

## **Recurrence of Colonial Resonances in Australian Aboriginal Narratives**

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**Abstract:** *Every piece of writing effortlessly or assertively emphasizes the presence of a narrative pattern. Marginalized population in every society irrespective of their geographical location, ideological subscription and cultural identification seem to be victims of the discourse of discrimination of one kind or the other. Discrimination, a subjective tool, implements the subjugation and thereby making it a mode of operation in societies formed on hierarchisation of its population. Countries with colonial pasts in various landmarks on the globe narrativize their histories, mapping it against the yardstick of discrimination meted out to them in achieving Australian Whiteness. Australian aboriginal narratives utilize the recurring pattern of the dynamics of colonial white supremacy and aboriginal marginalization. These narratives present a conscious effort to study of race, class and whiteness to present their life stories, some fictionalized and others based on facts. These narratives have been centering around and emphasizing the genocidal nature of 'forceful transfer of its mixed-race population'. The paper utilizes the stolen generation predicament in understanding the dynamics of aboriginal narratives.*

**Keywords:** aborigines, narratives, recurrence, colonization, marginalization, hierarchy, hybrid, mixed-race.

Life narratives, especially Aboriginal<sup>1</sup>, indulge in a storytelling mode of narration not necessarily the clichéd ‘once upon a time’ pattern. There is the inadvertent attempt of many of Aboriginal narratives to enfold into the colonial issues of Aboriginal displacement and dislocation and the emerging consequences. Aborigines in their narratives, mostly refrain from indulging issues such as international political scenario, thereby limiting it to as a phenomenon of colonial aftermath. Australia unlike other postcolonial country is a settler colony, established with the aim of unburdening the overpopulated nineteenth century European nations. Aboriginal narratives indulge in the recurring theme of settler colonization. Since the time of colonial intervention Australian land provided and perpetuated the segregation of its population into two unequal binaries of the superior and the inferior. The white jail authorities, along with the imported juridical system from Europe had to occupy the position of the dominant and the criminals and the natives the inferior dominated. Aboriginal narratives seem to be dealing with the contradicting and contrasting encounters with whites in several spheres of their lives. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the first phase of aboriginal life in the bush, second parts leads to the circumstances of removal and the mission life, thereby leading to the third part which discusses the aboriginal life under colonial apprenticeship and the paper concludes with the fourth section in tracing the recurring resonances of colonial marginalization.

## I

### **The Discourse of the Stolen Generation**

Aboriginal writing, in this case the stolen generation<sup>2</sup>, follows certain pattern essential to them. The first pattern is the utilization of the backdrop of the colonization for the narrative. Most of the

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal in this paper includes only the native population of Australian decent within the Australian and Torres Strait Islanders. It extensively also includes the aborigines of mixed-race, i.e. the people having the racial connection to the native population from either of their parents. Australia, especially in the nineteenth century, had witnessed a great inflow of foreign population such as Chinese, Italian and Greek. Anyone having the racial admixture with these migrants groups, can also be deemed aboriginal owing to their native ancestry.

<sup>2</sup> Stolen Generation, the term was coined and popularized by historian Peter Read in his pamphlet *The Stolen Generation: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969* (1981). This paper published by the Department of Aboriginal affairs in Australia was among ‘the first attempts to document the devastation of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their parents’. This term then onwards is used to refer to any aboriginal

stolen generation narratives go around the colonial politics of the juridical system. These narratives depict in length the injustices incurred on them through various programs for the aboriginal people. The Aborigines Protection Board and the policies and acts are held genocidal towards the aborigines especially the mixed-race. The second pattern is seen in the depiction of Aboriginal lives in the life-writings/auto/biographies/collaborative life histories. This paper traces the narrative pattern employed by life writings by stolen generation aborigines

Stolen generation aborigines in their narratives, mostly, use the depiction of half-caste life into three divisions. The first part comprises of the early childhood of these children where they are situated with their aboriginal community in their traditional set up. In this phase they are seen to stay in close association with their mother, with or without the father. In many cases the fathers were white aboriginal station masters or white telegraph men. This phase where they live with their traditional families is seen as the most carefree phase of their life and it is in this phase that they are in close proximity to aboriginal bush life. Bush life which is about bush walks, bush tucker<sup>3</sup> and about *Dreamtime*<sup>4</sup>. This phase is responsible for their lifelong dedication to the spiritual connection to their totems<sup>5</sup> and land. Land is considered sacred and is considered as the connecting force to once ancestry is taught in this phase. Aborigines though do not lead nomadic life style, but they follow a hunter-gatherer life. And children are taught and trained in this phase to use weapons such as axe and shovel for hunting. Stolen generation aborigines discuss a lot about their food. There can be two reasons for this, the first being their close association with their land and its products, the second could be the half-fed life they lead on the missions, once they are out of

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child of mixed-race who was removed from his/her family to be raised in state run government orphanages called *Homes*.

<sup>3</sup> Bush tucker refers to the bush food that natives in Australia have fed themselves with since thousands of years. It basically includes Australian species like Kangaroo, emu, fish etc. Bush tucker can also refer to any indigenous flora/fauna used for cooking or medicinal purpose in any continent.

<sup>4</sup> Dreamtime or Dreaming refers to the Australian Aboriginal's belief in the unification of creation and eternity of time. This can be considered a system of belief or spirituality that thrives on the belief that the spirits continues to exist before and will exist after existence of the mortal body. It connects the physical and spiritual systems through the connection to the land and totems.

<sup>5</sup> Totem refers to the aboriginal spiritual belief that each person is connected to a natural species, i.e a bird or animal through its ancestral connection. One may have snake as his totem others might have any bird as his totem. It is similar to the concept of guardian angel.

their comfortable atmosphere. Food was always a point of discussion for half-caste taken away children on missions and dormitories. Once a year only during the Charismas times only they were served good food, rest of the time they complained about the food. They missed the bush food and the special way it was prepared. They disliked the mission food which hardly had any meat and was made in the European way but always kept them half fed. Even when they are apprenticed food is always something they look forward to. Their narratives give glimpses of discrimination carried out in food also.

## II

### Namesake Homes on Missions

The bush life, aboriginal family and carefree phase leads into the second phase of the aboriginal life. It not only brings about an entire change of the surroundings but also one's associations. Aboriginal half-caste children are taken away from their familiar surroundings to be brought up in government orphanages, contrarily called Homes<sup>6</sup>. The children taken away could be of any age group starting from the taking of infants. The notable point here is that the removal of children in most of the cases was forcefully carried out. That means in most of the cases parents did not approve of their children being taken by the authorities. Contrary to their willingness their children were taken away. There were few cases also where parents voluntarily allowed the taking away of their children. They thought that their children will be given good education and other comforts. Aboriginal children were taken away so that they could be trained to be skillful servants for the white households. Boys were trained to work at stations. And girls were trained so that they can be of use as house-helps. They were kept in the places called as missions<sup>7</sup>. These missions were basically run by catholic missionaries (Nuns and Brothers) who helped in the effective functioning of the missions. Aboriginal children in different missions had different experiences with mission

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<sup>6</sup> Homes in colonial Australia referred to orphanages maintained by the white government which worked in coalition with the Aborigines Protection Board. Together they carried the forceful removal of millions of aboriginal mixed-race children, called the stolen generation.

<sup>7</sup> Missions in Australian context, refers to government restricted enclosures where Catholic missionaries trained the native population to convert into Christianity. Missions in the nineteenth century Australia became the hub for implementing European laws on the native populations.

authorities. Aboriginal kids on missions were made to stay in dormitories<sup>8</sup> and that is why their lifestyle is called dormitory life style. The wardens are generally very strict with strict rule implemented in the dormitories. Boys and girls are made to stay in different dormitories. Even the people from one region were never allowed to stay nearby in the dormitory.

In mission life, aborigines had to forego of their language. They were not allowed to speak in their native tongue. In case they are found doing so, they were heavily penalized. Swearing was also strictly prohibited among the aborigines. If they ever swore also that was also in their own language so that mission authorities do not come to know about it. Aboriginal kids had to always stay half-fed because the food was always less and the quality of food was degrading.

Aboriginal children were taken away in the pretext of education from their families, but they were not given adequate education. The education they used to receive was always basic arithmetic, little English so that they can read and write their own names. They were given moral education, so that they become efficient and honest slaves for the white households.

As soon as these children were taken away from their families they were given new English names, in case the aboriginal child only has an aboriginal name. Their name and the place to which they originally belonged and the country they came from were written down in records which were called files. Their parent's details are also recorded. The name of their community and the tribe are also recorded. They are given a date of birth which was to become their official date of birth. This created a lot of problem when aborigines wanted to trace back their ancestry through their records they were only misguided. These records were dealt with much secrecy as they were called as government documents. The funniest part was that only white government authorities had access to them. Even white research scholars had access to these, but aborigines had no access (*Auntie Rita*). They believed that these records had contents which were not appropriate for

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<sup>8</sup> Dormitories, in the stolen generation context, refers to the modern day hostels for the aboriginal children where they had to live separate from their families. Several of the infant aboriginal children were also taken away and put in the care of dormitories.

aborigines to see. The actual truth was that aborigine's life histories were hidden from them which they have every right to have access to.

Mission and dormitory life has its own benefit and disadvantages also. Dormitory life again taught children to lead a kind of community life. The younger boys and girls in their respective dormitories looked after the newly arrive young kids. They form groups and try to have little bit fun in whichever way possible. Boys and girls if found together were heavily punished. Another important concept of dormitory life was the punishment. Punishment was an integral part of dormitory life. Punishment was given for several reasons like meeting of boys and girls, stealing and many more. They were whipped and sometimes locked up for days together without food and water.

The most difficult part of an aboriginal half caste life is the days lived on the mission apart from their parents. But there are some aborigines mission is their only home as they know of no other home other than the mission. It is because they are taken away as small kids so that they have no memory of their parents or of the community. Every aboriginal kids goes through periods of loneliness as mission does not allow them to be in groups with other aboriginal kids or allow them to have fun.

### **III**

#### **The Politics of Colonial Apprenticeship**

Once the educational formalities are accomplished and the aboriginal child reaches the age of thirteen years, then he or she is sent to work under the guidance of either white station masters or white houses. And it is here that the third phase of aboriginal life begins. This phase brings adulthood and maturity to the aboriginal child. The aboriginal child is sent out to work, hence there is some freedom in their life from the monarchial mission and the dormitory authorities. Even though there is freedom, this phase brings its own risks and turbulations. It is in this phase that no one takes any responsibility of the aboriginal child and he/she is made to act as self-responsible adult. They are left alone in some white household to stay at the mercy of the white people who are not only new but have different lifestyles. Aboriginal boys were mostly sent out to work on

station. They were given minimum food and made to work on hard soil for the long days. They were not given any day off. Girls had to work as domestic maids. They had to do the kitchen duties, take care of the children at home and at the same time given the outside, garden jobs as well. They were always overburdened with work and not even allowed any moment of rest. Glenyse Ward in the book *Wandering Girl* describes the phase of her life as a maid for a high class white family who used to treat her like dirt. This is the description she gives of the humiliation she had to face through the mistress of the house, “every time she scolded me I felt like I was dirt, but as I explained before, I sort of overlooked the situation. I could see the funny side of things. I was a person that nothing could ever get along for long. I was a happy go lucky girl!”(Ward, 79)

While the master and mistress of the house had their tea in beautiful cups with saucers she was made to have her tea from a tin mug, she had to have her food from a tin plate which was never the condition even on the mission. On being asked by Ward why can't she have a cup and a saucer the answer she received was that she was there as a black servant so she should not question anything or anyone. She was one of the aboriginal children who used to miss the mission as her only home. It was because she was treated very badly by her master and mistress. She was not even allowed to come in front of the guests. If ever there was any party at home she was told not to be seen anywhere the house. Once she happened to come in front of the guest which the mistress took as an offence against her orders and scolds her for not having any brains. Even her guests were surprised that she had a black servant who could have a name, ‘whenever they were entertaining or having a party at night, I was never allowed to be seen. I had to go straight to bed. My orders were, I was not allowed anywhere near the house. I was out of bounds to her dark servant, she didn't want the embarrassment of me amongst her supercilious friends. The sight of me might have put this toffee noses out of joint’ (Ward, 22).

Mrs. Bigelow, the lady for whom Glenyse Ward worked, used to take her to work at her daughter's house. She was not allowed in the main rooms though. She only had to do her work and wait for the orders from the mistress. Though the food she used to get was better than the mission. No one in the house ever spoke any good word to her. All they expected of her was to do her work. She was not allowed to rest for a while. She had to get up at five in the morning and had to work

throughout the day non-stop, even when the family was out. Mrs. Bigelow made it a point that in her absence also Ward does not get a moment of free time. She always gives her a list of work which was always enough to keep the girl busy till her masters came back from home.

Margaret Tucker in her autobiography, *If Everyone Cared* had also worked in white households after staying on the mission. Her experience was also like Glenyse Ward. She also felt that she was not given a moment to rest. The family expected her to do all the kitchen duties, house duties, and duties of the young boy and also to keep the garden very clean. She was made to wear rags and no footwear was given to her. But when once her mother visits she is made to wear good clothes and also footwear. This is sheer hypocrisy where the parents of the aboriginal children were made to believe that their children were being provided with proper circumstances to live in. It cannot be generalized that all white families ill-treated the aboriginal children. There indeed were families who looked after the aboriginal children as their own family members. But the authors I am dealing with, none of them had the opportunity to have such good circumstances.

Loneliness and humiliation were always part and parcel of half-caste children who were taken away to be raised in government mission. This does not end when they are sent out to work. Rather they are isolated in the new working environment which only expects them to toil night and day. Mission life forces one to be lonely. One has to live on their own. But in spite of that, aboriginal children learn to live like communities as so many of them share a common life, snatched away from their parents in the dormitory life called mission. But once out of mission they no longer have any opportunity to lead community life. They had to lead lonely life which was so unlike aboriginal community life. Ward describes the loneliness that she faced in the Bigelow household, “at least if there were other kids around with whom I could share a laugh or joke. May be if I had one of my mates with me, the episode of the turkey wouldn’t seem so bad. We could look on funny side of it and have a good laugh (Ward, 122).

After going for job they talk about their life in the new white household. They share their experiences of work and the newly attained freedom. Some people get married in this phase of their life. They get exemption certificate and settle down to have their families. In this phase they encounter the true laws made for the aboriginal half castes. Before this phase all was taken care by

the mission authorities and before that by their families. Here they themselves face the aboriginal protection laws and policies. They come to the realization that all their actions have to be directed by the Aborigines Protection Board. Even for getting married they had to take permission of the government. They didn't have the permission to move from one place to another without permission. They had to have permits<sup>9</sup> for anything they did. Permit was an important document and required if aborigines wished to do anything. Aborigines were not allowed in various hotels and restaurants and they even were not allowed to have alcohol. Action was taken against any hotel if they served alcohol to aborigines. Aborigines were not at all free anywhere. If any young aborigine was seen to be roaming alone, police was informed and they were sent back to mission to which they belonged.

Aborigines who wished to lead a free and independent life had to apply for exemption certificate<sup>10</sup>. This certificate gave aborigines that rights which the whites had. After getting this certificate the particular aborigine and his family were free from all the aboriginal laws and policies. The only condition was that after applying for the certificate the particular aborigine and his family could not keep any relation with their people and the community. If they were seen to be associating with the people of their community then their exemption certificate will be cancelled. The certificate was not permanent and depended on one's conduct towards it. Those had this exemption certificate felt superior to those who did not have certificate. This was a plan so that aboriginal community can be broken. By giving rights to certain aboriginal people they wanted to assure them that their rights were secure. They were made to believe that they will be treated equal to the whites which actually never happened. This segregation did not help the aborigines in any way rather they

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<sup>9</sup> Permits were the written forms signed by the authorities of Aborigines Protection Board which gave the permission per the legal movement of any aborigines. Aborigines under the Protection Policies were not free to travel or move out of missions/reserves, if they had to they had to carry with them permit specifying the reasons for it. Any aboriginal travelling alone without a permit was bound to attract public and police attention.

<sup>10</sup> Exemption certificate was one of the outcomes of the white government's policy of Assimilation. It allowed the aborigines to have rights at par with white on the condition that they leave all their aboriginal connections and customs and be part of the common white Australian identity. This further broke the connections between the aboriginal people and their customs and traditions.

came to the realization that they could never be part of the white community. This certificate gave all the false promises which it could not keep.

#### IV

#### Conclusion

Aboriginal half caste children of stolen generation could not narrate any other experience other than being taken away. Their 'forceful removal' forms the central concern of their narratives. Their narratives seem to indulge and embark in the *before* (in traditional set up), *during* (in missions and dormitories) and *after* (in apprenticeship with white station masters or white households) removal circumstances of their lives. Memories of the childhood, separation from their families and losing connection from their land evoke recurring emotional outburst in their discussions. Memory thereby plays a very significant role in the recoding of the aboriginal lives. Loss of freedom, discriminatory policies and ill- treatment at missions and dormitories capture the central focus of their narratives. These narratives, time and again, due to their aboriginal ancestry, colonial contact and white inheritance (with the colonial policies) form true hybrid narratives with resonance of colonial oppression.

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