

Unlearning to Live White: Some Aboriginal Plays Vis-à-vis the Australian Assimilation

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to examine the policies of Aboriginal assimilation carried out by the white Australian government since the arrival of the Europeans in Australia. The official assimilation policies of the Aboriginal people were between 1930s and the 1960s, however it had long progression prior to this. The Assimilation policies began due to the racist assumptions of the Europeans and the feel the need to maintain national homogeneity in Australia. This desire to maintain national homogeneity was expressed in different ways in different periods. The mixed descent Aboriginal children were the major focus for the government officials. These children were taken away by forced from their Aboriginal families and were put in the home set up for them. They were forced to conform to white standards so that they would lose their Aboriginality. The concepts, policies and consequences of the assimilation policies have been a major concern for most of the Aboriginal writers and playwrights today. The Aboriginal playwrights through performance have portrayed the nature and consequences of assimilation policies. They choose to render their story in a narrative mode using biographical and autobiographical taken from real stories. These assimilation policies have a number of negative consequences in the Aboriginal society which resulted in the loss of their culture, traditions, and languages etc., needless to say their land. The article would address issues such as political empowerment, social co-existent and racial tolerance which are highlighted in the selected works of Jack Davis and Jane Harrison.

Keywords: assimilation, Aborigines (Aboriginal, Aboriginality), consequences, racial tolerance.

The concept of assimilation had a long progression in Australia. It showed its masks among the government officials and missionaries in the early nineteenth century, and within the protectionist regimes that were set up later. The concept was variously named as merging, absorption and assimilation. These concepts of “absorption” or “mergence” could mean the genetic dissolution of Aboriginals into white “blood”, or, the “breeding out of colour”. (Moran, 2007, p. 2) It could also mean the cultural absorption of Aborigines or part-Aborigines into the white society and combination of both biological and cultural absorption. In 1947, A.O. Neville, Commissioner of Native Affairs in the state of South Australia offered a written solution to the “Aboriginal Problem”:

Scientific research had revealed that skin pigmentation could be bred out of Aborigines in two or three generations. If I could only have the money and the legislative power to start a selective breeding programme I could, in a matter of sixty to seventy years, solve the “aboriginal problem” by breeding a race of white Aborigines. (Mc

Laren, 1993, p. vii)

The course of assimilation includes various objectives. While there was an important reparative trend- doing something to “uplift” those who had been neglected at best, and treated appalling at worst, by the Australian nation—there was also destructive trend, responding, in some instances, to paranoid fears concerning the future of the white nation, and in others to the perception of the incompatibility, or undesirability, of Aboriginality in the modern Australian nation. (Moran, 2007, p. 2) In April 1937, the first ever national conference of the principal administrators of Aborigines met in Canberra, A. O. Neville, Western Australian Protector of Aborigines, asked the conference, “Are we to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?” Neville’s idea of merging or absorbing the so –called ‘half- caste’ Aborigines into the European population by a process of encouraged inter–breeding had won the approval of all the delegates to the conference – who were more or less universally alarmed by what they thought of as ‘the problem of the half –caste’. (Manne, 2001, p. 210) One of the playwrights Jack Davis’s plays symbolizes the tragedy of the *Nyoongah* Aborigines in the southwestern part of Australia viewed through the eyes of the Aborigines. Davis’s first play *Kullark* (home) has been described as a ‘documentary on the history of Aborigines in Western Australia’. (Casey, 2004, p. 138) His first two plays *Kullark* (1984) and *No Sugar* (1986) detail the removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional homelands and the effects of this displacement suffered by the Aborigines. In *Kullark*, Davis reenacts the history of the Aborigines where the entire population of the Northam camp, were rounded up by police and dumped at the Moore River Settlement. The Northam Shire Council said that they had scabies and were a health risk. However, at Moore River it was found that only four of them had the disease (*Kullark*, 46) Here Davis depicted the first generation of the Yorlah family who were among the victims. We find the family’s resistance of the enforced settlement and their helpless situation. The White Australia policy came about in this era along with greater surveillance and restrictions on Aboriginal people. The segregation of Aboriginal people on the Reserves that in part resulted from structural economic change allowed the assertion of Australian identity as a white nation. (Norman, 2007, p. 73) Therefore, the setting up of reserves in Australia became a vital key to dispossess many indigenous people of their traditional lands. In his play *No Sugar* (1985), Jack Davis draws attention on the depression year. It was a hard and difficult time for even the whites and it brought exceptional hard times for the Aborigines. *No Sugar* is also about the enforced migration of the Millimurra family to the Moore River Settlement, just like the Yorlah family of *Kullark*, and the tribulations faced by the family. Davis dramatized the words and behavior of real historical figures such as A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of the Aborigines, and Mr. Neal, the Superintendent of the Moore River Settlement. Davis relies heavily on oral literatures and his

stories were from the Aboriginal past as told to him by his family, (Casey, 2004, p. 136) Davis also spent several years of his youth in the Moore River Settlement. The white authorities segregated the natives in the reserves from the whites in order to prepare them for assimilation in the mainstream Australia, as A.O. Neville in speech on his Australia Day visit to the Moore River Settlement tells the encamped Aborigines:

...I was reminded that the world is in the grip of depression and that many people are suffering from hunger and deprivation of many of the essential elements which make for a contented existence. But you, in this small corner of the Empire, are fortunate in being provided with adequate food and shelter... It doesn't hurt to remind yourselves that you are preparing yourselves here to take your place in the Australian society, to live as other Australians live, and to live alongside other Australians; to learn to enjoy the privileges and to shoulder the responsibilities of living like the white man, to be treated equally, not worse, not better, under the law. (*No Sugar*, p. 97)

Paternalism in short was the pronounced attitude Neville was proud of, and of the government in looking after the Aborigines, providing them food and shelter. However, Neville was furious when the Aborigines alter and modify the hymn 'There is a Happy Land' with a parody that sums up their condition in the Settlement:

There is a happy land, / Far, far away. / No sugar in our tea, / Bread and butter we never see. / That's why we're gradually / Fading away. (*No Sugar*, p. 98)

Neville was so angry and immediately tells them to stop singing, he is appalled by the 'disgraceful demonstration of ingratitude' and swears that the Aborigines 'will live to rue this day'. And as for the punishment he announces that 'there will be no Christmas this year'. (*No Sugar*, p. 98) The motive for these mission services was hardly pure philanthropy; it was one of a scheme used by the white governments on the Aborigines so that they could be assimilated into the white society. The missions became indispensable means of implementing the new policy of assimilation. As early as February 1947, A.P. Elkin had informed a conference of mission officials that it was essential for their institutions to:

Have a positive economic and welfare policy. In addition to the spiritual... [they] should set out to teach the native to meet the new era of civilization, which must, of necessity, make its impact on him in the future. (Shoemaker, 1992, p. 68)

There was a change in policy from passive "protection" to a policy described as "assimilation" at the 1937 Conference of commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities, Protection Boards became Welfare Boards. (Prentis, 1978, p. 84) The government tackled the issues of the Aborigines and the 'half- castes' (mixed descent of Aborigines and whites). The conference was sufficiently impressed by Neville's idea of 'absorption' to agree that,

... this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all

efforts be directed to that end. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 26)

One of the motivations for assimilation was the need to maintain national homogeneity. This urge for homogeneity was expressed in different ways in different periods. Initially the concern was to preserve the link between white race, white nations and white territories. One of the most prominent methods of assimilation, which had a great impact on the history of Australia that was directed toward the Aborigines, was educating the Aboriginal children. The 'half- castes' children were particularly targeted by the government and taken away from their parents and put them in institutions which were set up especially for them so that they could be absorbed into white society. These children, it was hoped, would then assimilate and intermarry into mainstream society. Welfare officers, removing children solely because they were Aboriginal, intended and arranged that they should lose their Aboriginality, and that they never return home. (Read, 2002, p. 57) One of the characters, Black Actor, in *Kullark*, speaking over the music says:

The police would just arrive and take the child and put him on a reserve or a mission where he could learn to live white, to assimilate... The children were caught, belted by the authorities, and told not to mix with those dirty blacks. (*Kullark*, p. 42)

Insensitivity and inhumaneness propelled by white assimilationist programme could hardly ever educate the world about the saner bond between the child and the mother. Furthermore, this western educational scheme required the complete desertion of the indigenous culture. The most catastrophic aspect of the assimilation policy was that it led to many children being taken away from their parents and families and placed in foster care or groups' homes. These children have come to be known as the 'Stolen Generations'.¹ Carmel Bird aptly summarises the themes and effects of removal across all regions of the country:

The children could be taken at any age, and many of them were taken from their mothers at birth or in very early infancy. Most of the children so taken were put up into institutions where the other children were mostly Aboriginal, of mixed race, and where the staffs were non-Aboriginal. If a child was adopted or fostered out to a family, the family usually was white. The objective of all this activity was to absorb the Aboriginal children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage and blood, and to bring about, within few generations, a form of breeding-out of all Aboriginal characteristics. (Briskman, 2003, p. 6)

The policies and practices of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families are seen through the voices of the Aboriginal people. Their accounts of these experiences are highlighted in the writings of almost all the Aboriginal writers today. The forcibly removal of children from their families was one of the most inhumane methods of implementing assimilation policies. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families was systematically carried out, in an attempt to break down the social structure of Aboriginal culture. (Read, 1998, p. 13) Jane Harrison, a descendent of the Muruwari people of New South Wales,

was commissioned to research and write a play about the 'lost children', based on the experiences of members of the community. (Casey, 2004, p. 219) At first the project was named *The Lost Children*, but it was later changed to *Stolen* and the script development process began formally in 1992. In the course of writing *Stolen*, Jane Harrison read thousands of oral transcripts and spoke with many members of the 'Stolen Generations'. *Stolen* demystifies the term 'the lost children', it is about the sufferings and the traumatic conditions of the Aboriginal children who were removed from their families, and it weaves common elements of the stories of many Aborigines who were removed from their family at a young age. The play features five protagonists Jimmy, Sandy, Shirley, Ruby and Anne, each character brings out the different kinds of oppression faced by the Aboriginal children, the five characters become the representative of the experience of all the children who were stolen from their families. The scandal of thousands of Aborigine children forcibly snatched from their 'unfit' parents by the Australian government and placed into homes in the '50s and '60s is vividly realized in this moving drama. (Galton, 2001, p. 1) The white Australian government actively pursued the policy of assimilation in reference to Aboriginal people as a way of improving their way of life. Many people saw assimilation for Aboriginal people as a positive policy as it was seen as a way of improving them and merging them to white culture. As assimilation became a key policy for the government, more and more Aboriginal people were forced off the reserves and into the towns and cities. Many Aboriginal people wanted to move to cities and find work - to get away from the control of the reserve manager or to be self-determined. But when they came in the cities they faced racism and discrimination, and instead of being assimilated into white society, they were mistreated by the white society. The Aborigines were prohibited to enter the white domains and were forced to live on the fringes of society in poverty and unemployment. In many rural areas segregation became widespread, and Aboriginal people were shunned from the hotels and bars and other public places run by whites. Throughout Australian history a racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people had been one of the major issues. When the Aboriginal men worked under the white people they were lowly paid. Coercion, exploitation and wage injustice persisted in the industry throughout the era of assimilation. For sixteen years between 1933 and 1949, the Aboriginal minimum wage in the Northern Territory pastoral industry was pegged at the lamentably low level of five shillings per week (Shoemaker, 1992, p. 67). This condition is highlighted in Davis's *No Sugar*, when the sergeant who says that their men were too lazy to work confronted Gran and Milly, they replied:

Milly: Look, last week my Joe cut a hundred posts for Skinny Martin and you know what he got? A pair of second hand boots and a piece of stag ram so tough even dawg couldn't eat it; skinnier than old Martin 'imself.

Gran: And we couldn't eat the boots. (*No sugar*, p. 23)

The working condition of the Aboriginal people was very worst and that

sometimes they would even receive their wage in used goods, which were of no use or goods to them. This feeling of helplessness permeated the minds of the male Aborigines more than the female. Another example of wage exploitation of Black Australians was ubiquitous:

During 1954, rates of pay for Aboriginal workers in the ... area were about half of those demanded and received by white employees doing the same work... Frequently Aboriginal employees were persuaded to take cheap wine (sweet sherry or muscat) in lieu of part of the wage due to them. (Shoemaker, 1992, p. 71)

Another characteristic of the assimilation policy was the lack of right to citizenship of the Aborigines in Australia. The Indigenous peoples of Australia were not recognised as citizens. The right to vote was finally granted in 1962 and the white Australians gave the seal of approval in the 1967 Referendum, which required Aborigines to be counted in the census and allowed the Commonwealth Government to make laws for the Aborigines anywhere in Australia (Prentis, 1978, p. 88). Before the 1940s, Aboriginal people could not become citizens, but after the Second World War they could be counted as citizens if they applied for a certificate, which is, if the white authorities think that they are entitled. By having a certificate, however, they had to give up all ties with the Indigenous community, including their relatives.

To be able to vote, to be able to move around with no restrictions, to be able to buy alcohol; basically to be able to make any sort of decision about their lives, Aboriginal people had to deny their heritage and their families. The government saw citizenship as a lure to make Aboriginal people assimilate. They promoted the certificates as a good thing and encouraged those who were civilised enough to apply for them. The majority of Aboriginal people who compared them to 'dog licenses' (*Kullark*, p. 59) looked upon these exemption certificates with contempt. Racial discrimination and segregation, and expressions of racial difference more generally, were problems that could be ameliorated by policies of assimilation. (Moran, 2007, p. 2) When World War II came to an end, for most of the Australians it was a time of relief and celebration. However, the celebration was short lived for the Aboriginal Australians in many parts of the nation. Many of the Aboriginal men took part in the war and in the army they were treated equally with the white Australians, which made them have national integrity towards Australia. But, when they returned home they were faced with the same treatment- racial prejudice and discrimination. Aboriginal playwrights used soliloquy to question and undermine the white assimilationism. In *Kullark*, Alec, who served in the army for five years during the war was discharged with citizenship rights. He was so happy to finally got citizenship, in a moment of ironic soliloquy he holds up his citizenship card and says, "Well do I look any whiter to you? This certificate says I'm now white, so I gotta think white an' act white... But now it's nineteen forty-five an' I gotta make a new start." He smiles wryly and looks at his card and continue to say, "We already got a name for these things, we call 'em dawg collars. You know so the police can just look at this and tell who we are..." When Alec

returned home to his parents in the reserves and told them that they have now the permission to leave the reserves as he got himself the citizenship rights, his mother replied, "Aw, that'll be 'ard. *Wetjallas* (white people) still the same in this town, still don't like *Nyoongahs* (Aborigines)". However Alec was optimistic and sarcastically replies, "Army life, tent. Home life, tent. There'll be some changes so don't forget to look around for that house next week, Mum." The next day when Alec met a policeman he was trying to prevent him, but the policeman, who was already aware of his citizenship rights caught up with him any way and told him to get off the reserves quickly. He also told Alec to make sure that the rest of their relatives stay away from their house after they moved to town. He further told him to turn his rights if they couldn't keep the 'standard'. After the policeman left, Alec in a soliloquy says, "Well, did you hear him tellin' me to keep on the straight and narrow? Can't have no 'lations visitin', can't live on the reserve. Citizenship don't sound much like freedom to me. I seen a lot of blokes die in the war for freedom. None of 'em would call this freedom, none f'em." (*Kullark*, p. 59-63)

Lynette Narkle in an introduction to Davis's play *In Our Town* (1992) succinctly sums up their condition: "Our Aboriginal men came back to another silent war, institutionalized racism; compensation and equal rights and opportunities did not include our men." (Narkle, 1992) The story of Alec and his family in the play, *Kullark*, is just one example of the predicament of an Aboriginal family. There are thousands of families who shared the same experiences in the real world of 'white' Australia. In short, Aboriginal plays are steeped in postcolonial sensibility. The assimilation policy did not work - Aboriginal people did not want to lose their traditional way of life or become white. According to Adam Shoemaker (1992), "This policy was doomed to failure because it presumed that Aborigines had to absorb a white lifestyle totally in European terms" (p. 66). The white community used speech to accept Aboriginal people into their society, but racism was literally predominant in Australia. The Aborigines were looked down upon with distrust and contempt. Though assimilation policy that was implemented for the good of the Indigenous people by the government, it turned out to be just another way of destroying Aboriginal culture. It turned out to fail from the very beginning itself, because the Aboriginal people were always being told to conform to white standards, but they were never given the liberty to change, change was enforced upon them. So the white Australian government policy of assimilation never gave the Aboriginal people the same rights as the white Australians, even though they were policed and dictated to fit in the mainstream white community. Aboriginal plays are strongly aware of the Aboriginal problems and voice social criticism of the double standards maintained by post-colonial Australian governments.

Endnotes:

1. The historian Peter Read first used the term 'stolen generations' in 1981 in his pamphlet, *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*.

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