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A Painful Past: Depiction of Stolen Generation in Aboriginal Life Writing

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The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families is one of the darkest chapters of Australian history. Snatching children from their families was the most ravaging practice. A recent national report on the policies found that there was not a single Indigenous family that did not have a child taken away. The term “Stolen Generations” was coined in 1982 by the historian Peter Read in a short report written for the New South Wales government. He reminds that at the time no one was interested: “Non-Aboriginals said that it couldn’t have happened. The victims of removal thought it was a shame job to talk about their removal” (Read, 4).

In stealing Aboriginal children White people stole their future language, tradition, and spirituality that they could pass to their children. White people hoped to end Aboriginal culture within a short period and get rid of them. In three generations they thought Aboriginal genes would have been bred out when Aboriginal people had children with white people. The practice of removing children from their families had begun during the European settlement when children were used as guides, servants and farm labor. Aboriginal children were “forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia” (HREOC, 2). In 1909 the Aborigines Protection Act gave the Aborigines Protection Board legal section to take Aboriginal children from their families. In 1915, an amendment to the Act gave the Board power to remove any child without parental consent and without a court order. The HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) research found that children removed from their families are disadvantaged in many ways:

They had been taught to reject their Aboriginal culture .

1. They suffer from depression and mental illness.
2. They are the victim to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.
3. They are unable to link their land.

Most of the stolen children were mixed, relation between white and black resulted in increased mixing of blood and they were called half caste and became the problem of white society. In 1997 after the report of *Bringing Them Home*, the first national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children came into existence. Frow talked about that it was the first report to “give a voice to those who have not been listened to, or who have had the language in which to tell a story taken away from them” (Frow 2). *Bringing Them Home* depicts the stories of over 500 Indigenous Australians who had been forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.

Young children were stolen from their families to be placed in girls and boys homes, foster families or missions. At the age of 18 or 20 they were released into white society. Many Aboriginal people are still searching their parents Jennifer, personal story in the *Bringing Them Home Report* says: “I feel our childhood has been taken away from us and it has left a big hole in our lives.” (25) The children usually removed were between the ages of two and four; and, in some cases they were removed just hours after birth, as is shown by Doris Pilkington:

Every mother of a part-Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time and they were powerless to stop the abductors. That is why many women preferred to give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where they believed their babies would be taken from them soon after birth (Pilkington, *F R-P F* 40-41).

Carmel Bird, a white Australian novelist, edited a small selection of the stories contained in *Bringing Them Home* and published them under the title *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*. Bird's stories give the mother's point of view and his introduction makes it very clear how she wants the stories be read:

No two words strike deeper into the human heart than the words 'stolen children'. Nothing is more valuable to us than our children, nothing so irreplaceable, so precious, so beloved. The history of white Australians is marred by children lost in the bush, children spirited away by unknown agents. The stories of these children have become the stuff of myth, icons of horror, and they ring with the notes of darkest nightmare. (Bird,10)

There are some other children experiences who had to face hardship after the separation with their families: "Sometimes at night we'd cry with hunger. We had to scrounge in the town dump, eating old bread, smashing tomato sauce bottles, licking them." (HREOC,7)

The stolen children were raised in institutions or fostered out to White families. Bill Simon taken away aged 10 says :

"We were each handed a pair of pyjamas with a number Mr. Borland, the manager, had given us earlier printed on the pocket, and a shirt and pair of shorts also. I was number 33. Not Bill. Not even Simon. Just number 33." (65)

Life Writing texts dealing with the topic of the Stolen Generations have been emerging in Australian literature since the 1970s and there are still many autobiographies and text being published today. The aim of this paper is to deal with the topic how Aboriginal writers have depicted and dealt with this subject in autobiographies and fiction. I would like to select women writers rather than man because they faced double jeopardy first as children and then as mothers. They have become "the bearers of 'naïve knowledges,' a counter-discourse to white culture" (Brewster.3). Indigenous women's autobiography is a way of revealing the reality of their lives and positioning themselves as subjects instead of objects and a protest against government or whites. Female authors have been, still are, pioneers in Australian Aboriginal writing of life stories, they directly experienced the process of removal and through their experience and memoirs tried to explore the condition of Aboriginal in Australian.

Storytelling plays the role of educating non-Aboriginal people about invisible part of history. Anne Brewster in —Aboriginality and Sally Morgan's *My Place* tells:

These stories are not merely for our edification and entertainment; they are not told simply for white people's consumption; at the very point that they resist consumption these stories reveal the existence of other knowledges, some of which remain inaccessible to non-Aboriginal people (Brewster,24).

It was shocking that innocent children who were completely discouraged from the family contact had to face such cruelties and punished for breaking the rules. Many Aboriginal autobiographies tell stories of a forcible removal from their families by government. In 1977 Margaret Tucker was the first Indigenous woman, who publish her own experience of being removed as a child in a book, titled *If Everyone Cared*. The next generation are Glenyse Ward, Doris Pilkington, and Sally Morgan.

In simple prose Glenyse Ward gives account of her life after removal in her autobiography *Wandering Girl*. It is a text about a stolen aboriginal girl who was taken away from her mother because she was a half cast. The story is focused on the period of her life when she was working for the Bigelow family. When she was baby, she was taken from her Nyoongarvii parents to St. John of God's orphanage in Rivervale, Perth. At the age of three she was moved to Wandering, short for St Francis Xavier Native Mission at Wandering Brook, was treated like a slave. She had to grow up with humiliation from the whole family, especially from Mrs. Bigelow who talked to her scornfully all the time.

A note at the end of the 1995 edition reveals that “when her mother took her to the doctor's when she was one year old, she was taken away by Native Welfare as her mother was deemed unfit.” The opening page text illustrates the pain of stolen generation :

You see in the early days of survival and struggle, there was a lot of hardship and agony amongst the Aboriginal people. Through the misguided minds of earnest white people we were taken away from our natural parents. This affected all of us. *We lost our identity* through being put into missions, forced to abide by the European way (Ward.1)

Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow The Rabbit- Proof Fence* depicts the dishonorable history of the Stolen Generations. The impact of it has passed on to the families, who suffered the loss of their children; and to the next generation—whose parents were also part of the Stolen Generations. The separation of Aboriginal Children by Western Australian Government is the main issue that she addressed in her book. Leaving home is always a dreadful experience for the children, especially when their parents standing behind and not being able to do anything to save their children. Pilkington was herself the victim of child removal. At the age of twenty five she met her mother and heard her story and decided to narrate an oral recital from her aunts and mother. She chooses her mother and aunts' memoir rather than her own. In the *Sunday Morning Herald* She described:

For a long time, though, I was angry, particularly at the missionaries who brought me up to believe Aboriginal people were dirty and evil. For many years that alienated me from their families. ... My reunion with my mother, my ability to return my country, was pivotal to my healing- as it is for others separated from their families. (Pilkington 15)

She tells the story of three Aboriginal girls, Molly Kelley, her sister Daisy and their cousin Gracie. The authority comes and simply announces that he comes to take Molly, Gracie and Daisy to the school. They were forcibly removed from their families, at Jigalong in the East Pilbara region of Western Australia, and sent to Moore River Native settlement near Perth.

Pilkington says, “every mother of a part- Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time and they were powerless to stop the abductors” (40),

The condition of children are worst there. They are not allowed to speak their native language and if they spoke, are put into solitary confinement for 14 days. This story illustrates their escape from confinement in a government camp for half-castes, and their return home.

The girls make their escape by using a “rabbit-proof fence” as a navigation tool, they walk 1,500 without food or drink to return to Jigalong. The fence symbolizes freedom in the book and it runs from coast to coast in Western Australia. They give encouragement to many stolen children to find their lost identity. Pilkington says:

I’m hoping that through my writings others, who have been taken away from their traditional areas, would be encouraged to go back and reconnect with their land, reclaim their language, culture and identity. It took me over 10 years to really sit down and say _I belong to this land, the land belongs to me. I had to go through a lot of relearning (54).

Doris Pilkington portrays her own story, in *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, her removal from her family was quite different. Her mother Molly suffers from appendicitis, her doctor recommends the Commissioner of Native Affairs to send her Perth for an operation. The note that “Molly and her children would be travelling with Bill Campbell by overland mail” and that “Molly’s ‘black husband’, so called, was to be left at the station” (55) not reached to the Molly. The authorities did not inform Molly that she would be taken away together with her children. In an interview in February 2002, in ABC Radio National’s Indigenous Arts programme, Doris Pilkington talks about her experience with the government:

My mother had been suffering with appendicitis for many months and in those days Aboriginal people weren’t admitted into public hospitals. They were taken to hospital if there was a medical problem and only if there was a —Native Ward attached to that hospital (Pilkington).

When Molly is hospitalized, her daughters Pilkington and Anna are taken to Moore River. When, after a month, Molly is released from the hospital, she is taken to the settlement to meet with her daughters. However, she is not allowed to keep her daughters, she can only keep her daughter Anna as she is still breastfeeding her, Doris Pilkington has to stay there. Molly has to run away from the settlement with Anna, leaving Doris behind. This separation is differ from the others as Molly chooses to leave with only one of her daughters. Although she couldn’t keep her younger daughter for a long time, she loses Anna very shortly because she is “too white to remain in the native environment” (61). Molly tries a lot to prevent it but she can’t.

The Aboriginal female autobiographies such as Sally Morgan reflect the culture of dispossession, sexual molestation, story of the stolen children and untold sufferings and pain. The book traces how She uncovered her family history and includes not only her own story but that of her mother, her grand-mother and her great uncle. The chief protagonists of this novel Gladys and Daisy are representative of the stolen generations, Aboriginality or marginality racism, who interpret the harsh exploitation and repercussion of the oppressor’s manifestation of power on the identity of the individual. Her grandmother refuses for a long time to talk to her about it. When Sally finds out that she is Aboriginal, she started to do something to identify with

her new found heritage. Her research enables her to understand her Nan's and Mum's fear and shame.

Although Daisy eventually talks about how she was stolen from her parents but she refuses to talk about her first experiences as a mother. She neither tell how she became pregnant not what happened to her baby. Sally thinks that she has only one baby But her research enabled her to understand that she had at least six children taken from her. At her last stage of life, Daisy says to Sally: "don't you understand, yet ... there are some things I just can't talk 'bout" (Sally.343).

Aborigines were exploited as servants, unpaid labor. This exploitation was possible in the relationship between the British and Aborigines because Aborigines were not protected by Australian laws. Sally explains why she has begun to write the history of her family and of Aboriginal Australia in general as such:

Our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. Nan thinks I'm trying to make trouble, but I'm not. I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story (Morgan, 164).

Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* is another testimony to the child removal policy in Australia. Nannup's mother always tries to protect the children and tells them: "If they (the scouts) come around, get under the bed and don't talk, just keep quiet" (Nannup. 38) but she can't protect them. Alice Nannup was also forcibly removed from her parents and sent to the Moore River Native Settlement. Where she was trained as a domestic servant and sent to work for white families, she faced there a lot of hardship and humiliation. Nannup also later traced back her Aboriginal roots. Alice was twelve before she was removed from her family and fourteen before she was taken to Moore River. She already knew a Yindibarndi Law, bushcraft and language, as well as how to cook, clean and serve before she arrived. Alice was too old to be easily displaced.

When Nannup was taken her mother was convinced that she is taken to be educated, and her mother allows them to take her daughter to school and Nannup, too, looks forward to going to school; She says that she really thinks, she is going to school: "I didn't know, I never even thought of it really, that there were other plans for me" (39).

Alice finally returned to her Aboriginal family in 1965. This was a very difficult time for her. She felt very cheated that she missed her family and their affections but the reunion with the relatives fills her with emotion, it was a crying session, and a memory session. Despite the forty year gap in Alice's association with her family, lot of changes had occurred in her absence. This healing in continued in Alice's final return to her country in 1987. She states:

I put the water in my mouth and I blew hard towards the sun. As I blew this big rainbow came, and I said 'Yinda Ngurra-I belong' ... I felt good then, I felt I was back They saw him, they saw the snake. He was stretched out on top of the water and they just couldn't believe it ... [Later] two old tribal men came to see me. They were really happy to think that I did the right thing ... I felt really good

about going back, because although they tricked me when they took me away, in my lifetime I was able to get back some of what they took from me. You see, forty-two years later I got back to my family, and sixty-four years from when I left Port Samson, I got back to make my peace with my country. (Nannup 223).

When children were taken away from their families to provide better conditions for living, however, truth was totally different. The children were subjected to overcrowded dirty dormitories, inadequate clothing and insufficient food. Their conditions was very harsh as the money was used by the authorities for their own benefit and there was lack of money to provide children any facility they needed. According to *Bringing Them Home* report: "The physical infrastructure of missions, government institutions and children's homes was often very poor and resources were insufficient to improve them or to keep the children adequately clothed, fed and sheltered." The children remain hungry because they did not use to be enough food to satisfy the children's appetite. Pilkington says that "offal collected from the slaughterhouse and taken down to be cleaned and cooked on the coals of a big fire lit on the banks of the river, was more tasty than what was provided by the cook and staff at the kitchen" (Pilkington.66).

Rita Huggins depicts different situation, ... an official would ration out food, clothing and blankets every fortnight, but the food was only enough to last a few days. ... Among the rations was a lot of anything bad for health like sugar, salt, flour, tea, offal ... and bibles and very little of any nutritional value". (Huggins.19).

Alice Nannup gives an example of how the soup was being prepared: "For the soup they'd cook up these awful sheep heads. First they'd skin them, but never take the eyes out, then they'd split them down the middle, give them a quick rinse and throw them in the copper. Sometimes those sheep heads had bot-fly in their noses but they wouldn't worry about that" (Nannup,64).

Regarding clothes and food, their condition was worst there. They even were not getting the basic things they needed. Nannup describes in winters neither of them possessed shoes: "It got so cold that when Herbert and I used to go and get the cows to bring them in, the ice used to freeze our feet. We didn't have shoes to wear, so we used to wait for the cows to let their droppings down and fight for every cow that dropped so we could stick our feet in it" (54). Doris Pilkington explains that when there was shortage of elastic for the girls' underwear it was substituted with white tape (Pilkington, 82). Glenyse Ward describes the underwear they wear "made of Dingo brand self-rising flour bags" and comments that "if there had been a prize going for fashion in those days I am sure we would have taken first" (Ward,4)

Aboriginal children were sent to work for unknown people especially at the white's houses and they were treated worst. Aboriginal workers are not treated as human beings but as animals. Glenyse's time at the mayor's home is much more difficult as she is not at all accepted as a part of the family. Her process of growth in adverse circumstances imposed by racist society, As Mrs Bigelow's "dark servant" (12) and "slave" (19), she becomes an insecure, depersonalized a "robot" (62), "shadow" (77), or "dummy" (131), unable to express herself. The treatment she faces can't be ignored, Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow drink from nice cups, Ward is given a tin mug. She says typically, "In those days, not so long ago either, we were not allowed to say anything against our white bosses. So I hid my feelings and told (Brother Leonard) they were

good and I liked it there, just to please him. If only he had known how I felt” (126). Ward is forbidden to sing or make any noise; she is there “as her Mrs. Bigelow’s servant, and she [Mrs. Bigelow] wasn’t allowing her servants to go around making noises” (20).

There is another shocking example of their cruelty, although they live in a beautiful house full of silver decorations and red carpets, but Ward is sent through the whole house into the garage where she is told that this is going to be her room. When she objected and asks the reason of it she is again told what she had already heard – that she is her “dark servant” and she worked for her [Mrs. Bigelow] (13). This reception was shocking for her. She has never experienced such a treatment before. This text shows her slow process of growth towards a fuller self-awareness and more assertive attitude. . Eventually, “I had started to hate the place, and had made my mind up to leave as I was sick and tired of their attitude towards me” (151).

The Bigelow’s guests are not supposed to see a dark servant when they want to entertain themselves so she was forbidden to be seen near the house when guests are in the house. She depicts:

Soon as I opened the door all the chatter and laughter stopped. You could hear a pin drop as all eyes were on me. All of a sudden, some pushed-up voice, with a plum in her mouth, came out of the crowd, “Tracey dear, is that you little dark servant?” I just stood there smiling. I thought it was wonderful that at least people were taking notice of me. There were sniggers and jeers from everywhere. I turned to the lady who did all the talking, and said, “My name is Glenyse”. She was quite startled; she said, “Oh dear, I didn’t think you had a name.” (24)

Although Alice Nannup’s condition is better than Glenyse. Mrs. Larsen is a nice person but the work, though, is very difficult for Nannup. She has to spend days and nights with Mrs. Larsen, who may need her help any time. But like the other whites she calls her black, “My little black girl has been with me for such a long time and she’s worth a hundred of those others that I can’t trust, so I’ve decided to keep her on for a while” (Nannup,101). This is very disappointing for Nannup and it hurts her a lot.

Earlier when Alice Nannup was taken away by Campbell from her family in Beeginup where she had to do work as a child. She depicts that she and her friend “Herbert had to milk sixteen cows every morning, then take them out to the paddock and then bring them back home in the evening”. (52). In *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, Doris Pilkington depicts “six hours a day, six days a week. Sunday was set aside for worship and meditation. It was a life of firm discipline and hard labour, a regiment lifestyle” (Pilkington142).

The children work a lot but get a few, their wages are very little. Glenyse Ward gets three months wages four dollars. Alice Nannup wages are five shillings a week half is given her pocket money and that the other half goes to Mr. Neville to put in the bank (93). Although Nannup had a time limit for every job, their wages sometimes used to be taken away if they couldn’t complete in time, “See, we’d have ten minutes to wash up the dishes, and if we didn’t do it in time we’d lose the two shillings” (Nannup,52).

Half of the wages of the Aboriginal workers was sent to the bank to be saved there for them; however, most of the Aboriginal people never got this money. Alice Nannup describes:

We were all working girls and to get our money that the department held in the bank we had to go into the office and ask for it. You had to tell them what you wanted your money for, and they would fill out a request form. Then the lady at the office would have to go and ask Mr. Neville if she could give us our money. Then he'd send her back to ask what we wanted it for. If he said yes, she'd say to us: 'Now don't you squander it. You make it last.' Always she'd say that – even though it was our money. (118).

The traumatic past of the Stolen Generations documented in Indigenous life writing and *Bring Them Home* report. One of the most important functions of Aboriginal writing is to make non-Aboriginals realise that there is another side to their country's history. As Jackie Huggins explains:

the nature of our concerns as Aboriginal people is at times fiercely urgent and emotional, to the point that we can deal with them in no other time except the present. So, in order to get our voices heard, we sometimes have to take drastic steps, such as stating the issues clearly in spite of who might hear them and whether it will offend them or not. ... Aboriginal affairs are a never-ending story with many chapters being written all the time. (Auntie Rita 148)

The forcible removals of children were really severe, even though the stated intention of the government was to mix Indigenous people into modern society, but there is no improvement in the social status of Aborigines. particularly in the areas of education, employment and health. But In 1995, the common wealth Attorney General established a National inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders children from their families which is conducted by HREOC. The common wealth Government announced a package aimed at reuniting families and enabling Indigenous people to get historical information about themselves and their families. The result of this was that the Australian Parliament apologized to the stolen generation for forcibly removing children from their families. Now the National Sorry Day is an Australian event, held each year on 26 May since 1998.

Black writing became a tool for Aboriginals with which they fight their battle for justice and recognition. Suppression gave the tongue to Aboriginal women authors and they wrote their experiences for being Aboriginal and for women. The voice of Aboriginal women were unheard, but now telling of past experiences, alienation and adversity have helped them to overcome it. The Aboriginal female autobiographies such as those of Alice Nannup, Ward and Sally Morgan reflect the culture of dispossession, sexual molestation, story of the stolen children and untold sufferings and pain.

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