

Hybridity, Resistance, and Belonging of Alec Yorlah in Jack Davis' Kullark

Dr. Colette Sharmila¹

¹Assistant Professor in English, PG & Research Department of English V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi – 2, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Mail Id: colettesharmila@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to read the hybrid identity of Alec Yorlah in Kullark by the Australian Aborigine playwright Jack Davis' Kullark. Alec Yorlah was a child of the Stolen Generation who was forcibly removed from his family and community. So he was cut away from his roots and assimilated into an alien White environment. An adult hybrid Alec Yorlah despises his aborigine identity and he tries to mimic his assumed White identity. But he is constantly reminded everywhere of his Aboriginal status and how he cannot be a real White. However, Alec refuses to come back home and accept his ancestry, but in vain persists with an unreal identity.

Key words: Stolen Generation, Aborigine, identity, assimilation, ancestry, hybrid, mimicry..

INTRODUCTION

The Stolen Generations (also called Stolen Children) were Australian Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families and communities by the White colonisers to be brought up in foster homes and care institutions so that they would give up their ancestral ties and shed their cultural roots to be called half-castes and get assimilated into the dominant white culture. As Peter Read reports, "the removals of those referred to as half-caste children were conducted in the period between approximately 1905 and 1967" (23). This forced separation or mass abduction broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties and has left a lasting and intergenerational impact on the lives and wellbeing of these Aboriginal people. According to the Russell McGregor, In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten. In that time not one indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal (confirmed by representatives of the Queensland and Western Australia governments in evidence to an inquiry). Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children, causing immense psychological pain and trauma for generations. (44)

This forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families was part of the policy of Assimilation, which is Charles Spielberger informs that, "the process in which a minority group or culture comes to resemble a dominant group or assume the values, behaviors, and beliefs of another group" (615). Assimilation was based on the assumption of racial inferiority and white superiority.

This concept of assimilation is now in a postcolonial situation discussed vigorously in most of the Australian Aboriginal writings. Comparing to any other stage in history, European-descended Australians are now guilty with their own cruel past. This preoccupation with the past has occurred in two paradoxical dimensions: first the honouring of the country's ignored history, and second with an increasingly sense of guilt and blame over their ancestors' treatment of Black Australians. Sarah Maddison in her book *Beyond White Guilt* argues that there is no point in looking to governments for a solution to these challenges; rather, it is up to all Australians who ought to acknowledge their collective responsibility, introspect, and develop a revised perspective of their national self, for only then practical solutions for reconciliation and reparation are possible.

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Jack Davis is one among the Australian indigenous playwrights who revisits the Stolen Generation and their traumas in his plays and he has been hailed as the most significant and influential Aboriginal playwright of his time and John Scott, describes Jack Davis as part of a generation who were “products of assimilation revolting against assimilation” (108). Davis’ play *Kullark* presents the assimilation experience and the responses of the Aborigine Noongar tribe to this trauma. The Noongars had inhabited Western Australia more than 4500 years before the European colonisers arrived on the island.

Kullark narrates the experiences of three aboriginal families -Mitjitjirro, his wife Moyrahn and their son Yagan of the Swan River Settlement people of 1830, Thomas, Mary and Alec Yorlah of the 1930s and Alec Yorlah, his wife Rosie and son Jamie Yorlah of 1979 – three generations with varying attitudes towards colonisation. Maryrose Casey tells that, The action [in *Kullark*] begins with a version of the first contact between Europeans and the Noongar peoples, culminating in the tragic death of Yagan in 1833, and covers the forcible separation of families and communities and removal to reserves and the ongoing discrimination against the indigenous people such as the treatment of indigenous returned servicemen after the Second World War. The action here moves between different time frames and geographical places in Western Australia: the Yorlah’s kitchen in Perth in 1979, a farm in the Pinjarra region in 1829-1834, the Moore River settlement in the 1930s and the Yorlah family’s humpy in 1945. (135) Alec Yorlah is a man of the Stolen Generation who was brought up in the ambience of the colonisers. On his return from service in World War II, Alec Yorlah struggles to live with dignity but his awareness of his Aborigine genes forces him into passivity and negation. Now Alec faces the problem of hybrid identity of being neither an aborigine nor a complete White. He is trapped between two cultures, his original Aborigine identity and the western settlers’ identity. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” describes this in-betweenness or as an ambiguous hybrid status as “mimicry”:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference . . . mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. (88)

Alec Yorlah, a stolen generation child, conceptualizes himself as hybrid and others as Blacks. On his return from the war Corporal Alec, at a roll-call identification registration rejects his Aborigine roots but declares his White identity:

This is to certify that Alec James Yorlah is hereby exempt from the Native Administration Act pursuant to regulations’, etc., etc. Oh well, Civvy Street here I come. Not Corporal Nyoongah but Alec Yorlah number two four seven five four three by Alec Yorlah, now classified white by the Commissioner of Native Welfare. (166)

Alec Yorlah here ironically and simultaneously registers his ambiguity by mentioning that he is no longer to be considered a Nyoongah (an Aborigine) but is a White as redefined and classified a White by the white citizenship norms. Alec’s rejection of his roots and his desire to be taken as a White highlights Alec’s assimilation into the white community.

But the assertion of being a White is shaky and uncertain because despite his assimilated identity Alec Yorlah is sent to live in a reservation for the Aborigines. Alec Yorlah is unable to fit in the places of reserved people. He tells his mother to look for a house outside the reserve so that he can be away from the Aborigines: he returns he clearly states to his mother “Hey, I want you to start lookin’ around town for a house, Mum, we’re gettin’ off the reserve” (167). This highlights that he is not fit in the world of reserve place.

In other scene, the conversation between Alec and Rosie highlights the assimilation of Alec when Rosie alerts him about their insecure situation:

ROSIE: Well, at least it’s their ‘ome, not like this place ‘ere. We could be kicked out any time. ALEC: Old Tony can’t do that. Our rent’s paid up.

ROSIE: That ain’t the point. If mobs of Nyoongahs keep comin’ round here we’ll be in trouble, that’s for sure.

ALEC: They can’t do that. Wetjalas have their friends visitin’ ‘em so we can do the same.

ROSIE: No. We can’t Wetjalas look at us as bein’ different and we can’t get away with things the way they do.

ALEC: Look, if I wanta ‘ave my friends ‘round ‘ere for a drink nodding lan’ lord ‘sgonna stop me, that’s for sure. (108)

Alec’s argument with the policeman again raises the issue of citizenship which ultimately drew his mere vexation:

POLICEMAN: As far as I’m concerned your father is a troublemaker. ALEC: To you maybe

POLICEMAN: And while we’re on the subject, now you’ve got your citizenship rights, just make sure you stay away from the reserve

ALEC: Movin’ out next week. Me an’ the family got ol’ Beaumont’s place just outa town, so you can’t tell me I can’t live with my family.

POLICEMAN: I didn't say that. Just make sure you tell the rest of the relatives to stay away from the house.

ALEC: That's your job, not mine.(169)

Despite his protests, Alec Yoriah is helpless and can do little to do other than abide by discriminatory rules. On the other side, Alec has to accept his lot of being nominally counted as a white citizen at the cost of shedding relationship with his relatives and acquaintances living in the reserve. Alec Yorlah longs for an assimilation only to lose his roots. He is a hybrid who does not dare to choose a path of radical protest against the White coloniser's assimilation project, but nourishes futile hopes of being ultimately accepted as a White as seen in his conversation with Rosie:

"Well, Rosie's comin' down next week. Reckon we'll get married, 'ave a few kids; but when my kids grow up I want to see they get a good education. I want 'em to grow up to be teachers or nurses, something with a bit of dignity. They've been servants and farm hands far too long. Far too long." (172)

Jack Davis makes obvious the ambiguous status of the Stolen Generation who were forcibly taken away to be brought up in an alien environment. Alec Yorlah's life has been ruptured and he occupies an uncertain third space caused by a process of assimilation over which he had no control. He has been cut away from his cultural roots and left adrift to lurch from one identity to another and be a perennial hybrid.

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