



# Breaking the Fetters and Taking Charge: A Reading of an Aboriginal Woman's Memoir

Aditya Singh Dulta

Assistant Professor of English, Govt. College, Sanjauli, District Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India  
[adityaworldorg@gmail.com](mailto:adityaworldorg@gmail.com)

Received: 23 Mar 2022; Received in revised form: 18 April 2022; Accepted: 23 April 2022; Available online: 30 April 2022  
©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *Twenty-first century Australia is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic democracy, a developed and prosperous nation. However, it's history of 'settler colonialism' has its own shades of grey. The original inhabitants of Australia were the Aboriginals who resided in the island territory for about more than 40,000 years till 1788, that is, about 234 years from now. However, their share in the total population of Australia has dwindled to about 2.5%. Even today, they are at the fringes of society, both economically and politically. The mainstream discourse, which is white, male and written from a Euro-centric perspective, brushes under the carpet such inconvenient facts. The dominant narrative presents a much distorted picture of Australian history and culture, eulogizing the colonizers and demonizing the Aboriginals as barbarous heathens who were in dire need of being reformed, civilized, cultured and Christianized. Few Aboriginals, who have managed to ascend the economic ladder take this responsibility of speaking up and revealing their community's story, history, culture and what was and is being done to them.*

*The present paper is a reading of one such memoir by an Aboriginal woman, Am I Black Enough for You? (2012) by Anita Heiss. What is unique about Heiss is that unlike majority of her people, she is educated, urban, economically independent, an academic and an established author. Her predicament is also unique, which is, the accusation from her white peers of false claims to Aboriginal heritage for upward mobility by grabbing government doles for the minorities. The paper is a humble attempt to contest the pervasive cultural stereotype which portrays the Aboriginal race as primitive, backward, illiterate, unhygienic, savage and doomed to extinction. The paper attempts to analyze the historical, social and economic reasons for their post-1788 disadvantageous position. The paper also strives to emphasize that with support from the government and the people, the same Aboriginal race could once again be an engine for nation-building. Moreover, besides demolishing the lies propagated by the colonizers and presenting their own truth, authors like Heiss reach out to the larger community beyond the individual self.*

**Keywords**— *Aboriginal, memoir, settler-colonialism, cultural stereotype.*

Twenty-first century Australia is a developed and prosperous nation, a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic democracy. Historically, it is a 'settler-colony' of the British. The original inhabitants of Australia were the numerous Aboriginal tribes who resided in the island territory for about more than 40,000 years till 1788, that is, about 234 years from now. However, their share in the total population of Australia has now dwindled to about 2.5%

and they are at the fringes of society, both economically and politically. The mainstream discourse, which is white, male and written from a Euro-centric perspective, brushes under the carpet such inconvenient facts. The dominant narrative presents a much-distorted picture of Australian history and culture, eulogizing the colonizers and demonizing the Aboriginals as barbarous heathens who

were in dire need of being reformed, civilized, cultured and Christianized.

The present paper is a reading of one such Aboriginal woman's memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012) by Anita Heiss. What is unique about Anita Heiss is that unlike majority of her people, she is educated, urban, economically independent, an academic and an established author. That is why, it is all the more incumbent upon her to speak up and reveal her community's story, history, culture and what was and is being done to them. Her predicament is also unique, which is, the accusation from her white peers of false claims to Aboriginal heritage for upward mobility by grabbing government doles for the minorities.

Anita Heiss' memoir opens with an outrageous article by Andrew Bolt published in the mainstream media, in which he questions the author's Aboriginal lineage owing to her light skin and accusing people like her of securing professional and monetary advancement by falsely claiming to be Aboriginal. Anita's mother too was declared part-Aboriginal in the article. Anita's grandmother belonged to the stolen generations and her mother was born on a government mission. From here stems Anita's desire to use her position for the betterment of Aboriginal people through self-expression and self-representation to demolish the stereotype of Aboriginals being only backward, uneducated, unhygienic and savage, etc. The general belief was that they could never be professionals, tech-savvy and smart. During her school years, racial profiling and name calling were common and only a selected Australian history was taught, the ugly part being brushed under the carpet. She not only moves from the individual to the collective but also from the local to the universal as she talks about and compares Australian Aboriginals with the indigenous people of Canada, New Zealand and America, their common issues being oppression, segregation, racism, dispossession of traditional land and an undocumented history of people of colour. Her personal experience of working with children in different schools made her believe that if nurtured properly since childhood, black children too could become responsible and productive adults like their white counterparts. As a woman, she also contests various stereotypes associated with black women, such as being rustic, physically strong, pastoral, submissive, rude, poor, illiterate and married with lots of children.

The colonial powers laid the foundation to the colonizing juggernaut by creating false psychological fetters in the form of 'myths' about the inferiority of the non-white race across the globe, including the indigenous people of Australia, the Aboriginals. The doctrine of 'post

colonialism' serves as a fitting tool through which the onerous task of exposing and contesting the lies manufactured and propagated by the colonizers is undertaken. Myth, within a culture, refers to any story or plot, whether true or invented. M H Abrams defines it as follows:

It is a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (170-172)

One such myth is the myth of peaceful settlement, especially in the context of British settlement in Australia. The official history maintains that the founding fathers of the British penal settlement found the land 'terra nullius' (Bourke and Cox 59), that is, desert and uninhabited or at the most inhabited by a few nomadic tribes always on the move without any settled laws, customs or real ownership of the land. Aboriginal authors like Anita Heiss take this responsibility upon themselves to break the fetters of false discourse foisted upon the world by the colonizers to shirk off the guilt of colonization and massacres. They reveal the truth behind England's nefarious designs to occupy foreign territories. They say that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the socio-economic situation was anything but rosy. Poverty forced thousands to migrate to cities such as London in search for livelihood. The limited infrastructure of the cities was stretched beyond limit. Unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, violence, alcoholism and abuse were rampant. The have-nots started exhibiting "traits of brutality, mistrust, misogyny and social alienation, born of broken families and dismal social and economic conditions" (Broome 21). As the jails in Britain were already bursting at the seams, the British government had been transporting these anti-social elements to its New England colonies in America as 'indentured labour' since 1717. However, the growing resentment and rebellion there which was soon to acquire the shape of 'American Revolution' discouraged Britain to send any more convicts there. Therefore, the government began to look for a new penal settlement and a Pacific base outside England. It was then that the government pondered over the new land discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770 who christened it for Britain as New South Wales. Thereafter, under the charge of officers and marines, these convicts were transported to Australia.

The invading contingent hoisted the Union Jack on the foreign land on 26 January 1788. The colonizers

came here to settle down and hence Australia like the United States and South Africa came to be known as a 'settler colony' unlike other colonies such as India where the main motive was to loot the resources of the land and fill the coffers of the mother country. The colonizers brazenly exploited the land and labour to advance their selfish empire-building design at the cost of the sweat and blood of the natives. The Aboriginals put up their best resistance against the subjugation but could not match up to the economically, politically and technologically superior English invaders. As a result, thousands got slaughtered in the large-scale killings. Their trauma became unbearable owing to further loss of hope and will due to the displacement and dispossession of the land which had been central to the existence of the native tribes. They considered the natives half-humans or half-animals, therefore they "kept Aboriginals inferior, aberrant, inept, oppressed, depressed, suppressed both in image and in reality" (Tatz 75).

Women were exploited brazenly and the children produced from such forced unions being light in skin colour were called as 'mixed-bloods' or 'half-castes'. They became part of the 'Stolen Generations' later. These 'half-castes' or light skinned indigenous children —the "honorary whites" (Bourke 41) through blood quantum—the children of exploited indigenous women, were allowed to be abducted by the State to assimilate them into the white culture. The callous colonizers tore apart these children from their mothers' breasts, segregated and confined them to orphanages, to be raised to work on the fields and as domestic helps in the English houses, apart from being mentally, emotionally, psychologically, physically and sexually exploited. It was believed by the racist ruling elites that the mixed-blood children had much more chances of becoming an asset to the Australian nation and economy. Many of these children, ranging from being a few months old to teenagers, could never see their families or loved ones again after their removal. The scars lasted for a whole life time. Moreover, they faced existential dilemma or a crisis of identity as they had been brought up in institutions disparaging Aboriginals and Aboriginality. Anita Heiss in her memoir refers to a government report entitled *Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report* (1997) which acknowledges the removal of indigenous children from their families. It was this enquiry which recommended that 26 May be observed each year as 'National Sorry Day' "to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects...as a mark of respect and remembrance" (195).

Another cleverly crafted psychological fetter on the basis of which the colonizers attempted to legitimize their appropriation of foreign land, is the 'myth of

civilizing and assimilating' the barbarous heathens of the third-world nations. However, in the name of civilizing, the colonizers brutalized, enslaved, subjugated and exploited the natives.

In *Am I Black Enough for You?* Anita Heiss poignantly remarks that she always wondered why her maternal grandmother, Amy Josephine Talence, looked so solemn and grave in her picture hung on the wall. The documents she managed to access from the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs revealed that her grandmother and her four-year old sister Florence were removed from their family by the Aboriginals' Protection Board in 1910. Such children were deprived of filial love, blood relations, home, language, culture, tradition, heritage, roots and identity. These children virtually grew up without any roots to gain strength from, without any support to fall back on, without any family member to share their pain with, without any concrete memory of the past to draw solace from, and without any hope or help to make their present and future life any better. Heiss estimates the number of such 'stolen generations' to be around 15-20,000 in New South Wales alone (31). It is not that the Aboriginals did not put up resistance to save their children from being kidnapped, but their strength was no match to the State's fury. Carmel Bird exposes the real motive of the Welfare Department behind institutionalizing the native children:

By seizing children of mixed descent, institutionalizing them, teaching them to despise their Aboriginal inheritance and sending them out to work as station hands or domestic servants, authorities wanted to sever the cultural connection between the children of mixed descent and their aboriginal families and communities and to prepare them for a place in the lower strata of European society. (144)

The 'myth of successful assimilation' of the Aboriginals in the dominant white culture is contested and exposed time and again by activist authors like Anita Heiss. The truth being, that the Aboriginals are still on the fringes of Australian society, everyday facing racial bias, discrimination and inequality. Lending support to the argument, Jenny Burden says:

Feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and helplessness of life empty of meaning and purpose resulted in wide spread apathy among the Aboriginal population. All too often escape into alcoholic oblivion became a panacea for the psychological pain experienced by vast number of Aboriginal people. It remains so for many to this day. (196)

In the twentieth century, the entrenched racism manifested itself implicitly rather than explicitly. Heiss recounts an experience from her past when an Anglo housewife as well as her neighbour in Matraville advised her to identify herself as anything but Aboriginal. Heiss says:

But in telling me I was stupid for identifying as Aboriginal, and therefore opening myself up to be discriminated against (when I could just as easily *choose to be Spanish* instead), demonstrated how she understood the way racism worked in Australia. (9)

Heiss worked as a baby-sitter for this woman for a brief period and it seems that Heiss' light colour was an added qualification for the job. Heiss says that it was the white community she moved around with, who made her realize her aboriginality. Since her early childhood days, she had experienced discrimination vis-à-vis the white children. Equality and assimilation, therefore, were plain myths in an environment that left her psyche scarred. That was the time when she realized it for the very first time that she was different. Name-calling was rampant and Anita Heiss, a five-year old, would often be reduced to tears. She found herself increasingly becoming sensitive to taunts of "...abo, boong and coon" (88).

Further rejecting the claims of successful assimilation and acceptance of Aboriginals in the mainstream by the vast majority, Heiss reveals that only selected history of Australia was taught in educational institutions, largely leaving out the Aboriginal heritage. Children would learn about the World Wars and the Cold War and the like, but invasion of pre-contact Australia and the genocide were never taught.

Anita Heiss shares a personal anecdote which had a very profound influence on her psyche. At the time of the 1967 referendum, her father, and her elder sister who was just two years old at that time, were counted on the census but her mother was not. Her father and sister were granted citizenship in 1968, the year Anita Heiss was born. A deeply moved Heiss says that though her father was an Austrian immigrant, he and his daughter were counted and granted citizenship because of their 'fair' complexion. However, her mother, who had her roots in Australia since generations, was not counted because she was coloured and Aboriginal. To add to the misery and pain, citizens were encouraged to enumerate and register their dogs and cattle and they were indeed counted, but the Aboriginals were not and that too in the land of their forefathers. Heiss says it pricked her hard that "the government considered animals more valuable than my mum" (100-1).

Heiss in her story consistently keeps shattering the myth of assimilation and exposing rampant racism. She moves from the individual to the collective and from the local to the universal in solidarity with indigenous tribes across the globe who have been at the receiving end and alienated in the land of their ancestors. Heiss says that even in the developed west, governments divided indigenous people on the lines of "a caste system defined by blood quantum (half-caste, quarter-caste, full-blood, quadroon)" (123). These derogatory and divisive terms were used "as a means of watering down and eliminating Aboriginal peoples in Australia.... Slangs like 'abo, nigger, half-caste, part' et cetera are exclusively reserved for "the other" (123). They forget that all white Australians have migrated from England, Ireland, France, Germany and other countries. But they would never call themselves as "'half-caste Australian' or 'Part-Australian'" (124). Heiss rightly questions that when white Australians claim for themselves one identity with mixed heritages, then why the Aboriginals are not allowed that one identity, that is, Australian with mixed heritage. In other words, Anita Heiss would want to be recognised as Austrian-Australian Aboriginal just as Barack Obama is seen as a proud African-American.

Anita Heiss is of the opinion that it is education and the right upbringing given by parents, teachers and society which produces generations who can be an asset to their nation. If this essential constituent of a healthy society is lacking, then children, whether white or black, are an antithesis to the concept of demographic dividend. She forms this opinion on the basis of her interaction with students across races as a touring Aboriginal writer. She observes that white students and teachers could be ill-mannered and racist as well without any gender and cultural sensitivity.

Heiss quotes the 1951 Aboriginal Assimilation Policy of the government, which was later amended in 1965 at the Native Welfare Conference:

The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single community-enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities and influenced by the same hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (158)

Howsoever noble and idealistic this declaration of intent may appear, it smacks of rigidity, conformity, superiority and passive acceptance of the majority community's ways at the cost of losing one's own distinct identity, whether linguistic or cultural. The lofty promises were never delivered as the indigenous Aboriginal

community was never treated as equal partners for cohabitation and nation-building. Heiss rightly says, "We don't appear on the national identity radar as anything other than a problem to be solved or an exotic fantasy, and we have no defined role in the Australian political infrastructure" (160).

Referring to Bolt's defamatory article against her, Heiss says that Aboriginality and culture are not just skin deep. Moreover, the dominant and majority community should not nurse grudges against the long marginalized and backward, if, owing to their sheer hard work they ascended the ladder educationally, socially and economically. Referring to a lot of nasty comments and trolls online to Bolt's article, Heiss says that those accusing her of using her Aboriginality for "a leg-up" (79) should remember that being a doctorate and an established writer, she was well qualified for whatever jobs she had taken up till date. Besides, she has done many voluntary and unpaid jobs, as in Koori radio, for the sole aim of service to her community. The most ironic line in Bolt's article demeaning Heiss and other Aboriginals was, "I think it is sad if we harp on about differences and rights based on trivial inflections of race" (79). Bolt and his ilk realize this basic as well as supreme truth only out of jealousy after seeing Aboriginals like Heiss secure respectable positions professionally. Had they realized and accepted it much earlier, there would have been no reason for Bolt's heartburn and he would not have regurgitated his grudge against her in the form of a condescending article. And what more could Aboriginals ask for? That is precisely what they had been saying since years that they are not children of a lesser God. Further expressing her angst and exposing the prevalent hypocrisy, Heiss says when people like Bolt see her prosper professionally, economically and socially, they compare her to other whites and call her a 'fair aborigine'. However, when it is not about jobs or positions but about equality and respect, she is reduced to just being Aboriginal. She questions as to why the whites do not always accept her as one of their own in all situations and circumstances if she is so fair? She says very emphatically that it is time the people of her country realized that Aboriginals could be "educated, professional, savvy and smart" (80). In her own words, "I feel we are often still regarded by many in the broader community (propelled by the media) as only being *really* Aboriginal, or *really* Black, if we are desert-dwellers, poor, uneducated, at risk and dark-skinned" (81).

To conclude, renowned theorists like Ashcroft et al correctly say about deliberately constructed myths and their impact on history and society, "The unfortunate truth seems to be that however discredited the pseudo-scientific basis of racism may be, its power to form discriminations

remains potent" (211). However, as we have seen in the life-narratives by Aboriginal women such as Anita Heiss, 'race' could be employed as a tool of resistant identity too, as also in the Negritude movement in Africa, which was a proud assertion of black identity and it was employed as a counterforce to the denigrating effects of racial bias on colonized black peoples.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed., Cengage Learning, 2015.
- [2] Ashcroft, Bill, et al., editors. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2009.
- [3] ---, editors. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2006.
- [4] Bennet, Bruce, and Jennifer Strauss, editors. *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [5] Bird, Carmel, editor. *The Stolen Children: their stories*. Random House Australia, 1998.
- [6] Bourke, Colin, et al., editors. *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., University of Queensland Press, 1994.
- [7] Bourke, Colin, and Helen Cox. "Two Laws: One Land." Colin Bourke et al., pp. 56-76.
- [8] Broome, Richard. *Aboriginal Australians: A History since 1788*. Allen & Unwin, 2010.
- [9] Burden, Jenny. "Health: An Holistic Approach." Colin Bourke et al., pp. 189-218.
- [10] Dulta, Aditya Singh. *Aboriginal Women's Voices: Repression, Resistance and Testimony in Three Autobiographies*. 2012. Himachal Pradesh U, M.Phil. dissertation.
- [11] Groome, Howard. "Education: The Search for Relevance." Colin Bourke et al., pp. 168-188.
- [12] Hemming, Steve. "Changing History: New Images of Aboriginal History." Colin Bourke et al., pp. 16-37.
- [13] Krupat, Arnold. "Post colonialism, Ideology and Native American Literature." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 176-179.
- [14] Tatz, Colin. "Aboriginality as Civilization." *Images of Australia: An Introductory Reader in Australian Studies*, edited by Gillian Whitlock and David Carter, University of Queensland Press, 1992, pp. 75-93.
- [15] Webby, Elizabeth, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.