

The Representation of Transgenerational Trauma in Jack Davis's *No Sugar*

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Abstract:

This is a study in the role of transgenerational trauma and its effect on the Aboriginal dramatic work. Using trauma studies within a postcolonial framework, this paper shows how Jack Davis manipulates the stage to give voice to the unspeakable trauma of Aboriginal Australian woman in *No Sugar*. This paper attempts to read this play as an indictment against both imperial and patriarchal ideologies that tend to disenfranchise many generations of the women in an Aboriginal postcolonial context.

Keywords: transgenerational trauma; Jack Davis; Aboriginality

تمثيل الصدمة عبر الأجيال في جاك ديفيس بدون سكر

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الملخص:

هذه دراسة في دور الصدمات عبر الأجيال وتأثيرها على العمل الدرامي للسكان الأصليين. باستخدام دراسات الصدمات في إطار ما بعد الاستعمار، توضح هذه الورقة كيف يتلاعب جاك ديفيس بالمرحلة لإعطاء صوت لصدمة لا توصف لامرأة أسترالية من السكان الأصليين في "بدون سكر". تحاول هذه الورقة قراءة هذه المسرحية باعتبارها لائحة اتهام ضد كل من الإيديولوجيات الإمبريالية والأبوية التي تميل إلى حرمان أجيال عديدة من النساء في سياق ما بعد الاستعمار من السكان الأصليين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة العابرة للأجيال؛ جاك ديفيس؛ السكان الأصليون

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1. INTRODUCTION

Theories of trauma's effects on the individual psyche are often employed to explore the individual experience of a collective traumatic event in a text, thus creating a link between the experience of individuals and cultural groups. The traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively, divided the psyche, influenced memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past. Examining the cultural context of an individual or collective group's experience of trauma enables greater attention to representations of extreme experience such as rape, war, slavery, colonial oppression, and racism. Trauma, thus, as Atkinson (2017) states, "is transmitted affectively across generations, and between subjects, families, and societies at large" (p.3). In this sense, Jack Davis's *No Sugar* can be read from a postcolonial feminist perspective, that is, an analysis of the impact of colonization and oppression upon aboriginal women.

Jack Davis's plays are authentic reflections of the lives of Australian indigenous population shaped by his own personal experiences. In Davis's theatre, the individual feminist probes into the depth to understand the politics of representation of women in postcolonial Australia. In his writings, Davis seems to echo Cathy Caruth's belief that trauma is "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat" (p.16) in which history appears as simple models of experience and reference. Economically repressed and suppressed by circumstantial threats like rape, alcoholism, domestic violence, forced migrations as well as the general effects of their doubly colonized situations, Davis 's women expose the more ruthless side of racist, colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Davis adopted the method of showing the Aboriginal reality to the audience in place of loudly telling them about the discriminations brought about by the arrival of the Europeans in Australia and their subsequent intrusion into the Aboriginal society. Davis's *No Sugar* can, therefore, be read as silent and subtle comparisons between the old

Aboriginal world where women had considerable freedom, and the contemporary world where Aboriginal women had been silenced, deprived of their rights and commoditized as sexual objects.

No Sugar is a realistic play that takes place in 1929, during severe economic hardship. It is a four-act play that tells the story of an Aboriginal family's struggle for dignity, equality, and justice during the Australian depression. Munday-Millimurras families are Noongars, an Indigenous group that has suffered social and institutionalized racial discrimination and suffering. It shows and challenges common racist beliefs and systematic abuse of Noongar people under the leadership of A.O. Neville who was the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia at the time. The story traces the family's transfer from their camp at Government Well Aboriginal Reserve in Northam to the Moore River Native Settlement outside Mogumber (Jacobsen, 2014,p.1) . The title of Jack Davis' play *No Sugar* comes from an incident during the 1934 Australia Day ceremony, when their Chief Protector A.O. Neville instructs the Moore River Settlement Aborigines to sing "There is a Happy Land" in honor of 'Saviour King' George VI; instead, they sing "No sugar in our tea/Bread and butter we never see" (Das ,2013, p.3).

There are three generations of Millimurras: Gran, the grandmother, Milly and Sam, Milly's brother Jimmy, and their three children, Joe, Cissie, and David. They reside in Northam, a town in the south-western section of Australia, and depend on the government rations and rabbit hunting for their livelihood. *No Sugar* reveals the secret motive behind the relocation of unwanted Aboriginal families from the Government Well Aboriginal Reserve in Northam, Western Australia, to the remote Moore River. They were informed that the relocation to Moore River would be temporary due to healthy reasons, and that any property they left behind is maintained for until they returned. However, this was just a pretext to remove them from their home. The actual reason for displacement is political one.

Davis sees trauma as Fanon a “massive psychoexistential complex ” matter and the permanent psychic injury that remains repressed and

unhealed (p.5). Such an injury can have a historic and social dimension when trauma affects a colonized or formerly colonized society. Although Davis's main demand in *No sugar* is to show how the Millimurra-Munday family face the daily racism and discrimination, he also aims to investigate how different individuals respond to the trauma of colonial past. He demonstrates how decades of casual interpersonal racism may lead to the systemic disenfranchisement of many generations of those people. Such trauma, as Ashcroft et al., (2007) assert "has particular relevance in indigenous societies of settler colonies where the expropriation of traditional lands, displacement of indigenous populations, and child removal (the 'stolen generations') so traumatizes the society that social dysfunction results" (p.268). In this sense, *No Sugar* may be taken as Davis's maneuver to illustrate the transgenerational trauma of Aboriginals in general and throughout female figures in specific, as they experience racism, forcible displacement, sexual violence, and the rooted idea of stolen generation.

2. TRAUMA, HOME AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN

The forcible displacement from home is at the heart of the most of Davis's plays. Traditionally, feminists have viewed home as a patriarchal space where the subordination of women is legitimizing through a fixation of their roles as unpaid workers in the family, caregivers and child bearers. However, this conceptual model may not be applied to the Aboriginal context, particularly because in the Aboriginal society home does not mean a space that is in contradiction with the outside world, but home means memories, traditions, emotions and feelings.

Linked to Homi Bhabha (1992) who introduces the concept of "unhomely", "home" or dwelling is constantly haunted with shadows of various individual and collective traumas that take up the space of the Ego. Various narrations of the past from layers of individual and collective memory interfere with the Ego's sense of the historical present and the world. Those shadows creep up in the heart of modern dwellings. The unhomely moment intimated relates the traumatic ambivalences of a

personal, psychic history into the wider disjunctions of political existence (p.141).

In *No Sugar*, most characters experience the loss of home. However, traumatized by past, Davis presents a feminist figure as an emulation to home that including memories, traditions and emotions, in against to the intrusive norms of colonial Whites. The most audible female voice amongst all of Davis's women characters is that of Gran Munday, the old matriarch. Haunted by colonial past, she is so sensitive towards Whites who invade her aboriginal home. She represents a strong connection to the past, and also a staunch refusal to assimilate into the culture that so negatively affects her society. She is a nostalgic woman who calls past in her spirit. Davis portrays her as counterpart to the lost home to all Aboriginal around her. This can be shown by her encourage others to use the native tongue, Noongar, and refusing to use it in times of exasperation.

She severely abhors the infiltration of European culture into that of the Aboriginals. Like the male members of her family, Jimmy and Sam, she too is worried about the survival of the Aborigines and concerned about the reclamation of their rights. On being ordered to move to the Moore River Native Settlement, her prompt initial response is:

CONSTABLE: You're being transferred to the Moore River Native Settlement.

GRAN: I ain't goin'.

CONSTABLE: You're all goin'. You're under arrest.

GRAN: What for? We done nothin' wrong.

SERGEANT: It's for health reasons. Epidemic of skin disease.

JIMMY: Bullshit, I'll tell you why we're goin'.

CONSTABLE: You wouldn't know.

In reply to Sergeant Carrol's charge that Aboriginal men are too lazy to work, the old lady boldly replies: "They not slaves, Chergeant!" (p.17). Gran sternly believes that a return to Aboriginal traditions is the only way to save Aboriginal culture from extinction. She despises the entry of

European mores and customs in Aboriginal households and finds the Europeans responsible for the destruction of their own land and people:

SERGEANT: That shouldn't worry you, Granny, you should remember when you used to grind up jam and wattle seeds.

GRAN: More better than white man's flour, no weevils in jam and wattle seeds.

SERGEANT: Good tucker, eh?

GRAN: When I was that high we go and get 'em and smash 'em up and get a bag full, that much!

SERGEANT: You can still collect 'em, nothing stoppin' you.

GRAN: Where? Wetjala cut all the trees down. (p.16)

Moreover, the postcolonial trauma is demonstrated through silence in *No Sugar*, Davis's women are seen to be silent about their own miseries. They had double plight as they do duties that were hitherto done by Aboriginal men and have miserable lives under White authority. In this sense, the natives' silence in the play provides a narrative representation of the issue of the subaltern put forward by Gayatri Spivak. In her 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak states that, the oppressed are not only subject to the elite rule in the state, but also dominated by Western patriarchy and imperialism. Their disempowered, dispossessed status further marginalizes them, as they tend to be dominated by the discourse of people who hold the power and have the possessions. For Spivak, the male-dominated subject has no history and cannot speak, then the female subject is even more deeply in shadow. Therefore, Spivak has her doubts about whether female subjects are ever able to give voice to any injustice, leading her to conclude that they are actually a muted group (pp.90-91). Davis echoes such promise in his characterization of Aboriginal women. For example, Mary who resides in the camp, had miserable lives. As she reports to Joe about a tyrannical White master who surveys them at work: MARY: He's [Mr. Neal] is always hangin' around where the girls are workin'; in the cookhouse, in the sewin' room. And he's always carryin' that cat-o'-nine tails and he'll use it too.

JOE: Bastard, better not use it on you or any of my lot

MARY: He reckoned he was gunna belt me once.

JOE: What for?

MARY: 'Coz I said I wasn't gunna go and work for guddeehi on a farm.

(p. 57)

This conversation reveals is that women must keep silent and just do their jobs. In the same time, if they are found to be even at a little fault in their work, or unwilling to work at the pleasure of the White master, these women receive whiplashes. And beyond such physical torture there is also the possibility of sexually assault. similarly, old Gran Munday and her daughter Milly have to stand in the queue to collect rations for the entire family. In this particular scene, the character of Gran can be seen as a personification of the traditional ways of the Aboriginal Australians, living off the land and relying upon it for survival when the white government cannot provide for them. When men were either busy working for some White master , as Milly reports, “Cockies want ‘em to work for nothin” (p.17), or they could not come because of the threat of being put inside a prison for no valid reason , as the Sergeant warns Milly, “...you tell that Bush lawyer brother of yours, if he comes here arguing I’ll make him jump: straight inside” (p.17)). On their return, Milly cooks food for the family and she and Gran serve the meal to the entire family. Gran then later mediates to stop a brawl in the family. These scenes are important as they demonstrate the range of work that the Aboriginal women perform in their new habitation., There is not a single instance where these women complain of such their workload. Except for Gran, none of these women characters talk of weariness or ill health even once.

Many ethnic and racial groups have traumatic experiences because of racial treatments. Moreland-Capuia (2021) observes that “Racism experienced daily on a wide structural scale represents a persistent breach of safety, and individuals subject to racism daily live in fear, and living in fear daily (also known as trauma) has deleterious impact and thus racism

is a form of trauma”(p.165). Racial trauma, therefore , can result from major experiences of racism such as workplace discrimination or hate crimes, or it can be the result of an accumulation of many small occurrences, such as everyday discrimination and microaggressions. In the course of the whole play , the Millimurra-Munday family have to deal with racism every day, both personally and in the workplace. As a result, they are abused and taken advantage of because white Australians have a lot of power in politics and society . It is noted that racism affects all characters in the play, even the three youngest characters, Joe, Cissie, and David . David and Cissie, who are only children, are also subjected to racism at school, where they are given unclean apples with holes instead of the big, delicious apples that white children are given, as Cissie complains: Cissie complains that the shopkeeper sells “ small shriveled apples to her and her brothers while wetjala [white] children” get “large fat ones” (p.16). Cissie's words reveal the pervasive racism in the aboriginal context that Davis demonstrates in the play.

Racism appears in conversation between Milly and sergeant when they discuss the removal of soap from government rations (given to the aborigines kept in settlements)

MILLY: Whose idea was it to stop the soap?

SERGEANT: The idea, as you call it, came from the Aboriginal Department in Perth...

MILLY: I just can't believe it, no soap!

SERGEANT: Your trouble , Milly ,is you got three healthy men bludging off you , too lazy to work. (p.22).

The conversation displays how rationing brought Indigenous people into conflict with not just the state ministries that determine ration allocation, but also the police who deliver it. The Sergeant observes that “three healthy men are budging away from you, too lazy to work” (p.23). The reality is that racism, along with economic hardship, has resulted in the unemployment of Aboriginal men. The Sergeant is really rude to the Aboriginal men. When Milly informs him of this, he just responds,

“They're afraid to look for it for fear of finding it”(p.22). Gran demonstrates their men's pride by emphasizing that they are not slaves. According to the Sergeant, soap is a luxury item, and their men must work in order to enjoy such products .

Evans (1999) holds that of the most traumatic issue that faced the Aboriginal women is the rape and sexual assault. The extended practice of the sexual assault of Indigenous women did not stop with the end of the Settlement era. Ruthless European policies subjected the entire Aboriginal population to agony and the Aboriginal women suffered too; but to put the distresses of the women in the same bracket as those of men will be an over simplification since women had to face problems unique to their gender, which compounded the torments of their already problematic lives. Evans explains this in lucid terms:

as a far larger Aboriginal population confronted a widely spreading European invasion and settlement. From this time Aboriginal women, being both female and black were subjected to dual patterns of oppression and to the intense, derogatory stereotyping which accompanies the interplay of racist and sexist ideologies and practices. (1999, p.201)

In *No Sugar* , we are told that of the eighty women who went out of the Settlement camps to work as domestic helps, thirty returned as pregnant . This is an example of the violation of Black women by White masters and the violation of Black women by White : “eighty girls from the Moor River Natives Settlement who went out into domestic service last year ...Thirty returned to the settlement in pregnant condition ” (p. 21) . The victimization of Aboriginal women continued in later times as well. In course of time the nature of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women began to get more and more complex. It needs to be noted that these acts of violence against Aboriginal women were not mere simple acts born out of gender discrimination, as Andrews comments :

The problem of violence against Aboriginal women incorporates an array of factors: race, gender, the after effects of colonialism, the minority status of Aboriginal people, the unequal access to societal resources, and consequent unequal development of Aboriginal communities. In addition, addressing this problem demands an appreciation of the differing roles and status of Aboriginal people, ranging from a separate or fringe community to an integrated part of Australian society. This great variety of factors complicates considerably the analysis of the issue of violence against Aboriginal women, because it involves an interplay of all these factors (1997, p.917).

Davis exposes the horrors associated with the violation of women's bodies in *No Sugar*. In a scene, the Aboriginal girl, Mary Dargurru becomes a victim to the White Sergeant O Neal who manipulates his authority to subjugate Aboriginal girls for his own enjoyment. As a result, he has become a source of fear and threat for the Aboriginal girls Mary expresses this fear when she says: "He's always hangin' around where the girls are workin'; in the cookhouse, in the sewin' room. And he's always carryin' that cat-o-nine tails and he'll use it, too" (p.62). This scenes demonstrates how Aboriginal women are particularly exposed to sexual assault. As Robinson (2020) asserts that " [women's] sexuality was policed and contained, and their children were removed from the influence of kin and community, their bodies were used as sexual objects by white men, and many were forced to become domestic servants" (2020 , p.8).

Additionally, the idea of surrendering husband and oppressed women also manifested throughout the play. As Mary complains about Neal's harassments , Joe convinces her to tell him what's wrong, and Mary responds:

MARY. Mr Neal.

JOE. Yeah, what about him?



MARY. He's trying to make me go and work at the hospital. ...

MARY. When Mr Neal sends a girl to work at the hospital, it usually means ...

JOE. Means what?

MARY. That he wants that girl ... for himself.

(p.69)

This conversation between Joe and Mary reveals the vulnerability of Aboriginal girls and the powerlessness of Aboriginal men. Later, when Mary decided to elope with her lover Joe after being impregnated by the latter, the sergeant found them out and put Joe in jail. This can be termed as a violation of the basic rights of a human being through a misuse of the law. Here, the sergeant used his authority as colonialist not as a protector. Mary was sent back to the Moore River settlement, and when she refused to be admitted in the hospital under Matron Neal, Sergeant Neal beat the pregnant Mary with a whip. This act of physical violence stands for the helpless submission that awaited most indigenous individual in a colonial institution. In Act Four, Sergeant Neal is about to whip Mary, but the Act ends with a blackout and a scream. Here, the theatre represents the dilemma of these characters. The theatrical amalgamation of darkness and the sounds of torture is highly relevant to reflect the indescribable torture that Aboriginal women had to suffer at the hands of the White men in power. Davis thereby shows the susceptibility to physical violence of the doubly marginalized category, the economically, socially and racially dominated community of the Aborigines, as well as the women in that community.

3. THE TRAUMA OF LOST GENERATIONS

Although issues like dispossessed, forcibly displacement and violence occupied wide space in Davis's plays , the case of "Stolen Generation" forms yet another important branch of his writing. It is one other aspect of traumatic effect that needs to be noticed, and this is the stealing away of children from their mothers on grounds of better nurturing. This

infamous issue of the “Stolen Generation” affected the Aboriginals for a long time, and the effect of this can still be felt. Davis had experienced by himself the state of being stolen from his original family and was victims of the policy of assimilation. Thus, this matter comes throughout his No Sugar with much of deep emotions and reality. However, this being exclusive to the Aboriginal experience, it is not surprising that it is only in the plays of Davis that we find reference to this. A reader comes to get an idea from Davis about the traumatic history of the stolen generation in delirious recapitulations, scared reminiscences and other anecdotes.

The policy of adoption was part of the assimilation agenda of the settler society in Australia. As Swain(2013) writes, “In the Stolen Generations narrative, adoption is located most clearly within the discussion of assimilation, the policy that, from the early twentieth century, promoted the absorption of Aboriginal people into the Australian population” (p.208). Young Aboriginal women were persuaded, compelled, and, even lied to in order to gain their consent to give up their children for adoption. “Young women who had themselves been subject to removal were almost powerless in the face of such pressure” (212).

Children born out of wedlock were often the cause of serious physical and mental trauma for their Aboriginal mothers. These acts of stealing children from their mothers left a profound impact on Aboriginal women. These incidents were proof of the complete disregard that the White law-makers had for Aboriginal maternal emotions. Since there is clinical White law-makers had for Aboriginal maternal emotions. Since there is clinical evidence that women undergo post-partum depression after childbirth out of a sense of loss caused by the separation of the baby from the mother, the entire stolen generation must have meant much depression for the Aboriginal mothers. Unfortunately for them, they were considered nothing but bodies or child-bearing machines without emotions.



As a representative example, in *No Sugar*, Mary's refusal to go to the settlement hospital to deliver her baby is based on her feeling that post-delivery, the Whites would take her baby away from her. She cries: "Help! Help! Joe! I want Joe! [...] Don't let them take Baby" (p.96). At a later point of time post-delivery when the White Matron Neal comes to examine the well-being of the mother and the child, Mary bursts out with: "No! Don't let the Matron see Baby. Granny, go and hide him. Please, please, don't let matron take him away" (p.98). Then, the pleading turn to be hysterically, as she remembers what has happened to Lilian whose child has been killed by Sergeant O' Neal :

No, don't touch him! You're not havin' my baby, leave him alone! [...]
No! Don't take him to the hospital. The trackers will get him and kill him [...] And bury him in the pine plantation [...] Like Lilian's baby.
Mr. Neal tell them to do it, to kill Baby. (p. 98)

No Sugar by Jack Davis, a work of realistic fiction that is set in 1929 during the Great Depression and addresses how Aboriginal people are treated in rural Western Australia. It was as political discourse against injustice government in time of oppression. Davis manipulates his audience into looking beyond race relations and into the life of a close Aboriginal family who have been driven from their homes and traditional lives. There is more theatrical elements use in this play by jack Davis to convey the sense of depression and injustice government. By creating an ironic dialect of humor and suffering within his unquestionably dramatic style, Davis enforces a personal sympathy and understanding from the audience.

The point on which the entire play operates is the difference in cultural understanding between colonial audiences and Aboriginal characters. Davis' use of humor is noticeable throughout the play, providing a sense of relief as the women demonstrate courage in the face of hardship, set against the backdrop of a desolate Australian society. Humor is made credible by two indigenous characters, Milly and Gran. Humor is depicted through 'You don't want to shout like that Chergeant,

you'll 'ave a fit, just like the dingo when gets a bait' (Act 1, Scene 2) . One cannot help but sympathize with Gran's clever and sarcastic humor as she makes fun of the "chergeant" who denies them their heavily consumed rations. critics have argued that there is a distinctive sense of Aboriginal humour most often employed as a strategy for survival.

CONCLUSION

Jack Davis is a prolific and distinguished 20th-century Aboriginal Australian playwright and poet.. In his *No Sugar*, he shows how women are subjected to colonial power and male-domination. Thus both the imperial power and patriarchy control women in the colonized countries. By focusing on the stories of women who are victims of racism, forced relocation, sexual assault, and the horrifying removal of their children, Davis uses *No Sugar* as an illustration of transgenerational trauma in the Aboriginal community. This study demonstrates how the Millimurra-Munday family deals with racism and discrimination. Davis wants to learn how other people cope with the trauma of colonial history.

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