



Changing Paradigms of Indigeneity in Australia and the Politics of Representation

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Abstract

Since the arrival of settlers in Australia in 1788, the Australian Indigenous society has undergone significant socio-cultural and political transformations. The colonial period of Australia can be divided into distinct phases based on the relationships between the native people and the settlers. During these phases of the colonial period, the settlers adopted various policies aimed at erasing the Australian Aboriginals' Indigenous identity. Some of these controversial policies were the policy of eugenics and miscegenation, the Stolen Generation, and the forcible displacement of the native peoples from their traditional lands to confine them on reserves and missions controlled by settlers. This displacement, coupled with other factors like disease and violence, significantly reduced the Aboriginal population. Furthermore, children of mixed heritage were forcibly removed from their families. These colonial policies were aimed at destroying the rich cultural practices and cultural heritages of Aboriginals, as these are the major sources from which Aboriginals derive their Indigenous identity. The post-colonial Indigenous society of Australia is going through the process of decolonisation through restoration and revival of cultural practices, thinking patterns, beliefs and traditional knowledge systems. This paradigm shift is taking place as Aboriginals are recovering their cultural practices, rich Aboriginal languages and their Indigenous identity. They are revisiting and renegotiating their past as they are making consistent efforts to incorporate the marginalised voices based on gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. It has become highly significant for them to revisit their rich Indigenous history and society, as all the modern-day problems of theirs emanate from the cultural subjugation, exploitation, and historical injustice meted out by the colonisers. These injustices continue to affect post-colonial societies through various legacies like economic inequality, social stratification, and psychological trauma. With these shifting paradigms of Indigeneity in Australia, the demand for representation in policy-making is gaining momentum. This includes calls for direct representation in parliament, self-determination, and control over Aboriginal affairs. This research paper will examine the multiple facets of Aboriginality with respect to changing times in Aboriginal history, and it will also explore the need for activism and representation for Aboriginals in the contemporary scenario of the country.

Keywords: Aborigines, Representation, Indigeneity, Paradigm, Politics, Literature.

Introduction

The colonial encounter of the Australian Aboriginals has been entirely different from the rest of the Indigenous communities across the world. It was a different form of colonialism in Australia, as the settlers didn't colonise Australia for economic gain; rather, they settled there and followed different policies to wipe out the race of the original inhabitants of the land from their own country, and this form of colonialism is nowhere to be found in any other country. Since the advent of the settlers to the modern day, it has always

been challenging for Aboriginals to sustain their Indigenous identity and culture from the onslaught of the colonial policies of the settlers.

Changing Paradigms of Indigeneity and Political Representation

Indigenous identity plays a pivotal role in the lives of Indigenous peoples as it keeps them connected to their land, culture, language, belief system, and values. For them, the Dreamtime sites are of great significance as these sites are the source of connectedness to their identity. The displacement and forcible removal of Aboriginals from their traditional lands and the Dreamtime Sites will eventually lead to their deprivation from indigeness, as it refers to the loss or denial of rights, resources, and cultural identity experienced by indigenous peoples. George Jerry Sefa Dei, in his book *Indigenous knowledge in global contexts: Multiple readings of our world*, defines indigeness as:

Indigenous-ness may be defined as knowledge consciousness arising locally and in association with the long-term occupancy of a place. Indigeness refers to the traditional norms, social values, and mental constructs that guide, organise, and regulate ways of living in making sense of the world. Different forms of knowledge (e.g., knowledge as superstition, knowledge as a belief in the invisible order of things, and knowledge as "science " all build on one another to provide interpretations and understanding of society. Thus, different knowledge represents ways that people perceive the world and act on it. (78)

In the context of the above-mentioned definition of indigeness, Aboriginals are the earliest known occupants of the land in Australia. The colonial process in Australia was a continual process. It was not done solely for economic purposes like the British had done with the rest of their colonies. In other colonies, they were more concerned with monetary gain and the supply of raw material for their industries in Britain. In the case of Australia, however, the situation was very different, since the occupation of the land was the primary motive of the colonisers. Had they come to Australia only for economic reasons, they would have never explored the Australian land to settle there. The arrival of convicts and new settlers sponsored by the British government had already revealed the expansionist policies of the white government. "The white possession of Australia was done by declaring it 'land of no sovereign power' (Flood 22), and this illegal possession of the continent was justified by the white settlers with the help of colonial discourse. Discourse, as Foucault theorises, "is the system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups" (Ashcroft et al. 55). Under colonial rule, Aboriginal society had to go through various socio-cultural transformations. The upshots of the colonial rule on the aspects of the Aboriginal lives can be distinguished in the form of the gradual displacement of natives from their traditional lands, different forms of physical and epistemic, psychological, and sexual violence inflicted by the colonisers. The onslaught of colonisation for two centuries has made the Aboriginals more inclined towards Western cultural practices. Owing to the introduction of these practices among Aborigines, the society is disintegrating and has made them more vulnerable to exploitation by the white regimes in Australia.

For Aboriginals, the land has always been an inalienable component of their indigenous identity as they derive their cultural identity from the ancestral land that they have inherited from their forefathers, and through the land, they remain connected to their Dreamtime ancestors. The role of the land in the lives of indigenous peoples is described by Franz Fanon as "For the colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all,



dignity” (Fanon 45). During the colonial rule in Australia, it was done to a great extent as Aboriginals were displaced from their lands and were forced to live in reserves, which affected them disproportionately. The forcible displacement from the ancestral lands made Aboriginals more vulnerable to the exploitative policies of the white settlers. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is an international non-governmental organisation established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Geneva, and this organisation works for internally displaced persons. In its report titled *When land, knowledge and roots are lost: indigenous peoples and displacement*, " it gives the following observation about the internal displacement of indigenous peoples:

Uprooted indigenous peoples may lose traditional knowledge, the spiritual connection they have with the land and with their languages and cultures. Moving away, temporarily or permanently, means sacrificing a part of their identity. It can result in depression, anxiety, and suicide, as well as other impacts on their physical and psychological health. (34)

Land has always been an essential component of Aboriginal literature and carries a sacred value. Aboriginal writers make demands for certain social, political, and economic rights. Aboriginal literature is an intersection of activism and literature in which writers perform a dual function and work as activists for the rights of the people of their community. Through their literary works, they spread awareness about the rights of Aboriginal people in Australia. The process of activism began after the 1960s when demands were made to provide and protect the political and civil rights of Aboriginals. Jennifer Clark, in her book *Aborigines & Activism: Race & the Coming of the Sixties to Australia*, quotes Chika Dixon to throw a light on the slow rise of activism in Australia. It is **“a slow start for Aboriginal activism when in 1968 he could recall only twenty or so Aborigines participating in a march down Sydney’s George Aborigines and Activism 70 Street to support the Gurindji in their land claims at Wattie Creek” (53).**

New paradigms of indigeneity in postcolonial societies are emerging, shifting from a focus on resistance to colonialism's direct impacts to broader considerations of identity, knowledge systems, and political agency within a globalised world. These paradigms of indigeneity came into prominence with the establishment of Post-Colonial research, Post-Colonial theories, and Post-Colonial indigenous research methodologies. Hitherto Aboriginals had faced systematic marginalization by the successive governments in Australia, racial discrimination, inhuman treatment with the full blood aboriginals, forcible removal of half-caste children from their parents, upbringing of these children at reserves and missions to inculcate into them the western mores and manners, the policy of exclusion through different legislations, suppression of Aboriginal voices and all forms of colonialism ranging from the academic colonialism to the cultural imperialism. Colonisation is a "fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results” (Said 207). There were serious ramifications of the colonial period in Australia, as Aboriginals carry innumerable painful memories of colonial subordination. **"The mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter" (Gandhi 4).** During the second half of the 20th century, with the introduction of Post-Colonial studies, it paved the way for the new literary theories and new research methods to be applied to understand the colonial experiences of the colonised from their perspective by rejecting the Eurocentric notion of the settlers. “The word postcolonial is used in the research context to denote the continuous struggle of non-Western societies that suffered European colonisation, indigenous peoples, and historically marginalised groups to



resist suppression of their ways of knowing and the globalisation of knowledge, reaffirming that Western knowledge is the only legitimate knowledge" (Chilisa 29). The Western historians followed a Eurocentric approach, intending to negate the indigenous history and to keep white superiority intact in the binary world. The major thrust of Post-Colonial studies is to decolonise the "captive mind". In order to decolonise the "captive mind" from the oppressive colonial past, Poka Laenui suggests five phases of decolonising the mind: rediscovery and recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. In the first phase of decolonising the minds, the colonised other rediscover and recover their history by negating the history written by white historians, in which Aboriginals don't find an appropriate place. They start to take pride in their traditional culture, language, and identity. They start to dream by invoking their traditional knowledge system in order to give a voice that has been suppressed by the colonisers. In the post-colonial period, literature has become a powerful mode to share the trauma of the colonial past, too, in the language of the colonisers. The Aboriginal literature written by the Aboriginal writers from their perspective renders a new paradigm to the indigenous identity of Aboriginals. In their works, they share the painful memories and experiences of the colonial rule and expose the bitter truths of the colonial rule, which have been removed without a trace by the white writers who followed the Eurocentric approach to keep their superiority intact.

Aboriginal writers have been giving a voice to voiceless peoples. The two major issues that they take up in their works are 'race' and 'quest for their Aboriginal identity'. To make their claims more substantiated, they take support from post-colonial theories such as critical race theory, critical theory, and postcolonial discourses, and they challenge every discipline of Eurocentric colonialism. Said observes that **"no subject area or theory, be it biology, physics, language, mathematics, Marxism or feminism has escaped Eurocentric colonialism and modern imperialism and globalisation."** (Said 1993) Post-colonial remembering is also a significant issue in Aboriginal writing. From the post-colonial remembering, psychological problems stem from dislocation and identity issues. As Bhabha announces,

...memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering is never a quick act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. (Bhabha 63)

Race has always been a contentious issue in Australia. The racial conflict was there in the power struggle. To wipe out the black people, certain policies were followed by the settlers, and Aboriginals were declared a 'stagnant' and dying race. The abominable policies of eugenics and miscegenation were adopted by the protector of Aboriginals to make Australia a country of white people. To understand race relations in the critical race theory, we see how society organises itself along racial lines and hierarchies. In modern Australian society, the issue of racial discrimination is still the same. The dominant white society racialises the minority group of the Aboriginal group at different times.

Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research is a research think tank for the Indigenous people of Australia. It plays a significant role in policy-making for Aboriginals. It also publishes several series of papers to highlight the modern-day socio-economic and political issues being faced by the native people of Australia. In one such paper entitled *Aboriginal community governance on the frontlines and faultlines in the Black Summer bushfires*, the author highlights the prevalence of racial

discrimination in the modern-day Aboriginal society by taking the recent issue of the Australian Bushfires, in which they were the victims of systemic racial discrimination:

Aboriginal people did go to the evacuation centres only to be turned away because the staff there said we've helped enough of your people today; we've helped enough of your community members. When you speak to people who are directly affected and you ask them why these things are happening to them, all of them connect it to historical racism and colonisation. The most damaging instance that happens for people who have lived through these disasters and are still recovering is feeling like they have been forgotten. (Williamson 21)

Despite making much effort at the global platform in different forms, the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples has not been alleviated yet. From the frontier period to the modern day, Aboriginals have been facing different forms of discrimination in Australian society. The historical injustice and the traumatic memories of the past have left indelible imprints on the perspicacity of the natives, and the state is unwilling to come to terms with the past. From the frontier period (1800-1900) to the new paternalism (1972-), in every phase, we see the discriminatory and biased policies of the state against the Aboriginals. During the frontier period, the cause of contention was the native land, as the colonisers needed more and more land for their pastoral industry. The forcible removal from traditional lands and exclusion from the census of the country were two main discriminatory practices of the period. During the protection period (1900-1968), discriminatory provisions were made to control the lives of Aboriginal people in every sphere, and in this period, 'stolen Generations' and 'stolen wages' were the two most discriminatory practices. The children of the Stolen Generations are still suffering due to the policy of removal and dislocation. A public apology was extended by the state to the children of the Stolen Generation. But the state hasn't succeeded in 'closing the gap' between the Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. As Professor Megan Davis who was the chairperson of *Family Is Culture Review Report* commissioned by the NSW government, observes, "The Bringing Them Home" inquiry is the closest the state has come to an official ventilation of the history; however, the government's inertia on the implementation of its recommendation is a powerful demonstration of the "state's reluctance to acknowledge the past" (37). The reluctance of the state to eradicate racial discrimination against the Aboriginals made them more susceptible to exploitation. The ideological conflicts between the conservative politicians and the liberal politicians hindered the implementation of a policy to eradicate discrimination against Aboriginals in Australia. No efforts have been made by the successive federal governments to materialise the political aspirations of Aboriginals. In the political aspirations, we can include two major points: land rights or participation in the democracy, i.e. no political representation of Aboriginals in the parliaments. Without political representation, the suppressed voices would not be heard, and the native people would remain the victims of racial discrimination.

Conclusion

Hence, the political indecisiveness (approval and abrogation of laws) is a big hurdle in materialising the political aspirations of Aboriginals, and this indecisiveness makes Aboriginals more vehement in their demands, as seen with the Tent Embassy in 1972. The issues of autonomy, self-determination, and political legitimacy need to be addressed at the earliest, and this is the only way to alleviate the disparity between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. There is a greater need for an inclusive approach to be followed by political parties in power in Australia. So, an inclusive approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia involves respecting their cultures, histories and actively involving them in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This includes using respectful language, acknowledging their unique identities and working in genuine partnership to achieve beneficial outcomes.

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