



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

WRITING THE SELF: THE ROAD TAKEN TO REACH RESILIENCE

VEENA SHARMA

Lecturer in English, Govt. Polytechnic Kullu, Himachal Pradesh



ABSTRACT

The Australian Aboriginal and half-caste writers resort to autobiographical writing as a means of self-expression and socio-cultural reflection. The writing and the reading of such autobiographies are seen as therapeutic, as a process whereby the autobiographer and the reader are brought to a confrontation with Australian social history and its legacies in the individual life. This leads to a deeper self-knowledge and a greater recognition of shared humanity.

The present paper is the study of *The Dusty Road* (2005), an autobiography by Irene (Winnie) Larsen, which allows her to interrogate the painful and harsh memories of her *Noongar* childhood. It strongly relates to racism as is evident in the debates about the dispossession of indigenous peoples as a result of settler colonialism and unjust policies of the government. Larsen's life story is an interesting one, and obviously of importance in thinking about contemporary multi-cultural Australian society. The paper aims at analyzing how Larsen's autobiography plays an important role in recovering the indigenous heritage for Australia's national self-definition. It also analyses how it arguably works towards an assimilative conception of white reconciliation with an unacknowledged past of indigenous genocide.

Key Words: Aboriginals, racism, displacement, removal, multiculturalism,

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The Australian Aboriginal and half-caste writers resort to autobiographical writing as a means of self-expression and socio-cultural reflection. The writing and the reading of such autobiographies are seen as therapeutic, as a process whereby the autobiographer and the reader are brought to a confrontation with Australian social history and its legacies in the individual life. This leads to a deeper self-knowledge and a greater recognition of shared humanity.

The present paper is the study of *The Dusty Road* (2005), an autobiography by the Aboriginal-Australian, Irene (Winnie) Larsen, which allows her to interrogate the painful and harsh memories of her *Noongar* childhood. It strongly relates to racism as is evident in the debates about the dispossession of indigenous peoples as a result of settler colonialism and unjust policies of the government. Larsen's life story is an interesting one, and obviously of importance in thinking about contemporary multi-cultural Australian society. The paper aims at analyzing how Larsen's autobiography plays an important role in recovering the

indigenous heritage for Australia's national self-definition. It also analyses how it arguably works towards an assimilative conception of white reconciliation with an unacknowledged past of indigenous genocide.

The indigenous autobiography is a distinct literary genre of the Australian life-writing that has generated from a certain stage in post-colonial Australian history. Such writing forms part of a larger process by which indigenous peoples work through post-colonial trauma to reclaim their identity in political and therapeutic contexts. Since it evolves from the trauma of separation and removal, it reflects on and describes an acute sense of physical, spiritual and emotional displacement. It has become an important means of articulating the silenced Aboriginal life experience of the 'Stolen Generations,' and voices its ongoing struggle against assimilative policies of the government. As Michelle Grossman also believes, the Indigenous life-writing has attained:

the cultural status as a genre more willing to engage with representational *métissage* across cultural and language traditions and communities than conventional literary Western paradigms, it has offered new opportunities for adapting the published text to the concerns and contributions of those whom such paradigms formerly excluded or marginalised, particularly at the levels of 'speaking' and 'writing.'(26)

Since the late 1970s, the genre of indigenous life-writing has strongly been embraced even by indigenous women so as to "offer their testimony of race oppression in Australia" (Elder 16). Likewise, a poignant example of indigenous life-writing is provided by Winnie Larsen, who was born to a quadroon (1/8 Aboriginal) father and a half-caste mother in Gnowangerup in 1933 during the high-flown period of the process of absorption and assimilation. In simple language she gives an account of her life in her autobiography, *The Dusty Road*, first published in 2005. She overcame an almost total lack of formal education and a serious childhood injury to attend the Great Southern Regional College of TAFE in Albany in her 50s, to learn all the skills she had missed. Her determined ambition, over an extended period, to learn and to write sufficiently made her capable to write her life story impressively. Because of a lack of transport she walked to TAFE every day for a number of years, in all types of weather, despite her disability. Her dedication was recognised by the college when she was nominated for, and won, a major award 'The Endeavour Award' for her persistence and dedication.

Larsen's family circumstances were structurally embedded in the White Australian policies and a policy of assimilation for the Aboriginal people. Her autobiographical search for her Aboriginal (*Noongar*) past became at the very moment of publication part of a wider discussion of Australianness that often presses upon the pulse of national consciousness. *The Dusty Road* cleverly appeals not only to her people but also to the mainstream readership with an acceptable message that glosses over present injustices while projecting its anger towards the past. In her introduction to the book, Winnie writes:

We kids had a bush life, camping in different places as dad moved around. In those days there were lots of bush flowers, wild fruit, birds and fresh water soaks. We were Noongar people and we believed in these things in a spiritual way. I have many memories of this life and that is why I am writing these stories. These stories show the way things were for us. I am hoping that both Noongar and Wadjila people will read them and know what Noongar life was like many years ago.
(6)

This autobiography is an overt narrative of the ways in which Australian settler society has dealt with the Aboriginal population in its colonising thrust, and what strategies it has employed to affect Aboriginal cultural and physical displacement from their tribal lands in its aim to control vital resources. White frontier violence, the dispossession of ancestral country, the relocation to missions and reserves, child removal and institutionalisation have all played their role in a process of displacement often considered a mechanism of genocide.

The process of institutionalisation by state policies of dispossession and removal inspired by late-Victorian eugenics foresaw no viable future for 'primitive' man in the face of Europe's civilisation and racial superiority. Euphemistically known as 'protection,' these official policies have had a two-fold structure of

biological segregation and absorption. Aboriginal relocation and institutionalisation on missions and reserves aimed to separate the Aboriginal communities from the mainstream and make the way to their physical and cultural disappearance. Deemed unable to develop 'civilised' standards of behaviour, the Aborigine was considered expendable and doomed to extinction. As Stewart Murray of the Victoria Aboriginal Land Council denounced in Kevin Gilbert's 1978 volume of interviews, *Living Black*:

Our people have had a vicious hard battle to survive in such a small state with three and a half million other people. In 1940 we were down to about five or six hundred people. They almost wiped out with their protection policies. Herding them into reserves and herding them back out again. (77)

Similarly *The Dusty Road* focuses on the plight and testimony of the 'Stolen Generations,' a large group of mixed-descent children forcibly removed at great distances from their Aboriginal families and raised to fit into white society. Larsen's three paternal aunts were taken away in their childhood by the white government people and their grandmother kept wailing. It is such children that became the main focus of assimilative government action; it is in their defencelessness that the breach of basic human rights is salient; it is also in their current recovery as indigenous rather than white Australians that the resilience and ongoing presence of the Aboriginal communities and cultures are manifest. Larsen admonishingly says, "No white person heard the cry or felt the pain of what they made our people feel. The strain these people put on our Noongar community" (56).

Justified in Aboriginal parents' inability to raise their children in acceptable mainstream ways, absorption into the white race through removal, fostering, adoption and inter-racial marriage revealed itself as a breeding-out policy; such "smoothing the dying pillow" of the 'race' (Haebich 134) would restrict the Aboriginal population on reserves and missions to 'authentic full-bloods' and automatically work towards falling numbers and their forecasted extinction under the guise and guidance of 'humane' mainstream intervention.

The policies of segregation have been a powerful discursive tool with which the mainstream has written Aboriginality into marginality and off the Australian map; there is no place for their 'primitivism' in contemporary Australian society. Larsen remembers that the government sorted their colour out. Her father was a quadroon, classed as white and therefore was not judged as a native under the 'Native Welfare Act' and therefore her mother had to apply to the government for an exemption card — the 'Citizenship Rights Card' so that she could live with him. This recognition meant total adherence to the white standards and complete snapping off the bonds with her people. And often surprise visits were made by the white government officials to check if there was any breach of the laws. "My poor mum, she felt such shame being torn away from her people because of white man's laws. . . . Some Noongar said that mum thought she was too good. There was a lot of jealousy about this and there's still some today," she says (43). However this could not change her blood and her real identity and she taught her children about their people and culture.

Larsen also remembers how she was not allowed to get a room in hotel because she was married to a white man. She had to face several other problems which finally forced her to get 'Citizens Rights Card' that prevented her from doing anything non-white and following anything native. Even to get her daughter back from the reserve she had to make the permit first. However, all this did not deter her from mixing with her own people in secret which often led to interrogation by the police. It was just because some of her own people had complained against her out of jealousy. After years of separation from her people when she visited doctor because of prolonged illness, she recalls, he said, "you're pining away. It was something that I can't explain but I know that other Noongars would understand what I mean" (82).

The Aboriginals and the half-castes have had always been treated no less than animals and dirty brutes. Larsen tells that when her family had to be shifted to different places as part of her father's farm work, they were often treated like animals. She remembers:

Often Noongar people were carted around in trucks. They would never put you in the front seat no matter how clean you were, or fair. I can understand why we walked. This was much better than all sitting in the back of a truck. It reminded me of a lot of sheep. (15)

She also recalls how her people were treated as aliens in their own country. Any function or entertainment that was often organized for the whites had no entry for the natives. She tells:

I remember there was a small hall in Ongerup. They held dances in the hall. They were for white people. But because dad played the accordion and he was well-liked, we went to the dances as well. I never saw any other Noongar kids at the dances even though there were a lot of Noongars living in the area. (12)

She remembers another horrifying incident when she was too ill to walk to the hospital in Ongerup. Her mother and siblings were struggling to push the cart on which she was writhing in pain on the dusty road and not even a single car that was passing by them stopped. She tells: "Whenever a car drove by my mum used to say *kaanya*— 'shame'" (32).

The Aborigines resisted the destruction of traditional means of sustenance in the bush by their integration into the pastoral industry on the basis of underpaid, unsteady seasonal work, and thus to some extent managed to elude mainstream control and interference. Yet droughts, economic slumps and other adverse circumstances compounded the already existing poverty amongst the indigenes and increasingly forced them to gather and wither on mission or reserve land, where they were subject to strict state control; or to move to more urban settings, giving up part of their culture and often living with restricted freedom, as Larsen records in her autobiography. These dire conditions remain unaltered despite the boasting of new egalitarian engineering in the present multicultural society. Kevin Gilbert writes:

White people's devaluation of Aboriginal life, religion, culture and personality caused the thinking about self and race that I believe is the key to modern Aboriginal thinking Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the mind of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else that causes the conditions that we see on reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations. (2-3)

Removal would entail severing the emotional, physical, cultural and geographical bonds with the child's Aboriginal progenitors and heritage in a process of displacement, silencing and denial of ethnic origins, in which mission reserves, children's homes and well-meaning white families all played their role. These part-white children, taken from their Aboriginal families and placed in institutions and white adoptive or foster families, preferably at enormous distances from their indigenous kin suffered so many trials and tribulations. The magnitude of this traumatic exercise of enforced separation and oblivion has been explicitly described by the historian Peter Read:

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 descendants 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. (ix)

Multiculturalism should be understood as a project of neither assimilation nor dissimulation, but as one of inter-culturality or trans-culturality. But it was never so. The bush people engaged as farm hands had to travel to different places. And every time they camped at a new place, they had to reinvent themselves according to the prejudices and rules set by the whites living there. As people with a different colour, they were not allowed to enjoy the same privileges of the whites. Larsen remembers that when her family moved to Gnowangerup, "the town had "Natives Not Allowed" signs on lots of different public places. We lived with this" (50). She says that they enjoyed their walk in the bush as there was no entertainment and no freedom to go to the picture hall or to go to the swimming pool or to eat in the tearoom after 6 pm. 'Natives Not Allowed' policy was strictly followed there. Only those with the 'Citizen's Rights' or 'Exemption Cards' could avail such

freedom. She remembers the painful journey by train when her mother and she were not allowed to use the sleeper because they did not have the citizen's rights card:

I remember the pain caused by the shunting of the engine. As I lay on the wooden seat, the shunting nearly threw me to the floor. The train left in the evening and arrived about 7am in Perth. At every station on the way the shunting continued. It was very painful trip for me. Mum and I were the only passengers in this carriage so I was able to lie on the seat. (61)

Once Aboriginal people gained the certificate they in effect had to lose their indigenous identity and culture, their family and their homelands, in exchange for living in the wider community. It is now recognised that the removal system created by different acts delivered a trans-generational impact on the lives of Aboriginal people that is still felt today. Many researchers and writers have noted that the process of removal resulted in the demise of Aboriginal societies, with the loss of homelands, kin, culture, language and identity. The 'protectionist' system can be characterised by an ongoing multi-faceted and systematic attempt to transform Aboriginal societies and culture. With many removals fragmenting families and kinship groups, numerous Aboriginal languages and sub-cultures were transformed to the point of extinction.

When ill, the Aboriginals and the half-castes were kept in quarantine in the isolated wards of the hospitals. Either nobody from the family was allowed to see them or their visits were restricted to few and far between. This often led to further deterioration of the condition of the patients. Larsen remembers how she used to pine for her family in the Native Ward of the Gnowangerup hospital, the ward built away from the main hospital and in dark. Later she was shifted to yet another secluded place, the Princess Margaret Hospital for children in Perth where again she missed her family. She painfully remembers, "I was about eight and a half years old. Mum and dad could not visit. I started to forget what they looked like. . . . I was very sick and fretted for my family. I would not speak to anyone and would sit by myself" (49). Even in the St. Joseph's Orphanage she missed her family a lot.

To drive the coloured people away, the whites used to do certain scary things like pursuing them in the dark, barging in their houses at night, pelting stones at their roofs or opening fire in the air to frighten them. Larsen remembers one horrendous incident:

Then one night, a scary thing happened to us. We saw a man walking in the distance. It was just getting dark. He was walking over to our place so we locked all the doors and windows. We did this just in time because the man was trying to break in. We had two little dogs, all they did was bark, and, every now and then, he would boot one of the dogs. He wouldn't go away, and then it was nearly four in the morning. So we went to our brother Victor's room and got his rifle. We put a bullet in it and stuck it out the window and fired it. He took off down the road, the dogs took off after him in spite of him trying to boot them all night. We could see the tracks he left in the sand the next day. (66)

Even children of the whites raised as racist chauvinists hurled insult on others different from them. Larsen's sister Una who was a good horse rider was once pulled off her horse and was called names by a group of white boys. Larsen bitterly remarks, "As soon as people found out that you had coloured blood in you and were native then you were in for a hard time" (55).

Significantly, Larsen's time at different places is the text's main focus, as it addresses her process of personal growth in adverse circumstances imposed by racist mainstream society. Nevertheless, the text shows her slow process of recovery towards a fuller self-awareness and more assertive attitude. She finds ways to circumvent the exploitative nature of the imposed chores and to enjoy herself, and her friendship with some well-meaning white people and some fellow Noongar girls working for other local families provide the emotional bonding and security she needs to develop as a person.

The text is a true account of cross-generational displacement and trauma told from the perspective of an indigenous daughter. After spending her childhood at different places coping with unfamiliar people, unhealthy environment, unfortunate loneliness and pursuing police officers and being confronted with the subaltern role laid out for her by a deeply racist society, Larsen undertakes a healing journey into traditional

land to recover her lost indigenous heritage. This prompts her to locate some of her people after so many years and recover her roots. She re-establishes contact with her kin and culture and recovers her sense of home.

Thus Larsen's autobiography finishes on an optimistic note when she recovers the link with some of her long-alienated people. Despite this account of indigenous resilience, there is an arguable element of accommodation in her autobiography in that it speaks out for understanding and reconciliation with the mainstream, thus projecting a 'nonthreatening' image of Aboriginality. Her stories trace a critical path back into a past that should never be forgotten and needs to be addressed even today if Australia is to come to terms with itself as the democratic nation of the 'fair go.' Thus, the autobiography also becomes a chant towards a hopeful future of cultural resilience and recovery.

She puts her plea for acceptance in the form of a verse entitled 'You':

You did not give me time to learn why
And your ways.
A Noongar lass so small and fearful
Yet you did not stop to think.
You took me from my coloured people.

A teardrop down my cheek I hide
Something you will never share.
A secret inside me
Of dreaming.
A secret I dare not share.

You pressed on me your way of living
And not a care for mine.
You would not know my laughter
Around a campfire
Eyes so bright.

You forced upon me loud noises
Bright lights, grey walls.
Not a soul to hold me at night
No one to care.

You seemed not to care
To give me a smile.

But you, I'll forgive
For not knowing my ways
For not living or laughing

I'll forgive you if only you let me free
To wander through the passages of time
To once again capture
My Noongar Dreamtime. (54)

Here she means to say her people's fight is not for a separate nation state but for freedom to preserve their own history, culture and identity. As is rightly said by Robyn Friend, "One's life story is one's spiritual backbone" balancing the assertion of 'self' and recognition by 'other' (24). Likewise through her life-writing,

Larsen tries to build a sense of community among several disparate and scattered families. She tries to make a real sense of Australianness in terms of longing and belonging as well as memory and experience.

Works Cited

- Elder, Arlene A. "Silence as Expression: Sally Morgan's *My Place*." *Kunapipi* 14.1 (1992): 16-24. Print.
- Friend, Robyn. "Voices from the Invisible: The Use of Oral History to De-marginalise a Hidden People." *Indian Journal of Australian Studies*. Special Issue on Nation and Pluralism 2 (2009): 21-32. Print.
- Gilbert, Kevin. *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*. Victoria: Penguin, 1978. Print
- Grossman, Michelle. When they write what we read: Unsettling Indigenous, Australian Lifewriting. *AHR* 12 (2006): 39-40. Print.
- Haebich, Anna. *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*. Fremantle, Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001. Print.
- Heiss, Anita & Peter Minter. *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008. Print.
- Kunhikrishnan, K. Identity Narratives. *The Hindu*, 10 (2003): 7. Print.
- Larsen, Winnie. *The Dusty Road: Memoirs of a Noongar Childhood*. Western Australia: Nutshell Books, 2005. Print.
- Read, Peter & Coral Edwards, eds. *The Lost Children*. Sydney: Doubleday, 1997. Print.
-