Australian Aboriginal Women's Life-Writings: Reading Motherhood, Trauma and the Re-writing of Australian Aboriginal History

Payel Paul*

*Dept. of English, Kulti College, P.O.- Kulti, W.B. – 713343, India; email: its.payel@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper will attempt a textual analysis of some of the life-writings of Australian Aboriginal women, the publication of which during the 1980s and 90s is considered to be a watershed in the history of Aboriginal Australia. These life-writings had contributed to the reconstruction of Australian Aboriginal history by giving voice to the long-silenced chapters of European invasion, colonisation, dispossession, deprivation and most importantly the child-removal policies of the state and their traumatic impact on the lives of the Aborigines who are now referred to as the 'stolen generations' after Peter Read's ground-breaking eponymous work published in 1983. A close reading of these texts reveals that the very idea of the 'mother' or 'motherhood' has been used in these narratives as a trope to delineate the deeply entrenched sense of loss of a vital life-giving spirit in the Australian Aboriginal men and women brought upon by the state-sponsored measures of separating the half-caste children from their Aboriginal families. This paper will show how the experiences of the Aboriginal mother or the longing for the mother by an Aborigine has been represented in these narratives as a recurrent motif to give a picture of the impact of the ongoing processes of colonisation and the tyrannical state policies on Australian Aboriginal life, and thus, to contribute towards a rewriting of the grand narratives of white Australian history from the Aboriginal point of view.

Key Words: Australian Aborigines, colonisation, stolen generations, motherhood, trauma, Aboriginal history.

This paper will critically examine some representative life-writings of Australian Aboriginal women like Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), and Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita* (1994) to find out the registering of the pain and sense of loss associated with the severing of the mother and the child as a result of the state assimilationist policies prevalent in Australia over a prolonged period of time from 1910 to 1970. The assimilationist policies of the state were brought into force to do away with the half-caste problem. It was decided that the half-caste Aboriginal children would be removed from their Aboriginal families and placed in Missions, Homes and training centres for Aboriginal children where they would undergo cultural re-programming in order to be fully absorbed into white Australia. The policymakers firmly believed that the few full-blood Aborigines living in the outback would eventually die out, thus making Australia a white nation. As a result of the child-removal policies, thousands of Aboriginal children were made to lose link with their families, their communities, their

traditional culture and their languages. One of the traumas undergone by these Aborigines was that of the separation from their mothers.The importance of the mother was immense in the pre-contact traditional Aboriginal societies, and from there had been passed down to the urban and semi-urban communities. Richard Broome observes that it was the mother in traditional Aboriginal communities who bore the sole responsibility of raising her children. She was the one who imparted the "crucial early education" to her children "in which the young were taught to survive in the bush and treat the land as friendly and part of themselves" (23). It was the mother who initiated the child into the hunting and gathering economy. Lateron, during the days of colonial encounter when Aboriginal women started giving birth to half-caste children, the identity of these half-castes was determined according to the identity of their mother. The half-caste children of Aboriginal mothers, though they had white fathers, were counted as Aborigines. Identity in Aboriginal Australia is therefore passed down the matrilineal line. In Sally Morgan's autobiographical narrative called*My Place*(1987), the half-caste woman, Daisy, her daughter, Gladys and her granddaughter, Sally, all have white fathers, yet they identify themselves as Aborigines. Sally, who was never conscious of her Aboriginal identity till her youth, was readily accepted by the members of her community in the Pilbara region of northern Western Australia as one of their own owing to the fact, that she was the progeny of Anne, the dark and beautiful full blood Aboriginal woman at the Corunna Downs Station. Therefore, the identity of the mother is crucial to the construction of the Aboriginal identity of the child in Australian Aboriginal communities. Moreover, as most half-caste children were not owned by their white fathers and were left to their mothers' care, and as the children of most urban and semi-urban women like Ruby Langford in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) did not enjoy the lifelong stable company of their fathers, the importance and influence of the mother in the upbringing of the Aboriginal children were immense.

The development of an Australian Aborigine's identity was inextricably attached to his/her mother whose loss or absence from the child's life could lead the child to a life-long search for wholeness. In the life-writing entitled, *Auntie Rita* (1994), by Rita and Jackie Huggins when Rita Huggins' mother passed away, she remarked, "When you lose your mother, you lose part of yourself" (Huggins 113). In the non-traditional Aboriginal communities, not only was the role of the mother and her physical presence crucial for the child owing to the circumstances of its birth and upbringing, but the image of the mother was also central in the lifelong journey of the Aborigines as adults, especially of those belonging to the Stolen Generations. During the assimilation era, when the half-caste Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their mothers, they underwent irrevocable mental and emotional trauma which they could never really overcome in their lives. The mother as an absence haunted the lives of the Aborigines as an ever-present reality. Noeline Briggs-Smith in an article on her great great grandmother, Granny Lizzie, describes her experiences while working in a home for the aged:

> Many of the Elderly Aboriginal residents, especially the women, would start to cry and look for their mothers if left outdoors on the verandah during the summer evenings. These women lived in the past, and within their minds they were children again, so as soon as the sun set they became frightened and wanted to come indoors. (88)

The trauma of removal and longing for motherly love never left these people even in their old age. Thus, the obsession for the mother was overpowering in the Aborigines. Even later in their lives when the members of the stolen generation related their stories of separation, they could not do so without shedding tears. In *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1983), a documentary film made on the women of the Yorta Yorta community, we find elderly and grey-haired women like Margaret Tucker and others shedding tears recalling their separation from their mothers. Tucker's voice quivers as she recollects what had happened to her mother when she was taken away from her:

> I heard years later how my mother cried and cried ... she had nowhere to go, she went out into the bush and my old aunt ... as they were coming past ... they heard this moaning like an animal, you know, they stopped ... and discovered that it was my mother lying under the tree. (*Lousy Little Sixpence*)

The pain of separation remained alive and the longing for the mother became a part of the lives of these Aborigines who were removed from their families in their childhood.

Due to the crucial role of Aboriginal mothers in the emotional life of their children, longing for the mother recurs as a trope in the lives of almost every character of all the four life-writings analysed in this paper. In Morgan's *My Place*, one of the most popular stolen generation narratives ever produced by the Aboriginal community, we come across several instances of Aboriginal characters in their middle or old-age re-living the trauma and pain caused by their separation from their mothers. Arthur, Sally's granduncle, describes how difficult it was when government officials were taking him away from his mother when he was only eleven or twelve years old:

> When they came to get me, I clung to my mother and tried to sing them. I wanted them to die. I was too young, I didn't know how to sing them properly. I cried and cried, calling to my mother, 'I don't want to go, I don't want to go!' She was my favourite. I loved her. I called, 'I want to stop with you, I want to stop with you!' I never saw her again. (182)

Arthur remembers that he was "worried about [his] mother" for a long time (183). He missed her for he knew that she loved him. They were told that they were being taken for their education and they would not be long gone. But it was a lie. Arthur never returned to his mother again, and one day much later in his life he could feel in his spirit that his mother had passed away:

> I was out in the paddock, diggin' roots. ... suddenly, I was struck blind. I closed my eyes and opened them, but I couldn't see nothin'. ... I sat down ... and stayed there for a while, real still like. That's when I knew Annie was dead. My poor old mother who I hadn't seen since they took me away was dead. (207)

For the Aborigines, losing the mother is like getting enshrouded with darkness. For Rita Huggins, it was like losing a part of herself, for Arthur it was like getting blind – like losing the cheerful light of day. When Daisy, Morgan's grandmother, was taken away from the station she underwent the same pangs: "When I left, I was cryin', ... my mother was cryin' and beatin' her head. ... I called, 'Mum, Mum, Mum!. She said, 'Don't forget me, Talahue!' ... I couldn't stop cryin', I kept callin', 'Mum! Mum!'" (332). In her case too, her mother was told that she would be back soon after her education was complete. But once in Perth, she was not sent to school but made to work all the while. She recollects, "I kept thinkin' of my poor old mother and how she thought I was gettin' educated. ... I wanted to tell her all I was doin' was workin'" (333).

The story was same even with Daisy's daughter Gladys who had felt the same pain and longing as a small girl spending her childhood at Parkerville Children's Home. She was placed in the Home when she was three years old as Alice Drake-Brockman would not allow Daisy to keep her baby. Gladys says that most of the nights she would cry herself to sleep on the cold bed of the dormitory. She describes the Sunday afternoons when visitors were allowed and she would eagerly wait for her mother to come, but in vain, for her mother was hardly ever relieved from work, and if at all relieved she could not afford the train fare. Gladys recalls:

> We used to wait and wait, we knew it was a long, uphill walk from the station, and we never knew whether someone was coming for us or not. That was the worst part. You hoped right up to the very last minute. I used to think, well, Mum will be here soon, I'll just wait a little bit longer. ... I remember some years when I only saw her twice at the Home. (250)

When Gladys was sick and had undergone a surgery, even then she did not get to meet her mother: "I cried and cried. I couldn't understand why my mother hadn't been to visit me ... She told me later that she couldn't get time off work" (250). On one occasion, all the children of the Home were to visit the zoo and Gladys was very excited for she had not seen her mother "for ages" and was "very sad" (253). However, after the visit, when they were on their way back crossing the Swan River on a ferry, Gladys saw her mother on another boat coming from the opposite direction, perhaps on her way to meet her daughter at the zoo. Gladys screamed and "jumped up and down," but her mother did not hear her for once (254). When the boats had passed, Gladys "slumped into a corner" and "forgot all about the elephants and bears and lions" (254). She says, "All I could think about was my mother. The sadness inside me was so great I couldn't even cry" (254). It was the separation from the mother or the scarcity of opportunity to spend time with the mother that deepened the longing for motherly love in the Aborigines of the stolen generation. This feature is an important aspect of the identity of these Aboriginal people as the development of their personality has always been accompanied with a sense of incompleteness that was caused by the absence of the mother in their lives.

We find similar recollection of the pain caused by the severing of the mother and the child, and a deep longing for the mother in other life-writings as well. In *Wandering Girl*, Glenyse Ward says, "I have a Mum, but I don't know where she is. I'll find her one day, I suppose" (638). Ward was

taken away from her mother by the Native Welfare when she was just one year old as her mother was thought to be unfit for raising her child. We find Ward as a teenager wondering "how [her] mother [might] be doing" (1231). Ward's longing for motherly affection is evident when she says, "I had learnt that she lived in Geraldton. She once came down to Wandering and tried to visit but I had not been allowed to see her" (1231).

In *Auntie Rita*, Rita Huggins was also removed from her parents at Cherbourg reserve when she was thirteen years old and was placed as a domestic servant with a "pastoralist family at Barcudgel Station" (37). Rita remembers pensively, "Being so young I'd always get homesick ... My daydreams and spare moments were spent longing for home" (38). Later on, when she had had two children during her service as a domestic and had gone to Mackay to avoid bringing disgrace to her father, it was her attachment to her mother that had brought her back to Cherbourg. She recollects, "My mother was constantly on my mind, I missed her a lot and felt guilty because I never wrote her any letters" (46).

Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* also acquaints us with Ruby who had spent her childhood cherishing the wish that someday she would meet her mother who had left her when she was small. When a teenager, she would often sit "machining trousers" at the "Brachs' clothing factory" in Sydney, and wonder about her mother (43). Knowing the pain of having no mother in life, Ruby had promised to herself that when she herself would become a mother, she would never leave her children alone. This yearning for the mother figure or rather, motherly love, present in almost all the subjects of the life stories included in the four life-writings, represents a vital aspect of Aboriginality as experienced by the Aborigines of the stolen generations. This sense of vacuity and loss shared by the Aborigines across Australia is a consequence of the inhuman government policy of the removal of half-caste children from their families. The Australian Aboriginal women in registering these experiences have not only rewritten Australian Aboriginal history but have drawn our attention to the essential psychological and emotional vapidity that remains at the centre of the development of the identity of an Australian Aborigine of mixed descent.

Any discussion of the representation of Aboriginal motherhood in Australian Aboriginal life-writings should also focus on the experiences of the Aboriginal women as mothers. As mothers giving birth to half-caste children, the Australian Aboriginal women were victims of the assimilationist policies of the government. Due to the government policies of removal of half-caste children from their Aboriginal homes with the purpose of assimilating them into the mainstream white society, thousands of Aboriginal mothers had suffered the loss of their children. Mothers screaming and wailing in Aboriginal camps and stations were a common sight during the assimilation era. Broome notes that children would be "forced into the cars, with mothers wailing and threatening the officers with any weapons at hand" (87). Aboriginal mothers lamenting the loss of their children are common in the Australian Aboriginal women's life-writings. In *Auntie Rita*, Rita Huggins remembers how one night their Bidjara-Pitjara people's camp at the Carnarvon Gorge was "turned into a scattered mess"

by "troopers" who came on horseback and took away the Aborigines of mixed-blood, children and adult (9). She remembers one old lady running after the truck that was carrying off her children and grandchildren, and crying "Don't take my gunduburries! Don't take my gunduburries!" (10). In Sally Morgan's *My Place*, we find Annie, Morgan's great grandmother desperately "cryin' and beatin' her head" when Daisy was taken away from her (332). Daisy could hear her wailing for "miles and miles" (332). Annie, the full-blood Aboriginal woman, had lost two of her half-caste children, Diasy and Albert, due to the child removal policy. Even Daisy in her turn, was separated from her daughter, Gladys, when she was sent to Parkerville's Children's Home. Daisy remembers that at that time Gladys was too young to understand anything. She thought she was going on a picnic, but it was too hard for Daisy to bear. She says, "I ran down to the wild bamboo near the river and I hid and cried and cried and cried" (341). Most Aboriginal women had gone through this phase of oppressed motherhood, when the oppressive white government after taking away their land and their culture, had also taken their children away. In *Auntie Rita*, we find that Mutoo who was born to Rita Huggins during her service as a domestic in Brisbane, had to be left with Rita's parents at Cherbourg. Rita says, "It was a hard thing for me to do but with being sent out to work all the time I had no choice" (42). Such was the oppressive demand for labour from the Aboriginal domestics that the white masters and mistresses didn't spare them any time for taking care of their babies. Daisy recollects that when Gladys was a baby, sometimes "she'd be cryin', cryin'" but Daisy "couldn't go to her" as she had "too much work to do" (340). Like Rita Huggins, Daisy too had to leave her first born child about whom she had not disclosed anything in the narrative. Daisy reveals, "Before I had Gladdie, I was carryin' another child, but I wasn't allowed to keep it. That was the way of it, then. They took our children one way or another" (340). Daisy wonders how people could be so heartless and thinks of the suffering her own mother had been through, "How can a mother lose a child like that? ... I thought of my poor old mother then, they took her Arthur from her, and then they took me. She was broken-hearted, God bless her" (Morgan 341).

If bereavement over the loss of children was a factor that characterised Australian Aboriginal motherhood, it was not only caused by the government policy of removal of half-caste children, but also by the effects of marginalisation and the discriminatory practises of the state. Due to malnutrition and poor living conditions, child mortality rate was very high among the Aborigines since the early days of colonisation. Alcoholism, addiction to methylated spirits and substance abuse induced by experiences of racial discrimination, unemployment, poverty, incarceration and police atrocities in urban Australia were also causes that led to high death rates of Aborigines. Ruby Langford's son, David, died of drug abuse. He had no job, no money, was divorced and had to give up the custody of his children. In his post-mortem report the "cause of his death was classified as acute narcotism" (Langford 227). Death caused by alcohol and drug abuse was not uncommon among the Aboriginal youths. David's incident had taken place at Glebe House and Ruby in her desperation to find some answers visited the place and found everyone in pathetic condition, living in their "own private hells"

(227). Often police atrocities were direct causes of death of Aboriginal youths. When Langford was writing her story, The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) (1987–1991) had already begun its enquiry into the high level of deaths of Aborigines in police custody. Langford in her narrative is tormented by her sons Nobby and David and their friends getting into trouble with the police, being arrested and sent to juvenile corrective institutions and serving terms in the prison. Ruby remarks, "I knew quite a lot about what went on inside prisons. Nob, David, Steve, James, Patrick and Horse all had stories to tell. ... I knew Nob had been bashed by police, ... that prison broke people's spirits, and it was killing our sons like a war" (224). According to Kahn et al., "In August 1988, Aborigines were placed in custody nationally at a rate some 20 times that of non-Aborigines" (352). Marcia Langton corroborates as she says:

> The Aboriginal people of Australia suffer the highest recorded imprisonment rate in the world, and it has long been recognised that dispossession, racism and cultural misunderstanding are the most significant contributions to the disproportionate rates of arrest, conviction and penalty for Aboriginal people. (201)

As a result of this high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal youths, Australian Aboriginal mothers suffered a perennial pain of separation from their sons. The fact that in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* not only Ruby but her friend Nerida too had suffered the loss of her children due to similar causes makes the scenario of bereaving mothers a general one in urban and semi-urban Aboriginal communities. Ruby remarks about Nerida and herself as mothers: "She had a family of ten children and lost four boys and I had lost two, so we know what it's like to lose the ones we love the most of all, our children" (221). Of the four dead sons of Nerida, Happy had died in a "shooting accident," and her eldest Bill was missing for three months and was then "found in the river at Dubbo" (221).

Racism and marginalisation of the Aborigines were causes that can be attributed to the bereavement of the Australian Aboriginal mothers. Writing about these issues in the narrative was one way of raising the voice and drawing the attention to the suffering these mothers were subjected to. It can be said that the excruciating pain felt by most Aboriginal mothers over the loss of their children is the most poignant of all Aboriginal experiences encountered by the Australian Aboriginal women of mixed descent. The 1980s and the 1990s were a time when the grand narratives of official white history were getting challenged increasingly by historical narratives that focused on Aboriginal Australia. The publication of these narratives contributed to the narrative accrual which had already gained a large readership in white Australia. These stories bearing poignant details of trauma and pain laid bare the racially discriminatory policies of the Australian government and proved the fact that though colonialism was over for white Australia, it was not for Aboriginal Australia. The notion of Aboriginal motherhood and the emotions associated with it have been used as a trope in these life-writings to delineate just one aspect of the Aboriginal experience amongst many others. By recording these experiences the Aboriginal women writers have contributed in their own way towards the re-writing of Australian history, which in turn resulted in the issuance of a formal apology to the

indigenous peoples of Australia by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008 and several other measures to undo and recompense the loss incurred by the Aboriginal peoples due to racially coloured, unjust government policies.

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