fall...the advice has come in handy on many occasions” (175) Story telling is right at the heart of the aboriginal culture...It is also vital in educating about life.(*qtd. in Pandirajan* 173)¹⁵.

Ruby has to play so many roles in her different lifestyles which caused an internal conflict in her heart to identify herself. Her first child was born when she was only seventeen, she had to grow up very quickly and adapt to the responsibilities of a mother at a very young age. Secondly, she still identified as a child. She also played the role of an educator. She asserts: “Sometimes I felt like a mother and other times ...I was the kid’s big sister, still a kid myself and playing with them for the day, waiting for the real mother to come and take charge of us all. And the real mother was me” (84). She thinks about her life which is without personal freedom, she introspects herself and reaches at the result that she could not become the person she wanted to be, she is only limited to a life. She thinks that: “I was a big woman but I felt very small” (202). A life between the city and the bush caused a disruption in Ruby’s identity. Ruby often stays with her relatives and maintains a close relationship with her kin, but she finds it impossible to

keep and run a complex system of distant relations together since she was constantly on the move from place to place:

“I felt like I was living tribal but with no tribe around me, no close-knit family. The food-gathering, the laws and songs were broken up, and my generation at this time wandered around as if we were tribal but in fact living worse than the poorest of the poor whites...” (96).

When Ruby visits her ancestral place, Bribie Island, she feels proud to belong to her Aboriginal race. She enjoys the natural beauty and greatness of bush life, it expresses her immense reverence for the lost ancestors and cultural roots. Here, Ruby is made aware that Aboriginal people still living in their tribal ways would not be able to cope with city life: “It was very hard on both sides and for our survival we had to be strong both mentally as well as physically” (235). Ginibi feels upset that her son couldn’t have judgment to dealing with problems in constructive ways due to the consequence of assimilation policies as the son says: “They still won’t listen, Mum” (263). The Statements such as: “I went to see Nob in the cells and he had two black eyes.” (182), means Nobby has been beaten by the police and that this behavior of police is a colonial history.

Proud Survivors:

The Indigenous Australians subsisted a spiritual life harmoniously in the lap of nature before the arrival of White people. These nomadic communities of oral cultures maintained a spiritual and physical link with their land since The Dreaming. The physical contact with the sacred objects of nature furnished them unselfishness, courage, strength and vitality. The land and the people were bound together by unique traditional concepts of spirituality. People derived their spiritual essence from ecology, bush songs, rituals, landscapes, animals, birds, tribal-dance, arts and story-telling tradition, ancestral spirit beings, which inhabited the whole land. All the parts of the nature provided them a profound pattern of life. This realm of spiritual existence is not detached from the contemporary world of survived Indigenous people but is entrenched in it. According to Aboriginal view man and non-human world is originated from ‘Mother Nature’ since the Dreaming, a phenomena that took place some fifty thousand years ago. It was their understanding of space and ability to establish a place in nature that in the course of life they received unique spiritual powers and rhythm to establish own religious pattern and beliefs. They believed in the existence of God and the power of spirits in all spheres of life and nature. In her autobiography *The Dusty Road*, Ruby has a deep reverence and spirituality which echoes in her narratives: “I knew the house was full of spirits... we used to hear the gate click shut, and footsteps on the veranda and down the hall. ... it was our home and they looked after us” (63). The Aboriginals realized that the spirits of their ancestors were living around them to bless and look after them, so their spirituality originated naturally and spontaneously. “The aboriginal belief that dead ancestors are present amidst the living and on a constant source of guidance” (*Pandirajan*175)¹⁶. Ruby’s culture extended her strength and courage to demonstrate her actual roots in city like Nora, the first Aboriginal athlete of Australia, who narrates: “I draw inspiration from culture” (*Pandirajan*175)¹⁷. In the autobiography *My Place* Arthur Corna also proves the Aboriginal belief in God and narrates: “God is the only friend... father...son and the holy spirit...(*Morgan* 210)¹⁸. The Aboriginal considered the creation of river, rocks, trees, fire, stars, animals etc. are infinitely diverged as the manifestation of nature on earth. The names of natural objects like trees, birds and animals etc. are identical to the names of Aboriginal children. The tribal name ‘Ginibi’, which she adopted after her trip back to her home country,

meaning ‘Black Swan’, she confirms her Aboriginal identity. This kind of naming reinforced their attachment to the land and it developed a strong sense of brotherhood and affinity between the human and non-human world. When she was in the city and suffering with the cruel colonial policies, she feels a natural sense of bonding with her ancestral land, she makes several attempts to move back to her Aboriginal origin in bush: “My mind...always turned back to home” (83). The Aboriginal people were eco-friendly, they never exploited the land and nature beyond its capacity for renewal, so nature gifted them immense spiritual power to grow and lead a secure life. Nature has been a mother and the natural objects have always yielded food and livelihood to the Aborigines. A ‘Megiker’, in Aboriginal race, can mysteriously give the information of rain, as Aborigines had managed to source certain information from nature itself by way of their esoteric training. The Aboriginal’s religious philosophy is very effective, they believe in the supernatural power of God, who nurtures the creation of the earth. Men throws seeds on the earth and God nurture it with rain, sun and wind. It’s the power of God that grows the plants, trees, flowers, vegetation on the land. On the other hand, Winnie Larsen, in her autobiography *The Dusty Road*, presents the same belief in the sacred World of Aborigines. Aboriginal spirituality is natural and they have a firm belief and reverence towards God and they have a sacred view of all creation of this World. Each and every object of creation is the manifestation of God. For them the mother earth is a part of miracles produced by God. She asserts: “We kids had a bush life... there were lots of bush flowers, wild flowers..., birds and fresh water soaks... we believed in these things in a spiritual way(6). The author feels attachment and love with her land. She recalls the damaged water hole ‘Night Well’ which was a natural and spiritual pilgrimage for people and wild life, destroyed by the colonial rule, during World war : “I was devastated to see the water hole...mother earth”(40). The attachment of the Aboriginal to the land and culture has deep spiritual roots, which made them alive for years. Ruby’s culture and spirituality extended in her strength and courage to demonstrate her actual roots in city. Nova Peris, the first Aboriginal athlete of Australia, says: “I draw inspiration from culture” and this is the “aboriginal belief that dead ancestors are present... guides” (qtd. in *Pandiranjan* 175)¹⁹. This is the spirituality in their culture that all Aboriginal have sympathy for the oppressed people of the World and they are surviving under the blessings of ‘Mother Nature’, spirits of ancestors and the supreme power of the God despite the moments of hardships. “Our story is in the land... in those sacred places...The Dreaming Place” you cannot change, no matter you rich man, no matter you king. You cannot change it... (qtd in *Pandiranjan* 175)²⁰.

The two composite narratives of stolen generation becomes significant under the powerful mode of their memory in the genre of autobiographies, they reveal the truth that these women’s lives faced the brutal treatment of colonial polices, their private and public space were suppressed by settlers, the unfair laws, unjust and policies of the white people caused them immense suffering, torture and humiliation. The narratives employ a deep interrogative tone to undermine the wrongs done to the stolen generation; there is an emotional tone of separation, mourning, empathy and appeal for security in the multicultural society of Australia. It was a political, social and economical control which was used to oppress them, but their determination, protest and courage made them proud survivors. It is the spirituality of their culture which generated strength, courage and determination to face the indifferent circumstances. The Aboriginal people have spiritual outlook and profound reverence for land and respect for all humanity.

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