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Self-Assertion and Politics of Identity in *The Silent Country*

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Abstract:

Self-assertion of Aboriginal identity and the identity politics attached with it is much discussed and debated issue in Australian literature of twentieth century. However, in the novels of Di Morrissey both of these issues are squarely focused and pondered over by the writer. She put forth realistic condition of Aboriginals in the Australia, problems being faced by them in society, failure of government's protective and assimilation measure, and assertion of identity in her select novel depicting the contemporary socio-political conditions of the nation.

Key concepts: Aboriginal, self-assertion, identity, politics, marginal, corroboree.

Introduction:

Aboriginal identity is much discussed issue in the twentieth century commonwealth literature. Australian literature in English is not exception for that. One such writer named Di Morrissey, who is often considered to be a popular writer started writing her novels in last decade of twentieth century, have enunciated enough voice for the issue in her novels written in post modern era. Australian Aboriginals are among the very much exploited and manipulated communities in the world. The colonial powers, specifically, Britain dumped their culprits to the newly found land named Australia in the late eighteenth century and left them to develop penal colonies there. While developing the land it was inevitable to have severe clashes with the Aboriginals. The well-armed whites outwitted on Aboriginals in every respect and removed them from their dwelling places and claimed the ownership of the land. Many decades of suppression and annihilation the Aboriginals answered back to the whites in their language and claimed their identity by self-assertion, belonging to the land, and equal citizenship of Australia. The topic is vast to curtail and fit into one paper, however, the researcher will particularly deal with self-assertion of Aboriginal identity and politics related with reference Di Morrissey's novel entitled *The Silent Country* (2009).

Pre-colonial context:

There were hundreds of self-identifying groups residing in the continent who were claiming to be original habitants of the continent. But the term 'Aboriginal' is a borrowed term. It was applied by the white colonizers to the black people of Australia. European empirical powers labeled all of those black groups as 'Aboriginals' despite of their distinct tribe titles. Therefore, Brownyn in his book states that,

“...identifying Aboriginal is historically constricted European thought imagination as the primitive and native understood in terms of distance from the civilised European male who stood at the top of global human and racial hierarchy.”(Brownyn Carlson 20)

The said hierarchy was based on European cultural progress which was an indicator of white man's superior intelligence developed since the Enlightenment era during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This thought process measured the physical and intellectual progress of mankind spread all over the globe divided into the continents in relation to the biological and racial criteria. Therefore, the 'full blood' Australian was seen as a 'primitive, babyhood of mankind, and archaic survivors of man's existence'. They were considered to be a dying race and wandering savage. On the other hand, the mixed-blood or partially Aboriginal generation was a major concern for the government agencies because the presence of Aboriginal blood was the indication of genetic inheritance embodied the capacity to progress culturally.

Colonial Context:

Initially, policies regarding Aboriginals were determined by the white officials from the higher authority in the government. Despite the failures of many such policies, it helped to infiltrate benevolent treatment for the Aboriginals. During the late nineteenth century Government began to grant various protective policies to the Aboriginal settlements in the white colonies resulting the reserves and mission systems to so called 'civilize' the small portion of Aboriginal population in the continent. There were various and rigorous attempts to define 'Aboriginal' on various levels of governmental agencies. In these attempts Aboriginality was defined first of all on the basis of biological basis i.e. blood-testing which is named as 'Blood Quantum' method. (Gale Thomas) In this method full blood aborigine was labeled as Aborigine, whose one of the parents were Aborigines were labeled as 'half-caste', those whose one of the grandparents were Aborigines were referred as 'quarter-caste or quadroons', and finally whose one of the great-

grandparents were Aborigines were called as ‘octoroons’. (www.aph.gov.au) However this system itself has flaws because further it was scientifically proved that almost every man in the world is, in one way or the other, descendent of African Aborigine called ‘Mungo Man’ whose remains were found in the proximity of Lake Mungo. (wikipedia.org) In 1928 government agency researching present condition of Aborigines and part Aborigines in Australia proposed the full absorption of ‘part-Aborigines’ into white community for separating mixture of full blood Aborigine with the whites. In 1937 there was national shift toward the assimilation of Aborigines with the white community dictating in the words of Reynolds,

“...the destiny of the native aborigine origin, but not the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the commonwealth...” (Reynolds 172)

But the term ‘Aborigine’, ‘Part Aborigine’ or ‘Not Aborigine’ were yet to be defined in legislative terms therefore this policy of assimilation was not much success. Only small portion of part-Aborigine was benefitted by the policy. It was often criticized that it was an attempt to fracture the family system of Aborigines in the country. One less talked about but more widespread and influential reason of this exclusion of part-Aborigine from the mainstream Aborigine community is to control the government expenditure on missions and reserves in the country. Legally, those who were ‘half-caste’ still considered Aborigines although they were deprived from all the rights of Aborigines due to their part-Aborigine situation. Opening decades of the twentieth century saw a new shift in the process of defining an Aborigine. Despite admixture of Aborigine and white ancestry, the skin-colour and cultural activities were used as determining factors of Aborigine people on individual and collective basis. However, later it was proved that there was enough space for subjective judgments regarding one’s Abiginity and therefore, skin-colour criterion was put aside.

Assimilation and Reconciliation Era:

In the second half of twentieth century the colonial attempts of defining, interpreting and regulating Aborigines were challenged by the Aborigines itself. Defining ‘who’ is and ‘what’ is Aborigine became entirely task of Aborigine community and individuals’ relating to it. However, it was not so easy transition from protection policy to self-definition because most of full-blood Aborigines were either died, or became part-Aborigines and hanging between ‘Abo or non-Abo’ position and lost the contact of their culture. These newly assimilated part-

Aboriginals started looking down upon their kinsmen and attempted, failingly, to maintain their so-called upper-class in lower strata in the Australian social structure. Further shift came in 1970s when new definition of Aboriginal was introduced in which three criteria were emphasized in an attempt to define Aboriginality. They were: **a)** person of Aboriginal descent, **b)** self-assertion of aboriginality by the individual, and **c)** acceptance of the individual by aboriginal community. In the same decade Aboriginality was termed as an ethnic category structured around self-identification as an Aborigine, and differentiation from other on the basis of biological and cultural criteria, pride in tribal traits of traditional society. In an urban cities the Aboriginal were came from various parts of country, the collective concept of Aboriginality was developed and enforced the individuals to think upon common grounds of identification.

The researcher shall study the novel in the light of above-stated account of Aboriginal assertion of identity and politics associated with the same which is connoted in the novel itself. The novel talks about a young woman named Veronica Anderson who is in the pursuit of a good storyline for her television documentary, accidentally came into the contact of the people who have experienced a trip to Australian outback region fifty years ago. The novel is about an encounter with Outback Australia and particularly white and black Australia. At the end of the novel Veronica succeeded in achieving one the best storyline on Australian outback region for her documentary and solved the mystery of a Russian movie director named Maxim Topov who was on tour of Outback and reported to be died suspiciously. But, in between these incidents she happened to meet various Aboriginals and partially white people and acknowledged their plight. She also experienced how they are identifying themselves and fitting in the rapidly changing modern Australian society. The character named Doris who is depicted as a writer and social activist fighting for the cause of Aboriginals and her son Jamie McIntosh are the central figures in respect of the issue stated in this paper. Veronica met Jamie when she was commissioned by her boss to search a storyline for his TV channel Network Eleven. He is partially aboriginal and confessed this truth to her honestly. When he took her to Arnhem Hills he confessed that,

“I mightn’t look very aboriginal, but my heart is. Lot of white Australians aren’t sure how to handle someone like we even if they are three quarters white, as in my case...”(Morrissey Di 277)

From the government sponsored policy of protection to the policy of assimilation up to mid-twentieth century part-Aboriginal people were continuously subject to segregation and the

aim of this practice was to assimilate them in the mainstream white Australian society. Such part Aboriginal individuals were vulnerable to absorption. But shifts in the ideology of defining identity enforced such individuals to define themselves in the context of their heredity, descent, and distinct cultural and traditional parameters. Jamie is a representative of that generation in Australian society. Government agency's assumption that assimilation will absorb part Aboriginals into the white society and rest of the full-blood Aborigines will sooner or later die out and their progeny will be extinguished was proven false. On the other hands, more elaborate concept of pan-Aboriginality came into existence in the last decade of twentieth century uniting all the blacks and protesting government sponsored practices of segregation and paralyzing their right to define themselves. The author rightly pointed out the issue in the novel and criticized on the same.

His mother Doris stated her pride to be Aboriginal in following words,

“To understand the essence of what all this is about...the connection a country has to the heart of Aboriginal and white people...For the Aboriginal people it has a deep spiritual meaning.”(Morrissey Di 68)

Apart from common descent and community identification; Doris emphasizes upon self-assertion as well as cultural parameter of defining her identity. She refers to Aboriginal myth narratives being told since thousands of years and her ancestral connection to the country. One of the criteria of Aboriginality is that they are nomads and wander all over the country. The concept of ‘possession of land’ is absent in their tradition. They worship land as a God. She refer partially black as a “gray nomads” and further states that the people,

“...who, in their later years sell their family home and get in caravans and four-wheel drives and spend time travelling around the ‘real’ Australia, they get sense of what this ancient continent and its first people are all about. You can only do that by being there”. (Morrissey Di 68)

For being an Aboriginal, in the words of Di Morrissey, one must have a ‘*walking sense*’ of life. There should be a development of intimate bond between human being and land. The mutual understanding between environment and human being increases adaptability of human beings for the smoother existence into the particular environment. Aboriginals revered land and their environment very much. For them these two things are next to Almighty and they pray it into their corroboree. They establish cosmic relation with an environment. Therefore, Jamie told

Veronica that he can sense the buzzing of birds, insects and there is no bombardment of city sounds and still it is a busy world when it is looking like empty and silent. Veronica feels that the land speaks to her. Her mindset was transformed in the company of Jamie. She started looking at Aboriginality in a different manner, and in a positive way.

When Veronica meets Doris, she came to know the real but pathetic condition of Aboriginals despite the government's inadequate endeavour to eradicate social discrimination on the basis of race and skin-colour. Doris is proud of her heredity nonetheless, she is well-aware and had been a subject to discrimination the basis of race and skin-colour. She told Veronica,

“...but there is still shameful inequality in this country, you know. Half of the people in gaols across the country are Aboriginals and yet they make up only two percent of the population. Our people have shorter life span and suffer dreadful health problems. Time isn't fixing it. We are losing next generation to disappear. Old people haven't been able to fit in and young people don't respect them. Traditional knowledge and lore is being lost...There are no easy answers. It is true that education, better health and housing are part of the solution, but it is a very complex problem. I just want to be able to help constructively where I can.” (Morrissey Di 434-435)

She also emphasizes that government assistance in reforming and rehabilitating these people is inadequate. It is mostly biased on the assumption that these people are utterly civilized, and therefore, they must be 'tamed' and no need to take into consideration the needs of these people. It was and still is supposed that Aboriginal people do not possess ideological power and challenge to the privileges of the state. This white supremacy is severely criticized by Doris in her above-stated expressions in the novel. The continuing task of contemporary Aboriginals and partially Aboriginals in Australia is to overthrow the received white's concept and identity label of Aboriginality and to invent new ones by self-assertion of the identity. Geoffrey Stokes expresses the need of “...replacement of more appropriate label of Aboriginal identity...” (Stokes Geoffrey 159) The novel focuses on the fact that Aboriginal people can create ideologies with the changes of time and progress that were largely different forms of aboriginal politics and culture in the past.

One more important point to be taken into consideration is that the identity itself is closely associated with the term heritage. Since the thousands of years Aboriginals have been living on the piece of earth. They have developed their distinct culture and civilization, their

myths and deities, and alien ways of leading life generations to generations. This reservoir of culture is still being transferred to the next generation by the elders in the extended families through the stories and the myths. Often, superficially, colour is held to be the primary criteria of Aboriginal identity which is not a true criterion. It is the culture which determines whether the person is Aboriginal or not. That is why families in Aboriginals held important place in community. In respect to this Doris says to Veronica,

“Not for many years until there was an understanding of what terrible wrongs had been wrought on Aboriginal families, which was one of the reasons I became active in trying to help to raise the funds and set up groups to help reunite families...Everyone wants to know where they came from, who their parents were and what their origins are, black, white or brindle. It is why family is so important to us now...” (Morrissey Di 67)

It is widely accepted and true that when an identity assertion takes place in an ethnic community, the members of the community manifest claims by organizing various types of movements including ethnic and cultural movements. An important link to Aboriginal identity is their land claims and kinship relations among the community. The feeling of being Aboriginal is very strong in Doris and her son Jamie. Although tracing the roots of Aboriginality have been difficult task for her, she and her son emphasizes on looks, memory of songs and stories told to them, Aboriginal's way of seeing the things, tokengiven to her by her friend Martha, and her kinsmen's way of relating to them.

Conclusion:

Di Morrissey describes a journey a young woman through the unknown regions of country exploring Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people who in the course of colonial history have become disconnected from their family, culture, and tradition; reasserting, reconnecting, and re-establishing their ties with their culture by overthrowing borrowed concepts of identity. It is an attempt of peeping into the new way of life and projecting it to the world interweaving finely crafted story into real socio-political condition in the modern Australia.

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