

Indigenous Australian Women's Life Writing: Their Voices to Be Heard

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that Indigenous Australian women's life writings reveal the empowerment of Indigenous Australian women in terms of expressing their voices and experiences as Indigenous Australian women in Australian society. This study is a qualitative research that collect qualitative data from books and journals through library research. The data are analyzed by applying interdisciplinary approach and presented descriptively. The result of this study shows that Indigenous Australian women's life writings, *If Everyone Care: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker* by Margaret Tucker (1977), *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987), and *Kick the Tin* by Doris Kartinyeri (2000) express their political and educative voices in order to enhance their life and potency in Australian society.

Keywords: Life Writing, Indigenous Australian Women, Empowerment, Potency

INTRODUCTION

This study intends to demonstrate that Indigenous women's life writings as a literary work are important sources of knowledge concerning the voice and the experiences of Australian Indigenous women who belong to the stolen generations. The literary works of Indigenous people deal with their experiences and have an intention in enhancing Indigenous people's dignity in white dominant culture because of the impact of colonialism. According to Adam Shoemaker, Indigenous Literature reflects and is in the line with the political movement of Indigenous people (Shoemaker 1989, p. 265). In addition, Muecke (1992) points out that the emergence of Aboriginal literature is a response to historical conditions of repression and struggle' (in Nolan 2004, p. 140). Dealing with the content of Indigenous Literature, Shoemaker states that Aboriginal Literature deals with their identity, history, dispossession, land and other rights (Shoemaker 1989, p. 277).

Some authors have observed that Indigenous writing has been marginalized in Australian society. Indigenous literature has been 'on the margins of works in the mainstream of white literature' (Hodge and Mishra 1990, pp. 24 - 27). This condition was emphasized by the publication of an anthology, *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* in 1990 which was intended 'to examine and redress the ways in which Indigenous Australian voices, particularly literary and polemical voices had been systematically excluded, marginalised or dismissed' in Australian culture (Grossman 2003, p.2). This suggests also that their voices through their writings were not being heard in the mainstream of Australian society. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the writer believes that the life writings of Indigenous women voice Indigenous women's thought and on the other hands, challenge the wrong perception of their identity and potency in

Australian society. In this case, the writer chooses three Indigenous women life writings: *If Everyone Care: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker* by Margaret Tucker (1977), *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987), and *Kick the Tin* by Doris Kartinyeri (2000).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative research that gain the data from books, journals, and other materials through a library research. Then, the collected data are presented descriptively. The data are analysed by using interdisciplinary approach as a part of Women Studies approaches.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous Australian Women's Life Writings

Life writings or autobiographies are writings in which the author, the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same person (Susana Egan in Nolan & Dawson 2004, p. 14). According to Mudrooroo, this condition still does not fit autobiographical writing because of 'auto in this sense means 'self' and biography too is concentrated on self' (Mudrooroo 1997, p. 188). I prefer to use the term life writings rather than autobiographical writings in order to avoid the confusion of the term 'auto' that refers to 'self'. In several cases, those Indigenous women's life writings do not only talk about the author stories but also she talks the stories of her relatives. For examples, *my place* (1987) written by Sally Morgan, tells about her grandmother, her grandmother's brother and her mother's experiences. *Auntie Rita* by Jackie Huggins tells about the experience of her mother.

I agree with the idea of Linda Westphalen who sees that the term 'personal narrative', 'life story', 'oral history', 'life – history', and 'autobiography' create different meaning for each person (2002, p. 25). Furthermore, Linda Westphalen points out that:

Indigenous women's personal narratives, life/oral histories and/or autobiographies (however this complex genre is defined) both reflect and preserve cultural heritage, family history, and experiences of wider social relations, such as state government policy, (Westphalen 2002, p. 15).

Moreton–Robinson, an Indigenous academic, argues that:

The term "life writings" has been used because the Indigenous women's texts that have been analysed do not fit the usual strict chronological narrative of autobiography, and they are the product of collaborative lives. In these life writings, experience is fundamentally social and relational, not something ascribed separately within the individual. Indigenous women's life writings are based on the collective memories of inter-generational relationship between predominantly Indigenous women, extended families, and communities (2000, p. 1).

Thus, I think that the important point here is Indigenous women's life writings reflect their personal experiences or their family's experiences or their communities. In this case, their experiences of colonial processes which 'are evident in their texts' (Moreton – Robinson 2000, p. 1).

Penny van Toorn states that the beginning of Indigenous writing had a close relation to the stolen children in early colonial period because those children who were stolen were 'the first Indigenous Australians to be formally taught to read and write' (Toorn 2006, p. 24). It is asserted that the first writing of Indigenous people was in the form of letters. Penny van Toorn states that 'The earliest piece of writing produced by an Aboriginal author was a letter dictated by Bennelong in August 1796' (2006, p. 53). The publication of *Letters from Aboriginal women of Victoria, 1867 – 1926* (2002) revealed that Indigenous women wrote letters for themselves, their families and for colonial official concerning their concerns about their children, families, land, freedom and other matters (Toorn 2006, p. 175). Penny van Toorn states that: "These women's letters... show how Aboriginal women viewed their own lives, and interpreted the broader political context within which they and their families were living" (Toorn 2006, p.176). This suggests that starting from the colonial period, Indigenous women's writing has a political intention in questioning their position under colonial control. Penny van Toorn further states:

Aboriginal writers in colonial times used writing to breach the barriers – social, physical and attitudinal – that separated them from their fellow human beings. Today many Aboriginal authors continue this tradition, writing their way into white readers' minds to dissolve the ignorance and apathy that have long made white and black Australians strangers to each other (Toorn, 2006, p. 196).

Moreover, Penny Van Toorn (2001) points out that Indigenous Australian life writing is considered as a new literary and historical work that appeared in the mid twentieth century, in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, it became popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Toorn in Attwood and Magowan 2001, pp. 1 – 2). In parallel to Toorn's previous statements, Michele Grossman asserts that since early 1980s, Indigenous writing such as 'life writing, oral histories, autobiography and memoir, prose fiction, poetry, drama, and children's literature – has become increasingly well – established' (Grossman 2003, p. 1). In other words, the rise of Indigenous life writing was integrated with the emergence of other forms of Indigenous literature. In addition, Nolan quotes the words of Whitlock (1996) saying:

Aboriginal Australians appear in autobiographical writing as a significant force only after an Aboriginal intelligentsia emerged in the 1970s and 1980s – leading to a surge in black writing and self – representation in the mid to late 1980s (Nolan 2004, p. 140).

Moreover, Muecke (1992) states that the demand of publishing industries and 'the emergence of Aboriginal or post-colonial writing courses in universities' enforce Indigenous writers to write their autobiography as a reflection of their past experiences (Muecke in Nolan 2004, p. 140). It is mentioned that in the period of 1987 – 1990, some Indigenous women's life writings were published namely Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987), Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) (Grossman 2003, p. 1).

In term of a life writing as a literary work of Aboriginal literature, it is important to see the position of life writings in the development of Aboriginal Literature in general. Mudrooroo, Indigenous writer explains that Indigenous literature is divided into several periods. First, 'the time of the dreaming', from the beginning to 1788, refers to the period before the coming of the Europeans in Australia. Second, 'the time of the invasion' refers to the period until Australia became 'the federation of the Australian colonies'. Third, the period

of 'punitive expeditions and protection' refers to 'the utter conquering and control of Indigenous peoples with the framing of restrictive legislation. Fourth, 'the colonial period refers to 'paternalism and assimilation'. Fifth, 'the period of self-determination and self-management refers to 'the official policy from 1967 to 1988'. Sixth, 'the period of reconciliation' refers to 'sharing culture' (Mudrooroo, 1997, p. 5). Moreover, Mudrooroo asserts that "the period of Reconciliation was signaled by the autobiography/ biography of Sally Morgan, *My Place* (1987) ... It is significant that in 1988 creative writing was replaced in importance by the life story" (Mudrooroo 1997, p. 16). Thus, it is clear that life writing became popular in the period of Reconciliation, in 1980s. This condition had a relationship to the period after the bicentennial celebration when many Australian realized that Indigenous history had been missed from their memory. '*My Place*, was hailed as a Bicentennial event' (Schaffer and Smith 2004, p. 94). In other words, the rise of Indigenous women's life writing has a relationship with the invisibility of indigenous history, specifically the history of the stolen generation and the marginalization of Indigenous women in Australian society. Anne Brewster, an academic, states that:

Aboriginal women's autobiographical histories are corporeal histories of the gendered and racialised body that has been placed under surveillance, disciplined, silenced and condemned to poverty (Brewster 1995, p.5).

There are three Indigenous Australian women's life writings that the writer discusses here. First, *If Everyone Care: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker*. Margaret Tucker was born in 1904 in Murrumbidgee River and 'was registered in Hay in 1904'. He was brought up in Moonaculla mission in New South Wales (Tucker 1977, p. 15) Her parents were both Aborigines of mixed descent. Her mother is Theresa Priscilla Middleton and her father is William Clements. Margaret has three sisters, Geraldine Rose, May Edna, and Evelyn Louise (Tucker 1977, pp. 14 – 17). Margaret and her sisters were taken away when there were at school and removed to the Domestic Training School at Cootamundra (Tucker 1977, p. 61). She was thirteen years old when she was removed to the domestic training and was sent to work as a domestic worker in Sydney in 1919 when she was fifteen years old (Tucker 1977, p. 104).

The book was drafted in 1975 – 1976 and was published in 1977 (Wilson 2004, p. 88). At that time, the narrative of the Stolen Generation was not publicly recognized by Australian people and Indigenous people. Bain Attwood points out that "Between the late 1930s and the late 1970s the removal of children was, as far as we know, neither the subject of many stories told in Aboriginal communities." (Attwood in Attwood and Magowan, 2001, p. 185). Moreover, Attwood states that in the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of social history and 'history from below' (hidden from history) opened other disciplines such as oral history, women's history and Aboriginal history (Attwood in Attwood and Magowan, 2001, p. 197). So, I assume that this condition also encouraged *If Everyone Care: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker* to be recommended at schools for the study of Australian History. It was 'reprinted three times between 1983 and 1984' (Attwood in Attwood and Magowan, 2001, p. 195). This suggests that Indigenous women's life writing has a significant contribution to the history of Indigenous people.

Tikka Wilson states that there was a 'significant change in Australian government policies toward Aborigines 'when Margaret Tucker wrote the book. For instances, Attwood et al. point out that in 1967, 'a national referendum was passed that indicated majority support for recognizing Aboriginal people as full citizens' (in Wilson 2004, p.88). In addition, Tikka Wilson states that in 1970s, Aboriginal community organisations were established such

as the first Aboriginal Medical Service (1971), Aboriginal Legal service (1973), The Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, and the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. 'All these organisations began to publish Aboriginal community perspectives on a variety of issues' (Wilson 2004, p. 88).

Margaret Tucker's life writing challenges the stereotypes of Indigenous people in white community. Tikka Wilson asserts that the life writing of Margaret Tucker challenges the misrepresentation of Indigenous people in white community who perceive them unable to care and to educate their children. Second, it changes the perception that white families, specifically white women are more "civilized" and more capable to take care Indigenous children (Wilson 2004, p. 90). Margaret Tucker states at the end of her book:

...Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls told in church one day about a black man who said, 'You can play a tune of sorts on the white keys of a piano; you can play some sort of tune on the black keys; but for perfect harmony, you must use both.' I got that point, it is a terrific one (Tucker 1977, p. 205).

This suggests as well that reconciliation is important for white and Indigenous people to live in harmony.

The second story is *My Place* by Sally Morgan. Sally Morgan is an Indigenous academic and well-known writer who was born in Pert, Western Australia in 1951. *My place*, her first book, was published in 1987 and achieved best- seller status. Her second book was *Wanamurranganya* which was published in 1989.

She searched her family history in her book, *My Place*. She was grown up first without knowing that her grandmother and mother were Indigenous people. She thought that her ancestor was Indian. She found later that her ancestors were Indigenous-people and started to reveal the life of her Indigenous grandmother, mother, and Arthur, her grandmother's brother. In this case, Sally Morgan revealed the hard life of her family's experiences to be removed in order to be assimilated in white society. The setting of the text was Pert in West Australia. According to Schaffer and Smith,

My Place, however, was hailed as 'a Bicentennial event: widely read, warmly embraced, heavily promoted and marketed in Australia and overseas...Having sold in excess of 500.000 copies worldwide, the book has altered an International audience to critical aspects of Indigenous life in Australia (2004, p. 94).

This suggests that Morgan's *My Place* had gained public recognition dealing with Indigenous people history, specifically regarding the removal of Indigenous children before the publication of *Bringing Them Home* in 1997. The text also was published in relation to the celebration of the Bicentennial year. It was the time when Australians were provided with the opportunities to see the disparity between 'living white' and 'living black'. *My Place* by Morgan and *Don't Take your Love to Town* by Ruby Langford Ginibi were Indigenous women's narratives which shocked white readers after not knowing for long time the 'hidden history' of the stolen children (Schaffer and Smith, p. 92).

Mudrooroo states that *My Place* was categorised as a reconciliation text. 'Not only the reconciliation of Indigenous people to the nation of Australia, but the reconciliation of the general population of Australia to the land of Australia' (1977, p. 192). Sally Morgan asserts:

We have to find a way of living together in this country, and that will only come when our hearts, minds and wills are set towards reconciliation...Reconciliation brings wholeness and peace, but the process itself is painful, angry and frustrating. Reconciliation takes time and patience (Morgan in Edwards and Read 1989, p.vi)

The third life writing is *Kick the Tin* by Doris Kartinyeri. *Kick the Tin* was written by Doris Kartinyeri. Doris was born at the Raukkan Community Hospital, 8 September 1945. She was taken away after the death of her mother, a month after her birth. Doris was brought up in Colebrook Home and her sister Doreen Kartinyeri was in Fullarton Home in Adelaide (Kartinyeri 2000, p. xiii – xvi).

'Kick the Tin' was a game that the children used to play at Colebrook Home. It symbolizes the life of Indigenous children who were kicked about by those who were in charge to 'educate' them in order to be able to live in white community.

I believe that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters experienced much suffering because of the abusive behaviour of white fella governments and regimental, oppressive institutions. By running and hiding we escaped white fellas' way. Everybody has now scattered in their own directions following their dreams and discovering their roots, taking different avenues just as in the game, 'Kick the Tin' (Kartinyeri 2000, p. 2).

Kick the Tin was published in 2000 after the Stolen Generations' narrative has become a collective memory for most of Australian people. Doris Kartinyeri also use the term of the stolen generations for Indigenous children who were removed. She started her narrative with a poem, "We are the stolen children" (2000, p. viii). Doris Kartinyeri was active working together with Blackwood Reconciliation group in efforts to build a better understanding between Indigenous people and white people in connection to the stolen generations. They built a monument at Colebrook to represent the experiences of the stolen children who lived in Colebrook (Kartinyeri 2000, pp. 129 – 130). Doris Kartinyeri states in her final chapter, 'I walk with dignity ...I believe that I am only now coming to terms with all that I endured in the past. The healing has just begun' (Kartinyeri 2000, p. 135).

The Voices of Indigenous Women Writers

I contend that the three Indigenous writers previously mentioned have the same intention in writing their narratives. Each text has a political intention in revealing Indigenous women's experiences dealing with the process of colonisation and the construction of their identity and claims 'identity, authority, connection, tradition, presence, geographical and ontological space, renewal, example, and survival' (Westphalen 2002, p.6). In this case, their narratives expose their hard experiences in dealing with their lives to be stolen and assimilated in white community in term of domestic workers. They seek for a true reconciliation between Indigenous people and white Australians.

Literature gives ways to express Indigenous people's experiences and their voices. As Alexis Wright, an Indigenous writer, points out that 'Literature is a very good tool for speaking out about the pain of humanity for Aboriginal people in this country' (Wright in Heiss and Toorn 2002, p. 13). Wright says that as an Indigenous writer, it became clear to her that Indigenous people cannot express the truth of the reality that they face openly,

but Literature helps her to express 'a good portrayal of truth' of Indigenous people. Wright asserts further that:

I also know we as family have suffered through each successive generation from the things that happened in the past which our families will not talk about. I call this the massacre of our voices which continues to this day. We have thousands of people who have no voice at all in today's Australia. I wonder how we are going to heal ourselves if we cannot speak about the pain of who we are? (Wright in Heiss and Toorn 2002, p. 13).

In other words, Indigenous Australians had suffered under the impact of colonization and its impacts have influenced their existence of life today. So, the writings of Indigenous people have become tools to challenge the dominant power of white people. This means also that Indigenous literature cannot be separated from their history in Australian society and Indigenous people consider themselves as the right persons to write what happened to their people in the past. Furthermore, the writer asserts that understanding Indigenous women writings cannot be separated from the social, political or cultural and historical context of their experiences in Australian society. In other words, the essences of Indigenous women writings are different from the writings of white Australian women writers because their identities have been constructed differently in Australian society in the past. For Indigenous women, their past experiences cannot be separated from their existence today because their identities had been constructed inferior to white people, specifically, white women as well. In short, Literature is a tool for Indigenous writers to express their thought concerning all aspects of Indigenous people's experiences in Australian society. Literature provides ways to voice their inferior existence and challenge the dominant power of white people.

I contend that Indigenous women's life writings has political and educative purposes. Indigenous women's life writings are the reflection of their experiences in the past, specifically in connection to the removal of Indigenous children. In this sense, Indigenous women's life writings become a challenge for white dominant power in order to re-evaluate the past wrong and to heal the impacts of the past. Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan state that Indigenous life writing have become 'a cognitive instrument' or a means to understand and make this life to have meanings because of the harsh condition that they faced in the past and still impacts their existence today (Attwood and Magowan 2001, p. xii). Furthermore, Mudrooroo states that Indigenous women's life writings express the truth of their experiences and empower other Indigenous women (Mudrooroo 1997, p. 180). In connection to that point, Nolan states that:

Aboriginal autobiography is tied to an identity politics that provides an opportunity for the other to speak the truth of their experiences, which is then read as resistance to the oppressive force of colonialism (Nolan in Nolan & Dawson 2004, p. 141).

This suggests also that Indigenous women's life writings have a political message that can challenge 'the hegemony of White Australia' (Narogin 1990, p. 163). In addition, Penny Van Toorn mentions that: "To appreciate these tactical aspects of Indigenous life narratives, it is necessary to view writing and storytelling as modes of political..." (in Attwood and Magowan 2001, pp.3 -4).

Life writing is intended to enhance Indigenous women's dignity to white readers and becomes an educative tool as well. Mudrooroo mentions that the message of life writing is 'one of understanding and tolerance, which may be a good thing in regard to Indigenous place in a multicultural Australia' (1997, p. 16). Furthermore, Ruby Langford Ginibi, an Indigenous writer (1993) states: "I write truth, and the truth is just to educate people – mostly non- Aboriginal people – about how we really are" (Mudrooroo 1997, p. 180). The statements of Ruby Langford Ginibi are emphasized by white academic, Jan Pettman (1992):

Aboriginal women may write for other Aborigines as part of a process of retrieval and recovery. They also usually write to a white audience, to tell the stories long silenced, to affirm the survival of Aboriginal women and communities against the odds, and to provide positive images of those long stigmatized (in Mudrooroo 1997, p. 180).

Thus, based on the statements above, it is clear that Indigenous Australian women writers address their writing for the white readers in order to voice their experiences that has been silenced for long time and to empower themselves in order to challenge the wrong perception concerning their community in white society.

III. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indigenous women's life writings as a literary works become intellectual documents that assert their political and educative intention to white readers. Furthermore, their life writings reflect the empowerment of Indigenous women in their effort to voice their experiences that have been marginalized in Australian society.

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