

COUNTER NARRATIVES AND THE “CULTURE OF FORGETTING”

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Abstract

By constructing a challenge to conventional representations, the works of Indigenous women playwrights demand an acknowledgement and revaluing of Indigenous experience from a personal viewpoint. Perhaps the most dominant and notable feature of their work is that it asserts the ways in which ‘otherness’, states of marginality or plurality can be seen as sources of energy and potential change. In a way their works produce an intercultural exchange in which the key idea of Aboriginality is re-negotiated and re-made through the deconstruction of conventional, mythologized and iconic representations.

Aboriginal Women playwrights have challenged the colonial gaze by debunking the colonial discourse which declared them ‘unfit’ to take care of and nurture their children. Consequently, the colonial powers committed a heinous crime of snatching innocent lives from the arms of their mothers in the name of the policy of ‘Protection’. The entire project of colonization was based on the idea of cultural superiority and the ultimate aim was to uproot Aboriginality in totality.

In the play *Stolen*, Harrison has provided a counter discourse by forging a true picture of strong maternal subjects and thereby disparaging this falsity. The Aboriginal mothers within *Stolen* are truly devoted towards the betterment of their children and are a complete contrast to the callous image propagated by the colonizers.

With the help of concepts like ‘discourse’, ‘stereotypes’ and ‘counter-narratives’ taken from the Postcolonial theory, an attempt has been made to delineate an authentic history of Australia thereby re-creating a robust literature challenging “the culture of forgetting”.

The genesis of Indigenous literature in English can be attributed to the expression of an Indigenous minority living on the fringes of the majority community. It is a mode of writing by and of an oppressed class that until recently was completely clouded under the tyranny of the oppressor. The majority accepted as fact that the Indigenous people are indecisive and indeterminate about themselves. They, therefore, need things to be done for them. Even to the point of representing them through various modes of writing.

Indigenous literature began as a cry from the heart directed at the invaders of the land. It is a cry for justice, a cry for an understanding and a plea to be understood. Indigenous writers, here the Aborigines of Australia, have a white Australian readership firmly in mind when they write and their aim is to project the predicament of their people to as many people as possible. This has resulted in a powerful literature which is robust and steadily expanding. Literature from an Indigenous viewpoint is being constructed: life stories, novels, plays, short stories are devoting their words to the Indigenous existential being in what is said to be a multicultural Australia. (*Milli Milli Wangka* 4)

As a vast land, Australia had and has many Indigenous communities and cultures, and their reduction into the 'Other', the Aborigine, as opposed to the 'Subject', the European settler, is a simplified construct. All singular, totalistic representations of the Aborigines are questionable, if not entirely fictional. Aboriginal writers have been employing all the literary forms available to bring forth their predicament as explicitly as possible. There has been a gushing of Aboriginal writers and writing after almost two hundred years of colonization. Aboriginal literature in its infancy was a form of disapproval shown by the indigenous communities towards handed down modes of representation growing to the level of protest and now a well established and reputed entity in itself.

Like any other genre of Australian Aboriginal literature, Drama grew out of a need to re-define Aboriginal identity in the 1960s with the civil rights movement on the upsurge. The main aim of majority of the Indigenous Australian playwrights was and still is today to reflect upon Australia's violent history by giving Indigenous people a say as well as to celebrate Aboriginal survival, pride and heritage.

Despite borrowing from the rich and ancient tradition of Western style theatre, Aboriginal Drama, described by Maufort in his article titled "Unsettling Narratives" as "Native appropriations of western dramatic forms" (105-10), differs from the Euro-American dramatic tradition in many ways, most prominently of course in its incorporation of Indigenous myth, storytelling and dance into the play. They alternate the use of realistic and mythical elements. Mudrooroo Narogin, who is often called the father of Aboriginal literature, describes this form of Aboriginal writing and theatre performance as "Aboriginal Realism" (17). According to him, it is a concept which expands European realism by taking in certain supernatural aspects, characters and situations found in Aboriginal storytelling.

Aboriginal Drama holds an important place in Australian literature. As a body of work, these texts express unique and specific cultural heritages. Plays by Aboriginal playwrights have become a forum for re-writing the history of Australia. These plays are replete by all the important aspects of Aboriginality as propounded by a renowned critic Adam Shoemaker—endurance, pride, protest, poetry, sorrow, anger and humor.

As a group, Indigenous women playwrights have challenged construction of Indigenous people, particularly the women, as homogenous by creating complex and varied representations

of Indigenous women. Their writings confront and contest these representations of Indigenous women as helpless and silent victims in the context of the broader framework of intercultural relations. The writings of Aboriginal women possess powerful potentialities and offer significant counter narratives which challenge the “culture of forgetting” (Manne 1996) which is endemic in the nation of Australia. Helen Thomson writes that “Forgetfulness in Australia is a politically charged strategy that has characterised settler history” (23).

One pertinent genre which is used by Indigenous women playwrights is that of Monodramas. Many of these Monodramas are to a large extent autobiographical. They are narrated as a story told by one woman who herself plays a plethora of roles. It focuses on subjective narratives of personal histories based on lived experiences of these women. Aileen Moreton-Robinson provides a significant politicized reading of such practices when she argues that “self representation by Indigenous women is a political act” (3). It is political because these are self representations which emphasize the “practical, political or personal” attributes of a life lived in a society which constructs Indigenous women as “other” (3).

An outstanding monodrama of the past decade is *Stolen*, written by Jane Harrison and directed by Wesley Enoch. This work was a co-production between Ilbjerri and Playbox Theatre, and is an account of the experience of five Aboriginal children who had been forcibly removed from their families. Each character has both a past and present story to tell about the process of reconciliation with their identity. The play analyses the traumatized states of people belonging to the ‘stolen generation’. The play was written in response to the 1997 report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which detailed the history of forced assimilation of Indigenous families into the white society.

Harrison’s play *Stolen* has a central thematic and a common location. All of the central characters are stolen children and all of them, except Anne, are adopted by a white family. There is not a single or central storyline, but the stories of the five central characters share significant commonalities. The play does not follow a linear narrative, but rather, to adopt Heddon’s terminology, it creates a “collage” (128) of multiple stories.

Jane Harrison’s play *Stolen* offers significant representations of strong maternal subjects, and functions as an important text for rewriting the history of Australia. Harrison represents the stolen children’s mothers as active subjects who never give up searching for their children. Aboriginal mother characters in *Stolen* undertake strong positions and through their involvement in maternal acts they are represented as being capable of nurturing their children, despite their separation from their biological child in a particular social world.

Within the context of Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney’s “dolls’ revolution” (1), Harrison’s play can be understood to have contributed to a significant shift within mainstream Australian theatre. Fensham and Varney propose that in the drama and theatre of the 1990s and early 2000s a group of female playwrights instigated a “dolls’ revolution” (1). This revolution was characterised by a shift in Australian drama, towards the depiction of strong and complex female characters. Fensham and Varney use the metaphor of the kewpie doll as an analytical tool, moving away from its feminine connotations, they imbue the doll with the power to create and spread revolution. Fensham and Varney suggest that female playwrights are boldly depicting a range of possibilities for being and playing female.

The Aboriginal mother characters within *Stolen* undertake acts which appear synonymous with Ruddick’s conception of maternal practices, even after their children are taken from them.

The mothers within *Stolen* engage most notably in the maternal practice of nurturance, and through their acts of maternal practice they exert a strong presence within the world of the play. Ruddick positions the mother as the individual responsible for the nurturing of a child's "developing spirit". She offers seven definitions of the term development which she perceives pertain to the child's "developing spirit". The definitions of development offered by Ruddick are: "to 'unfold more completely', 'to unfold gradually, as a flower from a bud', 'to free from that which enfolds or envelops', 'to form or expand by a process of growth', 'to evolve the possibilities of power', 'to make active, something latent' and to 'perfect, advance, further'" (82).

Stolen by Jane Harrison is about five half-caste Aboriginal children who were removed from their families and placed in a children's home. As the characters, Anne, Ruby, Shirley, Jimmy and Sandy, tell their stories they show that there is more to being stolen than the physical act. Jimmy's admission, "I've been a thief but I've never stolen anyone's soul" (34), is heartbreaking and morally challenging because it confronts the audience with the traumatic effects that his removal had on an individual whose punishment was a life sentence.

To begin with, the play has a very simple stage setting that consists of "five old iron institutional beds" belonging to the five main characters. The stage is at once "a children's home, a prison cell, a mental institution and a girl's bedroom" (1). In keeping with their lot in life, the bedspreads of four characters, with the exception of Anne, are drab. In the case of Anne, since her story takes place in her white adopted parent's home, her bedspread is pretty and expensive. All the time pampered by her white foster parents, Anne has a room of her own.

Belonging to different age groups, all the children are stolen and placed in the same children's home, though not necessarily at the same time. For example, Shirley is a grandmother at the very beginning of the play while the other characters are younger than her. However, in many scenes they interact as though they are all together. This mixing of age groups and the mixing of time show how generations of children were stolen. There are abrupt shifts of time and there is no chronological order followed. They were abused and beaten as children, and there is a constant endeavour and hope in them, to be united some day with their parents.

The five characters come on the stage, carrying suitcases; they peer around the set, and they talk about home, family – mainly their mothers. As explained in the text, "their voices are full of hope, but tinged with sadness" (1). And this is symbolically represented by Ruby's words "My mum's coming for me." The next scene, "Adult Flashes", presents two different situations. Shirley is overjoyed at becoming a grandmother. She gets excited at the thought of holding the baby in her arms and says, "Kate, I held you once in my arms and I didn't get to hold you for another twenty-five years" (2). When Shirley reminisces her past Ruby's sad cries for her mother are heard. Her utterances sum up the agony of every stolen child who has been removed from his/her mother. Ruby's journey through life is described by her two statements in the play: "I want my mummy...Where are you?" and "Don't need no home of me own. Got enough to do" (2).

Home, which is generally a symbol of love and care, becomes a house of mental and physical torture for Ruby. In the scene titled, "Ruby's Descent Into Madness", Ruby is tortured by the Authority Figures. She is subjected to domestic violence. Ruby's father and sister finally track her down in the hospital bed crying out in the dark. Her father informs her that "They made your mum sign a bit of paper... They said that she'd signed you up for adoption" (6). Ruby cries

pathetically for her mother. Having lost both her emotional and physical security, she descends into the world of insanity.

The experience of the boys who were removed from their parents is also as disastrous as that of the girls. Sandy, who was born as a result of his Aboriginal mother being raped by a white man in the desert, has no fixed home to live. He moves from one place to another searching for his home. Sandy as a child is constantly pursued by the welfare because of his light skin. He seeks refuge in one relative's house or the other. He is always running as he hears an urgent cry: "Run Sandy!" He and his mother always live in fear of being snatched away from his family. He says "always on the run. But I don't want to go. I wanna to stay" (4). But the welfare took him away from his family.

The communal effort taken by his people to save him shows how Aborigines had a sense of family and how women fought for their children. Sandy, holding a can of peas and looking at it with great contempt, directly talks to the audience and expresses his scorn and hatred for the welfare which cunningly made his family fall into its trap by finding a can of peas, past its expiry date in their house. And this served the reason for the welfare people to label the mother as "unfit" and take her children away from her. The devious measures that were used to remove the children are brought out in this scene.

Jimmy's mother makes constant efforts to know about her son. She continuously searches for her son by making several phone calls and letters but in vain. The scene proves how family visits were discouraged and forbidden and how the letters never reached their destination. In the scene "What Do you Do?" the excitement that the son and the mother feel at the prospect of meeting each other is shown. Jimmy's mother is worried that the gap of twenty-six years is a long time and she asks herself whether she would be able to recognize her own son. Finally, Jimmy's mother dies of heart attack even before Jimmy could turn up to meet her. When Jimmy returns to find his mother dead he expresses his infinite grief in the following words: "Oh, mum, if you'd held on a little longer" (32).

Only Anne, who is adopted by a white couple, enjoys comfort. She has got a room of her own with lace curtains. The white parents promise to give her a good education, a sense of security and a good upbringing. The white adoptive mother is, therefore, seen as the fitter of the two to take possession of the child and raise her. When the white parents inform Anne that she is an adopted child, Anne is shocked to discover her Aboriginal origins. She is caught between two different worlds. One is the white world of adoptive parents and the other is the Aboriginal world of real mother and Aboriginal relatives.

In the scene, "Am I Black Or White", Anne's mind is caught between the conflicting voices. The collective voices of her white family remind her of the privilege and the comfort she enjoys in the white family. The claims of the white family are counterbalanced by the voices of her indigenous family. The indigenous voices give her an identity and a sense of belonging, and advise her to "stick together" against the whites, who have raped their women, grabbed their land and stolen their children. The question, "Who are you?"(28-29) points at the identity, social, racial, cultural and spiritual problems. Anne is uncertain of where she belongs to.

Aboriginal mothers were declared as unfit to take care of their children and this discourse was propagated by the colonial powers to undertake the heinous crime of separating little children from their mothers. It was a garb to dupe the world of their hidden motive of eradicating

Aboriginality out of an entire generation. In the play *Stolen*, Harrison has provided a counter discourse by forging a true picture of strong maternal subjects and thereby debunking this falsity.

The Aboriginal mothers within *Stolen* are truly devoted towards the betterment of their children and are a complete contrast to the callous image propagated by the colonizers. The most significant example of motherly love is their attempt to free their children and warn them to run or hide from 'the Welfare'. In the scene entitled "Hiding Sandy" (3-4), it is evident that Sandy's mother is trying to protect him, and that she perceives in order to protect him she must make him run from 'the Welfare'.

In the scene entitled "It rained the day" (4-5), Jimmy's mother speaks the words "Don't you get caught... The Welfare- Don't... or the Welfare... If you... the Welfare... Willy, hide! Hide! The Welfare..." (5). Like Sandy's mother, Jimmy's mother acts as a voice of warning; a voice telling him to hide, a voice telling him to run. Both Sandy's mother and Jimmy's mother warn their children to run and hide from 'the Welfare', and it might be suggested that they do so because they recognise that 'the Welfare' will not foster the growth of their children, but rather "enfold or envelop" (Ruddick 82), constricting their growth.

Jimmy's mother continues to write to him year after year, never receiving a response. She speaks the words: 22nd October, 1963. Dear Willy, they say it's for the best, but I'm missing my boy. They won't tell us where they took you, but perhaps you could write and tell us so we could come and visit you and your sister. Now try to do nothing naughty... Love, Mum and Dad (12). As the letter is read, the stage directions state that the audience will witness, "a silent demonstration of JIMMY being subjected to humiliation. He's being beaten, he's forced to clean shoes, he's sent to his room and an old tin plate of shapeless goo, his dinner, is slid across the floor in his direction. We see the once happy boy slowly shutting down" (12).

Jimmy calls for his mother because he is not being preserved, he is not being nurtured, and he remembers her as someone who cared for him. The representation of Jimmy's mother, elsewhere, but thinking of him, writing to him, asking him to tell her where he is so that she can visit him, clearly presents her as a mother attempting to preserve her child, attempting to engage with her child and attempting to nurture him. Jimmy's mother says that she has not received any replies to the letters which she has sent, but she imagines that he is probably too busy to write to her "with school and everything" (16). Further, she writes that Jimmy's father is unwell, and that they are poor, but that she found some red wool and has knitted him a pair of warm socks. Jimmy does not receive the socks, nor does he receive the letter.

Within the play *Stolen* the Aboriginal mothers long for and mourn for their children. Shirley makes clothes for her children, despite their absence, because she longs to care for them. In the scene entitled "Shirley knits for her family" (19) the stage directions state, "SHIRLEY has a big bag of knitting that she lays out-from small garments to large, representing the years that she has knitted for her family without ever getting the chance to give them her symbols of love" (19). Shirley has two children, a son and a daughter, both were taken from her. She believes, but does not know, that she has grandchildren. It appears that Shirley longs to actively care for her children, and hence she knits for them, persistently.

Shirley is persistent in her search for her children. In the scene entitled "Shirley Never Gives Up Searching" (21-22) Shirley calls the authorities to ask about her children. The stage directions state, "One by one all the others join her on the bed and they all make calls-to the authorities, social services, anyone who might know anything regarding the whereabouts of her

children. The voices crowd over one another so it becomes a wall of sound" (21). The scene ends with Shirley standing alone, spotlight. She speaks the words, "Put me on hold... [...] You people have been putting me on hold for twenty-seven years"(22). With these words it is revealed that Shirley has been searching for her children for twenty seven years, and still she refuses to give up searching.

Jimmy's mother does not stop writing letters. In the scene entitled "Jimmy's story" (26-28) Jimmy's mother sends another letter, this time she writes to the authorities. She writes, "I am writing to let you know that we would like our son Willy to come back home" (26). In this scene Jimmy's mother is named for the first time, she signs her letter as "Nancy Wajurri" (26). In her letter she states that she and her husband are employed, clearly attempting to convince those in power that they are productive members of society and well able to care for and provide for their son. As Jimmy's mother speaks Jimmy is present on stage, in a gaol cell. It is evident that his mother believes that he is still in the care of those who took him, that she believes he is in foster care or similar. It is evident in this scene that Nancy wants to provide for Jimmy, wants to preserve him, and wants to nurture him. However, she does not know where he is and he does not know where she is, and the authorities have no interest in addressing this.

In the scene entitled "What do you do?" (29-30) Jimmy and his mother Nancy prepare to meet for the first time since he was taken. They speak, one after the other, however, they do not hear one another. The stage directions state that "NANCY pulls the twenty-six presents from out of the box and lays them on the floor. She takes the time to consider each one, as they represent all the love she was not able to give her son" (30). Nancy has twenty six presents, one for each of the years that has passed since Jimmy was taken from her. The stage directions state that after considering each present, "NANCY collapses and dies" (30). The presents act as tangible evidence of Nancy's active thinking of Jimmy. The pathos here is potent, as Nancy dies before she is able to give Jimmy a single gift, a single expression of her love. Jimmy commits suicide in prison when he learns that his mother is dead.

Jimmy's letter speaks the tragedy of the play clearly. He calls for babies not to be taken from their mothers' arms. The act of child removal in this instance is synonymous with murder. The message of the play is delivered powerfully through Jimmy's suicide note. Perhaps the message would not be so piercing, so unforgettable, if it were not delivered alongside the hanging, dead body of a-now adult-stolen child. Jimmy's voice can be heard as he speaks the words of his suicide note though his body hangs lifeless.

It is evident throughout the play *Stolen* that the stolen children's Aboriginal mothers want to care for their children. The play serves as a kind of counter-history and challenges the official version of history created by the colonial powers. By constructing a challenge to conventional representations, the works of Indigenous women playwrights demand an acknowledgement and revaluing of Indigenous experience from a personal viewpoint.

Perhaps the most dominant and notable feature of their work is that it asserts the ways in which 'otherness', states of marginality or plurality can be seen as sources of energy and potential change. In a way their works produce an intercultural exchange in which the key idea of Aboriginality is re-negotiated and re-made through the deconstruction of conventional, mythologized and iconic representations.

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