

TRAUMA AND FAMILY IN JACK DAVIS'S NO SUGAR

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صدمة والعائلة في جاك ديفيس ليس لديهم سكر

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Abstract:

The dramatic works of Jack Davis, the Aboriginal Australian playwright, are significant in themselves in demonstrating the politics of representation of family and trauma in Australian drama. Davis uses the strategy of showing the audience the Aboriginal reality rather than teaching them about the discriminations brought about by the coming of Europeans in Australia and their subsequent interference into Aboriginal society. This paper argues that Jack Davis's *No Sugar* is a postcolonial play that demonstrates a dialectical relationship between the anxieties of trauma, displacement and the Aboriginal Australian family in period of the Stolen Generation.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, No Sugar, Stolen Generations, Family

المُلخّص:

الاعمال الدرامية لجاك ديفيس ، الكاتب المسرحي الأسترالي من السكان الأصليين ، مهمة في حد ذاتها في إظهار سياسات تمثيل الأسرة والترواما في الدراما الأسترالية. يستخدم ديفيس استراتيجية إظهار واقع السكان الأصليين للجمهور بدلاً من تعليمهم التمييز الذي أحدثه قدوم الأوروبيين في أستراليا وتدخلهم اللاحق في مجتمع السكان الأصليين. تجادل هذه الورقة بأن مسرحية "No Sugar" لجاك ديفيس هي مسرحية ما بعد الكولونيالية توضح العلاقة الديالكتيكية بين القلق من الصدمة والتشرد وضمن عوائل السكان الأصليين الأستراليين في فترة الجيل المسروق.

الكلمات الرئيسية: صدمة ، لاسكر ، أجيال مسروقة ، عائلة.

1. JACK DAVIS AND ABORIGINAL LEGACY

It is irrefutable fact that any imperialist authority trend to marginalize people under its authority. As such dogma had prevailed, Aboriginal Australia was built through the use of a discursive regime that might be labeled Aboriginalism, a regime that operated in a manner similar to that of what Edward Said has termed Orientalism. The term Orientalism, according to Edward Said, refers to a discursive system linked with European imperialism that is intrigued by its other while simultaneously controlling who has access to or knowledge of the culture of this other. Although built as mysterious, the Other are incapable of actually speaking or knowing themselves, and as a result, they must be represented by experts from the dominant culture, who know more about them than they can know about themselves. Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, is a well-known colonial tactic, and it has mediated Australian Aborigines throughout the English-speaking world. Despite Aboriginalism's purported grasp of Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal people felt victimized by the majority society in Australia's deeply racist misunderstanding. (Hodge ,1994,p.p.98-99).

In her article, *Performing Aboriginalities: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Simona Achite argues that Aboriginality is a colonial invention that embraces a wide range of groups, and any debate of Aboriginality representations in literature, visual art should begin by acknowledge this fact (2007,p.117). Additionally, she notes that aboriginal people are historically unrelated who came from various and distant geographical regions, speak different languages, and in some cases are embroiled in long-standing conflicts.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, thus , create Aboriginality through three distinct experiences: Aboriginal peoples interacting with one another within specific Aboriginal cultures, non-Aboriginal peoples interacting with imagined and stereotyped representations of Aboriginality, and, most importantly, intercultural dialogue that allows for negotiation and mutual transformation (Achite,2007,p. 118) .

As such interaction happens, a theatre environment ,as Kershaw (1992) notes, seems a relevant medium of intercultural negotiation between cast and audience that challenges and transforms static perceptions where theatrical performances enact a transaction of meaning between the stage and auditorium, in which theatrical signs are constantly encoded and decoded through audience and cast interaction. Thus, “performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between a company of performers and the community of their audience in which ideology is the source of the collective ability” by which “the aims and intentions of theatre companies connect with the responses and interpretations of their audiences” (p. 16).

The entrance of Aboriginal writers and artists into the mainstream of cultural creation is still one of Australia's most significant cultural developments. Jack Davis, poet and dramatist, was among the first Aboriginal writers to make this kind of impact. He is widely acknowledged as the most significant Aboriginal playwright in Australia, influencing and encouraging the development of Aboriginal theatre (Hodge, 1994, p.98).

Jack Davis was born in Perth and raised in Yarloop, a small mill town southwest of Perth, as one of eleven children. He and his siblings were taken from their parents as a young teenager and relocated to the Moore River Native Settlement near Mogumber, north-west of Perth. His poems, plays, and nonfiction work redress Australia's black history where they stand as outspoken supporter and activist for Aboriginal people. At a young age, he began writing poems in response to his and other Aboriginal people's abuse. Davis's legacy to Australian literature includes many collections of poetry and two autobiographical works. He writes a number of plays, all of which represent an Aboriginal voice and perspective that appealed to a wide spectrum of people. His seminal plays make a radical revolution in Australian theatre as they stage an authentic Aboriginal experience in an artistic form. Among his most notable plays are *Kullark* (1979), *The Dreamers* (1982), *No Sugar* (1984) *Barung in: Smell the Wind* (1989), *In Our Town* (1990) and *Widartji* (1990).

To appreciate what Davis was attempting in this sequence of his plays, it is necessary to set his creativity in its context. His motives, thus, can be

read in the light of Fanon's understanding of trauma in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that deals with the effect of colonialism on colonized people in a postcolonial milieu. For Fanon, trauma's effects of internalized oppression are transmitted, namely via socialization from one generation to the next. In Fanon's words, "the black child subjectively adopts the white man's attitude", and "a way of thinking and seeing that is basically white forms and crystallizes in him" (p. 114). Fanon affirms that "a normal black child [...] will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world" (p. 111). In this sense, colonial trauma can trigger the individual to identify himself with a past collective sense of trauma as a member of an oppressed group, a case that is delineated in the most aboriginal writings .

Jack Davis belongs to the Stolen Generations. Such an experience has a deep impact on his psyche and on his dramatic work. Being socialized in institutional racism has been the main means of reflecting the trauma of the displacement and historical trauma of slavery.(Davis,Aboys,1991,p.9) Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents at a young age and raised in institutions with few parental figures. This traumatic separation and loss has had a profound psychological effect on the parenting abilities of young children who was forcibly removed.As a result, the intergenerational effects of trauma on Aborigines in Australia have a significant impact on their children who form the current generation (Raphale ,1998, p. 244).

Cutting away from the Aboriginal heritage to better assimilate into White society, these people are called "the Stolen Generations." But they soon found out that the promise failed to be realized and they had to lead a difficult life in the Settlement. Jack Davis was one of these children. He tends to depict is celebrated for the realistic portrayal of Aboriginal life and this characteristic has a close link to his childhood experience. Both of his parents were Aborigines who were raised in White families and the Davis family was the only Aboriginal family in a White community. When Davis was fourteen, he, along with his father and brother, was sent to the Moore River Settlement under the promise of farmer training and work opportunity from the Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville. This

experience becomes the material for his plays, most notably in *No Sugar*, which also takes place in the Moore River Settlement, and in which Neville is one of the characters. More importantly, the days in the Settlement gives Davis the chance to reconnect himself to his Aboriginal heritage. He learns not only the Aboriginal language of his tribe, the Nyoongah language, but also stories that were passed down by the elders (Grenville ,2006, p.76).

In his autobiography, Davis considers writing as “the best means of influencing public opinion and bringing about an improvement in the Aboriginal situation” (p.191, as cited in Crow and Banfield, 1996,p.68). In doing so, Davis has meticulously constructed a context for his description of modern black Australian life in order to situate it within a long history of Aboriginal oppression and struggle. Taken collectively, his four major plays provide a radical reassessment of Australian social history from an Aboriginal perspective, or, more precisely, he illuminates specific periods in that history that white Australia has largely ignored .In a protracted depiction of subjection, Davis's setting of a long history of Aboriginal oppression and struggle touches on the modern plight of Aborigines, tacitly urging spectators to analyze the relationship between the primary characteristics of that history and the present day. (Crow and Banfield, 1996, p.67).

Across Australia, there were at least two hundred different language groups with hundreds of associated dialects. In the aftermath of the destruction wrought by colonization, the Aboriginal peoples of common language groupings whose populations had borne the brunt of violence and death often identify with the general language group name from their region . Jack Davis ,like the most aboriginal dramatists ,believes in the magic of stage on audience and hence he used it as speaker on behalf the aboriginals. As Wheeler (2013) notes that “Aboriginal writers such as Hyllus Marsh, Kevin Gilbert, Robert Merritt, Jack Davis and Eva Johnson set out to tell their people’s stories and counter negative representations of Aboriginal people. One of the generalizations playwrights sought to counter was the assumption that all Aboriginal people were of the same group, nation and language ” (p.157). Thus, their narrative focuses on the lives and struggles of Aboriginal people was the main concern of their

dramas. Their texts offered one of the first examples of Aboriginal people using an Aboriginal English in a drama on Australian stages . This in itself was an important shift where the creation of new languages by colonized peoples such as Aboriginal Australians was often derided within imperial literatures and dramas.

In the 1980s, Jack Davis decides to take another direction of resistance when he used standard English in his plays and brought stories of Australian black-white relations to many audiences for the first time. For example Davis's *Kullark* (1983), first produced in 1979, and using Standard English, southwest Western Australian Aboriginal English, and the Noongar language, sets out to give an overview of the history of the colonization of Aboriginal people. The fusion of English and Aboriginal language becomes one of his characteristics in writing (Wheeler 2013,p.158). For Davis, dealing with the current situation is as important as the reclaiming of the past. This attitude is introduced in *No Sugar* when one of the characters declares that “our culture didn't die when Captain Stirling arrived? there is a new urban Aboriginal culture emerging that remembers the past while looking to the new ” (Davis, 1985, p. 85).

Davis's main concern is to highlight how indigenous spaces have been occupied and how Aborigines have been spatially constrained under European colonization . Stage space, for him, seems that space that could brake all limits and by which he can not only determine the imperialist restrictions but break it down (Gilbert,1994,p. 63).

2. FAMILY AS METAPHOR: THE TRAUMATIC FAMILY IN DAVIS 'S THEATRE

Probing through Familial issues is a unique way to understand the nature of certain nation or community. For Seigneuret, the debate of family conveys a familial discourse in which unities are deconstructed and then rediscovered, and power and culture alternately fold into each other in a sheltering and then an opening forth (1988,p. 507). Family represents a real site where historical events and effects are experienced. In postcolonial texts, the metaphor of the family plays an important role in

showing sufferings of those under imperial powers, as they surrounded by different types of imperialist agendas. McClintock (1996) states that the family can be “ a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative for national history, while, at the same time, the family as an institution became voided of history” (63). In drama, Jack Davis considers the Aboriginal family as a rich source of theatrical deixis which can be manipulated to show the constant traumatic effects over Aboriginal people in postcolonial milieu.

Haunted by the feelings of loss and fragmentation in refusal milieu, Davis's main concern is to present the traumatic aboriginal family in the storms of challenges. His plays explore the familial life and domestic space that reveal the shaping effects of history upon home and family. In this sense, family becomes the space where racialist history is entangled within domestic concerns to show the presence of colonial trauma within the current postcolonial psyche. Transmitting trauma from the survivor to the testimony's witness, or even later generations of the survivor's descendants was the main question in Luckhurst's (2008) *The Trauma Question*:

Trauma [...] appears to be worryingly transmissible: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients (as in the 'contagions' of hysteria or shell shock), between patients and doctors via the mysterious process of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood (p.3).

Since the family is the site where historical traumas intrude and make their effects known, representing familial experiences offers a venue for exploring trauma., Aboriginal Australia live in trauma of present and past . They live in what Halbwachs calls the “collective historical memory” in which members “has both cumulative and presents aspects. It shows at least partial continuity as well as new readings of the past in terms of the present”(p.26). As the families within the narratives experience trauma and

its consequences, they wrestle with understanding the history and political circumstances shaping their experiences. Particularly for those facing traumas experienced by previous generations that continue to affect them, they must grapple with historical understandings that often remain difficult to access in order to understand the trauma that continues to affect their present and their identity. Commenting on the psychological aspects of reading familial relationships , Fanon declares that “for the individual the authority of the state is a reproduction of the authority of the family by which he was shaped in his childhood [...] He perceives the present in terms of the past” (p.110).

For Davis , drama, being a spatial medium that provides an ideal vehicle for him to demonstrate not only how colonialism deliberately displaced Aboriginal people from country, but also how it sought to contain and control them. In his first play, *Kullark* , Davis creates a dramatic narrative by weaving together significant incidents of Western Australian Aboriginal history from the European colonization with present scenes of the Yorlah family, Alec, Rosie, and their son Jamie. By linking between present and past , Yorlah family dramatizes the effect of colonial trauma over different aboriginal generations . The story opens in the present, with an Aboriginal family whose lives are still strongly influenced by that history, and then swings back in time to three periods in Aboriginal-White history: the time of settlement, the 1930s, and the early post-war era after 1945. This is written in the style of a chronicle, and it follows the linear time that is considered the classic Western understanding of time, rather than the mystical or circular time of Aboriginal culture. However, the same group of Aboriginal performers perform each of his four time slices, dramatizing successive generations of the same family, the Yorlahs (Hodge, 1994 , P.101) .

This is a Western theatrical device that integrates what are known as Aboriginal cyclical presentation of time, or time as recurrence or repetition. Davis used this dramatic approach to illustrate a complex set of parallels and oppositions between the past and present, representing the various choices and strategies accessible at various points in time while simultaneously highlighting numerous basic continuities. The Aboriginal

hero, Yagan, who was executed in 1833, has different options than Alec Yorlah, who was deemed worthy of being armed to defend Australia against a common enemy during the Second World War but was not accepted as an equal into post-war Australian society, while his son Jamie pursues an education into White society in the 1980s. Each repetition represents neither regression nor advancement, but rather a new variation on a fundamental pattern. The past is not abandoned or clung to, but understood and utilized as a source of wisdom that is difficult to categorize as Aboriginal or European in the simplistic racist terms of Aboriginalism (Hodge, 1994 , P .101) .

While in *The Dreamers* , he focuses on the Wallitches, a modern Western Australian Aboriginal family. The play presents the impact of past on present over Wallitches. Uncle Worm is the dramatic focal point of the story, as he is brought home from the hospital to spend his final few months with his family. *The Dreamers* portrays the tragedy of an individual life and an entire aboriginal people ruined by dispossession through its juxtaposition of contemporary family scenes. The Wallitch household bears the brunt of the dispossession. The guys are chronically unemployed, devoting much of their energy to drinking, quarreling, subsisting on social security, and the occasional act of begging. Shane and Meena, the family's younger members are losing their Nyoongah language and culture. Contrary to her mother Dolly's desires, Meena wishes to leave school and is already accustomed to returning home very late at night. However, play's prevailing emotional tone is elegiac ,in that ,a lament for a tribal past, for a people who were once physically and spiritually at one with their land but are now lost in a foreign environment(Crow and Banfield ,1996, PP.71-72).

Davis's play *No Sugar* revolves around the Munday Millimurra family's experience of the Depression in Western Australia . The Munday - Millimurras are Noongars , a group who endured social and of Indigenous people institutionalized racial discrimination , great hardship and upheaval *No Sugar* confronts boldly the harsh treatment of the Nyoongah people at the hands under the leadership of A.O Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia (Jacobsen,2014,p. 4). The play reflect

the sense of the survival of aboriginal cultural depends the way that individuals of family shape their identity . The play shows how family is cornerstone on which identity can be maintained even in the most traumatic of circumstances .

CONCLUSION

This paper shows how Davis's *No Sugar* theatrically represents different familial respond to the trauma of colonial violence either by becoming angry and fighting back, trying to assimilate and obey the norms of their oppressors, or even becoming involved in the behaviors of the racist ruling class. By highlighting both the day-to-day racism wielded against the Millimurra-Mundays, and the long term effects of colonial violence on Aboriginals as a whole, Davis illustrates how decades of casual interpersonal racism can lead to the systematic disenfranchisement of many generations of people.

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