

Trauma of the Colonised: A Reading of Jack Davies' *No Sugar*

Dr. Colette Sharmila

Assistant Professor in English, PG & Research Department of English
V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi – 2, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Tirunelveli, Mail Id: colettesharmila@gmail.com

Paper received: 03-09-2024 **Accepted:** 20-10-2024 **Published:** 29-11-2024

Abstract

Of the numerous problems caused to the colonised people by colonisation, trauma was a significant and non-ignorable one. Colonisation caused immense pain and trauma to the colonized people and this was widely visible in almost all colonised countries. Yet, despite being a common and frequently evidenced aspect, trauma caused by colonisation has been less documented and less studied. The trauma of colonisation in the colonised people was caused by various forms of marginalisation, oppression and alienation that were completely new to the indigenous populations. This alien experience engendered in the natives, various psychological problems such as inferiority complex, resentment, anger, frustration and trauma. As these various acts of inferiorisation were new to the natives till the arrival of Europeans, they were certainly the result of colonization. The colonisers first came as brave adventurers or daring traders and then became settlers, and later turned intruders and finally, colonisers. Therefore, the trauma of colonization was also new all the aborigines, as individuals and as social groups. Jack Davis, an Aborigine dramatist, has dealt with this trauma in his plays. This paper attempts to analyse this trauma in Jack Davis' *No Sugar*.

Keywords: trauma colonization, Aborigine, pain, ration

Of the numerous problems caused to the colonised people by colonisation, trauma was a significant and non-ignorable one. Colonisation caused immense pain and trauma to the colonized people and this was widely visible in almost all colonised countries. Yet, despite being a common and frequently evidenced aspect, trauma of colonisation has been less documented and less studied. The trauma of colonisation in the colonised people was caused by various forms of marginalisation, oppression and alienation that were completely new to the indigenous populations. This alien experience engendered in the natives various

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.577

psychological problems such as inferiority complex, resentment, anger, frustration and trauma. As these various acts of inferiorisation were new to the natives till the arrival of Europeans, they were certainly the result of colonization. The colonisers first came as brave adventurers or daring traders and then became settlers, and later turned intruders and finally, colonisers. Therefore, the trauma of colonization was also new all the aborigines, as individuals and as social groups.

Trauma is a deeply felt emotional state that overwhelms an individual and affects their usual way of living and thinking. The dictionary of American Psychological Association defines and explains trauma as,

an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Long term reactions include unpredictable emotions, painful nostalgia, strained relationships, and insomnia. (“Trauma”)

The dictionary also tells that trauma can also affect the ways in which a body responds to traumatic stimuli. Trauma takes control of a person’s normal behaviour and warps their lives and their responses to live situations.

However, the trauma caused by colonization is much different from the trauma caused by other factors. Sigmund Freud’s view of trauma is apt in a colonial contest. Freud considered trauma as a deep, incurable, psychological fracture with a person’s past. Freud avers that traumatic experiences defy conscious or logical processing and embed themselves at the unconscious level, and they are resurrected as painful memories or nightmares. This idea of the “fracture with the past” (12), helps a postcolonial understanding of a colonial experience. Freud’s idea of a “protective shield” (13), i.e. the native social structure and the individual’s bond with that structure, is overwhelmed by new forms of marginalization. This underscores how trauma can destabilize the psyche, leading to long-term psychological conflict in the natives.

Colonisation resulted in immense trauma in the colonized people. Yin Paradies in “Colonisation, Racism and Indigenous Health” has documented that among the colonised populations the indigenous populations of Australia and New Zealand - the Aborigines - were the worst affected and impacted and traumatised. Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1925 – 1961) by his profession as a trained psychiatrist and his position as a postcolonial

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.577

theorist, offers a clear and through explanation of colonial trauma. He combines the colonial socio-political situation with psychiatry and reveals how colonisation had a traumatic effect on the natives. He argues that the gap between lived experience of the natives in a colonial situation and their past caused the trauma. The attempts of the colonial rule to enforce colonial logics silenced the voices of marginal populations. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon says that the native's life that was once "culturally and thereby socio-situationally determined" (124) in now, after colonisation, dictated by an oppressive system, resulting in an unimaginable trauma. Fanon, as a trained psychologist calls this trauma in medical terms "psychopathology" (145). Nonetheless, trauma and psychopathology are almost the same.

Frantz Fanon argues that the natives, in Australia the Aborigines, were never accepted into the White community; despite the erasure of their native identities, the Europeans always treated them as inferiors. This attitude was exercised by the Whites to keep the natives or the Aborigines trapped in "an inferior status within a colonial order" (45). He says that "A normal Negro child, having grown up in a normal Negro family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact of the white world" (99) because of the marginalisation it is subjected to. In a white society, such a hostile attitude on the part of the Whites to equate the natives with savagery and evil causes immense pain and trauma to the natives. This is valid in the case of the Aborigines too. This liminal status of the Aborigine caused a trauma that was almost impossible to overcome.

Jack Davis (1917 – 2000), an Aborigine 'poet, playwright and Aborigine rights' activist has written eight plays – all on Aborigine themes. His works deal with the problems caused by colonization and the victimization of the Aborigines in the hands of the colonisers. One of the major themes of Jack Davis' play *No Sugar* is the trauma caused by colonization. Hence, Jack Davis' plays can be called what Ted Morrissey calls "trauma texts" (44). The play *No Sugar* is certainly one such text. It documents the trauma caused to the Aborigines when they are subjected to various forms of inferiorisation, oppression and privation. First the Millimurra-Munday family, comprising Gran Munday, her children Jimmy Munday, Milly Millimurra, her husband Sam Millimurra, and their children Joe, Cissie and David are uprooted from their native land in Northam Government Well Aboriginal Reserve and are held in the Moore River Native Settlement, near Mogumber. Their life in the Native Settlement was miserable: they were not free, had no decent employment and their food and housing were squalid and horrifying. Life in the Aborigine reservations was traumatic as the

living conditions in the reservations were not only different from their traditional life style, but were also dehumanising.

In *No Sugar* Jack Davies reveals how life in the reserves were traumatic for the Aborigines. Before their lands were colonized and they were subordinated, the Aborigines lived a life that was in harmony with nature. M. Durie reveals that “Before colonization, the Aboriginal peoples lived an ecological lifestyle, which involved high levels of physical activity and sophisticated agricultural (and management, plant farming, and animal husbandry) and aquacultural practices” (27). He also informs that the food consumed varied with the seasonal availability; they were high in energy content and rich in nutrients. As they ate meat regularly, the food was rich in protein, micronutrients, and polyunsaturated fats and very low in sugar and fat. Therefore, A. Lee concludes that “There is little evidence suggesting that major health issues such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease were prevalent before colonization while maintaining traditional diets” (34). One of the significant food practices among the Aborigines was their concern for the weak and vulnerable people: food was distributed according to the Aborigine tradition and was based on social ethics. Here, the elders and children were served first. As A. Lee argues, “Food represented more than nutrition, with collection of food being an important social activity, an opportunity to pass down cultural behaviour and social behaviour from elders to younger people” (37). So, food was one of the ways in which the Aborigines enacted their social responsibility and that food is an important thing that demonstrated their care for and connect with their society. However, all these traditional values were ruined when the colonisers took over the land and the Aborigine communities and their ways of living.

Conditions in the Aborigine reservations worsened when Australia was hit by the Great Recession of 1929 -1939 after the First World War. The Great Depression hit Australia also inevitably. This in turn hit the rations supplied to the Aborigine held in the reservations. In *No Sugar*, Chief Protector Neville writes a letter to the British minister who was in charge of British colonies. In the letter he suggests further reduction of rations:

My dear Minister, herewith the information requested. I know I don't need to remind your good self of the extreme budgetary constraints under which this Department operates. Item one: the Native weekly ration currently costs this Department two shillings and four pence per week. Perhaps this bears

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.577

comparison with the sustenance paid to Whites unemployed which I believe is seven shillings per week". (20)

But the Chief Protector tells the Aborigines in the Government Well Aboriginal Reserve that the British government is working very hard to supply the needs of the Aborigines in the reserves:

NEVILLE: Goodness me, the West's scraping the barrel for a bit of good news. Results of the 'Most Economical Housewife Contest' . . . What next? (19).

Here, Neville is telling the Aborigines that Britain was working hard to feed the Aborigines, in spite of its own economic problems back at home. But, the Aborigines, whose lives were already miserable, faced only more privation and pain. It is seen that the Chief Protector in his letter is suggesting to the minister that the unemployment subsidy given to young Whites can be met by further reduction in the rations supplied to the Aborigines:

NEVILLE: The Item two: off the cuff, the proposed budget cut of three thousand one hundred and thirty-four pounds could be met by discontinuing the supply of meat in Native rations. Soap was discontinued this financial year. (20 – 21).

Jack Davis himself was well acquainted with the horrifying conditions in the reserves because he as an Aborigine grew up in the Yarloop and the Moore River Native Settlement, and later was sent to the Brookton Aboriginal Reserve where he lived for several years. So Jack Davies' representation of the Aborigines' trauma is authentic.

In *No Sugar* the Millimurra-Munday family had to live on rationed food that was hardly adequate to feed the entire family well. They had to survive on highly limited government rations, which were further reduced, citing the war as a reason: as reduced meat they've caught themselves, and a little money that Sam, Jimmy, and Joe earn doing odd jobs around town. The Millimurra-Mundays have to deal with various problems, including diminishing ration allotments, Jimmy's imprisonment for public drunkenness, and Cissie's poor health. All these caused immense trauma in them. Yet, they could survive only because of their family bonding, which is a basic Aborigine trait. Though they struggle to stay alive, each member of the Millimurra-Munday family takes care of the other members of the family, and makes numerous sacrifices for each other.

The play ends ambiguously: while Gran Munday, Sam, his wife Milly and their children find it futile to return to their native land, and choose to continue her miserable life in the reservation, Joe and his wife Mary decide to return to their ancestral lands in Northam. The probable outcome of their return is left in suspense. This return, however, in spite of its uncertainty filled future, can be the only escape from the pain and trauma of colonial suppression. Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* has argued that the returning of the victims of colonisation to their social sphere calls for a long drawn and creative process of decolonization and returning to the past. Only by reconstructing this history and uncovering its consequences can the natives comprehend the impact of colonization and give individuals the tools to come to terms with their past. Joe and Mary are engaged in this exercise. As Shelby Steele in *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race* says,

Trauma is both a wound and a promise - a scar that makes a person stronger, though the process of healing is rarely straightforward. It challenges individuals to confront their vulnerabilities and find meaning within their pain. For communities and societies, trauma can also act as a catalyst for collective reflection and transformation, though such processes require sustained effort and honesty. (84).

Steele sees trauma as both an individual and collective experience. By describing it as “a wound and a promise,” he argues that while trauma can cause despair and frustration, it can also lead the person to resilience and freedom. Steele’s insistence on perseverance leading to confidence is particularly relevant to social traumas, such as those caused by inferiorisation and humiliation. Here the return to the past can initiate a healing by acknowledging one’s roots, however, badly it has been projected. Joe and Mary, by returning to their native land are reclaiming their past and their confidence. This will enable them to come to terms with their trauma.

The African Marxist postcolonial theorist Amlicar Cabral argues that an internal defiance, a conscious psychological return to the painful past, a search for roots, a refusal to surrender to the hold of the coloniser and a defiance of the coloniser’s control over the minds of the colonised together form a good way out of the trauma. This conscious attempt decolonises the mind and relieves the trauma. Amlicar Cabral’s solution to the traumatic effects of colonialism and the psychological impact of Eurocentric extractivism that accompanies colonisation fits the Australian Aborigine situation also. As the key ingredient

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.577

in the solution to the pain of trauma, decolonising the mind and consciously reliving the pain impart significance to the experience. This helps the victims of colonisation to come to terms with the trauma.

Works Cited

- Cabral, Amilcar. "The Weapon of Theory." *Unity and Struggle*. University of South Africa, 2004. pp. 39–40.
- Durie, Mason. "An Australian Indigenous Model of Health Promotion". *Proceedings of the 18th World Conference on Health Promotion and Health Education*. Melbourne, 2004. pp. 26 – 30.
- Morrissey, Ted. *Trauma Theory as a Method for Understanding Literary Texts: The Psychological Basis of Postmodern Hermeneutics*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2016.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2004.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2009.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey, Liveright, 2020.
- Lee, Amanda. "The Transition of Australian Aboriginal Diet and Nutritional Health." *Metabolic consequences of changing dietary patterns*. 1996. pp. 1-52.
- Paradies, Yin. "Colonisation, Racism and Indigenous Health." *Journal of Population Research*, vol. 33, 2016, pp. 83–96.
- Steele, Shelby. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, Harper Perennial, 1991, pp. 84.
- "Trauma." American Psychological Association (APA),
<https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>
Accessed 20 December 2024.