



Tiddaism: Negotiating Aboriginality and the Experiences of the Australian Aboriginal Woman in a Cross-Cultural Context

Payel Paul

Assistant Professor of English, Kulti College

The author is an Assistant Professor of English at Kulti College, Paschim Bardhaman. She has done her MPhil and a UGC sponsored Minor Research Project on Afro-American Slave Narratives. Her doctoral research is on Australian Aboriginal Women’s Life-writings. Many of her papers have been published in reputed journals.

Abstract

After years of displacement and dispossession perpetrated by European colonizers the Australian Aborigines had come to inhabit a space where they could neither identify with the culture of their colonizers, nor could they return to their traditional roots which was retained only by a few living in the outback. Questions of identity became crucial in the 1960s when Aboriginal political activism rejected the stereotypical constructions of Aboriginality produced by white discourses, and called for a redemption and reconstruction of Aboriginal identity by the Aborigines themselves. The life-writings penned by Aboriginal women became very crucial in this redemptive process as they not only questioned western constructs of Aboriginality, but at the same time voiced a need for a particular ‘ism’ that would prevent the distinct experiences of the Australian Aboriginal woman from getting subsumed under the universalizing banner of feminism. The Aboriginal writer and activist Jackie Huggins came up with the term *tiddaism* to denote the experiences of Australian Aboriginal womanhood. As *tidda* means ‘sister’, the term *tiddaism* also points towards the group solidarity that is essential in Aboriginal women’s identity formation. This paper will study the Aboriginal woman, Ruby Langford’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* to explore the several aspects of Australian Aboriginal womanhood that have been represented in the text, and will try to find out how those aspects have contributed towards a construction of Aboriginality.

Keywords

Aboriginality, *tiddaism*, Aboriginal womanhood, in-between cultures

* This article was submitted to this journal before 14.06.2019.

Aboriginality is perhaps the most nebulous term in the field of Australian Aboriginal studies. Having been persistently constructed and represented by dominant white discursive practices, redefinition of the term had been on the top of the political agenda of the Australian Aborigines when they began their activism to reclaim their identity and their rights over their land. However, bringing together all the differences of language, culture and tribal affiliations under the banner of Aboriginality was even difficult for the Aborigines themselves until they started voicing and fighting for the recognition of the multiple Aboriginalities present within Aboriginal Australia. Australian Aboriginal women had been immensely instrumental in redeeming and reconstructing Aboriginal identity by narrating their stories in their life-writings. This paper proposes to examine Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), one of the most influential life-writings by an Australian Aboriginal woman, to take a look at how an Aboriginal woman has voiced her distinct Aboriginality by sharing her experiences as an Aboriginal woman straddled between two cultures.

The traditional life and culture of the Australian Aborigines were disintegrated when the European settlers arrived in the continent in 1770 and declared it "*terra nullius* [no-man's land]" having found no discernable signs of ownership of property amongst its inhabitants who were deemed to be belonging to prehistoric times (Attwood, "The Past as Future" ix). With the colonisation of Australia, termed by C. D. Rowley as "a long-drawn-out process of conquest," the Aborigines were dispossessed of their land, their hunting and gathering economy, their food resources, their language and culture (26). Eventually Aboriginal population dwindled away as atrocities perpetrated on them by the settlers escalated. Alcohol and "introduced diseases" also took a lot of Aboriginal lives (Berndt 97). Those who survived were "caught on the very lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder," and consequently lived on the fringes of Australian society in extreme poverty, ill health, and deprivation (Berndt 98). Between 1869 and 1930, Protection Boards were established which were given full power to move the Aborigines to various reserves around the country, and thereby, control their lives. In the words of Carter, reserves were "a means of 'solving' the Aboriginal problem once and for all, removing Aborigines from the land or townships; in effect, removing them from white consciousness and white history" (79).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, assimilationist policies based on racist presumptions started affecting the lives of the Aborigines in a devastating way. The increasing number of half-castes became a matter of great concern for the Boards which

took steps to absorb the half-castes into mainstream white society. The implicit goal of this policy was doing away with the Aboriginal race altogether – “the Aboriginal race would vanish as the ‘full bloods’ aged and died and the ‘half-castes’ were blended to whiteness” (Broome 86). Thereon began the forceful removal of half-caste children from their families. Children were wrenched from their mothers’ lap and placed in missions and homes where they got training for embarking upon a life of cheap domestic and other labour. According to the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, entitled *Bringing Them Home* (1997), around 100000 half caste Aboriginal children were separated from their families between 1905 and 1967. These children, severed from their families and their traditional culture, are referred to as ‘the stolen generation,’ a term popularised by Peter Read in 1981. The Aborigines who emerged out of the assimilation process were made to feel ashamed of their indigenous roots. They were taught white ethics and white way of life, and were severely punished for practising anything Aboriginal. In other words, they were “desocialised as Aborigines and resocialised as whites” (Read xii). “Haunted by ubiquitous signs of racial bigotry”, most of them, especially the light-skinned ones, attempted to “pass off” as whites (Henke 37). In Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) we find Sally’s mother advising Sally to tell her friends at school that they are anything but Aboriginal – “Tell them you’re Indian,” said Gladys to her daughter, Sally (Morgan 8). Most of the children, who were removed from their families, never returned to the communities, or met their parents ever in their lives. As adults when many of them set out to find their roots and their identity, they found the way back to their place extremely long and tedious. Thus a generation was born that was living in between two cultures. This class of Aborigines, half white, half black, was neither fully assimilated into white society, nor could it return easily to its Aboriginal community. In the words of Jeremy Beckett the “Aboriginal people were assimilated, not into the [white] community, but into the ranks of the oppressed, the colonised, coloured people” (“The Past in the Present” 203). As a marginalised section of society, they were living on the fringes of opulent Australian cities in utter poverty, persistently looking for seasonal work and battling against health and housing problems. They were Aborigines, but they had “never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer” (Morgan 141). They had never “participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime¹” (Morgan 141). These Aborigines inhabited a cross-cultural space where they always felt uncomfortable feeling deprived of a place to which they properly belonged. This lack of a sense of belonging and the

subsequent need to find one's own place was a crisis from which almost no half-caste Aborigine could escape. This crisis also led to the question of identity and the need to define it, for the Aboriginal people always had their identity defined and described for them by the white colonisers. White settlers, anthropologists, and subsequent white governments had defined Aboriginality for almost two hundred years. It was only since the 1960s when the fight for land rights and self-determination had begun, that the Aborigines started taking pride in their Aboriginal identity and felt the need to define it for themselves.

Due to the huge number of Aborigines residing in the cross-cultural zone, formulating an official definition of the term *Aboriginality* had always been problematic. John McCorquodale, in the 1991 report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, has pointed out that "since the time of white settlement, governments have used no less than 67 classifications, descriptions or definitions to determine who is an Aboriginal person" ("Kinship and Identity: Legal Definitions of Aboriginality" n.pag.). From the 1830s to the 1950s definitions were formulated by reference to blood-quotum, that is, the amount of Aboriginal blood present in the person. During the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginality was defined by reference to race, that is, as person was identified as Aboriginal if he was "a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia" (Gardiner-Garden n.pag.). In the 1980s a new three-part definition gained popularity, which defined "An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander" as a "person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives" (Gardiner-Garden n.pag.). This definition was accepted by all Federal governments for the meting out of different benefits to Aboriginal people.

However, the problematic associated with the definition of Aboriginality does not end here. First of all, Aboriginality resists straitjacketing into fixed categories as the traditional Aboriginal people are distributed into not less than 500 tribes across Australia, with language and culture varying from one tribe to another. Thus, if Aboriginality refers to a sum total of particular cultural traits, it is difficult to ascertain those traits which define the Aborigines as one people, as it always varies from tribe to tribe. Moreover, the term *Aborigine* was given to the native peoples of Australia by the Europeans, and therefore it can be argued that there was no "pre-existing pan-Aboriginal nation and no common history" of the Aborigines before the arrival of the Europeans (Martinez 135-136). In the words of Marcia Langton, "Before Cook and Phillip, there was no

‘Aboriginality’ in the sense that is meant today” (32). The Aborigines lived in small groups or tribes, and had strong ties with their land and the Dreaming myths associated with it. Thus Vincent Lingiari asserts, “My people are Gurindji, who live in Wave Hill area. That me countr” (qtd. in Martinez 141). As a consequence of this sense of belonging to one’s tribal’s land, the Aborigines considered members of other tribes strangers, and never thought of all the Aborigines as one people. The five hundred odd tribes living in Australia were given a common name, *Aborigines*, by the European colonisers who not only gave them a name, but also defined their identity and culture in terms that were alien to the Aborigines themselves. Bain Attwood in his introduction to the book, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines* (1992), has called the discursive practices that have constructed the idea of the Aborigine, ‘Aboriginalism,’ after Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’. He defines Aboriginalism as “a mode of discourse which ... produces authoritative and essentialist ‘truths’ about indigenes, and which is characterised by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge” (Attwood, Introduction i). European power and knowledge have constructed the Aborigines as the ‘Other,’ in binary opposition to the Europeans. In terms of the European colonisers, the Aborigines stood for everything which the Europeans were not. Whereas the Europeans represented culture, civilisation and progress, the Aborigines were constructed as savages, stone-age people, the primordial or primitive ‘Other’. Aborigines were represented in mainly two terms – as “noble or ignoble savages” or “soft or hard primitives” (Attwood, Introduction iv). Michael Dodson has described the changing image of the Aborigines in white Australia in the following words:

Initially, we appeared as the noble, well-built native ... Later, after we had fallen from grace, we appeared bent, distorted, overweight, inebriated, with bottle in hand. And more recently, we appear ochred, spiritual, and playing the didjeridu behind the heroic travels of a black Landcruiser. (27)

In the words of Jack Davis, this is the “Aboriginality” the Aborigines had inherited “from the WHITE MAN’S PAST” (qtd. in Stokes 165). The Europeans had so long determined the characteristics of Aboriginality and the Aborigines were called upon to fulfil those characteristics in order to substantiate their claims as to being Aboriginal.

From the 1960s began an era of heightened Aboriginal political and cultural activism. The Aborigines started taking pride in their Aboriginal culture, and actively engaged in defining their identity and reclaiming their silenced history. Aboriginal writers and activists like Jackie Huggins have expressed their indignation at the fact that non-

Aboriginal Australians had so long been defining Aboriginality. Huggins asserts, “There are no books written by non-Aboriginals that can tell me what it is to be Black as it is a fiction and ethnocentric presumption to do so” (Huggins 60). The activists have drawn the attention of their community towards the need to redefine Aboriginality and to fight for their rights. Since then they have been “rejecting white stereotypes and recovering, reaffirming and re-creating Aboriginal conceptions of character and identity” (Stokes 166-67). The development of the concept of pan-Aboriginality, despite the Aborigines’ identification with their particular tribal land and community, became crucial not only in shaping Aboriginal political thought and action, but also in challenging the stereotypical constructs of Aboriginality produced by white colonial discourses. Though Aboriginality was a construct used by white Australia to stereotype and marginalise the Aborigines, the Aborigines discerned the exhaustive quality of the term and embraced it to “describe Aboriginal people’s united identity,” (Brewster 3).

However, critics, historians and anthropologists like Marcia Langton, Robert Ariss, Gillian Whitlock and Diane Barwick have time and again given caveats against the unproblematised usage of the term Aboriginality. After over two hundred years of contact with European civilization, there doesn’t exist an Aboriginal culture fully insulated from its western counterpart. The critics in the field have emphasized the role played by the inter-racial contact zone in the development of Aboriginality. Marcia Langton opines that “‘Aboriginality’ arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience” (31). Looking for the origin of Aboriginality Robert Ariss remarks, “The construction and creative forces behind this construction of Aboriginality are as much located within Aboriginal culture as in the dominating culture of the white man” (135). Unlike the white colonisers who had been trying to describe the Aborigines in fixed stereotypical terms, the Aboriginal activists have reiterated the need to acknowledge the existence of immense diversity in Aboriginal culture, and to stop looking for traditional traits in order to define an Aborigine. Calling the notion of a “fixed and singular” Aboriginality, “a fantasy”, Whitlock emphasizes the highly contingent nature of Aboriginality and draws our attention to the “more mobile and plural notions of subjectivity and identity” articulated by Aboriginal people (156). It is an attempt towards advocating “cultural dynamism,” and a step towards “counterconstruction” against the hegemonic European models of Aboriginality as exemplified in the “corroborree, the boomerang, [and] the naked savage” (Ariss 133).

Despite the official endeavour in recognizing “self-identification and/or recognition by a community” as the criteria for authenticating a person’s Aboriginal identity, Beckett points out that the “remote Aborigine nevertheless remained the touchstone of Aboriginality” in white consciousness (“The Past in the Present” 207). The not-so-easy task of comprehending and formulating a definition of Aboriginality has been captured by Kevin Gilbert in *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (1978), who satirises the European attempt at identifying particular characteristics as signs of the “authorized version” of Aboriginality (Beckett, Introduction 7):

But what is Aboriginality? Is it being tribal? Who is an Aboriginal? Is he or she someone who feels that other Aboriginals are somehow dirty, lazy, drunken, bludging? Is an Aboriginal anyone who has some degree of Aboriginal blood in his or her veins and who had demonstrably been disadvantaged by that? Or is an Aboriginal someone who has had the reserve experience? Is Aboriginality institutionalised gutlessness, an acceptance of the label ‘the most powerless people on earth’? Or is Aboriginality, when all the definitions have been exhausted, a yearning for a different way of being, a wholeness that was presumed to have existed [before 1788]? (qtd. in Shoemaker 231)

Just as the presence of all these characteristics might make a man Aboriginal, at the same time their absence cannot take away from a man his Aboriginality. A man can be an Aboriginal despite not having any of the traits traditionally associated with Aboriginality. In the words of Brewster “Aboriginality is a continuing process of negotiation and redefinition” (15). The indigenous academic, Michael Dodson, says that even an Aboriginal person should abstain from defining Aboriginality, as that might end up in fixing it in “absolute” terms (39). One should rather accept the presence of multiple and diverse Aboriginalities instead of a single Aboriginality that can be reduced to definitions.

From the 1970s onwards the genre of life-writing became an effective medium for making Aboriginal voices from diverse communities heard. Aboriginal writers used the flexibility of this genre to present not only their own life stories but the stories of the members of their extended family with a conviction that the autobiographical nature of the genre would itself attest to its contents as facts and real happenings in the lives of its subjects. They used this medium to let the world know what it was like to be an Australian Aborigine, especially a half-caste living in urban Australia and not the traditional ones of popular imagination. Several Aboriginal men, like Dick Roughsey,

Jack Davis, Joe McGinness have recorded their life stories, but it was the Aboriginal women who dominated the sphere with their narratives of breaking up of Aboriginal families and severing of Aboriginal children from their mothers, communities and traditional lives. Examples of such stories include – Monica Clare’s *Karobran* (1978), Elsie Roughsey’s *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* (1984), Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Glenys Ward’s *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville’s *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* (1990), Alice Nannup’s *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Rita and Jackie Huggins’ *Auntie Rita* (1994) and so on. Life-writing has been an effective medium for the Australian Aboriginal women in redefining their Aboriginality and redeeming the silenced Aboriginal history from the chapters of official Australian history books. In portraying their own lives, the Aboriginal women have focussed on the uniqueness of their experiences as women belonging neither to the dominant white society nor to the traditional Aboriginal society, but rather inhabiting a cross-cultural zone where they experience both the benefits of retaining some strains of their traditional indigenous culture and the bane of imbibing some facets of the culture of their colonisers. In doing so, they have also registered their long standing stance of not considering their movement as part of the broader spectrum of feminism. Anita Heiss has categorically stated that their fight is against the “ignorance of a white feminist movement” that tends to assume that the Aboriginal women “wish to be joined under their banner” (39). Aileen Moreton-Robinson finds white feminist movement “grounded in the hegemony of whiteness which positions Indigenous women on the racial continuum” as the “least civilised ... childlike and ... degenerate” (69). It is the same hegemony that places the white women “closer ‘to the other end of the continuum’” where the category “white man” reigns supreme as the ultimate symbol of “culture and civilisation” (Moreton-Robinson 69). Jackie Huggins reacted against the radical white feminist anthropologist Diane Bell’s call for joining radical feminism in a bid to combat male violence against Aboriginal women, by asserting that Aboriginal women prefer social feminism rather than radical feminism, because their “fight is with the state, the system, social injustices, and primarily racism, far in excess of patriarchy” (qtd. in Moreton-Robinson 74).

In a lecture entitled “Gender Relations in Australian History” in 1993 at the University of Queensland, Jackie Huggins declared that she preferred the term *tiddaism* (*tidda* means sister) to feminism, which clearly indicates that their fight is against the oppression that the dominant white society inflicts on the Aboriginal race as a whole,

rather than particularly against the men (qtd. in Speechley-Golden 103). However, this doesn't mean that Aboriginal women are defensive of their men and are trying to gloss over the violence their men inflict upon the women. Speechley-Golden acknowledges with a note of sadness that Aboriginal men are "now sexist towards" their women, but this is just one among the other diseases like measles, small pox and alcoholism which they have acquired from their colonisers (Speechley-Golden 101). Identifying "sexual discrimination" as alien to traditional Aboriginal culture, Longley has opined that it has percolated within Aboriginal lives along "the new urban class and family structures imposed upon them by a notoriously masculinist white Australia" (Longley 371). Aboriginal women are conscious of that and they deal with this problem in their own way. In Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), the subject of enquiry of this paper, we shall find a picture of Aboriginal womanhood that in a way facilitates the construction, redefinition and representation of an Aboriginality that was supposed to be shared by the semi-urban Aboriginal women in the 1980s.

In traditional and non-traditional Australian Aboriginal communities the women played a part which had some characteristics that make the Australian Aboriginal woman's experience unique. Ruby Langford and her contemporary life-writers have constructed a notion of Aboriginality by representing these unique experiences in their works. Some of the characteristics of these experiences are a continuation of the customs of traditional Aboriginal societies, while others have developed through the Aborigines' long association with the dominant European civilization. The most unique feature about the woman in Australian Aboriginal societies is probably the immeasurably great importance of the mother figure. The importance of the mother had existed in the pre-contact traditional Aboriginal societies, and from there had been passed down to the urban and semi-urban communities. Richard Broome observes that it was the mother in traditional Aboriginal communities who bore the sole responsibility of raising her children. She was the one who imparted the "crucial early education" to her children "in which the young were taught to survive in the bush and treat the land as friendly and part of themselves" (23). It was the mother who initiated the child into the hunting and gathering economy. Later on, during the days of colonial encounter when Aboriginal women started giving birth to half-caste children, the identity of these half-castes was determined according to the identity of their mother. The half-caste children of Aboriginal mothers were counted as Aborigines despite them having white fathers. Identity in Aboriginal Australia is therefore passed down the matrilineal line. So the

development of an Aborigine's identity was inextricably attached to the mother the loss or absence of whom could lead to a life-long search for wholeness. It was precisely because of this that during the assimilation era when the half-caste Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their mothers, they underwent irredeemably disastrous mental and emotional trauma which they could never really overcome in their lives. Noeline Briggs-Smith in an article on her great great grandmother, Granny Lizzie, describes her experiences while working in a home for the aged – “Many of the Elderly Aboriginal residents, especially the women, would start to cry and look for their mothers if left outdoors on the verandah during the summer evenings” (88). The trauma of removal and longing for motherly love never left the Aborigines even in their old age. Even in later lives when these members of the stolen generation relate their stories of separation, they can't do so without shedding tears. In *Lousy Little Sixpence*, a documentary film made on the women of the Yorta Yorta community, we find that elderly women like Margaret Tucker and others are shedding tears recalling their separation from their mothers. The absence of the mother creates a void in their lives which they can never fill up with anything in the world. Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is also fraught with a deep longing for the mother who had left Ruby and her sisters when they were very small. Ruby looks for her mother and time and again dreams of getting united with her. She could never get rid of her longing for her mother till she actually met her in Sydney. Before meeting her she would often sit “machining trousers” at the “Brachs' clothing factory” in Sydney, and “wondering about her and whether she had other kids and trying not to think about it” (Langford 43). Such was the pain she had received from her separation from her mother that she had promised herself when she was still a child that if she ever became a mother she would never ever leave her kids. Eventually she became a mother, and her life-writing is all about the struggles of an Aboriginal woman in rearing a family of nine children.

The subjects of the Australian Aboriginal life-writings are not only obsessed with their mothers, but the subjects as mothers are also obsessed with their children. Often these mothers are seen unable to accept and cope with the death of their children. Due to poor health condition and malnutrition child mortality rate was very high among the Aborigines since the early days of colonisation. However, alcoholism and drug overuse induced by experiences of racial discrimination, poverty and police atrocities in urban Australia were also causes that led to high death rates of Aboriginal children. Thus the Aboriginal women living on the fringes of urban towns were often left lamenting over the

loss of their children. This was a typical experience of those Aboriginal women who had never known the warmth and protection of the elaborate kin system of the traditional Aboriginal societies, and were living in between two cultures. In Langford's narrative, we find Langford shattered by the loss of three of her children, Bill, Pearl and David. Bill died of epilepsy, Pearl in an accident, and David died of drug overdose the cause of which can be attributed to deprivation, frustration and continuing racial discrimination perpetrated on the Aborigines by the white society. Such strong was Ruby's motherly love that when she visits Bonalbo in her old-age to attend her school's 75th anniversary, and is hospitalised for a night, she looks out the window of her cabin and sees the school on the opposite hill and remembers her little children Bill and Pearl, now dead, waving back at her from the school playground as she used to stand and watch them during her work at the laundry of the very same hospital. Bereaving mothers were ubiquitous phenomena in Aboriginal communities. Even in Langford's narrative we find that apart from Ruby herself other women of her community are also left bemoaning the loss of their children. Ruby's friend Nerida had ten children, but she lost four of them to various causes.

In Langford's life-writing we also come across a celebration of motherhood. Langford is not just the mother of her nine biological children but is also a mother figure to the friends of her sons. Ruby's sons, Nobby and David, and their friends Allan Barrett (Allo), Terry Priest, Patrick Cheshire and Steve Farrant (The Horse) faced the same troubles growing up and living in Sydney and its outskirts. They drank heavily, robbed properties, fired at policemen and faced repeated incarcerations for various petty and grave crimes. However, in all their troubles they found an all loving, caring, and forgiving mother in Ruby. Ruby is the one who hides them in her house when they are chased by the police, she is the one who gives them shelter in her already overcrowded house when they wander around homeless, and she is the one who writes to them to boost their morale when they spend long terms in the prison. Talking about Allo, one of the many adopted kids Ruby had, she says, "He grew up like a brother to my kids. I'm the only mother figure he's ever known. He sends flowers and cards on Mother's Day, birthdays and Christmas" (Langford 167). Ruby is hailed and worshipped for her universal motherhood by all her adopted sons. Most of the boys address her as 'Mum'. Ruby boasts that on Mother's Day her "house was filled with flowers and [her] neighbour was jealous as she only got one bunch" (Langford 220). This universal motherly feeling that Ruby had was not uncommon in Aboriginal communities which thrived on elaborate kinship system. In

this regard Broome points out that the “Aborigines regarded their whole group as a family” and therefore, “the terms for family members, such as mother, father, brother, sister ... were extended to everyone in the tribe” (20). Therefore, for an Aborigine there wasn’t just one mother or father in the tribe, but many from all of whom he could expect parental care and affection.

The life of an Aboriginal woman in urban and semi-urban settings in the 1980s was radically different from the one in the traditional ones. The ills of colonisation having affected and disrupted traditional Aboriginal lives, the urban Aboriginal women were faced with certain socio-economic problems which women in traditional settings had never known. Along with and as a result of disintegration of traditional Aboriginal livelihood, problems like alcoholism and incarceration of male members had dislocated the family structure, often increasing the importance of the women in the family. In the words of Ann Brewster, “Due to factors such as the disintegration of traditional family and kinship structures, alcoholism and the high incidence of Aboriginal men in jail, in recent generations women have come to occupy a more prominent role in communal and family life” (Brewster 9). Roberta Sykes also reiterates the point when she says, “... least three out of every four black women will sleep alone, will bring up children without the benefit of black paternal presence, and will have no black male with whom to share their lives” (qtd. in Brewster 9). Thus in the urban settings the Aboriginal women were often the sole bread earners of the family. For Ruby, life was even harder. She had relationships with one man after another and none of them proved responsible. Ruby makes an assessment of the men she met in these words – “the men loved you for a while and then more kids came along and the men drank and gambled and disappeared” (Langford 96). With Sam Griffin, Gordon Campbell, Peter Langford and Lance Marriot, Ruby had in total nine children the rearing of whom was most of the time her sole responsibility. Ruby herself admits that she had done “gut-busting work” all her life (Langford 264). One thing should be remembered that the Aborigines always had seasonal work to do which never lasted long. To sustain her family Ruby had done several jobs ranging from felling trees and cutting logs at George Creek to making fences at various places like Nindigully, Toobeah, Talwood and so on. She had to engage in hard labour even during her pregnancies, sometimes alone when her partners would drink and leave without a word, and sometimes along with them. Finally when the last man leaves, it is Ruby who takes on the responsibility of keeping her family alive.

Among the many hardships undertaken by Australian Aboriginal women, violence perpetrated by the male members of both races is perhaps the most glaring. Violence in Aboriginal women's lives had been two-fold – intra-racial and inter-racial. Inter-racial violence was faced mostly by those Aboriginal women in urban and semi-urban settings who worked as domestic helps in white households. But as Speechley-Golden has pointed out, patriarchal attitudes and intra-racial violence had entered Aboriginal culture through its contact with the white colonisers. The latter was unknown in traditional Aboriginal settings where the communities were economically dependent as much on their women as on their men. Instances of intra-racial violence are strewn throughout Ruby Langford's narrative. Ruby had the first experience of physical violence being inflicted upon her in Gunnedah Hill by her first partner Sam Griffin after the birth of their son Bill. Before she had her own experiences she met other Aboriginal women at Gunnedah Hill who have had experiences of domestic violence. It was where she met Nerida for the first time. Ruby says, "I hardly saw [Nerida] without black eyes and bruises. ... My existence wasn't better, and I had my share of black eyes and bruises later" (Langford 58). Ruby's first partner Sam was always suspicious of Ruby cheating on him, while he was actually the one who was "running around on" her (Langford 59). He had once knocked Ruby to the ground and had tried to throttle her. He belted Ruby so much that she desired to go to her hometown of Bonalbo and that was where he left her. Her bashings continued till she had the last man in her life, Lance Marriott. Lance was cheating on Ruby and when she found that out she confronted him, and Lance in a fury hit her so hard on the face that her false teeth were broken and her lip was ripped open with blood pouring out profusely. After the incident Ruby was in the hospital, and had her face swollen for weeks. Lance was arrested. This incident, however, was a turning point in Ruby's life and she decided that she had had "enough of bashings and being knocked around generally" and would tolerate it no more (Langford 144). She didn't let Lance in her life anymore, and then on she started living life on her own terms. When asked by her son-in-law when she would get married again, she replied, "When I can get a man who can look after me better than I can do myself" (Langford 170). Ruby transformed from her fragile self of her younger days to a very strong woman. One day she found her daughter Aileen "doubled up in the middle of the road near the flat" (Langford 206). When asked what had happened Aileen informed Ruby that her husband Dennis had kicked her with his heavy shoes in the stomach. On hearing that Ruby got furious and "ran across the road and opened the door"

of the house to find Dennis at the table stone drunk (Langford 206). Ruby then narrates what she did:

He said something but I didn't give him time to answer. I belted him and knocked him over the lounge and flattened him. 'I didn't raise my daughter to be bashed and kicked by bastards like you'. I threw him out. I don't know where I got the strength from. (206)

This was a changed Ruby from her former self. From the feat of strength that she displays it becomes evident that Aboriginal women needed to be strong in order to protect themselves from male atrocities. However, one more thing is also evident that not much had changed in the generation of Ruby's daughter than hers. The Aboriginal women of subsequent generations also faced the same problems with men drinking, bashing and cheating on them. Anita Heiss has pertinently pointed out that the Aboriginal women's fight is not only "against the ignorant non-Indigenous population" but also "against the man who's been beating them for too long" (37). The likes of Ruby Langford have laid bare their lives of struggle against gender violence not only as a part of their healing process, but also in an attempt to raise their voice against male atrocities.

Another significant aspect of the lives of Aboriginal women that had come into being as a way out of their troubles in life is the bond they share with other women of their family or their community. It is the solidarity they find with other Aboriginal women that gives them a sense of identity, security and courage to carry on with their battles. Herein Speechley-Golden makes an important distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. She points out that the "dominant white society uses the 'I' context, whereby they perceive everything from its effect on them personally. Aboriginal society, however, uses the 'We' context – that is, they perceive things from a group perspective. ... Aboriginal people are defined by their culture as a 'We' people" (101). The importance of relational or group identification in Aboriginal communities has been emphasised here. Exceptional camaraderie between women is noticed amongst Ruby and her friends like Nerida and Gertie who at different points of their lives have shared the same household with Ruby. About Nerida Ruby says:

Nerida and I have been friends for about thirty-eight years of our lives ... And it seems that our lives always cross, no matter where we go. She had a family of ten children and lost four boys and I had lost two, so we know what it's like to lose the ones we love the most of all, our children. (Langford 221)

Their companionship emerged from a sense of shared feelings of loss and deprivation. For most women in the urban Aboriginal communities the experiences were the same. To make life bearable Ruby and her friends frequented The Empress Hotel where they drank and had fun. Ruby points out to the sameness of her life with that of Neddy's, "We shared our fun ... No money no land no job no hope. So we had to find ways to keep our spirits up ..." (Langford 151). Strangely enough this bond becomes stronger when Lance Marriott, the last man in Ruby's life leaves for good. Such friendship between women of the same community becomes a source of strength for the Aboriginal women who find compatriots in their struggle for life, everyone having undergone more or less the same experiences.

Ruby Langford belonged to the Bundjalung people of the Richmond and Clarence River tribe of New South Wales. But she hardly had any experience of traditional Bundjalung life, except for some faint memories of it from her childhood which was spent among her people in the Box Ridge Mission at Coraki. She had spent most of her life in and around Sydney and on the fringes of various semi urban towns of New South Wales. Though she had often lived off the bush, her life experiences were nothing close to that of the traditional Aboriginal women. Rather they were the typical experiences encountered by a semi-urban Australian Aboriginal woman. In Ruby's own words, the purpose behind writing her book was first of all to "know who [she] was," and secondly, to "give some idea of the difficulty [Aboriginal women like her] have surviving between two cultures" (Langford 269). The distinctive experiences of Aboriginal womanhood, shared by Langford in her book, help construct an image of the typical Aboriginal culture that grew out of the prolonged contact that traditional Aboriginality had with western culture. That in-between culture contributed to the life experiences of the Aboriginal women who suffered the dying away of traditional customs, but at the same time, felt blessed for having retained some. Through the representation of her experiences Langford has made a statement about her Aboriginality. However, this Aboriginality, though it shares many traits of pan-Aboriginal womanhood (like the speciality of the mother-child bond, carrying the load of the family, bonding with other women of the community etc.), cannot be said to represent the Aboriginality shared by all urban or semi-urban Aborigines. Aboriginality or the Aboriginal experience is different for Sally Morgan or Rita Huggins or Glenyse Ward, though all of them inhabit that dubious space between two cultures. Therefore, instead of calling Langford's representation 'the Aboriginal

experience', it is worthwhile to call it one of the many expressions of Aboriginality as exemplified through one of the many experiences of Aboriginal womanhood.

Note

1. In Aboriginal culture Dreaming refers to the great bulk of animist myths that describe the creation of the world and the passage of the Great Spirit personages. Aboriginal people trace their ancestry to these beings which participated in the Dreaming events.

Works Cited

- Ariss, Robert. "Writing Black: The Construction of an Aboriginal Discourse". *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988. 131-146. Print.
- Attwood, Bain. Introduction. *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*. Ed. Bain Attwood and John Arnold. Bundoora: La Trobe University Press, 1992. i-xvi. Print.
- . "The Past as Future: Aborigines, Australia and the (dis)course of History." *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*. Ed. Bain Attwood St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996. vii-xxxviii. Print.
- Beckett, Jeremy. Introduction. *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988. 1-10. *Google Book Search*. Web. 8 March 2019.
- . "The Past in the Present; The Present in the Past: Constructing a National Aboriginality". *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988. 191-217. *Google Book Search*. Web. 8 March 2019.
- Berndt, Catherine H and Ronald M Berndt. *The Aboriginal Australians: the first pioneers*. Carlton: Pitman Publishing Pty Ltd, 1978. Print.
- Brewster, Anne. *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography*. South Melbourne: Sydney University Press, 1996. Print
- Briggs-Smith, Noeline. "Granny Lizzie." *The Strength of Us as Women: Black Women Speak*. Comp. Kerry Reed-Gilbert. Charnwood: Ginninderra Press, 2000. 84-89. Print.
- Broome, Richard. *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance: 1788-2001*. 3rd ed. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001. Print.
- Carter, David. *Dispossession, Dreams and Diversity: Issues in Australian Studies*. Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education Australia, 2006. Print.

- Dodson, Michael. "The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality." *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*. Ed. Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003. 25-42. Print.
- Gardiner-Garden, John. "Defining Aboriginality in Australia". *Current Issues Briefs 2002-2003*. 2003. *Parliament of Australia*. Web. 20 June 2017.
- Heiss, Anita. "Why Does a Black Woman Write?" *The Strength of Us as Women: Black Women Speak*. Comp. Kerry Reed-Gilbert. Charnwood: Ginninderra Press, 2000. 37-41. Print.
- Henke, Suzette. "Aboriginal Autography: The Dreaming of Sally Morgan." *Cross-Addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Ed. John C. Hawley. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. *Google Book Search*. Web. 11 July 2018.
- Huggins, Jackie. "Always Was Always Will Be". *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*. Ed. Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003. 60-65. Print.
- "Kinship and Identity: Legal Definitions of Aboriginality". *Essentially Yours: The Protection of Human Genetic Information in Australia (ALRC Report 96)*. 30 May 2003. *Australian Government: Australian Law Reform Commission*. Web. 20 June 2017.
- Langford, Ruby. *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988. Print.
- Langton, Marcia. "Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television..." *An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things*. Woolloomooloo: Australian Film Commission, 1993. Print.
- Longley, Kateryna Olijnyk. "Autobiographical Storytelling by Australian Aboriginal Women". *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 370- 384. Print.
- Martinez, Julia. "Problematizing Aboriginal Nationalism." *Aboriginal History*. 21(1997): 133-147. Print.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. "Tiddas Talkin' up to the White Woman: When Huggins et al. took on Bell." *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*. Ed. Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003. 66-77. Print.
- Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987. Print.
- Read, Peter. Introduction. *Lost Children: Thirteen Australians Taken from Their Aboriginal Families Tell of the Struggle to Find Their Natural Parents*. Ed. Coral Edwards and Peter Read. Sydney: Doubleday, 1989. ix-xvii. Print.
- Rowley, C. D. *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice*. Vol. 1. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970. *Scholarly Information Services/ Library*. Web. 1 May 2018.

- Shoemaker, Adam. *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature: 1929-1988*. 1989. Melbourne: ANU E Press, 2004. Print.
- Speechley-Golden, Vicki-Ann M. "Feminism and a Reply to Grimshaw's Note." *The Strength of Us as Women: Black Women Speak*. Comp. Kerry Reed-Gilbert. Charnwood: Ginninderra Press, 2000. 100-111. Print.
- Stokes, Geoffrey. "Citizenship and Aboriginality: Two Conceptions of Identity in Aboriginal Political Thought". *The Politics of Identity in Australia*. Ed Geoffrey Stokes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 158-174. Print.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. London: Cassell, 2000. Print

The whole process of publication of this journal is carried out in a completely paperless mode.
Please think about our environment before printing.
If you are reading this from a printed paper, please scan this QR code with your smartphone
to reach postscriptum.co.in and read online.
Thank you

