



JOURNEY BACK HOME

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ABSTRACT:

The character of colonialism is different from what it seems to be. European colonizers did not colonise the land only, but also the minds of the colonized people. They tried to whiten the culture of the Indigenous people as they could not whiten the colour of their skins. Richard Dyer, in his influential study of cinematic representations of whiteness, offers the following definition:

[W]hiteness is maintained by being unseen.... [T]rue whiteness resides in the non-corporeal.... [It] is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people which is invisible.

(qtd. in Perkins 164)

KEYWORDS : *Journey, colonialism, negative policies*

INTRODUCTION:

Of all the negative policies brought to bear on the lives of Aborigines, the most traumatic to the psyche of the natives has been that of "Stolen Generations." It was a policy aimed at assimilating the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people in the mainstream white society. To assimilate these people, young children were taken away from their parents and were raised in institutions and families by the non-indigenous people. The majority of them were told that they were orphans or that their parents and families did not want them. Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities since the English occupation of Australia. In those times, 1993 single family had escaped the effects. National Inquiry set up in 1995 concluded that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1919 and 1969.

The policy had a long-lasting impact on the psychology of the Aborigines. The relationship between the psychological problems of the Aboriginal and Stolen Generations was observed when a Royal Commission established in the early 1990s to investigate the alarming trend that had evolved amongst gaoled Aboriginal people concluded:

"Over the previous decade (January 1980 to May 1989) Aboriginal People had died in custody, many by suicide." The Royal Commission (Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991) found

that there was "necessarily a relationship between these deaths in custody and the history of Colonization in Australia. Of those who had committed suicide, 43 had been removed from their families as children" (Bretherton and Mellor, 85).

The report of Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody paved the way for setting up of another commission under the leadership of Sir Ronald Wilson. *Bringing Them Home* (2007) was the report compiled after the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children from their families. The report "sits like a stone in the consciousness of many Australians" (Toorn 24). Under the leadership of Sir Ronald Wilson, the commission travelled across Australia receiving evidence from 777 people and organizations and gathered information from 535 people who had been removed as children from their families. In addition to stories of these 535 people, the commission also received written testimony from around one thousand others. The report includes the testimonies by people who were abused sexually and physically by white people.

It is interesting to note that the outward motive of the policy was to assimilate the Aboriginal people in the white society. Questions have been raised about the policy because the policy of taking away the children had already failed in the other settler societies of Canada and the United States of America. In 1894, Joseph Martin, Liberal Member of Parliament for Winnipeg, asked the question about the motives behind taking away the children from their parents. He noted that almost every child died shortly after being discharged from school (cited in Enns 102). When Australia adopted the policy, it had already failed in Canada. So it becomes clear that the reason behind emulating the failed policy was something else. Andrea Smith has depicted one of the reasons:

The rationale for choosing cultural rather than physical genocide was often economical. Carl Schurz concluded that it would cost a million dollars to kill an Indian in warfare, whereas it cost only \$ 1,200 to school an Indian Child for eight years. Secretary to the Interior Henry Teller argued that it would cost \$22 million to wage war against Indians over a 10 year period, but would cost less than one quarter of that amount to educate 300,000 children. (90)

The motive behind the policy could not be completed, but it had a long-lasting impact on the psyche of the Aboriginal children who were segregated from their families. The Australian government declared the Aboriginal parents unfit to bring up their children. The Aboriginal mothers were shown to be lacking in motherly feelings and thus incapable of looking after their children. The Aborigines were represented in racist terms:

The aboriginals of my native country are the most degenerate, despicable, and brutal race of beings in existence.... They are insensible to every tie which binds man to his friend-husband to wife-parent to child-creation to its God. They stand unprecedented in the annals of the most ancient and every attempt to reclaim them from their present, wandering, abject and brutal mode of life. (Miller 58-59)

Similarly, Western Australian Aborigines Protector James Isdell defended the policy of separation of children from their mothers on the basis of the insensitivity of the mothers and argued that they did not grieve for or even remember their children: "I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring" (qtd. in Wilson 82). On this pretext, they took away the children and put them into the nursery where they were trained in white culture and language. Later on, the children were given to the foster care of the whites, but they treated these children badly, rather we say inhumanly. The whites may appear to be caring and merciful, but their cruel reality has been experienced by the Stolen Generations. The diabolism of the whites is brought out by Rosalie Fraser in her autobiography *Shadow Child* where her foster mother treated her like a beast:

She laid me over her knee, ripped my pants off, forced my legs apart and pushed something long and sharp inside me, moving it around inside me. Oh my God, the pain I felt was shocking.... I was screaming in pain and shock as I lay on the floor, curled up, holding myself. (Fraser 19)

The Aboriginal writers express the pain of losing their families in their writings. Glenyse Ward, Iva Jones, Debby Barban, Pam Erriaron Williams and Rosalie Fraser have expressed the pain of being taken away forcibly by the whites from their respective mothers. They never felt the love and warmth of their parents. The male children were used as stockmen and were given responsibilities to carry out menial jobs outside their homes. The girls were used by white males to fulfill their sexual needs and perversities.

Eva Jones expresses her anguish that she cannot embrace her children since whenever she was embraced, she was embraced for sex only:

I was given first hug of my life in women's environment which I didn't know anything about.... It tore me apart because not understanding what a hug is, and to be given all of a sudden by some, you suddenly realize someone cared about you, but it wasn't that. It was abuse, as a 12 year old. (Terszak 43)

In short, the assimilationist policies destroyed the emotions in the Aborigines. Through this policy they destroyed the Aboriginal culture and tried to whiten them. The Aboriginal writers express their satisfaction that Australian government could not succeed in destroying the Aboriginal culture and their love for one another. They still prefer to live in community and to perform the rituals. The Aboriginal activists ultimately succeeded in stopping the taking away of children of the natives from their parents.

Margaret Brusnahan rightly describes the real character of such white people in her poem "Double Standards." She writes:

But back at home behind closed doors
They really showed me their form.
They said to me "Obey our laws
Or you'll wish you weren't born."

Such children, particularly females, express their sorrow of being separated from their parents. They were taken away on the pretext of giving them love, but the whites committed atrocities on these children. Brusnahan further adds:

The times they spoke or smiled at me
Were few and far between.
I think that they were born to be
Just hard and cruel and mean. (Brusnahan 184)

The unfortunate thing was that no one doubted the sincerity of such "mean" people as they pretended to be pillars of the community. Though these Aboriginal children were brought up by the-whites, they could not remove the Aboriginality from their hearts. They told them as Brusnahan observes in her poem "Civilised":

They think that being black is being sin;
They don't want to know the person within.
I've thought about it but couldn't hide
The me that is black, the me inside. (Brusnahan 185)

The white civilization is criticized which claims to be merciful and educated, they read in the Bible to love your brother, but they could not love the Aboriginal children. Certainly, the Aboriginal people do feel that physically they can be owned by others, but their mind and spirit cannot be owned by anybody. Lionel Fogarty rightly remarks in his poem "Fellow Being":

The aboriginal is the bread of man's rich land. We are the rock of ages and purpling skies. Look at e every scenery i face, y in bush you will see an aboriginal face, Body and spirit. The aboriginal is not owned by any human being on earth. Our presence is the flesh of fresh new worlds. (Fogarty 188)

Pam Tjanara-Williams expresses the pain of being taken away from her mother in the poem "Torn Apart":

Is this what you have done to us,
Took us away from the warmth
Of mother's arm screaming with pain cried for ears
Seeing my mother cling to the last feel-(Gilbert 88)

She was promised by the white protector that she would be treated like a human being, but she was made to "strip the bed and mop the floor" (Gilbert 88). As a child she thought of her mother who would have never allowed her to do these menial jobs. She yearns for love and affection of her mother and family. All she wants is the love that only the family has for a child. The abductors of Pam told her that her mother was unfit to take care of her which she finds was not correct. She cried for her mother, but her voice was blocked by the racist walls. Due to this heinous crime committed by the whites, both daughter and mother suffer. Pam points out her suffering in the poem "Torn Apart" which may bring tears to our eyes:

I cried for You at night
My Mother so strong and silent
I wail for the loss and pain
They inflicted on us both. (Gilbert 88)

This feeling is not expressed by women only, but also by men who after being abducted from their families were forced to do menial jobs like page boy, stockman, etc. The trauma of separation and attempts of assimilation have damaged their self esteem, and impaired their parenting skills and relationships. In turn, their children also suffered. This is a cycle from which these people find it difficult to escape.

Iris Clayton points out another dimension of forcible removal of the Aboriginal children. These children developed hatred against all the white people which created a rift between the two communities, They felt that all the laws are racist which are in the favour of white men. Because of this reconciliation has not been possible so far. In the poem "Kidnappers" he points out:

They all hate the white man,
With his racist laws
and they all keep the
White man out when he knocks up on their doors.
(Gilbert 108)

Another victim of Stolen Generations is Debby Barben who expresses her pain of not finding her father. She appeals to the agencies to help her find him out. She criticizes the white agency for not doing anything to find out the lost families, but she is very optimistic that one day she will be able to discover her father and mom. In the poem "To Look Yet not Find" she depicts her frustration as she is not able to see her parents:

To look yet not find I feel heavy weight
My mum I see
With everlasting hope, someday; hope to meet
Many names has she
I wonder if she knows who she is
to open the door I must find
the key
Hope! I won't give up
One day there is going to be a clue
And each other we shall see. (Gilbert 113)

In other poems, she depicts the treatment given to her by white people where she always had to work. She points out in the poem "Do you know what you are saying":

Do you know what you are saying
Have you heard it yourself
How much do you practise?
What you said
Do you know or think you do
You sit there talking and preaching
Patting yourself on the back
have you been through it. (Gilbert 115)

Kath Walker, Jack Davis, Lionel Fogarty et al. are of the view that they cannot assimilate the Aboriginal culture as Kath Walker rightly points out in her poem "Assimilation-no!" that the Aboriginal culture is just like a wide river and white culture is like a pitcher of wine which cannot change the character of the river if it is poured into it. She is not ready to surrender what the Aborigines love the most:

But a core is left that we keep always
Change and compel, slash us into shape, but not our
roots deep in the soil of the old
She echoes a strong feeling for the mother earth which she would not surrender:
Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother,
To change the unchangeable.
The gum cannot be trained into an oak. (Walker 21)

The poem makes it clear that just as a gum tree cannot be trained into an oak, in a similar way the Aborigines cannot be turned into white men. Thus she protests against the assimilationist policies.

In fact, yearning to go back home is a theme that is present in the work of every Aboriginal writer. Alexis Wright in her novel *Plains of Promise* shows this through the character of Ivy. It is also important to note that

though Ivy is very young when she is taken away from her mother and lacks first-hand knowledge about her country, yet she is aware of her country, her homeland:

The plane flew across the landscape that Ivy had seen
in her mind's eye from the windows with the flowing
curtains. Her home. (Wright 160)

These lines depict that the relationship between land and the Aborigines transcends physical boundaries. That is why Ivy was able to see her homeland in her "mind's eye" even when she had not seen the land in her conscious life. The important thing is that this relationship with land is not fictional as the same feeling was described by a Yorta Yorta woman who was a part of Stolen Generations:

Identity from land remained within me and when I
did my art it's symbolic and (the) Elders have picked
up the old scenes. I think there's something printed
on our DNA which has ancestral memory. (Kingsley et al 296)

In 1970s, the Australian government stopped taking away the Aboriginal children as they could not succeed in whitening the ancient race. Certainly, the Aborigines have a very keen mind; that is why they quickly picked up the new learning, they never forgot their roots. They did not want to change their myths with the European ones. They are very optimistic that one day the Stolen Generations will probably be united with their family and they will be able to learn their cultural practices.

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