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Aboriginal Narratives as Documents Obsessed with The Self

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Abstract:

Indigenous narratives engage themselves with very extremely selective topics whether it is autobiographies, biographies, testimonials or oral narratives. The central concern in such narratives is the experiences that an indigenous person or community is found witnessing. These narratives contain the wisdom and knowledge that are significant to aboriginal cultural practices and experiences. However, the Aboriginal narratives do not talk about the other issues like international political conditions, laws and life of other communities in other countries and continents. They talk about their life and the life of whites which they have experienced, also in majority of the countries with colonial experiences, the narratives seems to be revolving around the colonial contact and the conflicting colonizer/colonized conflicting relationships. The narratives by aborigines Australian aborigines are no different with their limited vision of world they seem to be engaged with. This paper critically analyses the cause and the relation between aboriginal narratives and their self obsession with concerns with Indigenous context and in this context Indigenous Australian via-a-vis colonial contact.

Keywords: colonial contact, indiginity, narratives, self-obsession, autobiography.

Australia unlike other postcolonial country is a settler colony, established with the aim of unburdening the extra population of the European nations. Europeans settled in Australia with the aim of settling a penal colony in Australia. Their main aim was to reduce the native population so that they can acquire the main lands. The initial history of Australia after colonization is filled with bloodshed as both the settlers and natives could not understand each other. They fought with each other to ensure their claim on the land. Most of the times, it was the

technologically advanced whites who won the battles. Gradual capture of aboriginal land by the whites led to the diminished control of aborigines over their land. Aborigines did not have any written laws as a result, whites acquired their lands on the basis of their own written laws. Not only that they gradually started taking control over aboriginal life also, so that later on they don't retaliate against them. This became ingrained in the aboriginal psyche that whites have been superior race so they have the right to govern inferior race like the aborigines.

Aborigines seem to be talking a lot about their relations with the whites. The other concern was their own life about which they talked in length. All they seem to be talking about is aboriginal lives especially the life that they have already led. Most of the aborigines, in their autobiography are seen to be obsessed with their life. Mostly the stolen generation people who have written their autobiographies are seen to be talking about their life only which is very limited but addresses the issues that are faced by the other stolen generation kids as well. If we look closely at their narratives they all seem to be talking about the same problems more or less in the same pattern. The narratives follow a particular pattern.

Aboriginal lives that the researcher is going to discuss in this paper will follow their life in a particular pattern. This pattern sees aboriginal half-caste life into three parts. The first part consists of the early childhood where these children have stayed with their aboriginal community. In this phase they are seen to stay in close association with their mother, with or without the father. In many cases the father are white aboriginal station masters or white telegraph men. In this phase they lead a completely carefree life as children. In this phase they learn about bush life and learn that their people live in close association to the land. Land is considered sacred and they learn this in this phase. They learn what is bush-tucker in this phase. Aborigines, though do not lead nomadic life style, but they follow a hunter-gatherer life. Aborigines do talk a lot about their food. There can be two reasons for this, the first being their close association with their land and its products, the second could be the half-fed life they lead on the missions, once they are out of their comfortable atmosphere.

The second phase of life is very different. There occurs an entire change of the surroundings. Aboriginal half-caste children are taken away from their familiar surroundings to be brought up in government orphanages, contrarily called Homes. The children taken away could be of any age group starting from the taking of infants. The notable point here is that the

removal of children in most of the cases were forcefully carried out. That means in most of the cases parents did not approve of their children being taken by the authorities. Contrary to their willingness their children were taken away. There were few cases also where parents voluntarily allowed the taking away of their children. They thought that their children will be given good education and other comforts. Which in any case did not happen. Aboriginal children were taken away so that they could be trained to be skillful servants for the white households. Boys were trained to work at stations. And girls were trained so that they can be of use as househelps. They were kept in the places called as missions. These missions were basically catholic missions and Nuns and Brothers were there who helped in the effective running of the missions. Aboriginal children in different missions had different experiences with mission authorities. Sometimes the nuns and brothers were extremely compassionate people and at other missions the nuns and brothers were cruel persons. Basically the missionaries were praised by aboriginals. It is the other authorities which are generally condemned by the aborigines.

Aboriginal kids on missions were made to stay in dormitories that is why their lifestyle is called dormitory life style. The wardens are generally very strict with strict rule implemented in the dormitories. Boys and girls had to stay in different dormitories. Even the people from one region were never allowed to stay nearby in the dormitory.

In mission life, aborigines had to forego of their language. They were not allowed to speak in their native tongue. In case they are found doing so, they are heavily penalized. Swearing was also strictly prohibited among the aborigines. If they ever swore also that was also in their own language so that mission authorities do not come to know about it. Aboriginal kids had to always stay half-fed because the food was always less and the quality of food was degrading.

Aboriginal children were taken away in the pretext of education from their families, but they were not given adequate education. The education they used to receive was always basic arithmetic, little English so that they can read and write their own names. They were given moral education, so that they become efficient and honest slaves for the white households.

As soon as these children were taken away from their families they were given new English names, in case the aboriginal child only has an aboriginal name. Their name and the

place to which they originally belonged and the country they came are written down in records which are called files. Their parents details are also recorded . The name of their community and the tribe are also recorded. They are given a date of birth which was to become their official date of birth. This created a lot of problem when aborigines wanted to trace back their ancestry through their records they were only misguided. These records were dealt with much secrecy as they were called as government documents. The funniest part was that only white government authorities had access to them. Even white research scholars had access to these, but aborigines had no access to. They believed that these records had contents which were not appropriate for aborigines to see. The actual truth was that aborigines life histories were hidden from them which they have every right to have access to.

The most difficult part of an aboriginal half caste life are the days lived on the mission apart from their parents. But there are some aborigines mission is their only home as they know of no other home other than the mission. It is because they are taken away as small kids so that they have no memory of their parents or of the community.

Every aboriginal kids goes through periods of loneliness as mission does not allow them to be in groups with other aboriginal kids or allow them to have fun.

Once the education is done and the aboriginal kid reaches the age of thirteen years, then he or she is sent to work. And it is here that the third phase of aboriginal life begins. This phase bring adulthood and maturity to the aboriginal kid. The aboriginal kid is sent out to work, hence there is some freedom in their life from then mission and the authorities. Even though there is freedom, this phase brings its own risks and turbulations. It is in this phase that no one takes any responsibility of the aboriginal kid. They are left alone in some white household to stay at the mercy of the white people who are not only new but have different lifestyles. Aboriginal boys are sent out to work on station. They were given minimum food and made to work on hard soil for the long days. They were not given any day off. Girls had to work as domestic maids. They had to do the kitchen duties, take care of the children at home and at the same time given the outside, garden jobs as well. They were always overburdened with work and not even allowed any moment of rest. Glenyse Ward in the book *Wandering Girl* as said by her had worked as a maid for on of the high class white families who used to treat her like dirt. This is the description she gives of the humiliation she had to face through the mistress of the house:

“Everytime she scolded me I felt like I was dirt, but as I explained before, I sort of overlooked the situation. I could see the funny side of things. I was a person that nothing could ever get along for long. I was a happy go lucky girl!”(Ward, 79)

While the master and mistress of the house had their tea in beautiful cups with saucers she was made to have her tea from a tin mug, she had to have her food from a tin plate which was never the condition even on the mission. On being asked by Ward why can't she have a cup and a saucer the answer she received was that she was there as a black servant so she should not question anything or anyone. She was one who used to miss the mission as her only home. It was because she was treated very badly by her master and mistress. She was not even allowed to come in front of the guests. If ever there was any party at home she was told not to be seen anywhere the house. Once she happened to come in front of the guest which the mistress took as an offence against her orders and scolds her for not having any brains. Even her guests were surprised that she had a black servant who could have a name:

“Whenever they were entertaining or having a party at night, I was never allowed to be seen. I had to go straight to bed. My orders were, I was not allowed anywhere near the house. I was out of bounds to her dark servant, she didn't want the embarrassment of me amongst her supercilious friends. The sight of me might have put this toffee noses out of joint!”.(Ward,22).

Mrs. Bigelow, the mistress of the house was very cold towards Ward. She used to scold her every now and then. She used to treat her like a dirt. “ With a haughty look about herself she shrutted out of the door, leaving me with feelings of animosity and humiliation. I fumbled through my case to find my nightdress and slowly put it on, blew the flame out and got that old familiar feeling called homesickness. I cried myself to sleep.(Ward, 12)

She used to take her to work at her daughter's house. She was not allowed in the main rooms though. She only had to do her work and wait for the orders from the mistress. Though the food she used to get was better than the mission.

As a friend she had old Bill who also used to work for the Bigelow family. No one in the house ever spoke any good word to her. All they expected of her was to do her work. She was not allowed to rest for a while. She had to get up at five in the morning and had to work through out the day non-stop, even when the family was out. Mrs. Bigelow made it a point that in her

absence also Ward does not get a moment of free time. She always gives her a list of work which was always enough to keep the girl busy till her masters came back from home. Margaret Tucker in her autobiography, *If Everyone Cared* had also worked in white households after staying on the mission. Her experience was also like Glenyse Ward. She also felt that she was not given a moment to rest. The family expected her to do all the kitchen duties, house duties, duties of the young boy and also to keep the garden very clean. She was made to wear rags and no footwear was given to her. But when once her mother visits she is made to wear good clothes and also footwear. This is sheer hypocrisy where the parents of the aboriginal kids are made to believe that their children are leading life under good circumstances. It was not that all white families treated these aboriginal kids badly, there were families who looked after the aboriginal kids as their own family members. But the authors I am dealing with, none of them had the opportunity to have such good circumstances.

Loneliness and humiliation are part and parcel of half-caste children who were taken away to be raised in government mission. This does not end when they are sent out to work. Rather they are isolated in the new working environment which only expects them to toil night and day. Aboriginal people are generally community people. From their childhood onwards they live in community. Which means the concept of nuclear family is not there amongst the aborigines. Families lived in closed association with other families. They did not believe in individual living, rather focused on community living. They shared food amongst themselves. They believed that land was sacred to them as a result all natural forces were also sacred to them. They believed in their dreamtime. They had tribes and all people belonging to one tribe were related to one another. They were relatives and had duties towards one another. If a child did not have the father, he was looked after by his mother, aunts, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. They believed in the concept of caring and sharing. They went to walkabout all together. The community protected the children. They had rituals which binded them together. They had dances and stories and songs which were exclusive to communities, outsiders were not allowed to be part of these. They had secret stories of their dreamtime which was unique to them and was guided by them. They believed that people can create thunder and storm. They had their own believes. They never had the need to stay alone or in isolation. Mission life forces one to be lonely. One has to live on their own. But inspite of that, aboriginal kids learn to live like communities as so many of them share a common life, snatched away from their parents in the

dormitory life called mission. But once out of mission they no longer have any opportunity to lead community life. They had to lead lonely life which was so unlike aboriginal community life. Ward describes the loneliness that she faced in the Bigelow household, “atleast if there were other kids around with whom I could share a laugh or joke. May be if I had one of my mates with me, the episode of the turkey wouldn’t seem so bad. We could look on funny side of it and have a good laugh”.

Aboriginal half caste children didn’t talk about any other issue than their being taken away. Whatever they talk about is related to their own life. They talk in elaboration about the community life lead among their own family members before they are taken away from their family. They talk about their people and about the bushlife. They talk about their bush food and bush rituals. They talk about the various fears and moments of happiness as a child. They talk about the love they used to get as children. Many aboriginal children could not talk about these as they were taken away from their families as infants, as a result they have no memory of community life lived among the bush people.

They next talk about the life of hardship lead among the missionaries. The narratives of different of different missions talk about different lifestyle. The focus of narrative in the mission is generally around church, school and dormitory life. Mission kids are seen to be given Catholic Church principles like not to cheat, not to tell lies, not to steal and so on. The emphasis is basically on the principle of leading honest lives. They are told stories of Bible so that they can be told about the concept of punishment and rewards according to one’s activities.“ As I explained before, my upbringing was strict, and if you poked your tongue at someone that was what was called a sin, and the nuns would punish us with a hit, if they caught us”(Ward, 95)

The second focus in the mission is on training. Apart from reading ,writing and arithmetic that are taught basic English and education of the Bible. Education is not only development of classroom skills only. They are generally given various other training while giving classroom teaching as well. But teaching helps them to develop skills like cooking, making mats, sewing, so that they can be trained to be good slaves for white families.

The next emphasis in aboriginal narratives is on the dormitory life. Dormitory life has its own benefit and disadvantages also. Dormitory life again taught children to lead a kind of

community life. The younger boys and girls in their respective dormitories looked after the newly arrive young kids. They form groups and try to have little bit fun in whichever way possible. Boys and girls if found together were heavily punished. Another important concept of dormitory life was the punishment. Punishment was an integral part of dormitory life. Punishment was given for several reasons like meeting of boys and girls, stealing and many more. They were whipped and sometimes locked up for days together without food and water.

Food was always a point of discussion for half-caste taken away children. Once a year only during the Christmas times only they were served good food, rest of the time they complained about the food. They missed the bush food and the special way it was prepared. They disliked the mission food which hardly had any meat and was made in European way but always kept them half fed.

After going for job they talk about their life in the new white household. They share their experiences of work and the newly attained freedom. Some people get married in this phase of their life. They get exemption certificate and settle down to have their families. In this phase they encounter the true laws made for the aboriginal half castes. Before this phase all was taken by the mission authorities and before that by their families. Here they themselves face the aboriginal protection laws and policies. They come to the realization that they cannot do anything without the permission of the government, that is the aboriginal welfare board. Even for getting married they had to take permission of the government. They didn't have the permission to move from one place to another without permission. They had to have permits for anything they did. The written document that gave them permission for so and so activity was called a permit. Permit was an important document and required if aborigines wished to do anything. Aborigines were not allowed in various hotels and restaurants and they even were not allowed to have alcohol. Action was taken against any hotel if they served alcohol to aborigines. Aborigines were not at all free anywhere. If any young aborigine was seen to be roaming alone, police was informed and they were sent back to mission to which they belonged.

Aborigines who wished to lead a free and independent life had to apply for exemption certificate. This certificate gave aborigines that rights which the whites had. After getting this certificate the particular aborigine and his family were free from all the aboriginal laws and policies. The only condition was that after applying for the certificate the particular aborigine

and his family could not keep any relation with their people and the community. If they were seen to be associating with the people of their community then their exemption certificate will be cancelled. The certificate was not permanent and depended on one's conduct towards it. Those had this exemption certificate felt superior to those who did not have certificate. This was a plan so that aboriginal community can be broken. By giving rights to certain aboriginal people they wanted to assure them that their rights were secure. They were made to believe that they will be treated equal to the whites which actually never happened. This segregation did not help the aborigines in any way . they came to the realization that they could never be part of the white community. This certificate gave all the false promises which it could not keep.

Aborigines, through the various policies of the state were only cheated. By showing faith on the whites and believing that they as superior race they will help in the upliftment of the aborigines, aborigines did not get anything. All they got was getting more discriminated and more humiliation. This is the reason why the aboriginal autobiographies are so self –obsessed and they talk about their pangs and sufferings because they did not have any means to go beyond that.

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