

---

**THE TRAUMA AND THE JOURNEY OF HEALING:  
A STUDY OF MARY TERSZAK'S AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY,  
ORPHANED BY THE COLOUR OF MY SKIN: A STOLEN GENERATION STORY**

**DR. P.RATHNA**

---

**Abstract:** The basic premise of this paper is to explicate the trauma endured by the people of the stolen generation as a result of the policies of the Colonial Government which were said to be introduced for the benefit of the fair – skinned Aboriginal children. The Aboriginal children were categorized into octoroons, quarter-caste and half-caste and accordingly they were alienated from their parents and their community. They were orphaned by the colour of their skin and were incarcerated in order to breed-out white culture and obliterate the trace of aboriginality. As a result of this regimented institutionalization, the half-caste children had to suffer severe psychological and emotional set back and identity crisis. They had to wage a life-long battle to attain emancipation. This paper also endeavors to expose the sincere attempts of the stolen generation writer Mary Terszak in using auto-ethnography as a vehicle in her journey of healing and healing process. Mary Terszak was not only able to identify her true ‘self’ but also pave the way for greater understanding by others, through her auto-ethnography, *Orphaned by the Colour of My Skin: A Stolen Generation Story*.

**Keywords:** Aborigines, Auto-ethnography, half-caste, stolen generation.

---

**Introduction:** *Orphaned by the Colour of My Skin: A Stolen Generation Story* is a heart-rending narrative of an Aboriginal woman Mary Terszak, whose life was “programmed” (OCMS vi) by the laws of the Colonial Government. In her auto-ethnography, Mary Terszak documents the first-hand experience of a stolen generation child, the horrors of the Government homes for the half-caste children, the sub-human conditions in which they had to grow, the alien culture and values that had been thrust upon them and the resultant mental trauma that she had to endure throughout her life. She chooses to write her story because; the “journaling” would give her an opportunity “to address the underlying issues of self-image, aggression and parenting. There is an absolute need for ‘this child’ to deal with the past”. (OCMS vi) Her auto-ethnography serves as an ideal vehicle in transcending her from being a depressed person to a confident one with “a stronger sense of self”. (OCMS vii)

The Aboriginal people, the first people of the land, were deprived of their basic human rights, dispossessed of their native land and doomed of to live a sub-human life due to the colonial invasion. Though the Colonial Government claimed that, the policies like The Aborigines Act (1905), The Native Administration Act (1936) and Natives (Citizenship Right) Act (1944) were instituted “in the best interests of the people” (qtd. OCMS 99), these in-fact, turned out to be pernicious in the lives of the Aboriginal people. Thousands and thousands of Aboriginal Children were forcibly removed from their parents and their family on the basis of their colour and were institutionalized. These children were indoctrinated

with white culture and values and were totally extricated from their own Aboriginal culture and people which ended up in what is called, “genetic genocide” (Muecke 116). Eventually, the people of Stolen Generation became the victims of deprivation without a sense of belonging, with the “Zebra striping of the mind” (qtd. OCMS 146), oscillating between white values and black feelings, desperately searching for an identity. The writing of her auto-ethnography – “stories about the self.... linked to others stories and cultural discourses” (OCMS 115) – enables the author to analyze her ‘self’, helps her break the shell of inferiority complex and empowers her to accept her true identify as an Aboriginal person.

The very title of this auto-ethnography, *Orphaned by the Colour of My Skin: A Stolen Generation Story* is revelatory; Mary Terszak was taken away from her family when she was just two years old, under the Native Administration act of 1936. She was ‘orphaned’ because of her fair skin in order to ‘breed-out’ as a white person in Sister Kate’s Children’s Home (SKCH) till she was twenty. In SKCH, the half-caste Aboriginal Children were made to believe that they had no parents and they had to be grateful to the government and the people who were kind enough to care for them. Mary Terszak reveals the childhood life of the stolen generation without any love, care or affection in the SKCH, thus: “To be forthright I think we were subjected to abuse, mental trauma and rejection in all ways, so this is the form of caring we were given (OCMS 3). The disgusting dunny cans used as toilets, the daily household chores like peeling of potatoes on a large scale before going to school, the painful tasks on washing day and ironing

day, the duty of polishing the church, the horror of walking barefoot without shoes in extreme heat and cold made life gruesome for them. Mary Terszak bitterly remembers how she was unaware of anything and unguided when she attained puberty at the age of ten. She says: "The memories of my childhood are empty, with stubborn scars embossed in my heart that cannot be erased." (OCMS 3). The cold and cruel treatment of the frequently changing house mothers had made an indelible trauma in the tender hearts of these children that it was difficult for them to get relieved even after they became adults.

As a result of her upbringing in such an inhumane condition, she grew up as a rebellious girl who was "always in trouble for fighting, ruining my clothes and misbehaving.... I guess nobody took time to find out why I acted the way I did." (OCMS 22). Throughout her narrative, the innate craving for somebody's care and love could be perceived. The misbehaving children were isolated and kept in the reformatory as a punitive measure. Mary Terszak was sent to the Home of the Good Shepherd at the age of 12, for the 'crime' of talking to her cousin and another boy after 7.30 p.m. At the reformatory, the children were treated like prisoners and the dormitory would be kept locked. This nightmarish experience had its pervasive influence throughout her life that she says: "this part of my life was really traumatic and it makes me feel bad. I often wonder how I am ever going to deal with these memories. When I think about this too much I become suicidal." (OCMS 26-27).

The children in the institution were made to work as domestic help in the white people's house. Mary Terszak documents the way the home kids were discriminated and ill treated by the white ladies, in those houses, thus: "I felt discriminated against purely because my skin was different to hers" (OCMS 31). Thus the stolen generation had to bear the brunt of their fair skin which was too white to mingle with their Aboriginal people and not too white to amalgamate with the white people. This developed an inferiority complex among them which prevented them from socialization and incapacitated them to take firm decisions in their life. Mary Terszak blames the institutionalization for her diffidence: "Actually it was very frightening. How could I converse with people when I felt so small in my mind? I only managed with small talk." (OCMS 33).

The incarceration and the indoctrination in the Home was chiefly reprehensible for her "dysfunctional relationship" (OCMS 47) with her children's father, John. Though they never got married, they lived together for twenty-two years. She was totally naïve and trusted John to the core. Despite, she could not get his love, affection and care that she had been longing to get since her childhood.

In addition, John started to have relationship with the baby sitter who was employed to look after their son Karl. During this period, Mary was physically and psychologically affected and started having panic attacks. The feeling of loneliness had created panic and a sense of insecurity that disrupted the normal course of living. Mary was always haunted with the complex that she had to be blamed for all the problems in her family life. She feels: "The relationship with my de-facto, John is indicative of my struggle for identity as an Aboriginal person; you feel inadequate to the 'white' person, who feels superior to you" (OCMS 138). The lack of maternal care and affection haunted her during her pregnancy and motherhood. She was so obsessed with family life that even a minor failure or inability ended up in guilty conscience which killed her peace of mind. In her words:

There were many tears throughout the parenting stages as I was learning how to be a mother.... The loneliness was frightening... This became a terrible battle in my role as a mother. My feelings were of guilt that I was feeling as a parent and that my responsibilities to the children were so important. (OCMS135)

The Stolen Generation people had to confront with the identity crisis right from their childhood. To cite Mary Terszak: "We were very confused as children, not knowing who we were. In the Home we were classified as white kids, but at the school we were 'niggers'. I could never work that one out." (OCMS13). The confusion aggravated when Mary Terszak came to know that she had an Aboriginal mother and family. She started her "journey of healing" (OCMS 4) at the age of 46. She was utterly shocked when she saw her mother for the first time in her life at the age of 47. "The disappointment of who my mum was shocked me, and I am not happy with the way it turned out, but that's how it is. I have been trying to accept that this is my mum but it is a real struggle to deal with this issue." (OCMS 9). The "enculturation as a white subject" and the indoctrination at the Home had made her think low of her own people. She called them 'those people', who she was told, were not nice. She states:

...we should it have anything to do with them. Its sad when you think, you were probably running from your own people, but didn't know. This sort of thing makes me mad, as I have had terrible problems dealing with my identity and wonder why on earth we had to be put through all that nonsense.(OCMS 35).

She was unable to 'fit' herself in her biological family after a long gap of 46 years. In these years, she had learned to live without them in her own style and vice versa. Though she had concern and respect for her

mother, she could not feel beyond that for her. She was so emotionally disturbed that she bursts: "I will never ever forgive the Government for policies and practices that denied me my mother's love." (OCMS 48). Even after twelve years of meeting her mother, she had still confusions about her identity. "I was still feeling the shame of being who I am and confused about who I belonged to." (OCMS 57). Her education and University exposure made her more and more determined to tackle her identity crisis and enabled her to be proud of her Aboriginal heritage, she declares:

I knew then that it was important for me to come to terms with my identity and to accept who I am. I cannot change who I am, but I can certainly achieve a level of knowledge and understanding of myself as an Aboriginal person. One day, hopefully, I can stand tall and be proud of my heritage. (OCMS 57).

Thus in this process of "Construction of Aboriginality", (qtd. Attwood. 302) she was trying to constitute her identity by negotiating with the past.

**Conclusion:** Mary Terszak's auto-ethnographical writing provides "first hand accounts of what really happened" (wheeler 237) to the Stolen Generation people. In this sense, it serves as one of the "history text books of Aboriginal Australia." (qtd. Wheeler 237). Thus Mary Terszak was empowered to reclaim her identity through her journalizing which served as a buffer in her healing process. As it was rightly told, "In the 'Construction of Aboriginality' we have been objects to be manipulated and used to further the aspirations of other people." (qtd. Clark 83). Mary Terszak's auto-ethnography, paves way for others with similar experience to attain emancipation.

### References:

1. Terszak, Mary. *Orphaned by the Colour of My Skin: A Stolen Generation Story*. Maleny: e-Content Management Pty Ltd., 2008, Referred to as OCMS.
2. Clark, Maureen. 'Mudrooroo and the Death of the mother' in *Home and Away*. Ed. Chandani Lokuge & Clive Probyn. *New literatures review*, 40 winter 2003.
3. Attwood, Bain. 'Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality in Australian Historical Studies'. Ed. Marian Aveling & Stuart Macinlyre. *University of Melbourne*. Vol. 25, Oct 1992, No. 99 pp-302-318.
4. Muecke, Stephen and Adam Shoemaker. *Aboriginal Australians: First nations of an Ancient Continent*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004.
5. Wheeler, Belinda. 'Helping Reshape Australia: Female Aboriginal Narratives.' in *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary Studies Reader*. Ed. Amit Sarwal, Reema Sarwal. New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2009 (pp-236-242).

\* \* \*

Dr.P.Rathna/ Associate Professor/  
Department of English/B.S.Abdur Rahman University/  
rathnasikamani@bsauniv.ac.in