

DENIGRATING OVERTONE OF THE ABORIGINES

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Abstract:

*During the colonization and after, the Australian society has been dominated by Europeans where the natives are always oppressed and their rights are denied. The natives very often have to face injustice, dishonour and discrimination. In this paper Julie Janson, an aboriginal playwright articulates the agony of the indigenous people. Through her Aboriginal characters she portrays their unheard cry to be treated as dignified human beings with equal opportunities. She reveals that the Aborigines are 'silenced' and their rights are violated. *Gunjies* (1996) is based on the real experiences of many Aborigines who died of police custody. The play revolves around the story of a social activist and a law student, Steve Allunga who is always aware of the rights and law of the government. He voices for the Aborigines but he was strangled to death. His cry for right is unheard.*

Keywords: *Denigrate, Aborigines, Violation, Injustice.*

Human rights are the rights inherent to all human beings irrespective of place of residence, sex, nationality or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language or any other status. Marginalised social groups like Native Canadians, Black Americans, Aborigines in Australia and Tribals and Dalits in India are vulnerable to human rights violation as they are oppressed by the dominant groups and deprived of their rights. Writers representing such marginalised groups portray circumstances where human rights are violated and they gradually empower their characters to assert their rights.

The condition of the Native women is more miserable when compared to men. The violence done against women is never publicly acknowledged. Young women are often the victims of rape. Lutz reveals the desire of the Indigenous in the following way:

Indigenous peoples want to enjoy the same rights as all other people without discrimination of any kind. They want to be regarded by everyone as full and equal human beings. They want to be protected from genocide, arbitrary execution, torture, forced relocation or assimilation and they want to enjoy their rights to freedom of expression, association and religion. They want to be treated equally with respect to opportunities for education, health care, work and other basic needs. (Lutz)

In that way, Julie Janson, an Australian Aboriginal woman writer explores the experiences of the indigenous people. *Gunjies* (1996) revolves around the story of a social activist and a law student, Steve Allunga who is always aware of the rights and law of the government and his lady love, Arana. He voices for the Aborigines but he was strangled to death. His cry for right is unheard.

The play also articulates the agony of the Aboriginal people through the character June, a Koori woman, Arana's aunt. She reveals that the Aborigines are 'silenced' and their rights are violated. She is a victim of racial discrimination, police harassment and sexual anguish.

The title of the play *Gunjies* has its significance. 'Gunjies' is an aboriginal term used by the Koori people to denote the police. Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man*, vividly explains the meaning of the word Gunjies: “. . . Gunjie is a kuri word . . . means policeman. We say gunjie, it means white copper animal.

Down there at Victoria, now, they got this different word, they say he a berrimaja, a white copper a berrimana . . ." (13). These policemen are disparagingly called "Gunjies." *Gunjies* uncovers many occasions in which the rights of the Aborigines are violated when they experience police harassment. Blackett, a white police sergeant, who is about fifty years and Johnson, a White police constable around twenty-five years who represent the colonial authority are unduly harsh towards Aboriginal people. An Aboriginal family representing the Koori community lives within the jurisdiction of the police station and they are often prone to such harassments. The family consists of Arana, the central character, Barney, her father, Merle, her mother and Jack, her uncle. Arana's lover Steve frequently visits their family.

The police break in the houses of the Aborigines without proper warrants. The play presents a scene where the police break Barney's house one night. When Merle and Arana are sleeping, the policemen, Blackett and Johnson enter their house by force without any proper warrant. This police intrusion reveals that the Aborigines are denied the privacy of domestic life. According to Nissim Ezekiel, "Home is where we have to gather peace" (251). This peaceful place has been disturbed by the inhuman attitude of the police. The right of the Aborigines to experience this peace and privacy of home has been denied to them. This inhuman act of the police affects the psyche of the young woman Arana who suffers from a nightmare. Both the police harassment and the consequent nightmares disturb their peaceful sleep.

Janson pictures the violation of human rights through the arrest scene of June. June is arrested and the charge against her is that she has involved in the riot of Steven Allunga's death. She tells the audience that in the riot she has found a shower of blood and the white fellows do not stop their shooting. It is very difficult for the Aborigines to forget the past injustice done to them. This is reflected in June's words:

JUNE. I felt a power in me that made me snap I was runnin' down the street . . . A shower of blood! All the Koories shoutin' so angry. Voice gone with beggin' that mob to go home before they all got arrested or someone killed by a gun from some ute goin' by . . . I'll never forget what whites have done to our people, it was all there in his face. (147)

The police use powerful weapons like gun to oppress the Aborigines and hunt the people like animals.

Arana also wants to join him and fight for the rights of their people. Being afraid of the police harassment, Arana's father prevents her and her mother warns Arana: "You gotta be careful, dort. Once they see you at those activist meetings - they'll photograph you and you'll get a file and you're marked for life" (99). Janson exposes the anguish of criminalization of the natives. The White people are always aware of the blacks and their deeds. There is no one to protect the natives against the oppression. The natives are always afraid of the white men. The brutal acts of the settlers towards the natives are numerous and also they try to criminalize the entire community. The police intrusion in the lives of the natives throughout the nation is violent. The violent nature of the police is revealed through the words that they use towards the Aborigines. This is portrayed through the character Blackett, the Sergeant. He gets information about the activist Steve through Detective Brown. The Sergeant thinks that Steve, who espouses the cause of the Blacks is capable of troubling the white administration. Hence he attempts to degrade him using derogatory words like, "Cheeky bastard" (108), "shit" (102), "black bastard" (102), "black boy" (134) and "you little shit" (138).

The policemen often misuse their power over the powerless and arrest the natives for trivial reasons. Steve has been arrested for he talked to a White girl. Steve calls the policemen 'hawks', for they are always cunning to look for the natives and arrest them for trivial matters.

The surprising representation of the Aborigines in jails and the number of deaths in police custody reveal the miseries experienced by them. Steve, a social activist, always cares for the rights of the Aborigines and defends the people belonging to his Aboriginal community. He is angry with policeman for arresting the Koories and killing them for the trivial reason of damaging some plantations can be seen in

the following dialogue:

STEVE. Where's it comin' from then?

ARANA. I'ear'd that they knock it off from some big plantations up in the hills. Everyone reckons that the gungies are runnin' it. *Everyone goes quiet.*] (120)

Steve cannot be cowed down by the threats. He is defiant and bluntly tells his people how they are degraded and prejudiced. His speech often provokes the police and they often charge him as an activist.

The unequal representation of the Aborigines in the jails and the number of deaths in police custody is another conflict between human rights activists and the White policemen. In *Gunjies*, Arana's family moves to Wilga, a country town for a football 'knockout' and a debutante ball. After the ball Arana and Steve walk by the river bank exchanging their views on the plight of the Aborigines. After their discussion, both of them wait for a taxi to reach their place. Unfortunately the police officers stop their car and approach them and identify Steve.

[BLACKETT *grabs* STEVE *by the shirt*]

BLACKETT. Steven what?

STEVE. Steven Allunga, why don't you piss off?

BLACKETT. Right you're under arrest for offensive language. Put the cuffs on him, Constable. (134)

Johnson takes him to his custody, for the charge of using offensive language. The aboriginals use offensive language to protect themselves. They have no other way to resist:

STEVE. You can't arrest me!

ARANA. What's he done?

[*She attempts to pull STEVE away.*]

BLACKETT. Cuff him!

STEVE. You've got nothin' on me.

[*He deflects JOHNSON's attempt to handcuff him.*] (134)

Arana watches Steve while he is being taken away. He resists non-violently, stiffing his body as the police force him to go into the car. The ordeal suffered by Arana and Steve, is a common occurrence in Australia. The Aborigines can be arrested or kept in police lockup on flimsy grounds or without any reason whatsoever. Blackett is very happy that he has caught a notorious activist who has been mentioned by Detective Brown.

Police atrocities thus pave way for the emergence of emancipatory characters like Steve and Arana. Such characters do so little for their community before that they have been strangled through the colonial power. The police give them physical and emotional torture but they cannot completely extinguish their fiery spirit of emancipation. The Aboriginal people who are locked up in jails are threatened like convicts. Veronica Brady points out that:

Aboriginal people have little access to systems of power. White peoples' interest continue to be preferred to those of Aborigines In the area of Justice, the report of the Royal Commission into the Aboriginal deaths in custody suggests that this kind of ill-treatment is not yet over. Aboriginal people throughout Australia are twenty-seven times more likely to find themselves in police custody than other Australians. (57)

Early next morning, in the police station, Steve is alone, stripped down to his underwear and socks. He sits on a chair with his hands tied behind him. Thus Janson picturises the hardships faced by Steve. Yet again she emphasizes how on trivial or foisted charges, Aborigines could be harassed and ill-treated. A report by NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council found in 1998 states: "Aborigines constituted a fifth of all those prosecuted for trivial offences such as offensive language and conduct charges" (Ray Jackson).

Steve protests against injustice and says:

STEVE: It's oppression, two hundred years of shootin' us down like dogs. We don't have to put up with this treatment. (136)

Janson insists that the experience of Steve is not a new thing but it is an old practice of victimisation. The words of Steve represent the history of colonization that extends around two hundred years. For the natives, it was a time of mourning and a great loss. Mundrooroo Narojin criticizes the White settlement of Australia as "a two hundred year long funeral service" (2). This echoes in Steve's words, "It's oppression, two hundred years of shootin' us down like dogs" (136). Steve does not lose hope and again talks back to the Sergeant and Blackett and asserts their (aboriginal) identity as Koories and he blames him as he says:

STEVE. You can't get away with it. You think Koories are gunna lay down and die, let your shit all over us. Let you murder us like you did that fella from the mission.

BLACKETT. I said, shut up! (136-37)

The play gives a genuine picture of the custodial death of Steve that is when the climax of the human rights violation occurs. The irate Johnson pushes Steve towards the cell. Though Steve resists violently, Blackett punches him on his face. Johnson stamps on his knees. Then he gets up and savagely knees Steve in the chest. Steve collapses on the floor. Blackett pulls him up and drags him towards the cell. Again Steve begs to make a call to the liaison officer. He also insists that he will fight against the cause for the injustice made to him. The following conversation is an evidence to it:

STEVE. Let me go, I'll fight you every inch of the way on this! Don't put me in a cell. Please! I want to call the liaison officer. I know my rights. (137)

The White policemen take advantage of the Aborigine, Steve and torture him in their custody. As a result of their inhuman punishment Steve dies in custody.

Thus Janson depicts the cruelties faced by the natives at the police station. The next day when Blackett and Johnson are in the desk, they are in a hurry to prepare a false statement about Steve's death. They prepare the false statement to deceive anyone who dares to question the custodial death. Steve is a victim of the police atrocities and racial hatred which the Aborigines have borne for ages. Here, the policemen have misused their powers and play with the lives of the Aboriginal people.

A similar situation occurs in Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man* too. The play portrays the fate of an Aborigine, all because of a White soldier, civilian and Priest. Here Merritt presents a happy three member family - an Aborigine, a woman and a boy. While they play and dance happily, the soldier, the civilian and the priest, the Whites enter. The priest offers *The Bible* in order to harass the Aboriginal family. But the three refuse to get *The Bible* from the priest. The apathy and scorn with which the Aborigines are held up to ridicule is presented in the following dialogue:

PRIEST. Very backward indeed. Unfriendly even.

SOLDIER. Aye, Very.

PRIEST. Yes, Very, Very Very

[*They regard the ABORIGINES thoughtfully. The ABORIGINES regard them fearfully.*]

SOLDIER. Savage ingrate

PRIEST. Alas, Yes. Too ignorant for light, too old for change . . .

SOLDIER. Too stupid for words. (6-7)

Then the soldier takes away his rifle and gives it to the priest. He blesses it and hands over back to the soldier who casually shoots the man like an animal. The woman and the boy are grief stricken but there is not any sign of remorse in the Priest, Civilian and the Soldier.

Custodial death is a common occurrence in the life of the Aborigines. However, there are significant differences between patterns of death amongst Aboriginal people when compared to non-

Aboriginal people. Approximately two-third of the aboriginal deaths was in police custody. The high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody in 1987 was noted. The number of deaths was more than twice as high as the average number for the preceding seven years, and this pattern has been found for both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal deaths in custody. A disproportionate number of Australians who died in Jail, from suicide or other causes are Aboriginals. Aboriginals have been endlessly harassed by the government officials and the police. For minor offenses indigenous men, women and children are often placed in missions, police lockups, juvenile detention centres of the prisons.

Johnson creates a report stating that Steve has committed suicide. If he reveals the truth he will be punished. Hence, he puts the blame on Steve and the custodial death is reported as suicidal attempt. The very next morning Arana's family meets the policemen. In spite of repeated enquiries they do not get any answer regarding Steve. Neither do they allow them to see Steve. Unable to tolerate any longer, Barney threatens Blackett and makes a riot against the policemen. Arana comes to know that Steve has been tortured and killed by the policemen. Steve's sister who goes to see his body finds that his face is smashed and his teeth are knocked out. On seeing the body of Steve, badly inflicted with wounds, she screams. Jack and Barney begin to yell, smashing glasses and throwing stones. The Koori people come to the station as "dark shadows" (143). They begin to attack the hostel and Jack asks the policemen to come out.

The Aboriginal people show their resistance through the riot and the police use their weapons to oppress them. After the riot, they come back to June's house. Merle makes the traumatized Arana sleep by giving her a sleeping tablet. Barney laments: "Look around Australia, all you see is Aboriginal ghosts. Wish they'd bring back tribal law. I'd spear the gunji and put him on the ant's nest" (146). His words show the desire of the Aborigines to have their age old practice of Tribal law not tampered by Colonialism.

Gunjies is one of the significant protest works which reflects the "Aboriginal crisis through Aboriginal eyes" (Wilde 9). Whether Arana should seek revenge or reconciliation is a matter of guess. There is also an implied awareness that not all the Aborigines are evil and there are also compassionate natives. One such compassionate native is Janson's Arana. She wants to take revenge against the White for the murder of Steve, and she has successfully done. But when she hears the yelling sound of the Sergeant for help, she walks towards the river to help him.

Arana's walking towards the river compels one to recall Derek Walcott's line "All in compassion ends" (197). Anger and the feeling of revenge are diminished by the power of compassion. The Aborigines, in the White terminology the barbarians, are more humane when compared to the civilized white humanized human beings. Even though the rights of the Aborigines are denied, they survive with self-determination and regain the strength from within to face the challenges in store for them.

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