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## **Aboriginal Identity: Believed, Perceived and Retrieved**

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### **Abstract:**

Marginalization is an intricate and multi-layered concept. Nations can be marginalized at the global level, while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order within nations. People who are marginalized have relatively little or no control over their lives and the resources available to them; they become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes and the dominant discourse.

Marginalization is more commonly made up of people belonging to the country in which they find themselves marginalized. One such grouping consists of the indigenous people, the Aboriginals of Australia who are often perceived by the majority group members as inferior beings. Their plight is universally that of marginalization and most importantly about the ideological definition of their marginalized identity in the interest of dominant group in society. This ideological disparity is meted by the oppressed or marginalized group in terms of resistance and resilience. In resilience there is a scope for an enhanced, re-claimed and reinvented identity.

According to Stuart Hall, Identity is not a stable and immutable entity; rather it is an ongoing process that is always in a state of flux. With the advent of Australian Aboriginal writing, the perception of Indigenous people by non- Indigenous Australians has changed by notion of Aboriginality and the way Aboriginals define themselves. Hence, Aboriginality has emerged as comprising of Aboriginal ancestry, traditions, customs, beliefs, language and kinship system, and political acceptance by the settler Australians—a continuing process of negotiations, reconciliation and re-definition.

The present paper would delve into the myriad layers behind the misrepresentation of Aborigines and their subsequent re-claiming of Identity through an extensive study of *Coorah*, an Aboriginal Drama written by Richard Walley. The paper would hinge on the key concepts given by renowned critics-Edward Said and Stuart Hall.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Identity, Discourse, Orientalism, Misrepresentation, Aboriginal Identity.

Marginalization is an intricate and multi-layered concept. Nations can be marginalized at the global level, while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order

within nations. The concept of Marginalization is at the core of phenomenon called exclusion; exclusion from fulfilling social needs at individual, inter personal and societal level.

People who are marginalized have relatively little or no control over their lives and the resources available to them; they become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities to make social contributions are limited due to which they often develop low self confidence, self esteem and a confused self-identity. They become isolated from the world around them as they are not provided with enough opportunities to mingle with the mainstream. Marginalized people sit on the borders of a society and are not fully accepted as the members of that society.

Marginalization is thus a complex as well as a very serious phenomenon. It can effectively push people to the margins of society, where their sense of security is in every way a threatened one (SinghaRoy 31-32). Marginalization is more commonly made up of people belonging to the country in which they find themselves marginalized. One such grouping consists of indigenous people, the Aboriginals of various countries who are often perceived by majority group members as 'inferior' beings. This ideological disparity is meted by the oppressed or marginalized group in terms of resistance and resilience. In resilience there is a scope for an enhanced, re-claimed and reinvented identity.

Although the term 'identity' has a long history, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the term came into popular usage. What is an identity? Etymologically the word 'identity' is derived from the Latin root 'idem', meaning the 'sameness and continuity'. The Oxford English Dictionary (vol.5) gives the following meanings of 'Identity'- The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration, absolute or essential sameness; oneness.

Identity is a construction. It is not a stable and immutable entity; rather it is an ongoing process that is always in a state of flux. Theoretically, however, identity is conceived from three different perspectives. From the first perspective, identity denotes a conscious and knowing subject. Secondly, identity is also a product or outcome of social relationships and third, identity is both an outcome and resource in interaction between the self and others.

According to Stuart Hall the postmodern subject is:

Conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined.... The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. (277)

The concept of identity is constructed on the underlying principle of difference—the difference between the 'self' and the 'other'. Dani Cavallaro in his book *Critical and Cultural*

*Theory* argues that within the Eurocentric culture, dominant ideologies have time and again defined themselves in relation to a subordinated ‘Other’. All those who deviated from the norms of patriarchal, heterosexual, colonial social structure, that is, minority groups such as women, gays and lesbians, and people of color were codified as the ‘Other’. Cavallaro further says that, “the ‘Other’ transcends all structures and any attempt to categorize it amounts to domesticating—and by extension, colonizing—its intrinsic alterity” (122) which almost invariably resulted in discrimination, disempowerment, oppression and abuse.

Edward Said, in his canonical text *Orientalism*, says that the Europeans strategically used discourses such as literature, sociology, anthropology, historiography etc., to construct the East (Orient) in relation to the West (Occident) as the menacing and mysterious primitive and savage ‘Other’ in order to validate the Eurocentric socio-political and economic structures of domination to the extent that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3).

Such discourses painted a very negative identity of the Aborigines in front of the world. “In an attempt to assimilate or integrate Aboriginal people with their very different culture into non-Aboriginal culture, government policies have defined what Aboriginal people were and how they should behave” (Brewster 13). In fact, the Aboriginal identity has been stereotyped as being barbaric, primitive, naïve in their system of beliefs, unmannered, and uneducated.

As a consequence, all the Aboriginal writers are determined to re-gain their true identity and mark their cultural presence. Writings by them are concerned with the deliberations about not only the self but also their Indigenous communities. In fact “In the absence of political, economic or social power they find an empowering site in literary textuality to express their anger, to interrogate their exploiters and to assert their humanity” (Singh 11-12). Their writings bring to the fore knowledge and information about the true Aboriginal identity which had been deliberately hidden by the colonial Australia.

Aboriginals believe that Aboriginality can be attained as well as retrieved. With the advent of Aboriginal writings, the perception of Indigenous people by non-Indigenous Australians has changed by notion of Aboriginality and the way Aboriginals define themselves. The long held opinion that Indigenous identity resides in color, blood and physical characteristics is being replaced by flexible ideas—recognition by the community, spiritual ties with land, connection with people, and negotiations with non-Indigenous people. It has taken a social dimension rather than just remaining a racial one. Hence, Aboriginality has emerged as comprising of Aboriginal ancestry, traditions, customs, beliefs, language and kinship system, and political acceptance by the settler Australians—a continuing process of negotiations, reconciliation and re-definition.

The work under consideration is entitled *Coordah*, which in English means Brother. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study identity issues as dealt within the play. The play is written by Richard Walley. *Coordah* was first performed by the western Australian Theatre

company at the Hayman Theatre, Curtin University, Perth in 1987. The play spans the period from 1940s to late 1980s. It revolves around the life of a couple, Treb and Elly along with their relatives and friends. It is divided into Two Acts. Act One has twenty six scenes while Act Two has ten scenes.

The play opens in the kitchen of Treb's house. Reference is made of a theft where a prized sheep has been stolen from Fold's place.

TREB. The boys got it last night. They pinched a sheep from Fold's place. (1.115)

ELLY. But on the way out youse decided to steal one and save the money for drink. (1.115)

At the very commencement of the play, Walley has taken up the issue of prejudice attached while describing the Aborigines. They are identified as lazy drunk liars who do not resist from committing petty crimes like stealing. Walley has opened the play on this serious note of racial stereotyping which creates beguiling identity about the Aborigines. However, the very next scene balances the prejudice appropriately where he talks about giving the voting rights back to the Aborigines. Gene, a conservative political candidate is seen talking over the phone.

GENE. But sir, how do you campaign among abos? You can't get them to vote- let alone vote for our party! Use my initiative.... Ok sir, I'll give it a go. Yeh, bye. Abos voting. (1.117)

Erasure from the process of government formation is synonymous with erasing identity and reversing the power is akin to gaining back the identity. It means that Aborigines are vital and integral part of Australian social and political arena. The right to vote in elections means that Indigenous people have the opportunity to choose who they think will best represent them and that their views must be taken seriously by anyone who wants their vote. It represents the voice of the silenced community. If inability to vote was same as identity obliteration, the gaining back of voting right means the opposite- the gaining back of Identity.

Every culture and its people have certain idiosyncrasies which differentiate them from those belonging to an alternate culture. This generates diversity among human beings as well as their cultures. Such distinctness leads to relativity in almost every sphere of life- be it food, occupation, clothing, tradition or to say lifestyle in totality. The pivot behind oriental discrimination hinges on this concept of 'difference'. The whites have always believed their way of life as supreme and have viewed every alteration with a scornful gaze.

With regard to the Aboriginal land, the Occident did not have a favorable opinion. They viewed the Australian landscape as bizarre, ghastly, harsh and barren. Nummy's anecdote about hunting Kangaroos in scene iii of the play hints at this ignorance of the white man towards the landscape along with its inherent flora and fauna. Because the Australian land rightfully belongs

to the Aborigines, therefore, they are the only people who know how to trap its associated beauty. Land is an important factor determining their identity. Being dependent on land for their survival they regard it as their mother, therefore, like a child they assume identity only in relation with its mother. Walley's deliberate infusion of such allegories in the text serves the purpose of gaining back their identity.

NUMMY. Well, after about an hour I said to them *wetjalas*, 'Put your guns away. I'll show youse how to catch a 'roo'. None of them white fellas knew how to shoot! Anyway, they laughed at me and said 'OK, smart arse – show us what you can do!' (1.117)

Phrases like 'they followed me', 'I'll show youse', 'none of them whitefellas knew' form strong retorts against the imperialist discourse. The omniscient power of the west has been shown as being incapable and inefficient in hunting down the kangaroos. This reverse discourse is the voice of the subjugated. It symbolizes the cementing of abysmal distance between the centre and the margin. It is a vehement voice claiming to re-gain their lost identity.

Another important device employed by Aboriginal writers while writing for identity is the use of humor. Even the Aboriginal society has survived the menace of colonialism by relying on their strong potential to find mirth even in the direst of situations. Therefore, their writings also employ this method to bring forth their invincible spirit to live, to form their distinct identities, their uniqueness amidst all distortions. Treb makes this importance of humor clear in one of his dialogues in the play:

TREB. Humour is what helped us survive. We can still laugh after we've seen our land fenced . . . after we've seen our people rot and die in goals . . . still after we've seen rivers dammed, tress cut down, the ground dug up, the sky filled with dirty smoke . . . still now that you've stripped us of our dignity, shattered our culture, poisoned us with booze . . . You want to take away our humour? Everywhere you go you push your ways of living down the throats of native people. (1.145)

It is quite apparent from the above quoted dialogue that humor forms a major role in the lives of Aborigines. Aboriginal humor has been a means of social coping with oppression within Aboriginal communities. It has also functioned as a muted or encoded form of opposition and rebellion when turned on often unsuspecting White authority figures.

Jackie Huggins in an article "Firing on in the Mind" said that "Things can be so funny, yet so deadly serious" (8). This quotation has been employed successfully by Walley throughout the play, majorly, through the character of Nummy. To quote one example:

NUMMY. I went to a meeting last week and I got up to have my say and the Chairman told me to sit down. He said I must speak through the chair, so I sat down, then I grabbed the chair in front of me, lifted it up and spoke through it! And I said to them 'Now I'm gonna have my say.' (1.119)

An issue as grave as coercing the voice of the Orientals, has been dealt with such jocularly by Richard Walley, so as the point becomes more allusive and consequential. The last line in the above dialogue commences the new dawn in the history of Aboriginal uproar for regaining Identity.

One potent identity issue dealt within the play is that of half castes. Aboriginal people of mixed descent feel the double sword with which the Australian society judges them. When they are successful, it is their 'white identity', but they are Aboriginal if they go to jail, die early or suffer from alcoholism.

DAVIS. He, my dear, is Koolbardi . . . a half caste . . . caught between two worlds. His grandfather is one of the old lawkeepers; wants him to learn and keep the practice going, but Jillawarra, another trainee lawkeeper, says his mind has been poisoned by us *wetjalas*. (1.120)

There is a severe identity crisis in half castes as they belong to both the cultures simultaneously, yet do not belong to either completely. They are struck between both the worlds. There are under the skeptical gaze of both the Settler and the Aboriginal World. They are not truly accepted by either of them. They are constantly scrutinized for their loyalty towards both the whites and the Aborigines. Koolbardi gets into argument with Jillawarra because of his being a half caste. For Jillawarra the only existing truth is the world of Dreaming which when questioned by Koolbardi leaves him furious.

JILLAWARRA: I knew one day you gonna say that . . . I knew it . . . you gone all white, *wetjala* make you *kartworra*. (1.122)

Jillawarra fails to understand the identity crisis inherent within Koolbardi and calls him *Kartworra*, which means mad in English. June also calls him 'half tame . . . half savage'. It is quite evident that he is accepted by neither of the two cultures but interests both for his oddity. Especially the Settlers, who are very curious to research upon half castes, as if they are their 'private stocks'.

The West claims to know the Aborigines through and through but according to Walley they know nothing about Aborigines. To quote Treb from the play:

TREB. Make up your mind! First you say no one knows us – then you say everyone knows us. What are you . . . a fucken idiot? (1.125)

The above dialogue brings out the complete ignorance of the western world. They are baffled by the exotic culture of the Aborigines, yet forge strong opinions about them. Without understanding their lifestyle, they dare to decipher it in front of the world. They fail to understand Aboriginal Culture which forms an important part of Aboriginal Identity as expressed by Tank, who very well understands the importance of culture in their life:

TANK. Get the bottles. We'll celebrate the revival of our precious culture. (1.126)

'Revival of culture' is a strong message propagated by Walley for the Indigenous people.

TANK: I really am proud to be with you, Nummy. For the first time in my life I can see the culture in you . . . and for me to be a part of it really made me have another look at myself. (1.134)

Tank acknowledges this fact of being associated with his rich culture. It gives him an anchorage to 'have another look' at himself. That another look is of self identification, of unbiased representation and of true self assertion.

Another forceful device employed by Walley in order to regain identity is dialogic confrontation. He wants to put stress on "acceptance" instead of "analysis". This becomes explicit in Scene x where we see June and Koolbardi in a conversation with each other. Both the characters become potent symbols-one of inquisitorial streak of the Settler and the other of congenial acceptance of the Native. June wants to know everything about Koolbardi- his lifestyle, Aboriginal dances, eating habits almost everything so that she can write an exotic story. Koolbardi makes fun of her habit as of all the westeners:

KOOLBARDI: You want to know whitefellas' biggest problem? They always ask *why*? Everything is 'Why'. 'Why do you do this?' "Why is that there?" 'Why do you eat?' never accept – always 'Why?'(1.129)

Every culture has some distinct characteristics and they must be respected for their differences. Aboriginal writers aim to voice this stance that true harmony lays in acceptance and not analytic questioning. Unlike Koolbardi, June's lifestyle is not under scrutiny as if it's the norm but his lifestyle is eccentric. Koolbardi's reply to her question forms a very strong dialogue which fractures the Western gaze.

KOOLBARDI. Nothing to tell. We sleep, wake, eat, breathe – you know all those boring natural things. (1.129)

Walley has declassified the western ideology which considers Aborigines as less than humans. By bringing into gamut the trivial routine of the day he has made his point very clear that Aborigines are truly human as any other person belonging to any other skin color. The inferiority of Aboriginal race is a mere façade generated by the social order of the West. Nature has infused every human with the same instinct to sleep, wake, eat and breathe. This natural order of things follows uniformity and not difference. The world order has been reversed by mankind which is the cause of suffering and woe.

In the last scene of Act One we once again witness a thought provoking piece of conversation between June and Koolbardi. Walley's insistence on acceptance between the two cultures is lucidly put forward in this scene.

JUNE. Communication which is achieved through trust. Communication between nations, between race . . . And Communication between two people. If people are honest with each other and talk about their life styles, their outlooks on life, it develops an understanding between them. Ignorance creates prejudice. (1.151)

Walley has penned down a very positive approach towards the future. The phrase “Ignorance creates prejudice” signifies the ultimate truth behind all the hatred and misery in the world. The actual truth about Aboriginal identity needs to be told to the world and that can be done only when Aborigines start to write their own stories and the West starts to accept their voice with dignity. True understanding of each other can be achieved only by means of a healthy communication. It is like an open invitation to the West for a healthy relationship in order to establish a happy world together. This is opined through a dialogue by Koolbardi:

KOOLBARDI. If we take the best from my people and the best from your people, we could make something good here. (1.151)

Only communication can lead to a better understanding between the two worlds. The animosity can be diluted only by harmonious talk. Positivity in both the worlds needs to be emphasized over the dark patches so that honey can be extracted out of the nectar leaving the wax behind.

Walley in his text has resorted to rhetoric, as a chief device, to question the established prejudice regarding Aboriginal culture and people. Scene iv of Act Two outlines one the major breakthrough in the play. Walley has left nothing unquestioned, not even the holy text of Christian- the Bible. A hefty piece of conversation takes place among Brother Davis, Jillawarra and Koolbardi. It has multitudinous layers of meaning hidden beneath it. When Brother Davis claims that The Bible has answers for all the questions, Jillawarra resists it with authorial dubiety:

JILLAWARRA. [*interrupting*] Just a minute, brother. You always tell us to look to the Bible: it has everything in there. Then how come it say one thing then say another that mean different.

DAVIS. The Bible does not contradict itself.

JILLAWARRA. Then how come it say ‘turn the other cheek’, then also ‘an eye for an eye’? It say ‘love your enemy’, yet how many enemy was killed in wars? (2.157)

Aboriginal law and tradition preaches oneness of the human soul and body with the entire universe. It does not motivate compartmentalization. On the other hand it teaches to respect differences and accept them with humility. This is the true Aboriginal Identity which Aboriginal writers want to tell to the World. Walley has made his purpose clear through this device of rhetoric.

JILLAWARRA. Mister Davis, I never ask this before. Out of respect for you I never asked – I know about you more than you think I know. Why is your way always right? Your God and our God have the same law. We say we one with the Earth – she my mother. You don't believe that. But you say 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'; same thing. When you see my people worship the spirits at our sacred places you say it no good. No good to worship the trees and the rocks. Yet you cut the trees down and make a building, shape the rocks to make altar, then you worship your spirits. (2.158)

This is another soul searching dialogue which emphasizes oneness at the universal or transcendental level. All the divisions on the basis of caste, color, creed, beliefs are a social construct. Nature does not propagate segmentation. Walley has shredded the very premises on which Orientalism is based. He unyieldingly fathers the doctrine of unity, of similarity between human beings irrespective of their color, caste or creed.

Walley has given the last dialogue of the play to a mentally challenged character, Ginna. He wants to bring forth the irony about the binary divisions. Aboriginals are very much human. They are as sensitive as any normal human being. They do not lack the capacity to think. They are not silly, heathen or barbarous. And this is their true identity.

GINNA. Coordah, lots of people think I am silly. Reckon I should stay in the home doing those paintings – putting red tops here and the blue ones there – but you showed them. You showed them, coordah, coordah. They say I got no feeling, but you showed them, coordah. (2.165)

Through the character of Ginna, the most powerful assertion has been made. Ginna, therefore, is emblematic of the brutality of colonizers who have dislodged the thinking ability of the indigenous people, the mental agony as witnessed by them. His voice connotes the voice from the margin which is trying to re-enter the main stage and assert its own identity. It is a reply against the western discourse, a voice that had been quelled for centuries. The identity as asserted by him is an endeavor of the entire community. *Coordah* means Brother in English, so Ginna's voice is the voice of appreciation for collective effort, togetherness and kinship. It is only through a collective effort that the Aboriginal identity can be re-gained out of the clutches of the colonial powers.

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