

**The Plight of Stolen Generation in Jane Harrison's Stolen,  
an Australian Aboriginal play**

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**Introduction**

The most important and painful issues associated with the “Lost Generation” came to be hotly debated in Australia and it was desired by the Committee of Management Ilbjerri to be the theme of its next play and began the project in 1992. Jane Harrison, having grown up isolated from the indigenous community, was attracted to the project out of a desire to explore her own heritage. She, a former advertising copywriter, is a descendant of the Muruwari people of New South Wales. Her maternal grandfather was an aboriginal. She went through thousands of oral manuscripts and interviewed several members of the Stolen Generation before presenting Stolen in October 1998, in association with the Melbourne Festival, Ilbjerri and Playbox. For a better understanding of Jane Harrison’s Play, Stolen its essential to be aware of the history of Stolen Generation.

**Stolen Generation**

Thousands of children were removed from their parents, families, culture and language under a government policy in Australia between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 1970’s. The government policy aimed at assimilation. The goal of assimilation as defined in the statement made at a state gathering in 1951 was to bring about a society in which “all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do.” There were discussions whether Aborigines could be “civilized” through contact with the whites or they should be moved onto reserves. During the early colonial period there were both official and philanthropic efforts to convert the Aborigines to Christianity and to draw them into European life. Later, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were reserves that separated Aborigines from the outside world, for, the whites believed that the Aborigines would soon die. The children of mixed descent were removed from their Aboriginal mothers in the reserves and were expected to be absorbed into Australian society. They were allowed to stay in welfare homes till they reached the age of eighteen and they were trained to do domestic and other menial jobs. After they were sent out of their homes, they suffered from loss of identity as they did not know who they were and having lost their

parents they had no sense of belonging. They were classified as half-whites, quadroons and octroons based on their complexion. When they entered the mainstream life they found themselves lost socially, emotionally and culturally. They belonged nowhere, and came to be known as the stolen generations. The exact date when the Australian governments adopted the policy of removing part-Aboriginal children from their mothers, parents, families and communities is not certain.

Terry McCarthy in his article “*Stolen Lives*” in Time dated September 4, 2000 fixes the date between 1910 and 1971. Some of these children were taken at birth, quite a few when they were two years of age and some in their early childhood. The babies and children thus taken away were sent either to special purpose institutions or to foster homes. Terry McCarthy cites a few cases to authenticate his story: “They came to take Archie Roach from his family when he was three years old. His aunt tried to scare the welfare officers away with a gun, but it wasn’t loaded. They took Marie Allen when she was seven. She cried all the way during the car ride from her home to Darwin [...]” (26). Archie Roach has a very vague memory of how in 1958, the welfare officers came to his house and took him and his brothers along with his three sisters telling his mother that they were going on a picnic. He never saw his mother again. Brought up in a Salvation Army orphanage in Melbourne, the young Archie was taught English and trained for a white foster home. He recalls being put through the ordeal of having his hair combed straight with the comb teeth breaking in his frizzy curls on each occasion. It was a futile and foolish attempt by the whites to make the natives of Australia look more like them. “They call Australia ‘a lucky country,’ ” says Roach. “But it is only lucky for some. I can hear the sound of moaning everywhere” (qtd. in McCarthy 27). It is roughly estimated that one out of every ten aboriginal children was removed from the family “under government policies aimed at providing a white education in order to ‘civilize’ them (McCarthy 26). In some cases mothers or families knew where their children had been taken and were able to maintain some continual contact with them. However, there were many tragic cases where the whereabouts of many children were not known to the parents. These children came to be known as the Stolen Generation. Terry McCarthy in a few telling words recaptures the miserable plight of the Stolen Generation: “Theirs is a story of tears, suffering, sexual abuse, lost identity, delinquency and mental anguish beyond the understanding of most Australians. It is a story of [...] misguided policies that had racist roots [...]” (McCarthy)

### **A brief analysis of Stolen**

*Stolen* tells the story of five Aboriginal children taken from their families and subjected to harrowing experiences. To begin with it has a very simple stage setting that consists of “five old iron institutional beds” belonging to the five main characters. The stage is at once “a children’s home, a prison cell, a mental institution and a girl’s bedroom” (1). In keeping with their lot in life, the bedspreads of four characters, with the exception of Anne, are drab. In the case of Anne, since her story takes place in her white adopted parent’s home, her bedspread is pretty and expensive. All the time pampered by her white foster parents, Anne has a room of her own. Belonging to different age groups, all the children are stolen and placed in the same children’s home, though not necessarily at the same time. For example, Shirley is a grandmother at the very beginning of the play while the other characters are younger than her. However, in many scenes they interact as though they are all together. This mixing of age groups and the mixing of time show how generations of children were stolen. There are abrupt shifts of time and there is no chronological order followed. In most of the early scenes the five characters appear as children, though in between Shirley becomes a grandmother. They were abused and beaten as children, and there is a constant endeavour and hope in them, to be united some day with their parents. All the scenes in the play are short. In spite of very short scenes and dialogues one is able to understand the plight of each child. Of the five actors in the London production of Stolen, three of them were themselves stolen giving their performances an authenticity and immediacy.

The five characters come on the stage, carrying suitcases; they peer around the set, and they talk about home, family – mainly their mothers. As explained in the text, “their voices are full of hope, but tinged with sadness” (1). And this is symbolically represented by Ruby’s words: “My mum’s coming for me.” The next scene, “Adult Flashes,” presents two different situations. Shirley is overjoyed at becoming a grandmother. She gets excited at the thought of holding the baby in her arms and says, “Kate, I held you once in my arms and I didn’t get to hold you for another twenty-five years.”(2) When Shirley reminisces her past Ruby’s sad cries for her mother are heard. Her utterances sum up the agony of every stolen child that has been removed from their mothers. Ruby’s journey through life is described by her two statements in the play: “I want my mummy...Where are you?” and “Don’t need no home of me own. Got enough to do.”(2) While “Where are you?” is a cry from the tortured soul of a child, “Don’t need no home of me own. Got enough to do” suggests the hopeless situation of a young woman who is totally shattered by life’s terrible experiences. Home, which is generally a

symbol of love and care, becomes a house of mental and physical torture for Ruby.

In the scene titled, “Ruby’s Descent Into Madness,” Ruby is tortured by the Authority Figures. The commands are very sharp, numerous, continuous and are given very fast. She is subjected to domestic violence. Ruby’s father and sister finally track her down in the hospital bed crying out in the dark “Where are you?” Her father informs her that “They made your mum sign a bit of paper... They said that she’d signed you up for adoption.” Ruby cries pathetically for her mother. Having lost both emotional and physical security, she descends into the world of insanity. She repeatedly utters only the following words, “Where are you” and “Got enough to do.”

The experience of the boys who were removed from their parents is also as disastrous as that of the girls. Sandy, who was born as a result of his Aboriginal mother being raped by a white man in the desert, has no fixed home to live. He moves from one place to another searching for his home. Sandy as a child is constantly pursued by the welfare because of his light skin. He seeks refuge in one relative’s house or the other. He is always running as he hears an urgent cry: “Run Sandy!” He and his mother always live in fear of being snatched away from his family. He says “always on the run. But I don’t want to go. I wanna to stay.”(4). But the welfare took him away from his family. The communal effort taken by his people to save him shows that how Aborigines had a sense of family and how women fought for their children. Sandy, holding a can of peas and looking at it with great contempt, directly talks to the audience and expresses his scorn and hatred for the welfare which cunningly made his family fall into its trap by finding a can of peas, past its expiry date in their house. And this served the reason for the welfare people to label the mother as “unfit” and take her children away from her. The devious measures that were used to remove the children are brought out in this scene.

Jimmy’s mother makes constant efforts to know about her son. She lives with the hope that her son lives a better life. She continuously searches for her son by making several phone calls and letter but in vain. The scene proves how family visits were discouraged and forbidden and how the letters never reached their destination. In the scene “What Do you Do?” the excitement that the son and the mother feel at the prospect of meeting each other is shown. Jimmy’s mother is worried that the gap of twenty-six years is a longtime and she asks herself whether she would be able to recognize her own son. The dialogue expresses their worries and they are an example of how the government’s decision of removing the

children has resulted in making the children a complete stranger to their mothers and their families. Finally, Jimmy's mother dies of heart attack even before Jimmy could turn up to meet her. When Jimmy returns to find his mother dead he expresses his infinite grief in the following words: "Oh, mum, if you'd held on a little longer" (32)

Only Anne, who is adopted by a white couple, enjoys comfort. She has got a room of her own with lace curtains. The white parents promise to give her a good education, a sense of security and a good upbringing. The white adoptive mother is, therefore, seen as the fitter of the two to take possession of the child and raise her. As a contrast to Anne's adoptive mother is Sandy's mother who is called an 'unfit' mother by the Welfare because she had in the cupboard a tin can of peas past its expiry date. When the white parents inform Anne that she is an adopted child and that her real mother is "an Aboriginal lady," and that she is dying and wants to see her, she becomes upset as they had not informed her that her real mother is "Alive! And she want's to see" her (13-14). Anne is shocked to discover her Aboriginal origins. She is caught between two different worlds. One is the white world of adoptive parents and the other is the Aboriginal world of real mother and Aboriginal relatives. She is numbed by the material comforts and conditioning by her white parents and she remains insensitive to her mother's last wishes. In the scene, "Am I Black Or White," Anne's mind is caught between the conflicting voices. The collective voices of her white family remind her of the privilege and the comfort she enjoys in the white family. The claims of the white family are counterbalanced by the voices of her indigenous family. The indigenous voices give her an identity and a sense of belonging, and advise her to "stick together" against the whites, who have raped their women, grabbed their land and stolen their children. The question, "Who are you?"(28-29) points at the identity, social, racial, cultural and spiritual problems. Anne is uncertain of where she belongs to.

For every Anne adopted to live in comfort, there are many other children who were trained only to perform domestic jobs. It is found from the dialogues that they are barred from becoming stockmen or flying planes. They have limited opportunities and they are trained to be cleaners or diggers and "earn much less" (18). The "Cleaning Routine," is sung to the tune of *We're Happy Little Vegemites* – an advertising ditty of the 1950's that represented the Australian children as healthy Vegemite-eaters looking forward to a prosperous future. In the context of the play, the song has ironic overtones as the children sing about the kind of future that awaits them. And the life in these homes is characterized by neglect and abuse.

### **Conclusion**

Stolen, presents to us the snapshots of the trials and tribulations of the five characters. The five children, Ruby, Jimmy, Shirley, Sandy and Anne represent thousands of half-white children who belong to the stolen generation. Anne who is fairer than the other children leads a comfortable life, while Ruby descends into madness, Jimmy commits suicide, Sandy loses hope of being able to accommodate with this world and returns to the desert he came from. Shirley is happy with her grand child. Stolen, in brief moving stories, makes a strong plea to preserve one's family, history and heritage. The play desires to tell the truth. The truth told by aborigines is different from the white version of history. Wilfred Harrison, the British playwright in the introduction to the play, Rescuers Speaking, quotes the words of R. G. Collingwood who says, "History is to tell man what man is by telling man what he has done" (15). Stolen reveals the hidden past of Stolen generations which was not disclosed before. The play serves as a kind of counter-history and challenge the official version of history created by the whites. *Stolen* and other Aboriginal plays, Leah Purcell's Box the Pony, Deborah Mailman's The 7 Stages of Grieving not only challenge and deconstruct the western notions of history but also literature, genre and canon and thus showing resistance to white dominance western And above all, the play aims to stir the conscience of White Australia. Hamlet's statement, "play is the thing to catch the conscience of the king," acquires immense meaning in the present plight of the stolen generation.

### **WORKS CONSULTED**

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