



UNVEILING THE VOICES AND THE SILENCES OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN: A STUDY OF JACKIE HUGGINS' *SISTER GIRL*

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Abstract

We're women we fight for freedom/We're strong, we fight for peace
We struggle every day to prove our worth/We're women and we're proud to say...
With my sister beside me, I am strong, I am free
When she's with me...I am strong, I am free...

- Tiddas, 1993

Aboriginal women are strong and resilient, but they face the need to protect themselves emotionally and mentally against stereotypes, sexism, and racism in their everyday lives. While black feminist organizations in the 1970s pioneered an intersectional approach to oppression, the white feminist movement gained momentum and strength, leaving Aboriginal women to be discriminated against based on their race rather than their gender.

This paper aims to highlight the perspective of Aboriginal women as portrayed in their "voices and silences" and "contentment and sufferings." It explores how race and gender intersect and often collide, as narrated by Jackie Huggins in her book *Sister Girl*. It also emphasizes the importance of Aboriginal women uniting to challenge the dominance of white-led women's movements and establish their own individual identities and spaces.

Keywords: Women's Movement, Aboriginal Women, Perspective, Voices, Silence

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Introduction

The Women's Movement, encompassing the Women's Liberation Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Suffrage Movement, has achieved international recognition. The rich tapestry of feminist movements is delineated by three distinct "waves," each engrossed in multifaceted facets of feminine concerns. The first wave, spanning the 19th to the early 20th century, was predominantly preoccupied with the pivotal issue of female suffrage. The second wave, flourishing from the 1960s to the 1980s, confronted entrenched cultural and political inequities. In turn, the third wave, commencing in the 1990s and persisting into the present, not only addresses the enduring struggles but also offers a riposte to the perceived inadequacies of its predecessor. Concurrently, the second wave witnessed a surge in social activism championing the rights of marginalized cohorts, including immigrants of non-English-speaking backgrounds, indigenous populations, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community:

As the politics of discrimination were questioned, racism and patriarchy (male dominance in society) were identified as modes of exclusion of groups and individuals from citizenship, the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s gazed at the future full of optimism. (<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/2829>)

Though egalitarianism means treating everyone equally, means women and men also equal, but the reality is considerably diverse. Unfortunately, while redeeming women from the protectorate of the male dominating society, feminism have not liberated them from the authority and control of social expectations. Germaine Greer in her book *The Female Eunuch* (1970) argued that the "women do not realize how much men hate them and how much they are taught to hate themselves". (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GermaineGreer>)

Status of Women in the Patriarchal Society

If we study the western scriptures, we find that the women had no right to participate in the decision-making processes. According to the *Bible*, Eve was held responsible for the fall of man as she was easily tempted by Satan. William Shakespeare wrote in his play *Hamlet*, "Frailty thy name is woman." (*Hamlet* Act 1, Scene II). All these illustrations show that women always had a lower place in comparison to men. The women were totally dependent on men. They suffered suppression in the patriarchal society and were to mind the hearth and home and bearing and rearing of the children. Lord Alfred Tennyson in his poem mentions the status of women:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth,
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey... (*The Princess* 427-431)

In Australia, the same male hegemony continued. When Australia became the federation in 1901, the British Parliament passed an Act to grant independent status to Australia. Women also raised their voice to be represented in the Parliament. During the debate, some parliamentarians were not in favour of granting the right to vote to women. In 1902, Federal Parliament passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act, in which:

women were accused of being 'social despots' who advocated a society of polyandry, free love and lease-marriages. Furthermore, it was argued that the women's vote would 'sap the very foundation of a nation' and granting women suffrage would lower the status of women and give married men a double vote. One speaker even predicted that by passing measures of this kind we shall be training women to become masculine creatures, entirely disabling them to discharge the functions which properly belong to their sex. (*Australian Civilization* 126)

This evidently shows the male bias against women. However, women were allowed to participate in Australian political system on certain conditions. Like Britain, in Australia too, women were not given the equal wages for the same work, so some women activists started a movement in this direction.

Objective of Study

- To highlight the perspective of Aboriginal women reflected in their 'voices and silences' and 'contentment and sufferings'
- To emphasise how race and gender blend, tending to collide, as narrated by Jackie Huggins in *Sister Girl*.

Feminism in Australia

The feminist movement in Australia began after 1970s. They established the Women's Electoral Lobby which discussed the problems of the women and made the society aware of the importance of women being elected to the Parliament. The Lobby suggested the following major areas of reform: equal pay, equal employment opportunities, free contraception services, abortion on demand and free twenty-four hours child care which the Labour government, elected in 1972, accepted. It was the Whitlam Government which provided sufficient funds to meet the demands of these women but these funds were cut down after the dismissal of the government. Thus, it is evident that it was the

Whitlam Government which first time accepted the role of women in the decision-making process.

Perspective of Aboriginal Women (their voices and their silence; their contentment and their sufferings)

The Aboriginal women were thought to be too inferior to be included in the white women's affairs. They suffered doubly- first being women and secondly, being black. The white women, to reach to the present status, had to strive for hundreds of years but the aboriginal women enjoyed the freedom since the dream time. Before 1788, these women had been playing a very important role in the Aboriginal society. Unlike the western women, they were a part of the decision-making processes related to all walks of life. In ancient Australia, the logical achievements of Aboriginal women were recognised. They lead an intellectual life grounded with spiritual and philosophical reasoning which was handed down through the ages by an oral tradition of each generation of women.

Much of the knowledge related specifically to women was known as the women's business and likewise, there was men's business. Aboriginal women enjoyed all the economic independence. It was a hunter-gatherer society where women were mainly responsible for gathering fruits, berries, yams and other vegetables. This required an encyclopaedic knowledge of botany. So, taking into consideration the fact that it was a preliterate society, it is obvious that women in classical Aboriginal societies were constantly exercising their minds. Aboriginal women displayed a paramount role in the economic spectrum of Aboriginal life. However, there was an interdependence between men and women and their roles complemented each other's. It can be seen even today that Aboriginal men and women are working together for the welfare of the Aboriginal community as well as for the nation.

In ancient times, the Aboriginal women had their own place where they could freely do their activities related to them. It is said that there was women's business and men's business which they had to do separately without each other's interference. On the other hand, the western women never enjoyed such freedom in the society. They were dependent for everything on men. The Aboriginal women were privileged in several ways, while the western women were treated as lower species by the other half.

However, the position of the Aboriginal women underwent a drastic change after 1788, when under the leadership of Philip Sydney, the first English people arrived on the place called Botany Bay.

These were actually the convicts who were brought to settle the British colony in Australia. They had very few women with them who perhaps could not fulfil the sexual needs of all the convicts. Therefore, when these convicts saw aboriginal women in their natural form, they used their physical force to satisfy their desires. When the aboriginal men and women protested, they were shot and killed. Later on, all the settlers started treating these women as a commodity to fulfil their lust. They controlled them by force or by giving them tobacco and other eatables as they had already destroyed their source of food by occupying their hunting grounds. Thus, they made all Aborigines dependent on them. The women were called 'gins' or 'black velvet,' Thus the position of the Aboriginal women changed altogether. They were doubly made wretched as first they were Aborigines and second, they were women.

For the whites, the Aboriginal race was uncivilised/ uncultured and very inferior to them. As far as women were concerned, they never respected even women of their own community; therefore, it was futile to expect honourable treatment for the Aboriginal women. Thus, the Aboriginal women became the victim of male chauvinism as well as the male frustration. They had not experienced such inhumane treatment before the colonisation. They suffered not only physically but also mentally.

After 100 years of occupation some states tried to control Aborigines' affairs legally. First such Act was passed by Queensland Parliament in 1897. This Act empowered the minister through a system of police protectors and reserve superintendents, to control the movements of Aborigines, to enter employment contracts on their behalf, to hold any funds they might have and control their spending. The Act assigned aborigines an inferior status, and regarded them as slave labour without entitlement to the wages enjoyed by their white counterparts. The real significance of the Act was its denial in law of fundamental human rights. The Act was the foundation on which all future legislation including the current legislation is based.

Ruby de Stage remarked on the consequences of this Act:

Well the Act means that if you are sitting down minding your own business, a station manager can come up to you and say, "I want a couple of blackfellows. He could come from any station, any property that wanted a blackfella. They just come in and take him, no asking, just take... just like picking up a cat or a dog. (*Sister Girl* 5)

This Act, thus gave the right to the whites to exploit the Aborigines men and women the way they liked.

They did not consider them as human beings but a thing which can be kept wherever they liked to. The Aboriginal women were particularly exploited in many ways. They were treated worse than the slaves. Marnie Kennedy rightly comments about the Aborigines during the colonial rule:

When the whites had pounded every bit of our lifestyle, culture, language, and our identity out of us, which left us a mass of bruised and broken humanity, we were signed on and sent out to slave for the white man. (*Sister Girl* 6)

The Aboriginal women were employed as nurses, domestic servants or sometimes as stock women. Even though the whites committed all the atrocities, the Aboriginal women nursed the white children without any grudge, even nurturing them on their own milk. Both white men and women fully exploited these domestic servants the way they wanted. Many Aboriginal women believed that the white women were more cruel than the men; perhaps it was because they wanted to show their frustration and power on these poor women as they could not do it in their own society. Thus, the Aboriginal women even became victims of the callousness of white women. Agnes Williams who suffered such cruelty and carried the wound to her grave, rightly describes the heinous act of cruelty committed on her:

You see this scar on my face, well I reckon that it was done by her (the mistress) because we had to scrub the pots and pans. And you know those steel pads with the gold threads through them, well I went off cleaning and she came in while I was cleaning the silver and I wasn't doing it right according to her. So she got it and scrubbed my face and said: "Now this is the way you rub!" And I swear from that day till this, when I think about it, I wonder how this (scar) started. Of course, now I have to wear hats all the time and keep out of the sun. (*Sister Girl* 7)

Agnes Williams exposes in her interview, how shabbily the Aboriginal domestic servants were treated:

The servants were treated like shit. I had food, rations and bread and dripping. The children would "sneak" me some food at times. When we had dinner I was given scraps because according to them (the people I worked for), this what I was used to. I was there for four years. (*Sister Girl* 8)

The relationship between Aborigines and the whites has been of mixed feeling. In this relationship, the Aborigines had always been a poor partner. I think it will be apt to compare the Aborigines and the untouchables in India. The Aborigines were not allowed to eat food inside rather they were served the food on the segregated place. They were not allowed to touch the food as

it was thought that it will be contaminated. Ruby de Satge recalls her experience during the interview:

Only two interviewees were allowed to touch food, and this was only in relation to menial tasks like washing and peeling potatoes and other vegetables. They never ever handled meat or assisted with the making of food like bread and scones. This can only point to the paranoia whites had about Blacks "contaminating" their food. (*Sister Girl* 8)

The Aboriginal girls were not allowed to attend school. But they were inducted in the domestic service at the age of eight or ten. The girls of eight years were forced to milk the cow and to do all the menial sort of jobs.

Young Aboriginal women were taken from country reserves and missions; most of the interviewees went to white homes that wanted maids. White women considered such help essential to the running of a household, especially in the tropics.

In more isolated areas, Black women performed a wider range of jobs than their European counterparts: they mustered cattle, went droving, served as shepherds, worked at road and fence building and repairing. (*Sister Girl* 10)

The Aboriginal women worked like the men. On the other hand, the white women never did the hard work which perhaps denied them the equal rights and opportunities as the men. Seeing the Aboriginal women working, astonished the white women.

When they were equipped with trousers and boots, and with calico tied around their breasts and hair, they were a match for any man, except in the throwing of beasts. They worked as hard as their men and possibly harder, since men often passed over disagreeable jobs to the women and set back to watch them work. (*Sister Girl* 10)

According to the Master and Servant Act of 1845, the servants were not allowed to leave the place of service without the permission of the master. In the absence of the master, they were locked in the cell so that they could not run away. If somebody ran away from the work and caught by the police, he was severely beaten and punished. Thus, this Act made the Aborigines the slaves on their own land. Even they were not allowed to attend the funeral of their near and dear ones which was essential for Aborigines to remain present on such occasions. Thus, the whites did not show any respect to the Aboriginal customs.

Agnes Williams told in one of her interviews that white women used to be more dictatorial than the males. She observed that her female bosses were the worst masters and even more dictatorial than the males. She commented: "you know, the women

were worse than the men in the way in which they treated you.” (*Sister Girl* 14)

In fact, white racial imperialist ideology granted all white women, however, victimised by sexist oppression, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relation to Black men and Black women. In the colonial context, the Black man had virtually lost his bargaining powers and the coloniser assumed almost total control; hence, the interaction between white man and Black woman was one marked by compulsion. Often young Aboriginal women lived almost simultaneously with her Aboriginal husband and a white man who in practice had more rights over her than her husband because of the great discrepancy between them in status.

Conclusion

The patriarchal nature of contemporary society means that Aboriginal women were subject to further specific oppression by both Aboriginal and white men. They have been typecast as capable only of roles and deserving only of treatment deemed unworthy or undesirable for that more highly valued- a ‘commodity’. Male dominance was, and is, a major ingredient in the culture that Europeans brought with them to Australia. This message came through to Aboriginal people, directly or indirectly, in words and deeds.

Despite the fact that the Aboriginal women suffered a lot during the colonial rule but after 1967, they surpassed men in every sphere of life. There are more women writers than the Aboriginal men. The Aboriginal woman is a politician, activist, athlete and fighting for their rights.

It is also apparent that Aboriginal women were viewed as the ‘Other’ based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual less cerebral, more interesting perhaps but less intellectual, more passive less critical, more emotional less analytical, more exotic less articulate, more withdrawn less direct, more oppressed but less political.

Writers on the subject highlight the ignorance about Aboriginal people, even amongst liberal Australians. *Tiddas* by Anita Heiss reflects five Aboriginal women’s friendship and support to each other. On the contrary, Lisa Bellar’s words in *Feminist Review* (1984) confirm that white feminists cannot understand the complexities of oppression and the contexts of Black and Asian feminists. She adopts the voice of a white Australian feminist, well-meaning but misguided, and selfish in her assumptions of homogeneity and shared struggle:

I don’t even know if I’m capable
of understanding
Aborigines, in Victoria?

Aboriginal women here, I’ve never seen one,
and if I did, what would I say,
damned me if I’m going to feel guilty. (*Key
Conception Postcolonial Literature*. 80)

To conclude, it can be projected that mere alignment with a feminist standpoint falls short when engaging with the literary works of women hailing from diverse cultural milieus. The historical limitations of middle-class white feminism in comprehending the layered impact of race and class on the experiences of sexism and abuse endured by Black or Asian women are evident. In contrast, Aboriginal women exhibit a proactive stance in the realms of politics, society, and culture, displaying a keen awareness of their rights. The paradigm shifts as the “Other” now assumes agency, returning the gaze through their expressive writings. The formerly oppressed now assert their voices, penning narratives that challenge prevailing norms and power structures.

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