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Working for Nothing: Creation of Wage-free Jobs for the Australian Stolen Generations

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Abstract:

The repercussions of Australian colonial past are very evident even in its present with the colonial trauma and pain lingering in its most successful and ever present colonial production namely the stolen generations. Australia, known as the penal-colonial expansion of overpopulated Industrial nineteenth Europe, is the land which gave birth to such a generation of hybrid race referred as stolen generation, who mostly never saw either of their parents, bore partial English names and hybrid in-between skin complexion and were trained to be servants for the white colonizers. Native inhabitants of the land were pushed to the margins with colonial inhabitation, which formed the fourth world circumstances. These circumstances witnessed its worst of colonization in case of the stolen generations. This generation of children worked for nothing, as either they were not paid regular wages or no wages in most of the cases. Their apprenticeship was legitimized through government documents and validated by the Aborigines Protection Board which scarcely mentioned the wages entitled to the apprentice. The paper intends to analyze the circumstances in and around the employment of these unpaid laborers' through the select autobiographies by them. The study focalizing on the employment clauses of stolen generation, delves into an in-depth scrutiny of the laws for aboriginal employment and concepts of colonial apprenticeship analyzing the repercussions that followed along with the study of the literatures by them.

Keywords: stolen generation, hybridity, contact zone, aboriginal, mixed-race, colonial apprenticeship, legitimization, wage-free

The term "Fourth World" came into use in the year 1972 with the formation of World Council for Indigenous People. It refers to the people who have been the occupants of a particular geographical location before the process of colonization affected their lives. The Native inhabitants of America, the Aborigines of Australia and Canada, the Maoris of New Zealand and the Dalit and Tribal inhabitants in India form the part of the Fourth World. This paper examines the fourth world conditions perpetuated in the lives of Aborigines by the European colonization in Australia where Aborigines. This paper is an attempt to problematize the circumstances of aboriginal apprenticeship as meted out by the process of colonial capitalistic expansion. The stolen generation forms the cardinal interest in the study of colonial expansion and capitalistic ambitions.

The Stolen generations are symptomatic of the *contact zone hybridity* that took place due to the continued interaction between these two racially divergent groups. Stolen generation in Australia were the racially hybrid children born due to the miscegenation between the white colonizers and the black natives. These stolen generation children due to their mixed racial

heritage are darker than most of the whites and the same time fairer than most of the natives. They are of both the races and were equally desired by both the communities. They were wanted by the whites as the whites felt that due to the percentage of white blood in them they can be easily assimilated into the white society. These children were to make for them the most economically viable source of cheap labour in the history of colonisation, which seemed to satisfy their capitalistic desires in the guise of humanitarian grounds. And the blacks wanted them due to their natural affinity for them. And the blacks with no such capitalistic motives wanted to cash –in in their emotional ties with their children.

White Australian policy wanted that Australia should be a completely white nation with no blacks in it. This worked out on their assumption that natives are a dying race due to their high mortality rate, so they won't survive anyway to be part of what they wanted as White Australia. The emerging threat to this assumption was the increasing population of the in-between mixed-race population, the stolen generation, who were neither white nor black and were expected to live longer than the natives. These mixed-race Aborigines posed a threat to the impending dream, hence, the white government found a permanent solution to erase this race as well. They wanted this race to be assimilated into the white community, assuming that the white blood in them will make it easier for them to adapt into the white society, and by mixing them with the whites their blackness can be 'wiped out' in three to four generations as observed by Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines.

This assumption made them to remove all the children from their families to the state-run orphanages contrarily called Homes. These mixed-race children were removed sometimes with the will of parents and sometimes with coercion in the pretext of providing them education and better living conditions than their bush focused native living conditions. The process of removal was always painful for the children and their family members. The proceedings were carried out legally with the involvement of the written-official document from the Chief Protector of the Aborigines and the Aborigines Protection Board. These children who were removed from their families never to return, made who were termed as Stolen generation by historian Peter Read in his 21 page pamphlet titled *The Stolen Generation: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. The removal of these children was politically validated by the fact that that these children were neglected by their aboriginal parents and deserved a better life which could be provided to them in the 'Homes' only. The removal of these children was rampant during 1909 to 1960's.

According to the statements made by the chief Protector of Western Australia A. O. Neville and the Chief Protector of Northern Australia Cecil Cook, the biological absorption of half caste was very much a necessity as it threatened the white population. For them this was the only way to deal with the emerging half-caste problem. All the aboriginal children below the age of eighteen years were the official wards and could be removed under the condition of 'neglect' from their parents. The Aborigines Protection Act 1905 denied any rights of the parents over their Aboriginal children. Hence, children were removed and parents had no say in the removal of their children.

Further, Clause No 11 of the *Aborigines Protection Act, 1909* said regarding the employment of the half-caste aborigines:

The board may, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of the Apprentices Act, 1901, by indenture bind or cause to be bound the child of any aborigine, or the neglected child of any person apparently having an admixture of aboriginal blood in his veins, to be apprenticed to any master, and may collect and institute proceedings for the recovery of any wages payable under such indenture, and may expend the same as the board may think fit in the interest of the child.

Every child so apprenticed shall be under the supervision of the board, or of such person as may be authorised in that behalf by the regulations.

Any such child so apprenticed shall be liable to be proceeded against and punished for absconding, or for other misconduct, in the same way as any child apprenticed by his father with such child's consent. (Aborigines Protection Act, 1909).

According to this act none of the half-caste Aborigines had any say in getting apprenticed by the Aborigines Board. They could be apprenticed any moment they were found neglected, of course the conditions and criteria of neglect was decided by the Aborigines Board. In most of the cases the reasons of neglect were made up to remove the children. Aboriginal parents had no say in whether they wanted their child to be removed or apprenticed. It was all done legally in the name of welfare of the child.

The Act further made it mandatory for all the half-caste children to follow the regulations made by the Aborigines Protection Act. The child so apprenticed under this Act could be apprenticed to any master- which meant that the relation between the employer and employee was that of the master and the servant and not of the employer or employee. This master and servant relationship was the reason why most of the aborigines at work were treated inhumanly by their employers.

Many half-caste children have found absconding due to the harsh treatment of their employers and absconding was punishable under this Act. This Act also confirmed that the child was liable for punishment if he/she was found not following the regulations made under this act. The most contradictory element in this act is that they legalize child-labor and refer to this as an act beneficiary for the child. The act claims that it thinks for the benefit of the child in the same way as a father will do for his child. It was very pathetic that no father will try to apprentice his child to inhuman treatment at the age of fourteen.

Most of the Aboriginal half-caste children from the mission were employed as soon as they turned fourteen. Parents of the children were not consulted. They were only informed that when was the right age for the child to be apprenticed. Rita Huggins in her autobiography *Auntie Rita* describes her feelings of being removed from her family, "we were like spare parts for cars, things to be used when needed, replaced when necessary"(Huggins,36).

Half-caste aboriginal girls were mostly apprenticed as domestic helps to white households. Rita Huggins was given the job of a nanny to look after the children in a white household. She states, "we were always given the children to look after, bath them, change and wash nappies, but were not allowed to discipline them in any way"(Huggins, 37).

Once these children were apprenticed they were expected to behave as adults. Rita Huggins was full of remorse for all the Aboriginal children as well as for herself whose childhood and innocence was snatched away from them. "White folks had the God-given right that we would work for them and the experience of years spent in that servitude took away a lot of our childhood and adolescence: playing, knocking around with kids of our own age. We were

made to act like grown-ups and to have responsibilities before our time. Child slave labor in many ways”(Huggins, 38).

Aboriginal children were further not allowed to keep any contact with their families or other Aborigines working with them. Most of the Aborigines were not allowed any holidays either. The Aborigines protection Act 1905 clearly stated that the every apprenticed child was liable to leave or absence from work “for not less than fourteen days, if the agreement is for a term of three months and not less than thirty days, if the agreement of the term is exceeding six months”. But in many cases the leave criteria was not followed. Aborigines were not even allowed to attend the funeral of family members and relatives. Rita Huggins friend Agnes Williams was not even allowed to attend the funeral of her mother. “She cried and cried and was broken hearted and has always felt cheated about that...her family shunned her for not attending because they thought it was her fault for not coming home”(Huggins, 39).

Working mothers were not allowed to take their children with them. They had to leave their children in the dormitories and go for work. Even they had to pay from their earning towards the upkeep of their children in the dormitories. The only time they could meet their children was during Christmas holiday or other holidays.

Aborigines were employed under proper rules and regulations to extract services from them but the only thing that didn't happen according to the rules was the payment of the wages. Most of the Aborigines never received any wages other than food and clothing and those who received wages were very low. Food was always meager and was never enough for a growing up teen. Margaret Tucker was not given tea for breakfast as milk was falling short for the white family. She remembers wearing hessian bags for clothes while apprenticed to a white family. The mistress of the family had once made her to wear her husbands' old pants. She had to roam barefoot all the times, the only time she was given a boot to wear was when her parents had come to visit her. The aborigines could not spend on their own food and clothing as they never received any wages.

The wages which they deserved was in most cases was withheld with the Aborigines Protection department and were never returned to them. “Alice was paid five shilling per week in Mr. Larson's house and additional pocket money by Mrs. Larson. While at Mrs. Campbell she used to get two shillings a week. The pocket money she used to receive needs special mention because most of the Aborigines never get pocket-money however hardworking and honest they might be”(Nannup,93).

Many a times the meager wages those were given to the half-caste Aborigines were cut down as punishment. They were made to pay for breaking things or for talking back. Ruth Hegarthy's mistress in her narrative *Is That You, Ruthie?* used to make her pay for the tickets of the pictures as the punishment for talking back. Hegarthy could not have refused as it was the rule that wherever her mistress wanted her she had to follow her wherever she went. Very soon Hegarthy had no money to pay for necessary things like toiletries and notepads for writing letters. The mistress even never bought any clothes for Hegarthy for which she used to receive coupons from the Native Affairs Department.

The employers always believed in showing outsiders that they are being nice to their servants and pretended being good in front of others. When Margaret Tuckers parents in her autobiography *If Everyone Cared* gave her some money to keep, her mistress said that she has enough of everything. She even takes away the money given to Tucker by her brother-in-law

who wanted to reward her for the services given by her. Aborigines were not allowed to keep any money with them which could give them any sense of freedom or worth. That is the reason many aborigines don't even know the value of money

Most of the Aborigines sought approval and acceptance from their white employers which hardly came their way. While at the mission and the dormitories Aborigines always craved freedom from that life. They thought the life of an employee will give them economic as well as social independence, but in most cases that did not happen. Tom Corbett describes in his narrative *No Option No Choice! The Moore River Experience*, was lucky to be employed with Miss James who treated him for his work and was neither racist or prejudiced. But many aborigines were never treated properly. They were only black servants who had to carry out the orders of their white masters. Anytime they failed to satisfy the master, the report was sent to the Aborigines Department. Reports were being sent for talking back, trying to meet other aborigines and many more.

Even though at work place these Aborigines were not well treated they could not complain to anyone. The Native Welfare department never bothered to investigate the conditions under which the Aborigines might be surviving with their white masters. Again it was a matter of shame recounting the torture one went through at the white masters place. Apprenticed Aborigines when they returned to the missions for holidays, they mostly hid their emotions and pretended as everything was all right and they are treated well. "One of the rules of being a dormitory girl was that you never complained loud, you accept your fate in silence"(Hegarty,103).

All the Aborigines were bound by the contract and then there were apprentice details which were never discussed with the concerned Aborigines. They were generally apprenticed for either six months or twelve months depending upon the services required by the white families. They were not allowed to leave in between the contract. Anyone who broke the contract was brought back to the dormitory and some were sent to Palm Island as punishment. Some were punished by sending them to stay in little girls dorm.

The nature of work assigned to Aborigines was designed in such a way that they were never idle. The day generally started early for them before sunrise and continued till late night. Ruth Hegarty was instructed to start her day at 5.30 in the morning. Work mostly included the chores in the house like cooking and cleaning, taking care of the children, washing their nappies and playing with them, outside works like feeding the poultry, milking animals. Hegarty describes her first day in the new masters' home, "firstly I was shown how to make fire in the wood stove. Second I was to help with breakfast, set the table, serve the food, then sit down and have my breakfast. Next, I was shown how to empty potties from under each bed"(Hegarty, 104). Hegarty bitterly detested the job of emptying pots of the grown up men in her master's family.

The Aborigines were usually not brought in front of the white guests, they were instructed to keep to their rooms. Glenyse Ward in *Wandering Girl* was instructed not to show herself in the party organized by her white mistress. It was considered shameful to have black servants in those days. They had to eat their breakfast in the kitchen only. Glensye Ward remembers her surprise on the first day at Mrs. Bigelow's house where she was served tea in a tin mug while the husband and wife had tea with good tea cup and saucers. While being questioned she said to

Ward that she was there as her black servant and her only job was to take and obey the orders given to her.

The houses where Aboriginal children were apprenticed were referred as situations, the reason might be that they were left vulnerable to varied situations at the working place. Girls were more vulnerable as they could be assaulted in the houses they worked for. Young girls even came back pregnant to the dormitories from their working place, most of them maintaining silence on that aspect of their lives.

Half-caste Aboriginal children maintained silence on many such situations as the Native Welfare Department won't listen to them in most of the situations. They had to somehow fulfill the requirements of the contract. Their only job was to keep their masters happy, giving them service and stay away from getting complaints. Complaints if reported had severe consequences which could affect their lives severely. The employment extracted all the energy of the aborigines in return paying them nothing and sometime a very low pocket money. The money entitled to them was mostly withheld with the Aborigines Protection Board which never reached the Aborigines. Aborigines achieved no sense of accomplishment or satisfaction or security that a job seems to confer upon employees. The nature of the jobs were as such which extracted all the energy from the aborigines. They were made to lead very lonely lives, as seclusion was more severe than the missions. Glenyse Ward had a very hard time at Mrs. Bigelow's house where she had no one to talk to even. Many of the aborigines felt that if they had company of their friends or any other dormitory mates then the suffering would have been lesser, loneliness added to their sufferings.

The jobs provided to the aborigines were in no way designed for the welfare of the half-caste children as it was claimed by the Aborigines Protection Act. They were no doubt separated from their families, they lost their friends in the dormitory. They were given responsibilities which were too severe for the young fourteen years kids. In addition to all that they were not paid wages, not allowed to study further, made to work like machines. They were worst fed and given old and discarded clothes to wear. The jobs were in no way self-fulfilling and demeaned the status of the Aborigines even further. The protection Act with its faulty clauses had made sure that aborigines in no way are provided with conditions that could help them get educated and find themselves jobs worthy of their talents. The European education system with the employment clauses conspired and worked in coalition to keep half-caste aborigines in the lowest rungs of the white society.

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