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Reclaiming Voice, Land And Identity: Cultural Sovereignty And Aboriginal Womanhood In *Auntie Rita*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the memoir *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, foregrounding its significance as a testimony of Aboriginal resilience, cultural continuity, and political activism in the face of colonial oppression. Through an exploration of themes such as forced displacement, racial discrimination, the Stolen Generations, kinship structures, and spiritual connection to land, the study highlights the memoir as a powerful counter-discourse to colonial historiography. It argues that language, storytelling, and intergenerational memory become instruments of reclaiming identity and dignity for Indigenous Australians. The narrative offers profound insights into Aboriginal communal ethics, egalitarian values, and the struggle for socio-political self-determination, contrasting them with the exploitative, paternalistic attitudes of colonial authorities. Ultimately, the memoir demonstrates how Indigenous women like Rita Huggins transform personal trauma into collective empowerment, reshaping postcolonial discourse and advocating for cultural integration over assimilation. The paper underscores the urgency of acknowledging Indigenous epistemologies in shaping contemporary democratic societies.

Keywords: Aboriginal Autobiography; Stolen Generations; Indigenous Identity; Postcolonial Resistance; Cultural Sovereignty; Kinship Systems; Land and Belonging; Testimonial Narrative; Assimilation vs. Integration; Aboriginal Women's Activism

Culture is a social construct that covers all facets of daily life, which evidently differ between geographical regions. In modern times, it possesses more egalitarian implications than ever. This principle was not as progressive throughout the period of colonisation. At that time, the 'lesser mortals' refrained from asserting their sophisticated status. It was the domain of the privileged few, those purportedly created by God in His own likeness. George Lamming asserts that culture "in the form of words, came from outside: Dickens, Jane Austen, Kipling and that sacred gang" (15). Ironically, akin to the celestial beings, those selected to expound on culture had lighter skin tones. This race asserted that it was divinely appointed by the Almighty

to rescue and civilise the 'dark devils' suffering in other regions of the planet. This burdensome task emerged as the 'white man's burden' and has had extensive repercussions for humanity. Abdul R. Janmohamed contends:

> By allowing the European to denigrate the native in a variety of ways, by permitting an obsessive, fetishistic representation of the native's moral inferiority, the allegory also enables the European to increase, by contrast, the store of his own moral superiority. (23)

During the 1950s and 60s, as the scope of 'culture' expanded to encompass the traditions and customs of marginalised groups, a new artificial division between 'high culture' and 'mass culture' emerged, serving to uphold the dominance of affluent white individuals over the global populace. Frantz Fanon's observation in this context is highly ironical, "Europe is literally the creation of the third world" (qtd. in Dirks 67). A democratic platform, much like literature, could not escape the impact of its influence, which is evident in the concept of the 'canon.' The idolatry of authors like Shakespeare is ascribed to their 'universality' (Ashcroft et al 71). The notion of 'universalism' stands in stark contrast to the diverse realities of the postcolonial landscape, as, despite their common histories of colonisation and oppression, the cultural beliefs and practices among these societies differ markedly. The fundamental characteristics of humanity are asserted to be encapsulated within the protective layers of those residing in the developed world, who already occupy a position of dominance, both politically and economically. The prevailing European elites exerted their influence across various domains, from historical narratives and political landscapes to cultural expressions. The norms were established by a select few, and conformity from the others was anticipated. To quote Chinua Achebe, "In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it" (75).

The marginalised segments of society, including the impoverished, black working class and the majority of women, have consistently faced exclusion. Every domain of human development and advancement has been shaped by dominant forces. The convictions, principles, traditions, and even the physical attributes of the white race became emblematic of the pinnacle of human development. This is the reason individuals from the eastern and western hemispheres have been designated with contrasting terms such as 'oriental' and 'occidental'. This man-made binary is described by Edward Said as follows:

> … Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient…. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. (25-6)

To restore both individual and collective sovereignty, it is essential to assert control over oneself and to ensure equitable participation in the governance of agencies and institutions, whether they operate on a domestic or global scale. This force plays a crucial role in self-representation, the formation of identities, and the advancement of humanity. Power is rarely given; it must be cultivated and claimed. The utilisation of language stands as one of the most formidable means to attain influence. Language forms texts, narratives, and perspectives, which in turn generate meanings and identities.

Acknowledging this power of language in identity formation, Australian Aboriginal authors, especially women activist authors, take up this responsibility to speak up for themselves and the entire community. Their community, the Aboriginals of Australia comprise just 3.8% of the total population of Australia. Once upon a time, the heterogeneous Aboriginal tribes exercised complete sovereignty over the Australian landmass. However, this freedom was usurped by the colonizing juggernaut of the British empire, which hoisted their national flag on the Australian soil on 26 January 1788. Thence began the saga of brutal

extermination of the natives through state sponsored tools such as genocide, displacement, dispossession and assimilation. The dark-skinned Aborigines were considered remnants of a historic age best suited for a slow death and the light skinned indigens, born out of the exploitation of native women, were stolen in early age from their mothers and confined to state run institutions with an aim to chisel out domestic servants and agricultural labour for the ruling elites. Rita and Jackie Huggins, authors of *Auntie Rita*, belong to the same ilk, who, along with their ancestors faced extraordinary circumstances and tests of endurance and survival.

The memoir *Auntie Rita*, authored by Rita Huggins, has been penned in partnership with her daughter, Jackie Huggins. The narrative exhibits a clear delineation of voices, with italics employed to signify Jackie's contributions. Rita and her family were forcibly displaced from their modest abode in the bush by colonial authorities and conveyed to a mission in a cattle truck. The individuals classified as 'full bloods' and 'half-castes' were relegated to distinct reserves. Rita's parents were regarded as individuals of mixed heritage, as both her mother and father had European ancestry through their fathers. They were compelled to abandon their traditional modes of existence and were required to adhere to European customs. Those who opposed were met with brutal consequences. Existence on the reserve was arduous, with mobility constrained, and the inhabitants were relegated to a state of servitude, subject to the caprices of their indifferent white overseers. Rita was relocated to a boarding school under the guise of an endeavour to refine her character. There existed a pervasive atmosphere of racism, paternalistic oversight, and constant surveillance. The remuneration for labour in the fields was to be entrusted to the stationmaster for safekeeping. She bore two children prior to her marriage, a consequence of her exploitation within the white households. It was uncommon for white men to accept children born to Aboriginal girls. In the year 1951, Rita entered into matrimony with Jack Huggins, and together they welcomed a total of five offspring. Her husband passed away in 1958, a consequence of the psychological trauma he endured during World War I, in which he served as an Australian soldier. However, his contributions were not recognised to the same extent as those of his white counterparts. In urban environments, the prevalence of intolerance and racial discrimination perpetrated by white neighbours, landlords, and even medical professionals was a common occurrence. Rita recognised the essential role of quality education, adequate housing, and meaningful employment for Aboriginal individuals to lead lives of dignity. For two decades, she held the position of director at the 'One People of Australia League' (OPAL) and maintained her commitment to activism throughout her lifetime. She dedicated herself to the advancement of her community while also challenging numerous misconceptions perpetuated by the dominant culture. She was nearly an Aboriginal diplomat, with her residence functioning as the unofficial office for OPAL.

The Aboriginal peoples hold a profound respect for the land of their forebears. Individuals maintain a connection to it throughout their existence, irrespective of their present circumstances or place of habitation. In *Auntie Rita*, Rita Huggins observes that in 1986, sixty years following her displacement, she and her daughter, Jackie, returned to the land of her forebears, her birthplace, Carnarvon Gorge. It served as a profound symbol of her lineage; a legacy transmitted through generations in a spiritual manner. At a profound level within her being, Rita had been yearning for this reconnection with her origins. The experience was profoundly enriching, providing substantial nourishment for her emotional and mental wellbeing. Jackie experienced a profound sense of humility as she observed her mother gracefully traversing the land, bestowing kisses upon it while uttering her prayers. In a way, she was paying her respects to her forefathers whose presence could be felt in the land and around. Jackie rightly says, "…it complemented my own sense of identity and belonging, and my pride in this" (13). Contemporary cultures and civilisations stand to gain significantly by rekindling their connection with foundational elements of their heritage. The contemporary individual, often relocating and navigating various races, cuisines, climates, cultures, and national identities, grappling with persistent feelings of inexplicable discontent despite material and professional achievements,

may find valuable insights in the ways of the indigenous peoples. One cannot help but agree when Jackie says:

> Like most Aboriginal people, it is my deeply held belief that we came from this land, hence the term 'the land is my mother'. The land is our birthing place, our cradle; it offers us connection with the creatures, the trees, the mountains and the rivers, and all living things. There are no stories of migration in our dreamtime stories. Our creation stories link us intrinsically to the earth. We are born of the earth and when we die our body and spirit go back there. This is why land is so important to us, no matter when and where we are born. (13)

A notable aspect of Aboriginal culture is their profound belief in the significance of family and kinship structures. An Aboriginal family functions as a unified entity, akin to the intricate and interdependent systems of a human body. The established Aboriginal kinship network was of considerable significance in the formative years as well. Rita Huggins reports that members of the community informed the parents about the probable existence of state-sponsored child abductors, as well as potential crackdowns, shootings, and instances of poisoning. She nostalgically recalls the gathering of the entire neighbourhood, united in anticipation as they listened to letters from family members and children struggling beyond their immediate surroundings.

The indigenous communities often opt for terms of endearment such as 'Auntie' or 'Nan,' thereby fostering a sense of communal unity and a broader connection among aboriginal peoples, even in the absence of familial ties. The unwavering respect afforded to elders, regardless of their social or economic status, has consistently characterised the genuinely egalitarian nature of Aboriginal culture. The elderly embody a wealth of experience, history, and knowledge. The native community in *Auntie Rita* expressed astonishment when the colonial authorities bestowed the title of 'King' upon Grandfather Chooky, a revered ancestor of Rita, due to his remarkable age of over one hundred years. The contemporary democratic societies have stratified individuals into categories such as monarchs, military leaders, heads of state, bureaucratic officials, and affluent entrepreneurs, bestowing respect in accordance with these distinctions.

The masters, influenced by cultural disparities, struggled to accept that the natives were capable of effectively managing their extensive families. This scepticism led to recurrent allegations of inadequate parenting and the compelled relocation of children to state-operated foster care facilities. Offering an insightful glimpse, Rita characterises her residence as a nurturing haven for fourteen children. There was always an abundance of sustenance, affection, and nurturing. For this reason, the inhabitants of Cherbourg, observing the most innate connection between a mother and her offspring, frequently remarked, "There goes Rosie and her ducklings" (19). The experience for these parents was marked by a profound anguish, as they endured a relentless anxiety regarding the potential removal of their children.

In sharp opposition to the individualistic and materialistic tendencies prevalent in the western world, figures such as Rita's father dedicated their lives to the well-being of their community and family. The profound injustice inflicted upon his people deeply troubled the elderly gentleman. The remaining individuals were rendered too shattered and immobilised to voice their thoughts. Nothing dissuaded him from championing the cause of his people and standing as the solitary advocate. With deliberate intent, he maintained a keen awareness of his surroundings and engaged with the radio for extended periods. He played a pivotal role in consistently bringing forth the concerns and authentic grievances of the local populace at Cherbourg to the attention of the authorities. Rita fondly recalls him as a man of considerable intellect, serving as a kind of "bush lawyer" for the community. It was for this precise reason that his removal papers in the Department of Native Affairs designated him as a "black stirrer" (24). It is hardly surprising that he was refused permission to attend the funeral of his wife's brother, Harry, who passed away at the tender age

of twenty-two. The authorities were acutely aware that a funeral represented the ultimate occasion to render final tributes. Nonetheless, their profound animosity and desire for retribution compelled them to reject even this chance for those who had the audacity to confront them.

Rita recognises that, in contrast to the offspring of wealthy masters, she and her siblings were devoid of mass-produced toys; nevertheless, their formative years were marked by considerable joy. Material limitations could not hinder the pursuit of happiness, alongside spiritual and cultural fulfilment. In their youth, they engaged in activities such as walking, fishing, hunting, and camping within the confines of the Reserve. They experienced joy, accompanied by a deeply rooted sense of creativity. She recalls with clarity the process of crafting dolls and various soft toys from materials cast aside by the affluent. She articulates with profound pride, "We were rich in other ways, rich in spirit" (26).

Jackie Huggins, Rita's daughter, considers herself fortunate to have inherited a profound sense of extensive Aboriginal kinship from her mother. She holds a deep appreciation for her mother's involvement in platforms such as OPAL, as it has enriched her life with a "extended family on top of our own and provided a sanctuary for us. We were made to feel wanted and loved there" (99). The kinship patterns, even within the realm of blood relations, encompassed connections that spanned from great-uncles and great-aunts to third and fourth cousins.

This kinship structures had been instrumental in enabling numerous Aboriginal women to deal with and nurture their children as single parents. They were supported by mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers who tended to their young ones during their absences for work. A notable event that highlights the elegance of this Aboriginal system occurred when misfortune befell the Huggins household. Rita's daughter, Gloria, tragically lost her life in a vehicular accident. Rita chose to care for Gloria's four children in a manner reminiscent of how her own mother tended to her first two children during her unmarried years. With an air of ease, Rita states, "At fifty-five, I became a mother again" (105). In traditional Aboriginal households, the upbringing of children or grandchildren was not perceived as a burden. Rita rightly says:

> There's an old saying. You can take the Blackfella out of the mission but you can't take the mission out of the Blackfella…Our custom of sharing will never die out as long as we have relations. The bigger the house, the bigger the families who live there. (132)

In *Auntie Rita*, Jackie Huggins articulates with notable pride that extended Aboriginal families were, in fact, cohesive and interconnected clusters reminiscent of a beehive. Conventions such as invitations and appointments were virtually non-existent. Jackie nostalgically recalls the spontaneous visits to her grandmother's residence in Cherbourg, where each person exchanged embraces, kisses, and an immeasurable sense of warmth. Jackie says, "She never knew we were coming. We just turned up, which is always the way with Aboriginal families. No formal phone call or message needs to be given that you are coming. You just turn up. Everything gets accommodated" (76).

Regardless of the social and material conditions, the experience of being with one's loved ones is profoundly enriching and fulfilling. Individuals such as Rita Huggins, in hindsight, perceive the confinement period in reserves as a chance to remain united under one roof with their kin. Only someone deeply rooted in their community, who values their connection to their people, could have perceived this glimmer of hope amidst one of the most egregious violations of human rights in history. It is really humbling and moving to hear a forced incarceration victim, Rita say, "One beautiful thing about having grown up in the reserve is that we were one big family even though we came from different parts. We shared experiences, and we shared our families" (78).

The act of sharing is a profound characteristic within Aboriginal culture. Rita Huggins reflects on her mother's character, noting that despite their own financial struggles, she consistently set aside food for a less fortunate woman who often visited their home. The act of sharing and assisting those in need has always been an inherent quality of the compassionate and thoughtful Aboriginal people. Following the premature passing of her husband in 1958, Rita relocated to Inala. She resided in a Housing Commission area located in an outer suburb of Brisbane. She struggled to navigate the fundamental requirements with the scant resources provided by late Jack's superannuation fund and the war widows' allowance. The stress of difficult circumstances took a toll on her and she herself says, "I spent money on good times and alcohol, and sought relief in the friendship of other men. I just wanted to have a good time- anything away from the grief" (66).

It is evident that this behaviour would have significantly undermined her financial stability. In this context, the Aboriginal kinship and solidarity emerged as pivotal forces, aiding her in navigating a significant crisis. During this challenging period, Rita consistently made an effort to assist others whenever the opportunity arose. On numerous occasions, she welcomed homeless and solitary women into her home for the night. Jackie's testimony reveals that the children occasionally relinquished their beds for the visiting guests. Remembering the old times, Jackie proudly says, "Although we had only a little ourselves, we still shared whatever we could" (69). Jackie demonstrates a profound understanding of her mother's situation, refraining from assigning blame for the circumstances that were beyond her control, which reflect the shared experiences of nearly the entire community. This episode in Rita's life emphasises that when individuals from diverse backgrounds receive fundamental support from the State and when all cultures are honoured and respected, empowered citizens will not only care for their families but also play a vital role in advancing the developmental objectives of a nation. Yet, the paradox lies in the fact that the elite and ruling class, having profoundly diminished and incapacitated the natives, regarded them with disdain as if they were mere pests, beasts of burden, and irredeemable miscreants. Jackie Huggins rightly puts it thus:

> The myth abounded of Aboriginal degradation, hopelessness and inferiority, part of the collective unconscious of the white nation. While the most violent acts of persecution of Aboriginal people were usually confined to the more remote, frontier regions, nevertheless racial prejudice and discrimination persisted in the cities. (74)

Another notable feature of Aboriginal culture emphasised in the memoir is the profound reverence Aboriginal people hold for nature, life, women, children, and animals alike. The Aboriginals refrained from killing or separating even a young mammal from its mother for sustenance. In stark contrast, the colonisers exhibited no reluctance in separating young native infants from their mothers and families, treating them as though they were mere inanimate objects. Rita Huggins reflects with affection on her family's way of life amidst the embrace of nature. The family resided in thatched dwellings known as 'gunyahs,' constructed from clay, wood, foliage, and gum resin derived from the surrounding trees. Caves served as an alternative habitat for her community, naturally regulating temperature without reliance on electricity, thereby circumventing associated carbon emissions. Rita herself emerged from the depths of one such cave. Within, these abodes exhibited a cleanliness and purity that mirrored the untouched beauty of the surrounding valley. Her community possessed an understanding of the cosmetic lotions, such as soap and medicinal remedies, that could be derived from the surrounding flora. For example, Eucalyptus leaves served as a treatment for coughs, goanna fat was utilised for cuts and scratches, and charcoal was employed for dental hygiene.

The lifestyle of Aboriginal peoples reflects a profound connection to nature: innocent, unblemished, and genuine, devoid of pretence, avarice, and duplicity, in stark contrast to the insincere, troubled, neurotic, materialistic, and self-serving behaviours exhibited by the so-called enlightened and progressive colonisers. During the peak of Reserves and state-operated educational institutions, the colonial authorities enforced their 'Victorian morality' upon the young and developing children within their confines. The thirteen-year-

old Rita reflects on an incident in which she faced punishment for her interactions with boys. Rita, accompanied by two other individuals, Betty Hart and Iris Hegarty, endured a week of incarceration, subsisting solely on bread and water, with her head shorn of hair. Additional restrictions encompassed prohibitions on discussions regarding one's homeland, familial matters, and the utilisation of indigenous languages. Rita's daughter Jackie condemns this "white paternalistic control and surveillance" (29). The self-styled modernists and heralds of the scientific and industrial revolution regarded with disdain the innate impulses of a teenager, particularly her allure towards the opposite sex. Conversely, the indigenous cultures engaged in a range of initiation ceremonies tailored to particular age groups, and there were exclusive gatherings for women, where the presence of men was expressly forbidden.

The mother-daughter duo of Rita and Jackie had to put up with some common challenges like "struggle, shame in the beginning, absent fathers of our children and, most importantly, being broke" (48). The native culture prior to contact was devoid of any semblance of pseudo-morality. In numerous tribal cultures around the world, this remains true. A troubling and frequent theme in numerous narratives by Aboriginal women is their experience of bearing children during their teenage years while employed as domestics in various affluent households. The purportedly civilised individuals of European descent abandoned these vulnerable young women, who were subsequently embraced by those labelled as uncivilised. These individuals not only took these distressed women as wives but also welcomed their offspring, in stark contrast to the biological fathers who had forsaken them. "My second daughter, Gloria, was eight years old when Jack and I married. Jack loved her as his own," says Rita who had two children from anonymous men before her marriage to Jack (58).

Children conceived from genuine bonds of affection were embraced and nurtured by the extended family as if they were their own. It is only in recent times that progressive Western society has begun to embrace the concept of single parenthood. A number of multinational corporations and governmental entities have begun to expand child-care leave provisions to include single parents, a development that was dismissed not too long ago. It is for this reason that Jackie has this to say to her mother Rita Huggins:

> For me, being a single mother has meant independence, freedom, choice, acclaim, unreserved happiness, status and power over my own life, among other things. All of which you were never afforded… Financial independence has to be worked at all the time but still I have a far greater capacity to achieve this than you ever could have dreamed of in your day. (48)

Rita Huggins asserts that the indigenous peoples have consistently embodied civilisation in its most authentic form. They embodied the principles they advocated. She asserts that her father exemplified the principles he espoused. Honesty, good manners, moral values, sense of responsibility, respect and loyalty were the cherished values he always imparted to his children "and if we erred we would face the consequences from Dadda. His word was law and we dared not speak back" (22). Rita reflects on the moment she endured a harsh punishment from her father for pilfering peaches from Nellie McIvor's orchard. Nevertheless, he later experienced a profound sense of remorse and endeavoured to make amends by showering her with affection, offering fruit, and arranging horse rides. "The value of his standard of life, humanity and pride, were realised by his children later in our lives," says Rita (22).

Rita Huggins underscores the significance of individual sovereignty by juxtaposing the freedom and confidence exhibited by adults who were never stolen as children with those who were deprived of such experiences. Talking about her husband, Jack Huggins, a Black man with Maori heritage she says, "He was never put on a reserve and he basked in his freedom which showed in his confidence and equality to non-Aboriginal people" (51). This observation confirms that dignity, love, familial connections, and education are essential components for a healthy and productive adult existence. Had all indigenous individuals

experienced a typical upbringing, they would have stood as equal contributors to the process of nation-building alongside their white counterparts. Jack stood out distinctly, a fact evident in his demeanour. The assurance evident in his body language garnered him considerable popularity, even among white women.

Contemporary progressive democracies present numerous advantageous opportunities for their citizens. However, a singular approach is insufficient for all circumstances. The entirety of the populace cannot be housed within urban centres, nor can the State ensure employment for all individuals. Consequently, the actions taken against the bush-people were both imprudent and disastrous. The act of displacing children from their relatively affluent households to state-operated orphanages, followed by their expulsion upon reaching adolescence, contributed to the formation of marginalised communities such as Inala, characterised by high unemployment and crime rates among a non-skilled population reliant on welfare assistance. Had their cultural practices been embraced and nurtured, both rural areas and urban centres would have been devoid of poverty and squalor.

In opposition to prevailing views, it can be argued that diversity enhances the complexity and fortifies the social structure of society. The preservation and promotion of this rich tapestry of culture, cuisine, language, and more are essential for sustaining the exquisite mosaic of a pluralistic society. Jackie Huggins also agrees with the perspective that 'integration' rather than 'assimilation' represents the most viable solution. The distinction lies in the fact that integration permits the incorporation of the cultural practices of marginalised groups, while assimilation results in the uniformity of prevailing cultural norms. Therefore, Jackie rightly says, "Assimilation policies didn't recognize the worth of Aboriginal culture and ways of life…. Assimilation was a strange word to me. It meant that we should become white people, which I could never accept" (85-87).

Exhorting the general populace to acknowledge and atone their sins and that of their ancestors, Whitlock quotes Margery Fee, who in turn refers to Thomas King in *The Truth About Stories* where he says:

> Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your lives differently if only you had heard this story. You have heard it now. (146)

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