

ABORIGINALS' RACIAL INEQUALITY AND LINGUISTIC DISPLACEMENT IN THE POEM "THEY ASK ME: 'WHO AM I?'"

Rasha Gazzaz^[1], Tariq Elyas^[2]

^[1] rgazzaz@kau.edu.sa

^{[1], [2]} King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract: Through a close reading of "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" poem, this paper examines the themes of racial inequality and linguistic displacement of the oppressed race of the Australian Aboriginals, specifically the lost generation as voiced in the poem. Adopting the theoretical frameworks of Kroskrity that focus on the linguistic racism and white supremacy, the authors analytically aim to explore covert linguistic racism through the poem's narrative. In addition, this paper conveys the representation of race and colonial powers by conveying the exclusion and discrimination the Aborigines faced since the 18th century. It highlights the 'White Supremacy' (concerning politics, culture, and linguistics) and the desperate measures the white settlement took to complete the erasure of the linguistic and culture of the minority group of the Aboriginal people. The poem highlights the unspoken voices of the lost generation through the poet's heartfelt agony with his encounter with the history of Aboriginals and their racial and linguistic oppression.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginals, Racial Inequality, Linguistic Displacement, Stolen Generation, White Supremacy.

INTRODUCTION

As a tribute to Australia's "Stolen Generation," the Aboriginals, in 2010, the poem "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" is created. Unaware of who they were then, the poem writer felt that his lack of knowledge of the culturally and linguistically distinct group represented people's ignorance of this ethnically rich indigenous race that had been oppressed, overlooked, and discriminated against since their colonization by the Brits in the 18th century. Wanting to translate this unawareness and unfamiliarity with a race that had its distinct history and culture, the poem writer composed a poem that is disruptive of the generic conventions of academic writing to mirror and represent the unfortunate reality, injustices, and un-settlement of the Aboriginals' historical journey in Australia.

At heart, the poem addresses the eponymous existentialist question of the Aboriginals' racial self-identity and their connection to their native homeland.

Interplaying between distance and silence, it laments the way Aboriginals are excluded not only from their native land but from the world; thus, pushing readers to understand the unknowable. Written in the first person, the poem represents the voice of a forgotten and overpowered marginalized community that is obscured by how the world views it. The verses also assert the existence of racism in Australia as echoed in words such as "scar," "tears," "oppressed," "crushing," and "scream," randomly placed throughout the poem. This racial discrimination, driven by the continuous effects of colonialism by the 'White' British Empire, feeds into perceiving Aboriginals as inferiors and "Others".

Composed of quasi-stanzaic lines, stanzas of uneven length and irregular patterns of fluid form, the poem offers a lengthy reply to the simple yet profound question, "Who am I?" The answer reveals "unspoken truths," "untold stories," and an "unwritten history" of a race that has been disregarded and forced into

subjugation due to despotic regimes of oppression by the white colonizers' idealized racial and linguistic claimed superiority.

Stanzas one to four provide a solid response using the anaphoric phrase, "I am," by which the poet asserts his identity. His affirmation that he belongs to a distinct group that is culturally and historically rich is evident in verses such as "I am the land of unspoken truth" and "I am the sky of untold stories." These lines convey his conscious self-reflection. However, in stanzas five and six, the poet uses negation to indicate problematic issues related to his identity. He utilizes the negative "not" to indicate the false identity attributed to and forced upon the Aboriginals by the world. In stanza seven, the dismayed speaker provocatively challenges his readers with a rhetorical question, "You ask me: 'Who am I?'" one which he is adamant about answering in the following stanza. In stanza eight, his final reply takes a more assertive stance, signifying the Aboriginals' confidence, strength, and perseverance. The ending stanza emphasizes their complex and rich linguistic repertoire, as represented in the last word of the poem, "Kanyini," which represents responsibility and unconditional love for all creations.

Reading this poem, one would assume that the writer is related in some way to the Aboriginals. However, it is essential to note that the poem is not written from a subjective point of view because the writer is foreign to the Aboriginals. Instead, during his stay in Australia, he identified with the Aboriginal culture, and his poem is a result of his need to reinscribe the harm the Aboriginals faced and still are facing. The writer was influenced by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, a political activist, artist, and educator who supported Aboriginal rights in Australia in the 1960s. One of Noonuccal's poems, "A Song of Hope" (1960), inspired the writer of "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" to voice his support for the native locals he lived among. While pursuing his postgraduate education, he researched the Aboriginals' history and was interested in their connection to nature and landscape. He was also fascinated by how their languages and dialects were and are affected by the landscape and enforced human laws.

According to Harris (1990), before the 1950s, knowledge of Aboriginal lives and circumstances came largely through writing by

white Australians, such as, Patrick White's *Voss*, Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*, Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup*, and the poetry of Judith Wright and Les A. Murray. These writers conveyed Aboriginal themes that focused on the plight of the native Australians.

It was not until the mid-20th century that Aboriginals found new ways of expressing themselves and their culture through the different literary genres and were recognized in anglophone literature (Brewster, 2015). Even though such literary works have been written from first-person perspectives and are considered accurate representations of the Australian Aboriginal plight, "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" poem, when analyzed and interpreted, proves to be a powerful vehicle for speaking back to colonial power from an objective and diverse perspective. It contributes to a broader understanding of indigenous socio-cultural, political, and identity perspectives as well as fosters cross-cultural dialogue and education. It also bridges indigenous and non-indigenous communities by facilitating cultural exchange and understanding by introducing indigenous perspectives to a broader audience.

Thus, the research questions of this paper are: (1) What are the racial inequalities represented in the poem "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" and (2) How are Aboriginals' racial and linguistic oppression narrated and voiced in "They ask me: 'Who am I?'"

The importance of this paper lies in its close reading of the poem, "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" to examine thematic concerns such as racial inequality and linguistic displacement concerning the oppressed race of the Australian Aboriginals, specifically the lost generation as voiced in the poem. Adopting the theoretical framework of Kroskrity (2021) that focuses on the linguistics of white supremacy, the authors analytically explore covert linguistic racism through the poem's narrative. In addition, the paper conveys the representation of race and colonial powers by conveying the exclusion and discrimination the Aborigines faced since the 18th century. It highlights 'White Supremacy' (concerning politics, culture, and linguistics) and the desperate measures the white settlement took to complete the erasure of the linguistic elements and culture of the Aboriginal

minority group. By providing a powerful critique of white supremacy and white language supremacy, this paper highlights how the poem represents the unspoken voices of the lost generation and their racial and linguistic oppression.

METHOD

Kroskirty's work on linguistic racism and white supremacy delves into how language perpetuates racial hierarchies and discrimination. It often focuses on the power dynamics of language, including how linguistic practices reinforce social inequalities and are instrumental in constructing and maintaining the social superiority of white people in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This idea includes examining how language policies, educational systems, and media representations contribute to the perpetuation of White Supremacy through the privilege of specific languages and linguistic features over others. In addition, Kroskirty's theory emphasizes the concept of language ideologies, specifically beliefs about language that shape and reflect social and cultural identities and power relationships. In the context of linguistic racism and White Supremacy', Kroskirty's work shows how particular dialects, accents, and languages are marginalized or devalued in society, often aligning with racial and ethnic hierarchies. This devaluation can contribute to the systemic exclusion of nondominant linguistic groups from social, economic, and political opportunities. We found that this methodology is suitable because it allows researchers to read and interpret the poem closely, guided by Kroskirty's (2021) theoretical framework of linguistic racism and White Supremacy. It also aims to provide insights into the interplay between language, identity, and power, thus highlighting the covert linguistic racism and representation of race and colonial powers, and their ongoing effects on the marginalized Aboriginal community in Australia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Sledd (1969), "One who speaks differently is an outsider, strange and suspicious, and we must make him feel inferior". "They ask me: 'Who am I?'" poem reestablishes this white supremacy and oppression linguistics. In a more vital context,

it highlights the inequality that Aboriginals have faced during and post-colonization of their land. Not only were the Aboriginals considered a minority group, but they were also objectified since the white settlement. An 'uneven world' (Pennycook, 2022) of racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities was established in Australia.

Aboriginals see that their languages and cultures are disregarded, denigrated, or even suppressed (De Varennes & Kuzborska, 2016). This is echoed in the poem, where the speaker struggles with an implied superior power erasing his Native Aboriginal identity due to Australian assimilationist policies, which support systemic oppression and dominant ideologies, resulting in cultural, racial, and colonial identity erasure. The speaker challenges the dominant culture that suppresses and marginalizes the cultural expressions, languages, traditions, and histories of his Aboriginal origin by asserting who he is in stanzas one through four:

They ask me: "Who am I?"
 I am the land of unspoken truth.
 I am the sky of untold stories.
 I am the distant stars,
 of distant children
 and I don't know
 which one is mine.
 I am the wind...
 that carries my lullaby
 to a stolen generation
 like a scar in a mirror
 I stare at everyday.
 I am the tears of the rain,
 and don't tell me they are scarce.

They ask me: "Who am I?"
 I am the trees of unwritten history.
 I am the blazing sun of spiritual
 mythology.
 I am the clouds of racing
 heartbeats and oppressed
 memories.
 I am the storms that
 discharge my wistful feelings.
 I am the sand ...
 feel me in your bare feet.

I am the Ocean, and
 I have many names.
 I am the crushing waves

That scream FREEDOM.

I am the rock they named,
Not the spirit they claimed.

The stanzas above support the speaker's affirmation of who he is through self-reflections and awareness in the repeated phrase "I am." He differentiates himself from the dominant culture and its history, norms, and values by signifying his own to remind the reader that he has a distinct identity that belongs to the long-oppressed Aboriginal minority group.

One important aspect of the poem is the poet's allusion to the Aboriginal's "distant children." The lines "I am the distant stars, of distant children and I don't know which one is mine" refer to the indigenous children who were forcibly separated from their families and communities by churches, welfare organizations, and governments. According to Jeffrey R. Dafler (2005) in his article "Social Darwinism and the Language of Racial Oppression: Australian's Stolen Generations," authoritative Australian policies have been designed to eliminate Aboriginal peoples since the beginning of the white settlement. The best example of this "systematic oppression of Aborigines by white Australians is the forced removal of mixed race children from their families for placement in institutions and foster homes for the purpose of their "absorption" or "assimilation" into white society." These policies subjected children to various degrees of cultural and linguistic re-education to ensure the biological and cultural extinction of Australia's indigenous population. Promised education, which reinforced 'white supremacist' and 'colonial logics,' the children were adopted by non-Indigenous families or raised in institutions that ensured the erasure of their cultural and linguistic identities and the dissolution of their race by marrying them into whites.

According to Kroskrity's theory of language ideologies, language is not simply a neutral tool for communication. But it is also a powerful symbol of identity, power, and status (Kroskrity, 2021). He argues that language ideologies often justify or legitimize social and political inequalities. They construct and maintain social and political hierarchies. In addition, in "Voices Silenced: What Happened

to Our Indigenous Languages?", Laura Rademaker (2019) states that Australia was "Once one of the most linguistically diverse places on earth with about 250 languages spoken when it was first colonised." However, in 1788, the first white settlement of British and Europeans established their colonies in Australia, and this was the beginning of the Aboriginal's dispossession. White settlers forced "colonial rules [which] systematically stripped Indigenous peoples of their languages through English-only education policies and discriminatory practices, causing deep-rooted issues that held communities back socially and economically, and fractured their identities" (Griffiths, 2020). One discriminatory action against the Aboriginals was the enforcement of the English language instead of their native language. This discriminative practice embedded in the Australian culture against the disadvantaged Aboriginals enforced the English language in schools and as a communication to reinforce linguistic white supremacy. At most missions throughout the mid-20th century, Aboriginal languages were attempted to be replaced with English. Using the word "*Kanyini*," the poem writer challenges white supremacists' linguistic privilege as the gatekeeper of knowledge and literacy of the universe (Brindle, 2016; May, 2007). "*Kanyini*" envelops the four principles of Aboriginal life:

1. *Ngura*: a sense of belonging to home and land
2. *Walytja*: family connecting with life
3. *Kurunpa*: love, spirit, or soul
4. *Tjuukurpa*: the belief about creation and the right way to live

In a study entitled "Identity, Translanguaging, Linguicism and Racism: The Experience of Australian Aboriginal People Living in a Remote Community," Oliver and Excell (2020) confirm that Aboriginals "Believed they were more connected to their culture because of their Aboriginal dialects and languages" and "described feeling 'shame' when speaking ... their Aboriginal language varieties. They also reported experiences with linguisticism and racism, even in their community, because of their language use and because of the color of their skin." (Roberson, Hanley & Pak, 2009; Witthoft et al., 2003). Languages, the foundation on which cultures are created, not only differentiate

people from other groups but also create their unique identities. Languages have a role as a gatekeeper and doorway (King & Scott, 2014; May, 2007). However, the Australian Aboriginals are disadvantaged because their government limits the use of their native indigenous language within the institutions of the state and relations with the public.

Another discriminatory act can be inferred in the poem's connotation of space as signified in "distant stars." The phrase "distant stars" represents the Aboriginal children and emphasizes the enforced broken familial ties between the lost generation and their past ancestors. The visual imagery here shows the children looking to their ancestors— their families, whom they can see but not reach. The "distant stars" can only appear in the paradoxical dichotomy of white and black during the night in this unique reverse panoptic view. This tragic image echoes the theme— the erasure of identity, as hinted throughout the poem, where space is represented as "psychic space imposed in the colonies" (Oliver, 2004).

In 1968, in one of his lectures, anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner discussed the idea of the "cult of forgetfulness" and coined the term "the Great Australian Silence." This term describes how Australians do not just fail to acknowledge the atrocities of the past but choose to ignore them. It also describes the erasure of indigenous perspectives and experiences from mainstream Australian history. This idea is portrayed through the poet's first-hand awareness of the world's inequality. The poem conveys this image through the themes of racial discrimination and identity erasure as well as the displacement and oppression of a culturally and linguistically rich minority group. The prevailing melancholic tone of the poem complements its commanding theme of racial-linguistic (Flores et al., 2020) and the colonization of psychic space by white colonizers (Oliver, 2004). Through the sad intonations in the first half of the poem, the images of injustice paint a picture of how tyrannical systems have shaped and molded the identities of the Aboriginal peoples for centuries. Nevertheless, the tones of anger and pride cannot be ignored as they control the poem's second half. The speaker's declaration of who he is, or rather who his people are, is

powerfully unearthed in stanza five and part of stanza six, where he detaches himself from belonging to any ethnic, religious, cultural, political, or social class group but his own.

Additionally, the poem stresses the idea of colonial identity erasure, which occurs when colonial powers impose their culture, language, and values on colonized peoples; thus, erasing or marginalizing the colonized culture and identity (Goodwill & McCormick, 2012; Hughes, 1998). Indigenous cultures and identities are questioned and deleted. In stanza five and the first two verses of stanza six, the poet says:

They ask me: "Who am I?"
From Adam and Eve, I am not born.
Not the land they declare.
Not an English, nor Welsh.
Neither Scottish, nor Polish.
Not a Christian, nor a Jew.
Neither Hindu, nor Buddhist.
Not a Muslim, nor a Pagan.

Not a King, nor a Queen.
Neither a President, nor a Chief.

In the excerpt above, the speaker confirms that he does not belong to any colonizing group - "Not an English, nor Welsh. / Neither Scottish, nor Polish. / Not a Christian, nor a Jew." In addition, he is not connected to any specific religion: "Neither Hindu, nor Buddhist. / Not a Muslim, nor a Pagan" or authoritative positions such as "Not a King, nor a Queen. / Neither a President, nor a Chief." In asserting his dissociation from mainly white supremacists, he refutes the stereotypes and biases that have influenced how others have perceived the speaker's identity group. In addition, his disconnection from these groups is a way of fighting against the loss of cultural heritage and identity as well as the dismissal of his people's racial identity. Finally, the lines challenge misconceptions about the Australian Aboriginals by providing a more accurate understanding of this marginalized and underrepresented group.

Perhaps the most important stanza in the poem is stanza six. One should spend more time reading and contemplating the meanings of this stanza as its verses establish the identity of the Aboriginals and acquaint readers with the original indigenous Australian peoples and

their sustained rich cultural heritage. The poem writer commemorates the Australian Aborigines as having the most extended continuous cultural history of any race and group on Earth. In verse, "I am the first never the last," he memorializes them as the oldest populations of humankind, the first of the Aborigines. He also honors the "Kookaburra," the "gum trees," and the "Acacia," all natives of Australian flora and fauna. Finally, the writer alludes to the philosophy of the "everywhen" in his verse "I am Aboriginal Dreaming." This idea, which connects all people and things, explains the universe's origin and its relation to nature and humanity, land and spirit, and the unique traits of the Aborigines. In addition, it cancels its appurtenance to time—past, present, and future, because in the hundreds of Aboriginal languages, the word "time" does not exist. Time is a dream, a concept alluded to in the universe. It indicates that the Aborigines' timeless concept allows them to "dream" while ignoring time. Aboriginal dreaming aesthetically connects past ancestors to the present speaker and future generations. The poem writer refers to this concept to deepen his readers' understanding of the Aborigines' rare and profound nature.

CONCLUSION

The poem was written to address racial inequality that the Aborigines have been subjected to since the white settlement invaded Australia during the 17th and 18th centuries. The lines convey his strong point of view towards the oppression the Aborigines suffered throughout the years. Also, his verses are sympathetic toward the lost generation, specifically the displaced children, who were

removed from their native homes and forcefully inserted into white families. In addition, the poem writer attacks people's ignorance and lack of information about the Aborigines. Specifically, he is dismayed at how many societies outside of Australia, including his own, are unaware of the existence of the Aborigines.

The poem reminds readers of the indignity and degradation inflicted on the proud people of Aborigines who have been dispossessed of their lands, denied recognition, subjected to decades of control and exclusion, and stripped of their socio-linguistic privileges. In a relatively short yet comprehensive poem, the writer succeeds in portraying the long and painful history of the dehumanization of and racism against the Aborigines. The poem pays homage to them for the underrepresented and underserved linguistic, geographical, and socio-political Aborigines. By focusing on the devastating impact on Aboriginal people and communities, the poem addresses this racism and implicitly calls for creating a more just and equitable society for all Australians.

As we consider these potential paths for future research, we honor the voices like the poet's, who use their art to challenge injustice and advocate for a more just and equitable world. The poet's call for recognition, understanding, and action echoes beyond the pages, inviting us to continue exploring, learning, and growing. By expanding our research to include diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches, we can deepen our appreciation for Indigenous cultures and contribute to the ongoing journey toward justice and equality for all.

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