

Too Afraid to Cry: State Coercion and Aboriginal Trauma in Ali Cobby Eckermann's Memoir

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Abstract

This paper engages with the book *Too Afraid to Cry* (2015) by Ali Cobby Eckermann, which poignantly tells us about the author's lived experiences fraught with traumas and tribulations, unmasking in the process the lies and hypocrisies of a nation that observes National Sorry Day to apologize for the atrocities unleashed to its Aboriginal inhabitants. Ali's powerful memoir would be the vantage point from which my paper would investigate the myriad forms of hegemony and racist politics in Australia as evident in the agonies of the "Stolen Generations". With the apparent objective to protect the Indigenous children from neglect and sexual abuse in their families and provide them with better environment to live in, the government started Aboriginal children removal programs. The Aboriginal children were separated from their parents and put to government institutions or adopted out to white families. But the reality is that underneath its benevolent garb the act intends to deepen White colonization over the Aboriginal population, leading perhaps to the inevitable extinction of the Indigenous communities through the abolition of human rights and ethnicity rights. Ali's autobiography proves to be a powerful indictment of the Australian government's racist policies that attempted to deny the history of the Aboriginal Australians.

Keywords: Hegemony; Aboriginal; Indigenous; Colonization; Ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

"When Aunty went to sleep, Uncle would sit next to me and rub my chest. I think he was looking for my bosoms. Fat chance! I was only seven years old and hadn't grown mine yet." [1]

The very opening of Ali Cobby Eckermann's memoir *Too Afraid to Cry* gives the readers a glimpse of the author's traumatic experiences which are simultaneously personal and universal. The book takes us on a journey through Ali's lived experiences saturated with sexual assaults and racial abuse. This paper would engage with the state coercion, appropriation and hegemonic policies of the Australian government and their impact on the victims, in the light of Ali's memoir. Ali herself was an aborigine and one of the 'Stolen Generations' who were victims of the Australia government's heinous racist politics. Through this book Ali has unmasked many hidden policies, lies and hypocrisies of the State that was determined to render everything black into white.

State Hegemony and the "Stolen Generations" Controversy

The book is steeped in traumas and tribulations that have been gnawing at Ali's soul over the years. Ali was born an Aborigine and like her fellow Aborigines she had to confront all sorts of racial atrocities unleashed by the state. When the Australian government implemented its Child Removal Policy under the surreptitious terminology of child Protection, thousands of Indigenous children were separated from their families. The state vindicated such injustices masquerading under the tags of "child protection" and 'civilization'. The government's justification was that the Aboriginal children were neglected and sexually abused in their families. People were made to internalize the belief: "Aboriginal people are like animals; Aboriginal families don't care for their children." [1]. The policy makers insisted that the Aboriginal children were urgent need to be separated from their families. The child removal legislation caused removal of children from their families in massive numbers. Policemen or other agents of the state were given the power to locate and transfer children of mixed descent from their families into government institutions or white families to prevent them from being socialized in the indigenous culture. The exact number of the removed children is not known. The "Bringing Them Home" report

says that at least 1000, 000 children were removed from their parents. Professor Robert Manne in his essay *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right* suggests that “approximately 20,000 were removed between 1910 and 1970, based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics report of 1994.”[2] The “Bringing Them Home” report discovered that removed children were, in most cases, placed into institutional facilities operated by religious or charitable organizations, and a significant number, particularly females, were “fostered” out. The trials and traumas of those part-white children, victims of the enforced separation and oblivion have been unearthed first by historian Peter Read who first used the term ‘Stolen Generations’ in 1981. He wrote a 21 page pamphlet titled *The Stolen Generations: the Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*, for the New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. He writes,

“In Australia today there may be one hundred thousand people of Aboriginal descent who do not know their families or communities. They are the people, or the descendents of people, who were removed from their families by a variety of white people for a variety of reasons. They do not know where they come from; some do not even know they are of Aboriginal descent... as they grew up, they were expected to think white, to act white, and in the end to be white (1997[1989]: ix).

Read’s pamphlet accused the authorities like Aborigines Protection Board and Aborigines Welfare Board of ‘attempted genocide’ in their policy of distancing the Aboriginal children from their families. He said, “Genocide does not simply mean the extermination of people by violence but may include any means at all”.[2]

Read’s claim was later supported by the official human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry. Its 1997 “Bringing Them Home” report concluded that “between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities.... In that time not one indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal” [3]. The report explored the traumatic experiences of these mixed-descent children in government institutions and white families. It is very much transparent that the policy would inevitably cause the elimination of the population of full-blood and half-caste Aborigines.

“Another Way of Life”: A Saga of Trauma and Turbulence

Ali’s memoir underlines the impact of the removal policy on the children who were made to live far away from their families. Being an Aborigine Ali too was taken away from her family and was adopted out to a white family. Her life in the adoptive environment was fraught with sexual assaults and racial abuse. Ali openly writes how from the age of seven she was subject to her Uncle’s sexual molestation. She writes,

“Uncle started to kiss me. His chin was all scratchy from not shaving. It felt funny, and I felt like laughing. But when he pushed his tongue down into my throat I screamed. No noise could come out, and I couldn’t breathe. He had put his body on top of mine, and I could not move. And the icy wind was screeching around and around inside my whole body. Ice cold tears forced their way out of my eyes down my cheeks.”[1]

With the surreptitious objective of relegating the indigenous communities to the brink of extinction the Australian government has been taking recourse to various forms of manipulative policies. The children removal policy is one of the state’s hegemonic strategies. This process entailed severing the emotional, physical, cultural and geographical bonds with the child’s Aboriginal culture and tradition. Ali says in her autobiography, “Mum suggested I should stay away from my Aboriginal friends, because she thought they were dragging me down”. She was not allowed to mix with the indigenous children. The removed children were punished if found speaking their indigenous language. They were forced to adapt to the ways of the new world of the white Australians. The indigenous children faced various racial problems when put to the schools mainly populated by the white children. In school due to her skin colour Ali was made to feel as ‘other kind’ at every moment. The school teachers referred to her as “her kind”. The

white girls would test her: "Someone held me while other hands pulled my underpants down... They said they wanted to know if I was the same as other girls' [1]. Ali's faith in life vanishes; "I watched the clouds. I watched trust disappear" [1]. At the school social Ali found some white girls trying to flush her cousin's head down the dunny. She was also an Aborigine. Ali couldn't resist her anger and started fighting with them. This incident put Ali in big trouble. She fell victim to the white people's prejudice about the black. She was called to the principal room along with her Mum. The principle said that she would not be allowed in the school anymore for she would be "too much of a disruptive influence on the other students" [1]. The problems of the removed children get more intense as they grow up into the adult world. Ali's life in the wider world was fraught with multiple tribulations. She writes, "At eighteen, I would be the first unmarried pregnancy in our small country town, and I knew Mum and Dad were ashamed of me. The younger siblings looked at me like I was the devil. I felt like I was carrying the devil inside me." [1]. She was compelled to give away her son in adoption. After this traumatic event Ali underwent a failed marriage. She got addicted to drugs and alcohol, and suffered from depression. The tormented mind does not leave her at peace. "The suicide thoughts would not leave my brain. When I went for walks, I saw myself hanging in the trees." Ultimately she took shelter in a rehab center to come out of this condition. She was referred to Rosemary, who runs a counseling service for Aboriginal people. There she came to learn about the Aboriginal Link Up service that helped Ali to find out her birth mother. She met with her in Canberra. Ali gets back to her roots by reclaiming the many fragments of her family and finally discovers the solace that she has been searching for. Ali learns that her mother also grew up without her mother, sisters and brother. In her own words; "It is hard to accept that I repeated the history when I adopted out my son' [1]. Ali says in the poem "Circles and Squares", " I was born Yankunytjatjara my mother is Yankunytjatjara my family is Yankunytjatjara I have learnt many things from my family elders I have grown to recognize that life travels in circles- Aboriginal culture has taught me that ." [1]. Among her own people Ali found it hard to adapt to the Aboriginal ways of life. Her growing up in the adoptive family had already erased the language, tradition, culture, history everything she could call her own. She comes to learn that she has lost a life that was her close to her soul. She is a part of those people who "looked into my face and into my eyes. They dance and sing around me. They welcome me back to my traditional country. They give me my skin name. They rub me with their healing powers and heal me using traditional medicine". She writes, "My heart is Round to echo the music of my family but the square within me remains." [1] The tussle between two cultures ended in the ultimate loss of the indigenous one. Ali can perceive "another way of life" of idyllic beauty and innocence beyond the quagmire of materialism the so called civilized white people are plunged in.

CONCLUSION

Ali's memoir emerges as a burning documentation of the racist politics and colonial discourse of the Australian government. The narrative with its blending of blunt prose and intense poetry presents the pangs and agonies of thousands of indigenous people, which are at once personal and universal. When Ali tells about the nightmares of a "muted heart hammered in a world of black and white", or when she asks, "How does a father feel/ After his child is abused? Does he want to kill the man/Who stole the innocence forever?" [1], the readers can visualize the traumatic existence of all the 'Stolen Generations', suffering similarly. She is speaking for a collective, for those who went through similar tragedies for years. Ali's cries give vent to the pent up agonies of all those black subaltern people who are really "too afraid to cry" before the colossal forces of colonization.

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Sankha Maji

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Citation: Sankha Maji (2015) Too Afraid to Cry: State Coercion and Aboriginal Trauma in Ali Cobby Eckermann’s *Memoir*. *IJHSSE* 2(5), pp: 206-209.