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Interrogating National Conscience: Blacks Versus Whites in Louis Nowra's Radiance

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The present paper analyses that how Radiance, an internationally acclaimed play by one of the famous Australian playwrights, Louis Nowra exposes the secret history of Australia's black and white sexual relationships and the fate of mixed-race individuals and their status in contemporary white Australia. The play, an emotional story of the inter-personal relationships of three half-caste sisters, Mae, Cressy, and Nona and their mother becomes a narrative of historical Aboriginal stories of dispossession and sexual exploitation. The aboriginal myths of the stolen children and the Home coming are dealt with in the story of the three sisters in the play. The paper will focus on the bonding of the three sisters after initial mistrust, lies and mysteries. It will also be analysed that how this intense family drama is suggestive of the reconciliation at the national level.

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The present paper analyses that how *Radiance*, an internationally acclaimed play by one of the famous Australian playwrights, Louis Nowra exposes the secret history of Australia's black and white sexual relationships and the fate of mixed-race individuals and their status in contemporary white Australia. The play, an emotional story of the inter-personal relationships of three half-caste sisters, Mae, Cressy, and Nona and their mother becomes a narrative of historical Aboriginal stories of dispossession and sexual exploitation. The aboriginal myths of the stolen children and the homecoming are dealt with in the story of the three sisters in the play. The paper will focus on the bonding of the three sisters after initial mistrust, lies and mysteries. It will also be analysed that how this intense family drama is suggestive of the reconciliation at the national level.

Radiance (1993) for which 'Australian Literature Society' awarded Louis Nowra its Gold Medal in 1994 was first performed at 'The Belvoir Street Theatre,' Sydney on 21 September 1993. It is a painful story of three half-sisters' homecoming, ironically after their mother's death, to heal their estrangement from one another and from their mother. Like most melodramas of family dynamics, it becomes the occasion for divulging secrets and probing personal, collective and cultural memories. Behind this story lie Australia's ghostly echoes of the disruption of several generations of the Aboriginal families through decades of government's policies of assimilation and protection. As Veronica Kelly observes:

Nowra's concern with the social lives of his characters is blended with the psychic territory of a culture, with the creation that is of images which reflect the collective unconscious of a people. In other words, they reflect in Nowra's own terms the true reflection of his country's psyche in fictional images. (Louis Nowra 92)

The play was premiered after the High Court's June 1992 'Mabo Decision' which gave the Indigenous,

the right to claim their land. The play is a portrait of a political climate in which the Aboriginal right to 'home' yet remains provisional and dependent on the fluctuating goodwill of the powerful whites.

Set in North Queensland, the play revolves around the catastrophic lives of three half-sisters— Mae, Cressy and Nona, who return to their childhood beachside home on the eve of their mother's funeral. Their ethnic origin is not clearly mentioned in the text of the play, but the theme of exploitation foregrounds it automatically. Though their mother is already deceased at the start of the play, she seems to appear as a character in the story through the reminiscing episodes narrated by her daughters. The retrospective drama reveals that their mother was sexually oppressed by a number of violent white boyfriends. One of them named Harry Wells, a local sugarcane plantation owner, whom she truly loved, gave her a house to live in. She was under the false impression that he would marry her, but he never did because she was a black woman. And when she died, he gave her daughters the notice of eviction from his house.

Mae and Cressy remember their painful past, when as minors they were separated from their mother. The white officials had forcibly shifted them to a remote religious institution to civilise and to teach them according to the norms and the codes of conduct of the whites. The long years of loneliness, sexual exploitation and separation from her daughters gradually afflicted her with premature senility and eventually madness.

Mae, the eldest sister reveals her illicit love affair with a married doctor in the hospital where she served as a nurse. She was jailed for stealing money from the nurses' fund to buy him gifts. She has become an alcoholic and a kleptomaniac for she is abandoned by everyone she loved and cared for. She tells her sisters that she was fed up with her mother refusing to tell her anything about her heritage or even if she loved her or not. Nona, the youngest sister, has been drifting from one boyfriend to the other. She is jobless, and she, therefore, engages in free sex with several men in exchange of money. She has turned into a nymphomaniac. She is also beaten up and imprisoned by her lovers. The most painful and shocking revelation comes from Cressy, the middle sister who at the age of twelve was violently raped by one of her mother's

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boyfriends. Scared of him, she kept quiet until she discovered she was pregnant. The result of this sexual abuse was Nona's birth. She could never come out of this trauma. She tried to forget this dreadful experience as well as her alienation from her mother and her daughter Nona, by taking up a career of an opera performer and a singer. She has become somnambulist due to stress and overwork. She hated her mother for not putting up a strong fight to rescue her and Mae from the clutches of the white authorities.

Having disclosed all the secrets and shared all the painful experiences, the trio build a deep sense of understanding and belongingness. To pay homage to their mother, they decide to scatter her ashes on the Nora Island, their ancestral home. Mae and Cressy set the house of Harry Wells on fire to avenge their mother's painful death. A strongly emotional mother-daughter bond binds the trio together.

Radiance, on the one hand, is seen as an exposure of the Australian secret history of black and white sexual relationships and the trauma of the stolen generations of the black children on the other. Its analysis of the moral dilemmas of the indigenes dispossessed, trying to regain a 'home' has a strong contemporary relevance.

The image of the ghost of the history— the haunted past, finds its parallel in the spirit of the women's mother that haunts the house until it is burnt down to exorcise the heart-piercing memories of rape, lies and mysteries. As the play opens, Mae, the eldest daughter tries to get rid of these painful memories by burning the chair on which her mother used to sit. She hysterically talks to her dead mother:

MAE: Are you still there? You are, aren't you? I'll have to burn down this place to get rid of you. Ghosts burn, did you know that? And you'll burn. It'll all burn down, even ghosts can't live in a place that doesn't exist any more. (1)

The physically absent mother through her emotional recollection of her daughters, remains strongly present as a colonised survivor in the play. She is also depicted as a symbol of the trio's spiritual motherland. She becomes a living force of transformation of their lives and the creation of their new identities. This enigmatic mother figure, an emotional force-field around which her daughters revolve, enthuses in them the spirit of survival. In dramatic terms, her silences function as a metaphor for that historical void which Nowra sees at the centre of white Australian history: "a kind of black hole of mystified good and evil meanings which her daughters must now decode if they are to find some sort of enabling script for their own survival," informs Veronica Kelly (Theatre of Nowra 97).

The play is also seen as an allegory of the nation. Rosalba Clemente, the director of the first production of the play, refers to it as Nowra's

interrogation of the national conscience and its relation to Australia's repressed traumatic past and present scenario:

On our own island European culture has never really come to terms with its past so the past can never really be finished with. It continues to glide alongside us— an ever present ghost. This outpost of European society still has much to come to terms with particularly in the face of a now ever darkening Europe. (Radiance ii)

The issues of the Aboriginals appear more explicitly in Radiance. At a broader level, the repressed family histories are seen as parallels of the repressed histories of the nation, and these draw attention to their traumatic and psycho-social effects on the Aboriginals in the contemporary period.

The trio's return to their familial 'home' echoes the Aboriginal myth of homecoming. The legal judgement about the persistence of the native title in 1992 signalled the commencement, rather than the achievement of the homecoming journey. Radiance portrays the characters in it as the strong fighters to secure their 'home'— the house that belonged to their mother. Cressy has been straining herself to financially support Mae to maintain their isolated ramshackle house wherewith lie their roots. Mae tells Cressy: ". . . The day I arrived some couple walked through the house taking pictures. They thought it was derelict. I threw them out: [Rueful smile] Yelling at them 'It's my home! Get out. It's my home!'" (14)

Nona loves to be home and she says, "Home is where the heart is" (18). The sisters' homecoming gives them a sense of togetherness. However, they discover the truth that the house they were living in never belonged to the family, neither emotionally nor legally. It had instead been loaned to their mother by Harry Wells till he could receive her sexual favours. They have now been given the court's notice of eviction. The three are pushed to psycho-social marginality. They have been doubly exiled, first displaced from their homeland and now evicted from their mother's house. It projects the painful history of Aboriginal dispossession and also its legacy in the contemporary multicultural nation.

Through this play, Nowra returns to the unfinished post-colonial moment, where the Aboriginal people still strive for the heritage which is theirs by right of origin and long occupation, but which remains, as Veronica Kelly says "unattainable, blocked by legal machinery and by obscure or disavowed white paternity" (Theatre of Nowra 98).

The greatest assault on the Indigenous culture and family life was the forced separation of the indigenous children from their families. The deliberate displacement of mixed-blood children, the half-breeds, as they are called, from their families had been the chief concern of State and Federal Governments. The main objective was to make their Aboriginal culture extinct

and their unique identity lost as *The Australian* (2007) reported in the article, "The Culture of Denial" (Web 2010). This occurred in every Australian state from the late 1800s until the practice was officially ended in 1969. During this time as many as 100,000 children were separated from their families. These children became known as the 'stolen' children.

These forced separations were the deliberate policies of 'assimilation.' This act of assimilation was, however, a cunning device to cut indigenous children off from their culture, to make them think and act as 'white.' The chief aim was to establish eugenecism, the whites' policy of the racial purity. Most of the children separated from their families grew up knowing very little about their Aboriginal homes, families, culture and heritage. Mae and Cressy are depicted as the poor cases of the stolen children in the play. Mae tells Cressy, "I came here because I wanted to know where I came from, how I ended up the way I did . . . how did my great great grandparents get thrown off the island I wanted to know about my father. My relatives. About her" (43). She cries out as her identity is lost and asks Cressy, "You don't know. Who are you? Who is me? [Thumping her chest] Who is me? (43). Cressy also cries in pain: "Not good enough, Nono. Not good enough. Not to have a father and your mother not wanting to see you" (26-27).

The removed Aboriginal children were maltreated in the foster homes or other institutions. They were frequently punished if caught speaking in indigenous dialects. The boys were raised as agricultural labourers and the girls as domestic servants. The physical infrastructure of such homes and institutions was often very poor and resources were insufficient to improve them or to keep the children adequately sheltered, clothed and fed. Cressy and Mae had to go through the same traumatic experience in the convent suffering "in the steam and stink of the laundry, with its smell of starch and dirty clothes in hell" (27).

Nowra through *Radiance* theatrically foregrounds the questions of racial hybridity and sexual oppression. The three fatherless women in the play are fragments, indicating the shattering impact of sexual colonisation. Their scattering away from their family is theatrically emphasised in a black slapstick comedy scene (I, iii) in the play, in which the three women try to transfer their mother's ashes to a tin box, "*Radiance Liquorice Nougat*." They struggle and MAE whips the box of ashes from NONA and in so doing sprays the ashes on she and her sisters and the floor. The three women are wide eyed in astonishment. Silence The three are now laughing, almost hysterically (30). The ashes are scattered and the trio's strained efforts of collecting them back end up with the possession of a dusty mixture, this mixture pointing towards the interbred identity of the three.

The interbred individuals are even today treated as 'outcasts' by the government in Australia. Nowra raises his voice against the contemporary eugenic policy of the government. In an interview with Veronica Kelly, he told, "this nineteenth-century fantasy about pure blood is such a shocking fantasy, because, yes, it's still with us. A stinking political correctness" (89). He suggests that this purist version of Australian identity that marginalises the minority groups must definitely be challenged. Nowra believes that "eventually all the human races should interbreed," informs Margaret Throsby, who interviewed him in 1997 (Web. 2010).

Dramatising a shattered family's haunting by historical secrets and shame, *Radiance* explores the theme of sexual exploitation of powerless black women. This theme is staged through a series of narratives which reveal the painful mysteries. A black mother of part-white children, doubly vulnerable on racial and sexual grounds, had little chance. Cressy and Mae, though placed in institutions, at least knew who their mother was and where they were born, but she is their only kin and her own family connections are a mystery, perhaps as much to herself as to her daughters. Nona tells Mae and Cressy, "Mum said our relatives were scattered across the whole country" (10).

The three women not knowing anything about their fathers, whom they call "aliens" (19), are full of bitterness. Their bitter revelations and resentments represent larger issues concerning two hundred years of repression of the black voices and black histories. The light is also thrown on the contemporary urban social conditions of the Aboriginal women who have children of unknown paternity, and these children are separated from their families in their childhoods. This particularly hints at the sexual vulnerability of the Aboriginal women.

Radiance through its emotional family drama exhibits Australia's haunted past of dismantled Aboriginal families through decades of government's harsh policies. "Who is she?" is the refrain of the dead mother's song which becomes an interrogation of the state policies which led to Aborigines' dislocated history and disrupted identity:

She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is the belle of Dublin city,
She is courting one, two, three,
Please won't you tell me, who is she? (54)

Painful mysteries surround the paternity of the three women in the play but it is the semiotic bond with their mother that rebinds them. They were all she had. Her haunting presence functions as the centre from which their memories radiate. The tin box which once stored '*Radiance Liquorice Nougat*,' their mother's favourite sweet, and which gives the play its title, is "treated as a sacred object throughout the play," observes Paul Makeham (190). This box now contains their mother's ashes which reminds them of her oppression at the hands of the whites. The trio intend to

take her ashes 'home' to Nora Island, their ancestral home: "We're scattered, like Mum, like her mum. But we'll take her home. And we'll have to do that for each other" (50). Though their identities are scattered, yet they are emotionally bonded with each other and with their mother symbolising the strong ties of the Aboriginal kinship. This kinship bond between them is the only uniting force worth sticking to. They set Harry Well's house on fire to avenge their mother's exploitation by him and the whole white paternity.

This act of revenge becomes an act of redemption for the three women in the play. As Leslie Rees puts, "In Nowra's theatre, the act of killing or any kind of destruction functions as a device of exorcising pain, loss and errors committed in the past. It paves the way for new future forgetting the anathemic relationships" (297). It enacts a ritual cleansing for Cressy as it was this dirty house where her child-like innocence was brutally destroyed by rape. For Mae, the radiating fire from the house burns the painful memories of lies, mysteries and betrayals with it. In a larger political sense, this act might be understood as the Aborigines' fight against their oppression by the whites. Paul Makeham reviews this act as "Nowra's preoccupation with fire's capacity to cauterise the colonial wound" (192).

With the radiating fire, the three women beam with joy and sing the loud version of 'The Belle of Dublin City.' They dance hysterically to this song, the unifying family ritual—the only thing they learnt from their mother. They laugh. Silence. They look at one another. The song has brought them together (50). They try to emerge as survivors of a painfully fragmented hybrid history. Mae says of Nona, "She's a born survivor. All us three are." "Sort of," Cressy equivocally replies (54). As the play ends, the trio try to reconstruct their identities from the hybrid heritage of pain, guilt and mysteries.

Through the painful story of the Aboriginal family, *Radiance* on the one hand exposes the cruel and injustice Australian race relations prevalent in contemporary society, and on the other focuses on the need to retrieve the past—both at personal and national level for an integrated self and integrated nation through understanding, bonding and faith. The evil legacies of the past need to be evaded to pave the future path of comfortable survival. Like the united family in the play, the nation must unite by letting the bitterness, illusions and misconceptions go.

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