

RESHAPING THE CULTURE AND INDIVIDUALITY IN SELECT ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

The Aboriginal nomadic communities with oral cultures maintained a spiritual and physical link with their land since the Dreaming. They lived a spiritual life harmoniously in the lap of nature for thousand years. The culture and people were bound together by unique identity and concepts of spirituality. People derived their cultural and spiritual essence from ecology, bush songs, rituals, landscapes, animals, birds, tribal-dance, arts and story-telling tradition, ancestral spirit beings. Thus, the whole world of nature provided them a profound pattern of cultural value. Historically, this cultural, spiritual and traditional life of Aboriginal people began to obliterate with the arrival of Europeans. They not only dispossessed the land and traditional life but also snatched their identity. However, with the advent of education and form of life- writing have paved the way for Aboriginals to show anger against the political, economical, social and cultural hypocrisy of colonial authority. The present paper takes into account the concern of Aboriginal women of stolen generations to reshaping the culture and individuality of Aboriginals in Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin* (2000) and Irene Winnie Larsen's *The Dusty Roads* (2005) and Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1988).

Keywords: Aboriginal, Culture, Identity, Stolen Generation, assimilation, discrimination, colonization, imperialism, Spirituality.

The concept of the Aboriginals' actual identity has been an ongoing contest for years. The indigenous people of Australia show the desire to have their own distinct national identity. However, the literature written by the colonizers portrays a blank picture of the native culture and identity. The colonizer's literature is full of misrepresentation, presenting natives as cruel and savages. Aborigine's cultural identity has been eroded by the white settlers by spreading false myths. However, with the emergence of the Aboriginal literature in the second half of the twentieth century, the process of resistance and reconstruction of self and identity has gained momentum. The contemporary Aboriginal literature is profoundly preoccupied with a purpose of reclaiming and restoring the culture and identity of natives. During the process of colonization,

Aboriginal children and uprooted natives suffered deep identity crisis. The Aboriginal autobiographical writing deals with the search of antecedents that relates it with the concept of culture and identity-issue of the dispossessed. Recently, women writers of Aboriginal origin have attracted worldwide attention with their autobiographies. They have largely and successfully dominated this literary genre since 1970s. The Aboriginal women writers like Penny Van Toorn, Ella Simon, Ida West Labumore, Marnie Kennedy, Robert Skye, Richard Freadman etc. have explored the significant cultural wealth of Aboriginal people. Today, history, memory, pain, protest and culture play a dominant role in Aboriginal autobiographies. The narratives of these autobiographies highlight the traumatic impact of colonialism as well as damage caused to the traditional mode of living. The autobiographies depict the Indigenous struggle against imperial power to protect their culture and national identity. The protest against cultural imperialism is also one of the dominating themes in post-colonial writing. Franz Fanon in his post-colonial essay 'National Culture' describes, "To fight for national culture means in the first fight for the liberation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle" (qtd. by Ashcraft 120). Thus, native culture is the crux of Aboriginal world that unites them against anti-colonial struggle. The struggle inculcates the spirit of nationalism among them. Culture in the post – colonial context has been defined by Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* as:

Culture' means two things in particular...like arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure. Second,...culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought. (XIII)

The British colonial power deliberately controlled the natural life and culture of the weaker Aborigines. The idea behind this possession was to regulate its chief agenda to break the cultural unity of the Aborigines. The form of such occupation developed in Australia in the last years of eighteenth century. Today, Aboriginal literature portrays the richness of native culture and languages exposing the ruthlessness of European cultures and its horrible impacts on the native land, culture and system of living. The native writers strongly advocate the rich culture past of the Aborigines which was abjectly destroyed by the whites. A number of Aboriginal autobiographies appeared in the late 1980s and 1990s deals with the extraordinary heroism and culture of the native people. It is not surprising that the political movement for the rights and identity of Aborigines gave birth to Aboriginal literature, which especially in the genres of poetry, fiction, and autobiography, now constitutes not only a distinct strain with contemporary Aboriginal writing but also a model for the literature of the oppressed groups in general throughout the world. The narratives of autobiographies elicit those incidents and episodes to surface which were responsible for the destruction of Aboriginal art and culture. Art gives Aboriginal people a means of describing their relationship to the land and each other. Aboriginal art provides the bridge between nature and culture. It becomes a way for the affirmation of identity, an expression of individual creativity as well as a means of communicating with people, both living and dead. The rock paintings of north Queensland contain many examples in which Aboriginal artists depicted the people and events around them, following the arrival of colonizers. Aboriginal people executed their ancestral stories in various modes of expression like

body painting, ceremonial ground designs, rock paintings, songs, stories and performance etc. Art was also an integral part of religious life. Men and women each had their own artistic domains and particular means of fulfilling their social obligations to each other and to their ancestors.

Today Aboriginal art is recognized around the world as an exciting, major contribution to world art and an expression of deepest humanity and unity with nature...The Aboriginal art of today has profound links with that of the past. The last several hundred years up to and including the present have seen a great variety of Aboriginal art forms around the country. (Anderson & Franchesca 245-258)

The identity of Aborigines is mainly influenced by the outcome of colonial policies like assimilation and medical experiments. The negative effects of assimilation policy are still visible among Indigenous families who have lost their hereditary roots. Today this policy has resulted in fragmented identities. Langford in her autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town* narrates the consequences of the government's assimilation policy under which native children were forcibly taken away from their families and placed in white missionaries. "The policy of assimilation was implemented with the aim of absorbing Aborigines in to the White Australian society where they would live just like White people" (David 26). Similarly, Ruby, a stolen Aboriginal child, in her autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, illustrates her experience of assimilation due to which her life torn between two edges. One commonality in these autobiographies is the presentation of two distinct identities in which one is superior to another. The identity of the colonizers seems dominating the Aborigines. The identity of the whites is superior because they have their own written history and roots wherein the natives have been demoted to a secondary place. The colonial rules and acts with western cultural influences penetrated in every sphere of the life of the Indigenous. It transformed their identity as a whole in Australia. Here, the natives wish to be identified with the so-called superior class of whites. The colonial Act of 1905 trounced the lives of the Aborigines. It began to suppress their economy life on the continent. Stolen girls of Aboriginal families sent out from the white missions into domestic service. Many babies born to stolen girls into domestic services raped by white men were also taken away from them. Dorris Kartinyeri asserts in this context: "I had lost my pride. My God! Are these people God's people" (63). This kind of policy profoundly influenced the Aboriginal race and identity. The Aboriginal Protection Act, passed in 1909, granted legal power to colonizers to remove Aboriginal children without parents consent. In 1915, an amendment added to this act and even much younger children were allowed to remove. The Cootamundra Girls' Home was used to conceal them and every young girl was prepared to go straight into domestic service of whites. In 1957, the Aboriginal Welfare Board called foster parents to adopt Aboriginal children, the aim was to decrease the economical expenditure and overcrowd population of children. The life narratives of Aboriginal women reflect the psychological fear of Aborigines like Nan and Gladys in *My Place*. Sally Morgan's mother, Gladys, prevents her to reveal her Aboriginal identity when she decides to write a book of family history. Gladys Corunna articulates how she was taught by family members at home to hide Aboriginal identity: "We learnt it was better not to tell the truth" (Morgan 259). The black color of the native inhabitants is a unique symbol of their identity. All members of Aboriginal community feel integrated among themselves on the question of color. The anxiety over the disappearing color of

race is discussed in autobiographies. The statement of Gladys is recorded as: “I suppose in hundreds of years’ time, there won’t be any black Aborigines left. Our color dies out, as we mix with other races, we’ll lose some of the physical characteristics that distinguish us now” (Morgan 300). Nan’s confession of her aboriginality also mentions her concept of color: “She lifted up her arm and thumped... hard on the kitchen table. You bloody kids don’t want me, you want a bloody white grandmother...I’m black, Do you hear, black, black, black” (Morgan 97). The author also finds difficulties in identifying with Aboriginality: “what did it really mean to be Aboriginal?... I lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. (Morgan 139). Secondly, when the author understands her Aboriginal identity is her trip at Corunna Downs Station. Sally meets her relatives of the Aboriginal tribe at Corunna Downs Station. The autobiography *My Place* depicts the virulent and racist behavior of the colonizers towards the Aborigines. The narratives of the book present the identity of women under two aspects, those who silently accept the circumstances as Nan faces every cruelty in a silent way for the sake of her family. On the other hand, Larsen’s mother is a protective mother. She presents the image of an Aboriginal mother. Similarly, Doris Kartinyeri has been continually haunted by pains, memory and dreams of her stolen sisters. But they all show strong power to resist the white policies. Sally’s courage reveals the strength of an Aboriginal woman who can restore her rights and dignity. She shows her love for Aboriginal culture and community. Generally, all the protagonist in their autobiographies prove the fact that Aboriginal women do not lack in courage or physical strength. However, the historical circumstances of colonialism completely influenced the whole life of native women. The present autobiographies focus on categorization of natives by whites which caused the loss of identity as whites imposed new identity upon them. The white people assigned Christian names to stolen children in the mission.

The actual name of a person becomes his identity and it signifies a particular religion and community but the Aboriginal identity is covered by the white name. It is quite evident in autobiographies that Aborigines like their own native names because they represent Aboriginality. Similarly, in *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward, the author’s is known as Billy Boy in the mission. Daisy narrates in *My Place* that “My Aboriginal name is ‘Talahve’... on the station... I went under the name Daisy Brockman. It wasn’t till I was older that I took the name Corunna” (317). The white man not only changed their names but created a different image from the acceptable traditional image of woman in an Aboriginal society. Gladys Corunna says, “I always thought of myself as the stolen child” (Morgan 242). Arthur Corunna, being an Aboriginal has a sturdy sense of personal identity. He never uses his white name Dark-Brockman to protect himself within the white community. His physical strength helps him to oppose the discriminating action of the white man. After some time he becomes a successful land owner. He is appreciated for his physical power among whites. The traditional way of teaching in Aboriginal communities used to go on all the time as children were told to closely observe the world around them. On the other hand, the religious education obliterated the spirituality of stolen children and there was no place for indigenous culture in white schools. Recently, “the majority of Indigenous parents still value education as being essential for their children if they are to achieve a better future. Many have a concept of what is a good education and are idealistic about schools. Many are concerned that their children develop in “both ways”, that they develop a strong sense of Indigenous identity as well as developing strong academic skills” (Groome 182). The use of native language in the autobiographies is an effort to restore the Aboriginality.

Aboriginal language plays an important role in the social system because these languages are central to Aboriginal identity. Many Aboriginal people use their languages to fulfill all their needs. Knowledge about native languages and the ways languages are used is vital to the understanding of Aboriginal cultures. The control over language by the colonizers becomes the most powerful instrument of cultural control. This control is achieved by the white people by displacing the dialects of natives. Dorris Kartinyeri depicts in *Kick the Tin* that her connections with her native language were deeply obliterated: "I had lost my culture and language. The word mother did not have any meaning for me. I just did not know the word" (47). Native dialects show the relation of Aborigines to land and spiritual beliefs. It is considered the core of one's personal identity. It determines their history in written or oral manner. The identity of the Aborigines is still surviving in their local dialects, yet most of the dialects have been disappeared with the destruction of many communities. Nan, Sally's grandmother, feels proud of her Aboriginal language. She shares her feelings with her grandchildren in tribal language. She tells them about bush trucker in native dialect. The influence of western culture, religion, language and mode of living can be counted upon the Aborigines. Aboriginal language centers, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is also engaged to accumulating the linguistic heritage of Aborigines. The cultural aspects of all the autobiographies are significant. The narratives of autobiographies simultaneously promote an idealized Aboriginal civilization of the past. According to Safora, the meaning of culture is the "integrated patterns of human knowledge, belief and behavior...consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, work of art, rituals, ceremonies and other related components" (784) rightly forms a civilization.

The reminiscences of the authors demonstrate the cultural warmth of the natives. Aboriginal's reliance in the magic, faith in the spirits of ancestors, their power of healing and curing the diseases reflect the supremacy of their sacred culture. They represent their cultural identity in bush songs, music, dance, body painting, traditional weapons etc. "...there is no nature without culture" (qtd. by Edwards 81). The melody and rhythm of tribal songs provide them peace, comfort and satisfaction. The Aboriginal culture is profoundly rooted in the land to which their identity is related. But "the association of Aboriginal people with the land was disrupted as colonization took effect" (Bourke 39). Most of the inhabitants comprehend identity in terms of social practices like kinship relationship, community acceptance, and living out a particular way of life. The female protagonists illustrate their mutual understanding and share colonial experience. Their stories of life bridge the gap of the voiceless history. All Aboriginal people can be identified with Larsen, Sally, Ward, Ruby and Kartinyeri because of the commonality of pain, fear, injustice, and cruelty. However, some members in narratives like Gladys in Sally's autobiography try to escape the suffering by hiding their actual roots because they are unable to live openly due to the fear of losing their children and family members. But towards the middle of autobiography all began to restore their courage and determination. Gladys is confident: "At least I have made a start. And I hope my children will be proud of the spiritual background from which they've made a sprung" (Morgan 300). The imaginative reconstruction of narratives by recalling the memory as well as the oral tradition of storytelling play an important role to investigate the Aboriginal history and these "black memories are sacred" (Cox 74). The authors search for Aboriginal culture, roots and identity draws on various available sources and in this process of writing "...memory does not fail though men forget" (qtd. in

Pierce 228). Today, many natives reject the term 'Aboriginal' because they find it problematic, particularly its insistence that all natives are inferior to whites and not possessed the land before the arrival of colonizers. So, all contemporary Aboriginal people collectively refer to themselves as *Murri, Kurri, Nyungar, Nonga or Palwa*. They want to replace the whole white man's collective naming of them as Aboriginals, and want their own 'National Identity' because they are the natural inhabitants of Australia. Presently, all assimilated Aboriginal families are discovering their actual heritage and roots, which were taken away in childhood. "Aboriginal people want to retain their languages, culture, social organization and the management of their lands and their lives. There is a constant struggle to retain identity, practice values and maintain beliefs (Bourke 10). Sally Morgan, Kartinyeri, Larsen, Ruby and Ward, even at the risk of losing family reputation and dignity, exhibit tremendous nationalist zeal for the cause of native people. So we can say that all aboriginal women writers of stolen generations put emphasis on the superiority of Aboriginals' culture, identity and race. They bring about the spiritual and cultural values of their traditional life in their autobiographies.

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