Chapter 2

PROTEST AS WATCHWORD

Two centuries of mute suffering and discrimination explode in Aboriginal literature and provide a key to the element of protest in Aboriginal women’s autobiographies. If literature is the battlefield of Aboriginal women writers, protest is their weapon and resistance their strategy. These writers narrate the inhuman treatment meted out to them, but going by the autobiographies studied, never with a touch of self-pity. These autobiographies reflect their sense of anger, anguish and protest. They do not embody an acceptance of their predicament but an endeavour towards change. Literature and activism go hand in hand in expressing Aboriginal resistance to subjugation and assertion of Aboriginality. This chapter will examine how this protest against discrimination and exploitation is voiced in the choice of genre, language, theme and technique of these autobiographies.

Being the moulding factor of Aboriginal women’s autobiographies, protest comes out through subverting the images created by whites and in writing alternate histories. This seems to be an effort to alter every description or category or label that has been created and nourished with a colonialist attitude. In altering these images and writings, Aboriginal women writers adopt different strategies. They speak in the colonisers' language but speak against them, adopt colonisers’ literary tradition but subvert it, adopt the colonisers’ strategy but attack the colonisers themselves. In doing so, these writers do not imitate the colonisers but innovate strategies of resistance against them.
One of the major complaints of Aboriginal literature against whites is that history has always been written from the colonisers' perspective and that the exploiter has written about the exploited and their experience without referring to the exploitation. Thus Aboriginal women's autobiographies try to fill the vacuum created by white history as far as the Aboriginal version of history and the Aboriginal voices in history are concerned. In the process, these autobiographies become alternate histories instead of remaining personal records of experiences and feelings of individuals. In presenting their personal life or portraying their family history, consciously or unconsciously, these writers deconstruct the history written or assumed by the settlers and reconstruct their native history. Anne Brewster rightly observes:

By reclaiming and rewriting history Aboriginal women intend educating both black and white Australians. For white Australians this education has the purpose of revealing the violence of colonisation which has been suppressed in official histories. For Aboriginal people the narration of the past has the additional role of producing a sense of unity and group solidarity. The awareness of a common past can thus bind together people who have been dispossessed. (Brewster 1996: 53-54)

The common past that Anne Brewster refers to seems to be the binding factor in Aboriginal women's writing. Aboriginal women seem to express collective experience from collective memory to create a collective consciousness. Even when these writers use "I", it sounds like "we". Most of the time these writers use "we" in autobiographies which are supposed and expected to be individual. The story of the self becomes a story of the community with a purpose to rewrite and recreate the community history. Lack of
their own version of history motivates these writers to create alternate histories in the form of autobiographies. For instance, in her autobiography *Is That You Ruthie?* Ruth Hegarty says that her story becomes the story of her fellow dormitory girls and her experiences and feelings reflect their experiences and feelings as dormitory girls. Aboriginal women writers hail from different economic and political conditions. But, they have their culture in common as well as their past, present and a great uncertainty about their future. Their common concern for the loss of their Aboriginal past, the suffering in the present and the threatening future unites them.

Sally Morgan, in her *My Place*, expresses her agony over absence of history written by Aboriginal people:

"Well, there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them.... I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story." (Morgan 163-164)

Sally Morgan not only expresses her agony over the brutalities and atrocities of whites against Aboriginal people but she also demands that those records or that part of the history should be made generally public or at least be accessible to the Aboriginal people. That these files are maintained not by the National Library but by the police itself reveals that the records were kept not as part of an effort to preserve history but only as secret
records. Sally Morgan’s overt statement that expresses her desire to write the other side of history is not confined to her and her autobiography alone but becomes a very crucial issue for most Aboriginal women writers and their autobiographies as well.

A "half-caste" Tasmanian Ida West repeatedly narrates her and her people's attempts in her childhood to achieve assimilation into white society and repeated rejection by mainstream Australian society. She also represents the heartrending tales of the half-castes by citing her personal experience. The contempt of the whites for the natives comes out in its true form in the episode in which West's house is set on fire by a white who adds abuse and curse to the already horrendous atrocity. Ida West not only presents her own version of the stories of her times but also tries to take the help of other sources to construct the history of Aboriginal people under colonial rule. She refers, for instance, to a letter written by a Hobart Town white gentleman as early as 1819, published in the *Asiatic Journal of Calcutta*, India, in the following year, which expresses concern over the racial discrimination in Australia. She quotes:

> Several interviews have lately taken place between the people of the settlement and the Natives of the west coast; who, as appears very probable, are debarred from all intercourse and interchange of sentiment with their countrymen on the eastern side, by that lofty range of mountains which intersects the island from the northern to the southern extremity. From the fearless and unsuspicious deportment of the former in these interviews, it would seem that the hostile disposition of the latter towards the people of the settlement was rather provoked by bad treatment than the spontaneous effect of their native ferocity. (West 105)
Such records, which should form a crucial part of history, are unfortunately missing from white versions. This is only an example to show how Aboriginal writers try to reconstruct history not only through their personal experiences and autobiographical writings but also by citing "historical evidences" in order to achieve their purpose. This reconstruction of history does not only deconstruct the history written by the other but also vehemently condemns certain incidents that have reinforced discrimination against Aborigines. To quote Anne Brewster once again, "Aboriginal memory preserves the unwritten black history of colonisation, which has been emerging in the public arena in the form of life stories of Aboriginal women. Aboriginal memory is transforming public perceptions of the past in post-invasion Australia" (Brewster 1996: 6).

Whether it is Sally Morgan who writes with a desire to tell the other side of the story or Ida West who writes with a consciousness that all these days only whites had been writing about the Aboriginal people, or whether it is Rita Huggins who maintains that her book is a record for her children and grandchildren and will speak to other people including whites about the story from the Aboriginal side, or Ruth Hegarty who says that whatever she writes would reflect the feelings and experiences of her fellow dormitory girls, or Elsie Roughsey who demands that the world should know what was not mentioned or Ruby Langford who dedicates her Don't Take Your Love to Town to every black woman who's battled to raise a family—they are all part of rewriting and reconstructing of history by each writer in her own way. For instance, in her Sister Girl, Jackie Huggins says,

I wanted to write about the silent history of Aboriginal women that has been the experience of so many of my mother's and grandmother's
generation. Although we learnt about the pioneering efforts of mostly European males, little was recorded about the "backbone" of the pastoral industry, the Aboriginal men and women who toiled as stockmen and domestic servants. This is so much a part of Australian history and it is about my history. The stories deserve recognition and need to be rescued, recorded and shared. (Huggins 1998: 1)

Not only is white history subjected to deconstruction and subversion in Aboriginal women’s narratives, but also is the image of the Aborigines constructed by whites. They try to counter, overtly and covertly, the image of the Aboriginal people that whites have been depicting as ugly, uncouth, aggressive, cruel, ignorant and many other qualities associated with the colour black. The accounts of Aboriginal life in Aboriginal women's writing reconstruct the image of Aborigines as subjugated and suppressed and also project them as a race with spiritual strength that has survived and will survive in spite of the eliminating and exploitative policies once followed and are still being followed by the colonising race. In doing so, they assert and reassert their Aboriginal identity. But, this assertion of Aboriginal identity is juxtaposed as a direct counter to the hiding of their Aboriginal identity by previous generations. Thus the writers unveil how Aboriginal people were effaced or how they were forced to acquire false identities since they were scared of being subjected to humiliation, harassment and of the threat of removal of their children from them.

For instance, Sally Morgan's *My Place* depicts three women belonging to three generations, grandmother, mother and daughter. The grandmother tries to hide the Aboriginal identity of her family, in fact she seems to be preoccupied with the threat of
her family's Aboriginal identity being recognised. This makes the family live under the disguised identity of Indians. This is balanced by Sally Morgan later who proclaims her Aboriginal identity and starts on her search for her place and her roots. Her revelation of the fact that her grandmother was scared of disclosing her Aboriginal identity and was scared of the police, unfolds a hitherto untold tale of deprivation and misery. This change in Aboriginal women over generations that is evident in the responses of Sally Morgan and her grandmother towards racial discrimination is not an example of the changing policies of the white government but of the changing attitude of Aboriginal people. That they have come together and are ready to fight against the white policies is revealed in their assertion of Aboriginal identity.

Assertion of Aboriginal identity being the main focus of Aboriginal autobiographies, descriptions of Aboriginal beliefs, culture and lifestyle help to give it substance, to make it more emphatic. They supply the missing link in Aboriginal history. Native belief in spirits, foreboding, bird calling, initiation and other practices are repeatedly referred to in these autobiographies. Not just a mention of them but the writers' belief in the same is also established. This implicit criticism seems to aim at the imposed western religion and the apprehension that it may clearly be, even when not asserted, a move toward building native beliefs once again. It does not necessarily mean that these writers do not believe in Christianity, for many of them are Christian by religion. I shall discuss further in my fourth chapter, "Conflicting Identities," the assertion of identity by Aboriginal writers, the identity crisis that they go through due to their split identities, which are created by the way they are perceived by white society, Aboriginal society and Aboriginal women writers themselves.
These autobiographies give vent to the writers’ nostalgia for Aboriginal culture. All of them lament over the loss of important features of indigenous culture like corroborees, community life, association with nature and spiritual approach to life and the world. This expression of loss of culture and spirituality strengthens their incessant battle against segregation. Detailed descriptions of hunting, food gathering and cooking are some of the means of expressing their nostalgia. They rejoice in describing such details and assuring themselves about the community’s belief in supernatural elements. For instance, in Pride Against Prejudice, Ida West describes how effective indigenous medicine is: "We made our own soap out of dripping and we used mutton-bird oil for rubbing our chests for flu. Garlic in your shoes was a remedy for whooping cough. We could boil the buzzies from the vine of the bush and bottle" (West 40). Belief in spirits is another characteristic feature of Aboriginal life which finds a prominent place in Aboriginal women's writing. Ruby Langford Ginibi, for example, reveals, "I knew the house was full of spirits. When we were kids we used to hear the gate click shut, and footsteps on the veranda and down the hall. We weren’t frightened, it was our home and they looked after us" (Ginibi 1988: 63). Ida West and Sally Morgan also discuss how they have always felt the presence of the supernatural. Sally Morgan describes how a bird predicted her grandmother's death. Great reverence and concern for preservation of nature are also predominant in these autobiographies. White Australian literature depicts the conflict between man and nature, man’s relentless efforts to subjugate it and his eventual defeat at its hands. But Aboriginal literature celebrates nature and sings of the harmony between human and nature. Direct attacks on racial discrimination and reiterated references to Aboriginal culture mould these autobiographies as the voice of a
whole culture's longing for freedom from discrimination and exploitation. This explicit and implicit protest against white supremacy is successfully conveyed in these autobiographies and makes them especially valuable as personal as well as vivid cultural and political documents.

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Since Aboriginal women writers basically protest against colonisation and discrimination, they attack policies of the white government, specifically those policies that affect the Aboriginal people drastically in the name of welfare. Hence, these autobiographies protest not only against white-constructed Aboriginal history and identity but also against the manipulations of the government. It is ironical that the natives of Australia were "given" citizenship rights only in 1967. Ironically, this sanction of citizenship rights inflicted more restrictions on the Aborigines, increased the interference of the government in Aboriginal issues and legalised some of the atrocities against them, for instance, removing the "half-caste" children from Aboriginal societies and parents. As it was discussed in the introductory chapter, these children, mostly half-caste children, were removed on the pretext that Aboriginal people were not capable of looking after their children or that these mixed blood children could be civilised. Removing them from their parents and putting them in dormitories and civilising them was the responsibility of the government and missions. Some of the children were removed in the name of education too. The sanction of citizenship recognised the hitherto non-existent Aborigines but they had to face more complicated problems now. Indeed, Aboriginal writers call citizenship rights "dog license" to express their contempt and anger towards the white concept of their citizenship rights. Ruby Langford Ginibi, in her
autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, goes a step further and vehemently criticises the Aborigines Protection Board also:

Those days, you hardly saw Kooris in pubs, because liquor was prohibited. People who did go to pubs had to show a Dog Licence ("Citizen's Rights") and if a white person was caught supplying liquor to blacks he was given six months without the option of a fine. Aboriginals were all right to join the services and fight for the country that we had no say in, but you couldn't breast a bar with your mates for a beer. The Dog Licence was a product of the Aborigines' Protection Board. And now I understood why Dad was so against the idea of the Board funding me to go to teachers' college. The main function of the Aborigines' Protection Board was to discriminate against Aborigines. (Ginibi 1988: 48)

What Ruby Langford Ginibi says about the Board is echoed in other Aboriginal autobiographies as well. The single paragraph quoted above brings in so many issues for discussion and echoes protest of so many: the fact that Aboriginal people have no say in their own country; Aboriginal participation in the war on behalf of the white Australian government; Citizenship Rights given to Aborigines by the white government are almost universally attacked. The Aborigines Protection Board and its unjust and atrocious interference in Aboriginal lives in the name of welfare is laid bare. It also brings out the fact that whites were prohibited from associating themselves with Aborigines. Ginibi's reference to her father's distrust of the Board also unveils how Aboriginal people were not inclined towards the welfare boards created by the white government.
Aboriginal women writers express their protest against the government policies that adversely institutionalised the Aborigines. As Ruth Hegarty says in *Is That You Ruthie?* Aboriginal people were institutionalised for reasons known only to the government. Her words, "never daring to", mould her autobiography and decide to express not only her dormitory experiences, but also those of many others like her. These are not mere words but the condition of Aboriginal life. This was the situation not only of Ruth Hegarty. From other Aboriginal autobiographies too we gather that this was the predicament of most Aboriginal people, and this is the inspiration behind Aboriginal literature, and in particular, Aboriginal women's autobiographies. "Never daring to" is the phrase that silences Glenyse Ward, this is the condition that Monica Clare portrays, this is the situation that conditions Ella Simon, this is the predicament that was inflicted on Margaret Tucker, and this is the fear that haunts Sally Morgan's mother and grandmother, to mention only a few.

*Is That You Ruthie* reveals how fear ruled the life of Aborigines and how their life was institutionalised and how this institutionalisation was intended to produce stereotypes. Ruth Hegarty says,

> my story is their story; whatever I write would reflect the experiences and feelings of all. Our lives were governed by the same policies and what happened to one, happened to all of us. No one was treated as special or given special privileges. We were treated identically, dressed identically, our hair cut identically. (Hegarty 4)

The common suffering leads to collective identity and community feeling. It develops a sense of sisterhood among the girls. But the equality that Ruth Hegarty refers to is not an
equality with the whites, not an equality with all other human beings, but only an equality among the institutionalised Aborigines. Her words stand witness to the fact that "identical" was the word that decided the perverse fate of the dormitory girls. Does this identical appearance ironically lead to protest against the shared predicament of the colonised? Is equality used as a means to suppress individuality and eliminate liberty? This equality, this identical appearance only helped in producing stereotypes deprived of individuality and independence. Not only was their future decided but also their liberty was curtailed, expression silenced and actions constrained. Ruth Hegarty narrates her childhood that was imprisoned, silenced, constrained, insecure and stressful.

Not just individuality, but "privacy" was another word that was unheard and unfound in the dormitory. Nor was it just lack of privacy but was also humiliation, especially as girls, that was inflicted upon them. The dormitory girls, even the older ones, had to undress before the authorities before going to bed. Ruth Hegarty recollects, "Taking off every stitch of clothing including bloomers, we put on a white calico nightie and, before walking up the stairs, we still had to lift our nighties in the light of a torch or a lantern to reveal that we had nothing on underneath..." (Hegarty 58). The humiliation of the dormitory girls did not end there but it extended into the classroom and even took the form of sexual abuse. Ruth Hegarty even witnesses some of the girls abused by white male teachers. This awareness led dormitory girls to excessive cautiousness. They were silent but cautious enough to fold their arms tight and make sure that the blouses were pinned right up to the neck. As Aboriginal dormitory girls they were subjected to tension, nervousness, and to an experience of walking on a razor's edge of perverse regulations at a tender age, with nobody around to comfort and console them. Their
identity crisis also haunts them early in life, for adulthood was thrust on them. They vacillated between being a girl child and an adult. Like everything else this identity of girlhood was also inflicted on them, which increased their insecurity even as the indignities of womanhood were simultaneously inflicted on them. Ruth Hegarty recollects her bewilderment as a four and a half year old child upon being told that she is a grown up girl now and that she cannot stay with her mother any longer: "That morning I was my mum's baby, that afternoon I was a big girl. I was expected to take responsibility for my actions" (Hegarty 27).

These autobiographies protest against the dual imprisonment of the Aboriginal people in the name of mission homes in childhood and in the name of Aboriginal identity in adulthood. They protest against deprivation—deprivation of home, of parental love, care, community life and liberty. Elsie Roughsey Labumore, in her An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New, reveals that the home that made them dormitory girls in the name of protection was not "home" at all: "Too much work, also too many belting, but it was all dormitory customs. There was no sympathy at all for us by anyone. They, who were in charge of us, were rough and cruel" (Labumore 15). Ironically, they were removed in the name of protection, but they had no protection there and they were exposed to loneliness, starvation, displacement, inhuman treatment, humiliation and sexual abuse.

Ruth Hegarty says that her book would tell the hurt and pain that the girls suffered of being separated from mothers and families. It has to be remembered that most of these girls in the dormitory had single parents. This again is the consequence of the colonisation, which resulted in divisions like "half-caste", "quarter-caste" and "part-
Aboriginal”. Because of the white blood in them whites thought, they were more educable and hence could get rapidly assimilated into white society. Whether assimilation into white society happened or not, they were certainly alienated from their culture and their people. They were deprived of community life, love and warmth of parents, care and protection of their own people and were trained to become good domestics.

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Aboriginal literature regularly expresses anger and frustration and this anger and frustration lead to contempt for the English, the language of the colonisers, which too is reflected in Aboriginal literature. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an inspiring force behind the Aboriginal movement as well as literature, says that English is a bastardised language and that Aboriginal people use English not out of love for it but because that is the only medium available to them to communicate with other Aborigines and whites, given the fact of the elimination of Aboriginal languages. Roberta Sykes, another Aboriginal writer, also reiterates the fact that Aborigines in reserves were forced to adopt English. On the other hand, they exploit their enemy’s language strategically to protest against the enemy. The major criticism frequently levelled against these writers is that they fight against western imperialism and yet they adopt the same western language and literary tradition. Yet English had become the only link language in a situation where hundreds of Aboriginal tribes existed with innumerable dialects; indeed many Aboriginal languages are even mutually incomprehensible. Then what about literature and forms of literature? Is it appropriate for them to use the western tradition of autobiography, for instance, given the assumption that autobiography is a western tradition? This is one of
the questions posed by critics. Leaving aside the presumed rigidities of literary tradition and racial assumptions, when one has to communicate with another, one must ensure that the listener understands the speaker’s voice. And if that means using a commonly understood yet colonially inherited language or genre, so be it.

Not only against language but also against literary forms do the Aboriginal women writers wage a war in their autobiographies. Sally Morgan flouts the rigidities of form by making her autobiography itself raise the controversy as to whether it is an autobiographical novel, or an autobiography or a biography. The life stories of her mother, grandmother, and her grandmother’s brother also become part of her own autobiography. Rita Huggins’ *Auntie Rita* is a narration by Rita Huggins and a commentary by her daughter Jackie Huggins is a crucial part in it. Ida West’s autobiography is more like a chronicle with newspaper reports, dates and many other details. Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s autobiographical fiction *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is an experiment with the conventional genre. Her childhood experiences become short stories for children in her autobiography. The first part of it deals with these and the second part deals with Aboriginal legends. *When the Pelican Laughed* and *Mum Shirl* were originally narrated, not written, and documented by others. *Karobran* by Monica Clare presents the writer’s own experiences but in a fictional mode. All these works are considered as different forms of autobiography that writers have experimented with. *Auntie Rita* which is neither a biography nor an autobiography in a strict sense is also taken into consideration. Similarly, personal narratives recorded and transcribed by others, for instance *When the Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup, are also included in the present study. This is only to make a point that for Aboriginal women writers, what mattered was
their purpose of writing their life regardless of definitive choice of genre. The present study considers autobiography in its extended, often inclusive, sense and hence works like *Karobran* find a place in our discussion.

All these writers have admitted that they have no particular fascination for the genre of autobiography, and like any literature of the marginalised, Australian Aboriginal literature also starts with personal narratives, gradually widening its scope. For instance, Roberta Sykes says, "It is not something that I chose. I would write entertaining novels. Not a choice. I, like all the black writers, have the social goal to educate and liberate the community and that is the first criterion" (Personal Interview 9 January 1998). Thus her preference for the genre is decided by her responsibility towards the race. It is not the writer in her but the activist in her who chooses the genre in which she writes. Ruby Langford Ginibi asserts in her autobiography that one "dreamline" is more powerful than an autobiography. But since everyone cannot understand the significance of *dreamlines*, she has to communicate by means of her autobiography. Although Aboriginal women adopt the form, they do move away from the tradition of autobiography in its strict sense. What is important for them is the expression of Aboriginal feelings and thoughts; they owe their allegiance to these and not to the narrative tradition. Contents take the primary place and push the form to the secondary place. One may contrive the form but new life is infused into it by this practice. Even the language they use is full of culture-specific Aboriginal words, deeply embedded in Aboriginal life and consciousness. These autobiographies prove that literary rigidities and theories cannot stand, cannot withstand the vehemence of protest. These writers succeed in achieving their aim of spreading awareness and sharing experience through their autobiographies. As postcolonial
autobiographies, they throw light on the writers' responsibility and both the necessity and their own ability to change the genre as well as the power relations in society. It is not their allegiance to the genre but their belief that their life stories rather than fiction is the more effective medium to reach the readers. This is the inspiration behind the writing of Aboriginal women's autobiographies.

These experiments with the genre of autobiography raise innumerable questions in the reader's mind. Why do they make this attempt to experiment with genre? Is this a mere experiment for experiment's sake? If it is an experiment, what did the writers want to experiment with, the genre, voices in the autobiography or the writer's liberty? If it is not a mere experiment or, at least in some cases, not a deliberate experiment at all, what was the purpose behind writing an autobiography without strictly adhering to the genre? Australia seems to have a very strong tradition of autobiography, starting from the personal narratives of the early settlement times. Is that the reason why Aboriginal women writers chose or had to choose autobiography? Did they think that this is the only genre in which they can express themselves? Even if it was not a deliberate attempt of the writers to adopt autobiography, and they found it easier to adopt from their tradition of story telling, is it not a fact that the writers gave more importance to the contents and not to the form and that the so-called western tradition of autobiography served the purpose of Aboriginal people to unravel the mysteries and atrocities of colonialism?

Trying to rewrite community history and common experience, and to write autobiography, which reflects a very personal experience-how could these come together and achieve the effect that the writers wanted to achieve? How does one's experience become the community experience and one's lifetime experiences represent more than
two hundred years of colonised experience? Aboriginal women writers do not provide any clear or direct answers to these questions, except by way of a few statements about the genre of autobiography. Instead, it is their work that provides clues and answers to the above questions.

Aboriginal writers have also had to face criticism that not only did they depart from the native tradition by adopting a western tradition but also by turning their autobiographies into a complaint against society, for Aboriginal literature by tradition is a celebration of existence and nature. When asked about this criticism, Roberta Sykes, for instance, poses a counter question: what is there to celebrate in colonised Australia? (Personal Interview 9 January 1998) It is one of the great achievements of Aboriginal women writers that they have not only moulded forms and narrative techniques of western literature but also the tradition of native literature to suit their contemporary and immediately relevant needs.

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Aboriginal women writers, though very conscious about women’s issues, do not identify themselves with white feminists or associate themselves with white feminist movement. In fact, they try to distance themselves from the white feminist consciousness about women’s issues. Jackie Huggins rightly observes in her powerful book on Aboriginal women, *Sister Girl*,

Despite the predominance of patriarchal rule in Australian society, Australia was colonised on a racially imperialistic base and not on a sexually imperialistic base. ...white racial imperialist ideology granted all white women, however victimised by sexist oppression, the right to
assume the role of oppressor in relation to Black men and Black women.

(Huggins 1998: 14)

As an Aboriginal woman, Jackie Huggins tends to identify herself more with Aboriginal people of both genders than with white women. This throws light on the Aboriginal contention that it was race that played havoc with them and it was their racial identity that was played with most. This view strengthens the consciousness of an Aboriginal woman that is all pervading in most Aboriginal women's writing—whether it is Sally Morgan or Ruby Langford Ginibi or Ruth Hegarty or Elsie Roughsey Labumore or any others. This also raises the issue of the participation of white women in the exploitation and colonisation of Aboriginal people. The sisterhood that Jackie Huggins defines and establishes is the sisterhood among Aboriginal women and not the sisterhood between Aboriginal women and white women.

Jackie Huggins not only dissociates herself as an Aboriginal woman from white feminism but also vehemently attacks it. She says:

Black women feel no sense of relief to find that they are dealing with a white woman instead of a white man in these matters. Many say they prefer to deal with white men because they then escape the missionary-style zeal that some feminists employ in their belief that because they are feminists they are experts on all and that Aboriginal women need "raising up" to their level of feminist consciousness. And so we see that colonialism is alive and well in the women's movement. Some feminists behave just like the missionaries' wives who wanted to raise Aboriginal women to the lofty heights of white women's sex roles and Christianity,
too arrogant to realise that Aboriginal women's traditional social, political and spiritual roles gave them a far better position than white women could ever imagine. (Huggins 1998: 31)

This is not prioritising white man over white woman, but only trying to prove how white women are different from and are indifferent to Aboriginal women. Huggins seems to be emphasising the fact that Aboriginal people, especially Aboriginal women, have faced equally bad treatment from white women, whose power is due to their race but not due to their gender. Interestingly, Jackie Huggins seems to suggest that there was not much of a difference between the Christian missions spreading Christianity in order to "reform" Aboriginal people and the white feminists' attempts at spreading awareness among Aboriginal women in order to "reform" them. The assertion of Aboriginal identity, specifically Aboriginal woman's identity in the form of a protest against white feminism is expressed by saying that Aboriginal women are in a much better position compared to white women and that the concept of white feminism does not really suit them or is not really required by Aboriginal women. In doing so, Huggins does not segregate white women but protests against the segregations created and maintained by white feminists as whites and as white feminists. Gender gets eliminated when Jackie Huggins discusses the whites who colonised and exploited the Aboriginal people, since it was their racial identity that dominated when they colonised and subjugated Aboriginal people. That the white women writers were mostly silent about the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, except for a few feeble and unconvincing voices like Catherine Susanna Prichard, may have triggered indignation in Jackie Huggins against white feminists. She
states that unfortunately white women think that they own feminism and that it is a false proposition.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to the Indigenous Medical services which used Depo Provera in the 1970s as a cheap contraceptive and how it did not work properly and led to spontaneous abortions in Aboriginal women. She reveals that Depo Provera was banned in the United States in the 1960s and it was not approved as a contraceptive in Australia, yet indigenous women were experimented upon. Moreton-Robinson says, "Whereas feminists demand legal abortions, Indigenous women want stricter controls over abortions and sterilisations because they have been practised on our bodies without our consent" (Moreton-Robinson 171). Aboriginal women became guinea pigs for the experiments conducted by the white government just as they also became a dumping ground for banned medicines. It is also important to recall the background of Aboriginal women not having any rights over their children, who were actually "stolen" from them by the government. Whereas it is a question of liberty and sexuality for the white woman, it is a question of race, motherhood, and liberty in a community context for the Aboriginal woman. Hence Aboriginal women cannot identify themselves with white women, whether they are feminists or not. It is not Aboriginal women who create segregating boundaries, but it is the discriminating white society and the racist white government which have already created these differences.

Jackie Huggins' observations provide a detailed and thought provoking introduction to this issue: "Today, while many white women have won their fight to get out of their kitchens, Black women are still fighting to get in, but this time tailored to their own specifications" (Huggins 1998: 23). White women's activities, she feels, have
to be seen as part of colonisation and oppression of Black women. Sisterhood is not powerful enough to transcend such racial boundaries. Once again, Jackie Huggins brilliantly analyses the difference between white women and black women and indigenous women's reluctance to join white women's liberation movement:

The white women's movement was at that time concerned with sexuality and the right to say "yes", to be sexually active without condemnation. For Aboriginal women, who were fighting denigratory sexual stereotypes and exploitation by white men, the issue was more often the right to say "no". Where white women's demands to control their fertility were related to contraception and abortion, Aboriginal women were subject to unwanted sterilisation and continued to struggle against the loss of their children to interventionist welfare agencies. While Aboriginal women insisted on their right to have access to full medical services, including information about contraception, their demands to control their own fertility were related to the right to have as many children as they wanted.

(Huggins 1998: 27)

This statement is not only a criticism of white women's attitude but is self-explanatory since it puts the Aboriginal woman's plight and fight in a nutshell. The liberty to say no to the white man, the liberty to have as many children as possible and keep them with her-are the concerns of the Aboriginal woman, whereas the white woman's concerns are the opposite. For white feminists, gender discrimination comes first and for Aboriginal women racial discrimination stands first.
The picture so far drawn in this chapter will remain inadequate in representing Aboriginal women writers, for it is not only the resistance against racial discrimination but also against gender discrimination that informs their work. Although majority of these writers concentrate on white atrocities against black women, there are writers like Ruby Langford Ginibi who move across the boundaries of race in order to look at the gender conflict within their own race. It is true that in her autobiography, sensibility and concerns of a woman dominate her Aboriginal consciousness. She takes her love to town repeatedly and fails miserably. She is exploited by one man after another. Unable to come out from the longing for familial relations and feeling insecure about her children, she proposes companionship or accepts companionship of men repeatedly. Ultimately, with the failure of every relationship, she remains alone with her children. With all these vagaries of life and her tasks to be achieved, she becomes increasingly sensitive to women’s problems. She not only strongly condemns, for instance, her own daughter being beaten up by her son-in-law but does something about it, too:

He said something but I didn’t give him time to answer. I belted him and knocked him over the lounge and flattened him.

"I didn’t raise my daughter to be bashed and kicked by bastards like you." I threw him out. I don’t know where I got the strength from.

(Ginibi 1988: 206)

The position of women in Aboriginal societies, at least going by the implicit reports in Aboriginal women's work, was secure and equal to that of men. But in the mainstream society, an Aboriginal woman's life becomes twice miserable as a woman and as an Aboriginal woman. Ruby Langford Ginibi points this out when she says,
I felt like I was living tribal but with no tribe around me, no close-knit family. The food-gathering, the laws and songs were broken up, and my generation at this time wandered around as if we were tribal but in fact living worse than the poorest of poor whites, and in the case of women living hard because it seemed like the men loved you for a while and then more kids came along and the men drank and gambled and disappeared. One day they’d had enough and they just didn't come back. (Ginibi 1988: 96)

Although her Aboriginal identity remains with her, it acquires derogatory meanings and ghastly consequences in a colonised society. She is deprived of community life, sense of security and sense of belonging. She remains a nomadic tribal wandering all over in search of work and shelter and carrying the responsibility of her children. Although she is a "tribal" because of her identity, consciousness and life style, she fails to get the security that tribal life provides. She does not seem to suggest that Aboriginal societies are ideal, but definitely proclaims that the position of a poor Aboriginal woman in Aboriginal societies is safer and more secure compared to that of her position in an urban white society. Not just insecurity, but also poverty haunts her and as a poor Aboriginal, single mother, with no stable shelter and work, Ginibi raises her voice against the hardships that are inflicted on women like her. The breaking up of families, especially Aboriginal families, moves her to tears since she not only identifies with the situation but is also reminded of her mother’s "elopement". These are the long suppressed shrieks of a woman in a displaced cultural atmosphere. The women are rooted out from their own tribal atmosphere and they have to live in the city alienated from it. They are always
reminded that they are tribals and hence segregated from society. And yet there is no security and tranquility of tribal society.

Even though Aboriginal women writers represent discrimination and exploitation among Aborigines themselves, again it turns out to be a criticism of the colonisers. These writers believe and declare that this discrimination and exploitation among Aborigines is due to the influence of the settlers and their cultural assimilation with white society. Such a criticism of their changing value system is another aspect of these writers’ work that strikes hard at the "mainstream" culture. The rapidly increasing crime rate among Aborigines, for instance, could be seen as a revolt arising out of frustration caused by subservience and insult. Sometimes Aboriginal identity itself becomes the reason for being accused of crimes not committed. Aboriginal women writers expose many such burning issues. In doing so, they not only attempt to trace the roots of these issues but also try to address them through their literature and activism.

Activism constitutes a major aspect of the writers’ concern for social, cultural and political issues. In some of the autobiographies discussed in the present study, especially Shirley Smith’s *Mum Shirl* and Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, we come across a major turn in the writers’ lives as they become associated with overt movements against harassment and discrimination by whites. These autobiographies, apart from coming to us as literary experiments in form and style, also contribute to the records of personal life and history that provide an inspiration for other Aborigines and become eye-openers for the whites and other readers elsewhere. For instance the life story of Mum Shirl. Shirley Smith, fondly addressed as Mum Shirl, is one of fourteen children born to Aboriginal parents living on a mission in New South Wales. From the
time she first went to visit her brother in jail, she started visiting other prisoners as well. And she stood by people in trouble, whether in jail or outside, people without homes, people without families and those who have lost hope. She worked for Aboriginal Medical Services and in the 1970s she was particularly active in the Land Rights Movement. She became the guardian for people who were troubled by the white law.

The story of Ruby Langford Ginibi, a mother of seven children, is different, yet as powerful and relevant. She strives hard to carry the yoke of family responsibilities. In the process she loses some of her children. In the later part of her life when her grown up children are subjected to harassment her scope broadens and her concern shifts gradually from the particular to the general. She starts working in the direction of emancipation and betterment of the lot of Aborigines. Thus her struggle goes on, but now as survival for the whole race:

I started noticing articles about black deaths in custody. There were ten Aboriginal prisoners for every one white prisoner. Many more black men died in prison than whites, and there were often suspicious circumstances - an inquiry that was held in the cell by one (white) man and was over in thirty-five minutes, and so on. There had been no real inquiries.

I knew quite a lot about what went on inside prisons. Nob, David, Steve, James, Patrick and Horse all had stories to tell, though they kept most of it to themselves. I knew that. But I knew Nob had been bashed by police, that tear gas was used on riots, that there was not adequate counselling for prisoners, that prison broke people's spirits, and it was killing our sons like a war. (Ginibi 1988: 224)
Like the previous quotation from Ruby Langford Ginibi, the words quoted above also sum up the police atrocities on Aborigines. This heartrending predicament of Aborigines contributes to such a complete change in the perspective of Ruby Langford Ginibi that she turns her attention from her own children to the suffering of the race. Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s words hold a mirror to the Aboriginal movement and the Aboriginal spirit for activism in her interview, "Recording the Cries of the People", with Gerry Turcotte: "this old cliched business of saying we are non-political. If you're non-political, man, you're dead, you're not even thinking. So this was another 'fear' thing that they put into the unenlightened to keep them from rocking the boat" (Rutherford 19).

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Deborah' Bird Rose examines two dimensions of silence in connection with Aboriginal literature: silence as an active voice and as a passive condition. She says that active silence is a characteristic of the indigenous system of knowledge, as well as of a religious and political life. She quotes from MacKinnon:

Passive silence derives from the deployment of power to stifle or destroy people and their knowledge. This form of silence is thus characteristic of regimes of terror...and is a principal tool in colonisation. As is well known, colonisation depends on erasure.... Where silence previously existed as an active voice, the practices that stifle and ultimately erase thus work a double damage: not only suppressing people's audible voices, but reconfiguring the meaning of their silences as well (MacKinnon 1987). (Brock 92)
We come across both active and passive silence in Aboriginal women's writing. Colonisation conditions the life of the colonised and the life of the dormitory girls gets more conditioned, for their identity as colonised, orphaned, Aboriginal dormitory girls contributes to the conditioning of their lives at different levels. Silence becomes very eloquent as it conditions the voices of Aboriginal women and speaks about the intentions and repercussions of the silence, one form of which is destructive and the other constructive. Silence becomes more eloquent than eloquence in that it throws light not only on the indigenous culture, resistance to colonialism, protest against discrimination and attachment to Aboriginal identity but also on colonialism, discriminatory policies and exploitation of Aboriginal people, especially Aboriginal women.

The two forms of silence, that is, one inflicted by whites and the other adopted by indigenous people, are in a way interconnected and also connected with the policies of colonisation. Because the silence inflicted on Aborigines is oppressive, Aboriginal writers decide to withhold information and adopt partial silence, and the silence inflicted and the silence adopted are both related to the colonised-coloniser relationship. The silence that is inflicted on the Aborigines has only one function, to silence the Aboriginal people. But the silence that Aboriginal people adopt has two dimensions, that is the conditioned silence and the powerful silence that is actually the power to withhold information. The second type of silence is used as a very strong weapon of protest by Aboriginal writers. The reluctance to speak about certain issues is juxtaposed with the assertion that the exploited should talk about the exploitation and only Aboriginal people should write Aboriginal history. Thus, there is a longing to voice condemnation of whatever has been written about them and also a deliberate silence in Aboriginal
women's writing. Whether it is conditioned silence or deliberate silence, silence in Aboriginal women's writing is even more eloquent than words; it says more than what has been said in words. This silence raises many questions, reflects the psychological conflict of the writer, throws light on the conditioning forces, provides a clue to the indigenous thought system and gives a silent voice to the powerful protest.

Let us first examine how silence throws light on the conditioning or how the writers depict the silence that pervaded their childhood dormitory life. The most heartrending narration that comes before the readers is that of Ruth Hegarty in her autobiography, *Is That You Ruthie?* It is silence that becomes the code of conduct in her dormitory life. It is silence that rules every minute of her life and it becomes a barrier not only for her expression but also for her communication with her mother who stays on the other side of the wall. Hegarty says, "We ate our food in complete silence. There was no way I could call out, 'Good morning, Mum, how are you this morning?' Neither could she call out to me. Already I was learning how best to conduct myself as a dormitory girl without getting into trouble" (Hegarty 28-29). Her conditioning in the home as a dormitory girl depends on its inflicting silence on her. It is this silence that makes her repress her feelings, it is this silence that makes her lose her individuality and fit into the role of a good dormitory girl and it is this silence that takes away from her the power and inclination to question. As a child she was deprived of the most comforting and relieving expressions of trouble, crying. As motherless children, dormitory girls were not even allowed to lament on the loss. They were hushed up and humiliated for doing so, "I kept most of my feelings to myself. I wasn’t able to show any sort of emotion, we were not allowed to cry.... Crying always resulted in punishment" (Hegarty 30).
In silence, loneliness, oppression, "identical treatment", loss and suffering, childhood turns out miserable for the dormitory girls and silence becomes a further burden on this misery. At least there is a streak of sarcasm in Ruth Hegarty’s words, but a writer like Glenyse Ward in her Wandering Girl confesses that as dormitory girls they were taught not to speak unless they were spoken to and even if they were spoken to, to speak the minimum. But this silence is not devoid of protest. In fact this is a silent protest. Ward naively walks into a party though as a black servant she was ordered by her mistress not to come out before the guests. Although this seems to be a naive act on the surface, it definitely is a very powerful silent protest. This protest does not stop here, but silently works against the oppressive white mistress. Afraid of going into the garden to pluck lemons for her mistress' juice, Glenyse Ward uses the stored lemons against orders. Again, against orders of the mistress, Ward eats from the expensive and refined cutlery in her mistresses’ absence. When she flies away into the world of freedom from such restrictions and domestic servanthood, she does it silently.

Ruth Hegarty reveals in her autobiography that she silently wrote to her mother, instead of requesting her mistress, about the need to hike her salary; her mother wrote to the superintendent and he wrote to Hegarty’s mistress. She raids the grapevine to which she was not allowed any access by her mistress. She comes before the guests without the white starched cap and apron she is required to wear for these occasions. Thus silence becomes a strategy of protest and protest becomes the outcome of silence and the essence of silence. Thus silence speaks volumes about the turmoil that goes on in the mind of the writer, about the need to adopt silence and how it bursts out in the form of action. This is Aboriginal women’s resistance against silence, oppression, exploitation and
discrimination that they are subjected to. And this is also resistance, in the language of
silence that they are made to learn from the system. Thus not only do they express
resistance in the colonisers’ language but also turn the strategies that are used against
them to express their resistance. And thus they give silence and overt subversion a voice
that is more audible and more effective than any other language.

Silence is turned into an order of life for the dormitory Aborigines, and in a way
they have no linguistic option before them because elimination of the native languages is
also a kind of infliction of extreme silence. It is not just thrusting English on them but,
inevitably, also moulding their English to Queen's English to avoid any possible
Aboriginal features. Glenyse Ward's *Unna You Fullas* brilliantly reflects this by referring
to her dormitory and school experiences and how Aboriginal children were strictly
ordered not to use words like "nah", "unna", "fullas" etc. because, according to the
teacher, they are all strange Aboriginal words, but not English. When one's language is
eliminated or cannot be spoken, that itself is a great loss to a person and it is a kind of
silencing. There is every chance of that person voluntarily taking up silence either
because of grief over the loss of one's own language, or because of an inability to learn
an alternative or simply because giving up one's language and taking up another is a
compulsion. It affects all the more when one is forced to give up one’s language and take
up another and that too in the standard form. This contributes all the more to the
silencing of the person. This is exactly what we come across in the situation presented by
Aboriginal women writers, in particular, Glenyse Ward.

It is also interesting how Ward brings to our notice the attempts of German
missionaries to speak English and how the Aboriginal children laughed at them, secretly
of course, about the heavy German accent. It is interesting because a group that has lost
its language, that has taken to another language and is being ordered to use it correctly,
laughs at the attempts of another non-English speaking group and its attempts to get
Anglicised in speech and action.

It is all the more intriguing when we look into the reasons for this silence
employed by Aboriginal women writers. Rita Huggins, in Auntie Rita, says that it is
difficult to voice those experiences because of a sense of shame and pain. Still, the
reason behind this silence is always somewhat enigmatic, as it has to be, for it is this
enigmatic quality that gives rise to multiple interpretations of the text. For instance, there
are silences in Sally Morgan's My Place and Monica Clare's Karobran. At a given place
it may be a partial silence like just referring to the issue but not giving much importance
or not dwelling on it in long discussions. At another place it may be complete silence
over a particular issue, which we know does exist. Both these kind of cases speak
eloquently about the silence employed by Aboriginal women writers, and above all they
speak in multiple voices depending on the multiple interpretations of the readers. Aileen
Moreton-Robinson rightly observes,

It is no mere coincidence that Indigenous and white men are not
mentioned or featured as main characters in the texts; it is Indigenous
women's relations with other Indigenous women that are given
significance... However, it is more likely that sexuality is kept private or
accorded little attention because this is where Indigenous women have
drawn the boundary between themselves and their audience. A boundary
that is related to the way in which cultural processes have shaped their subjectivity. (Moreton-Robinson 15-16)

Apart from finding it painful and shameful to narrate those experiences, Aboriginal women resent expressing their pain and feelings to the whites or non-Aboriginal readers. Glenyse Ward's *Unna You Fullas* brilliantly portrays repressive dormitories and rebellious Aboriginal girls. The runaway girls-Banner, Thelma, Zelda, Nickey and Bella-unfortunately fail to escape from the long arms of the Mission and are brought back to the Mission. Banner, who leads the group and who does not repent for her running away from the home, gets the worst beating by Fr. Albertus. The inmates of the home are shocked and some of them burst out but Banner bears it silently: "I didn't want to let them know I was in pain, I didn't want them to see me crying" (Ward 1991: 87). It is this self-esteem that takes the form of or finds expression in silence. But this silence is also the result of Banner's hatred for Fr. Albertus and when he meets with a fire accident while he is gardening, Banner is with him, still, and yet silent. She seems to be uninvolved in the whole episode, but her involvement cannot be denied. Thus the repressed feelings and reactions find their "expression", so to say, in the *noticeably* silent protest.

As against the background of such autobiographies and their strategy of responding to discrimination, Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* comes to us in a different light. She does not overtly protest against racial discrimination but rather simply narrates her terrible experiences describing her painful predicament. Her "innocent" narration in itself is her strategy of protest and resistance. Her autobiography does not deconstruct any established image but tries to construct the life of a slave girl so as to speak for itself.
This involves the reader, compelling him to draw the unstated conclusion. Her ignorance of the common/general predicament of the Aborigines and her innocence and implicit acceptance of racial inferiority powerfully construct the life and servile identity of an average Aborigine. Her being unaware of the Aboriginal movement itself turns out to be an asset to her implicit argument. Her autobiography does not consciously replace white history but it does reflect the fate of the whole enslaved community of Aborigines. What Sally Morgan states in *My Place*, the instances of Aboriginal children removed from their parents and culture, finds a link in other autobiographies and reaches the readers in its ultimate destiny in Ward's *Wandering Girl*.

*Wandering Girl* is one of the Aboriginal women's autobiographies that give a hint of class conflict to the whole issue of white versus native. She seems to concentrate on how an upper class family exploited her as a slave girl, though her being an Aborigine is one of the reasons for her life in the Board and her career as a slave. This is not completely ignored by the writer. Her autobiography concludes with the end of her career as a slave, except for a brief epilogue when she was free and happy as a wife and mother in her later life. This also allows the naïve narration to turn into a very strong attack against discrimination and injustice. Her selection of a particular period in her life as the theme of her autobiography vehemently highlights the very notion of discrimination, and it makes us feel, not merely understand, that enslaved Aborigines had no genuine existence or identity. Without spelling it out, she manages to fight against Aboriginal slavery in the very theme of her autobiography. She often refers to the oppressors as white bosses and implicitly suggests that their authority had to be accepted.
without questioning. But she subtly and covertly questions every aspect of white supremacy over blacks by delineating the pathetic plight of blacks:

Soon as I opened the door all the chatter and laughter stopped. You could hear a pin drop as all eyes were on me. All of a sudden, some poshed-up voice, with a plum in her mouth, came out of the crowd, "Tracey dear, is this your little dark servant?"

I just stood there smiling. I thought it was wonderful that at last people were taking notice of me. There were sniggers and jeers from everywhere. I turned to the lady who did all the talking, and said, "My name is Glenyse". She was quite startled; she said, "Oh dear, I didn't think you had a name". (Ward 1987: 24)

The unmistakable yet unvoiced protest in Ward’s book makes it distinct from some of the overtly protesting autobiographies. Disobeying her mistress’ orders that she should not appear before the guests, Glenyse Ward suddenly barges into the party and her very identity as a human being is simultaneously denied and questioned as well as forcefully asserted here. Glenyse Ward seems to admit this innocently but the narration is enough to infuriate the readers. One cannot but conclude that this is one of the most brilliant, even if unintentional, strategies of Glenyse Ward to protest against racist discrimination and to assert herself far more effectively than an outburst could.

It is noteworthy that Deborah Bird Rose calls this silence a meta-communication. Holding back of information, refusal to share information, which is also a form of silence but a constructive silence, silence used as a strategy, are the forms of silence that we find in Aboriginal women's writing. Jackie Huggins, in her Sister Girl, rightly points out:
The constant demands placed on Aboriginal people to be the educators is tiring. Surely it is time for non-Aboriginal people to begin their journey of discovery by themselves. It is too much to expect Aboriginal people to be continually explaining their oppression-as if somehow it is their fault and they have to talk and write their way out of it. And do others really listen to their pleas? (Huggins 1998: x)

Although these words provide a clue to the silence in Aboriginal women's writing, they also raise some questions. For instance, does it not contradict the argument that so far only whites have been writing about Aborigines? No doubt Huggins' words mirror the reality and more so the question that is posed at the end of the above statement. But, it is one of the major concerns of Aboriginal literature that, while so far only whites have written about indigenous people it is time for the indigenous people to speak about themselves and the oppression that they have been subjected to. Probably this is the dilemma that all marginalised literatures and silenced voices experience as there is an indignation about others writing about them and simultaneously about expectations of others for them to speak "for themselves". As an imposed silence conditions and kills individuality, a compelled eloquence also conditions and stifles expression.

The conditioning of the Aboriginal women to be silent thus works in two ways as it has been discussed earlier. There is a requirement ordered by the entire social institution of Australia to be silent and there is also a requirement from their Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal society that they should be silent about their pain and pleasure. Thus they are conditioned to be silent in two ways by two forces, but one destructive and the other constructive, or at least preservative. Jackie Huggins observes, "I came to
understand that the resistance that Aboriginal people meet in white bureaucrats when attempting to see Aboriginal records is one of the most contemporary forms that silencing takes” (Huggins 1998: 132).

Silence that is used as a strategy of protest and which is a consequence of conditioning also puts forth some questions: Is this protest naive, is it conscious, and is this eloquence of silence intended or unintended? Who are these writers addressing themselves to, whites or their fellow indigenous people, or indigenous women in particular? For instance, Jackie Huggins says in Auntie Rita suggesting self-consciousness:

One of the most important things Aboriginal people can do for their children is to instil a dignified purpose and strong identity of being Aboriginal. This is the foundation for their future and costs nothing. It is a duty we all have to ourselves and our next generations. To be proud to say who we are and what we are without any feeling of inferiority is one of the greatest gifts of life we can give to our children. A secure identity base is the basic ingredient for the hazardous road ahead. (Huggins and Huggins 101)

If the writer is addressing herself to indigenous people, as it is quite evident in these two cases at least, how does her silence about certain issues help her and her readers? For it deprives her of the opportunity of sharing her experiences. Does it help since problems and suffering are understood by others because they to go through similar predicaments? If she is addressing the whites, how does such information and tone reach
them and how does she intend them to react? How can she be sure they will notice the 
content or the tone? As Jackie Huggins observes,

Until there is a real understanding of racism in this country and 
genuine moves made towards racial equality, many Aboriginal women 
will not be prepared to talk publicly, to audiences of "others", about the 
oppression they suffer through sexism. White feminists' interference in 
this issue is unwelcome, as to date it has only reinforced racist stereotypes 
of Aboriginal women, men and culture. (Huggins 1998: 35)

There is silence between the characters and besides that is the silence between the 
writer and the readers. Silence between the Aboriginal and white characters may be of a 
kind that was inflicted. But the silence that exists between the writer and the readers is 
the one that was, at least in some cases, intended. For Aboriginal women writers make 
brilliant use of the right to give or withhold information that the writers feel entitled to. 
Monica Clare's complete silence about her first marriage and her child through this 
marrige is one of the best examples of this. We see Isabelle as a girl first, and then 
suddenly she comes to us as a woman. What happened in between we do not know 
unless we read the Introduction.

This silence may also be related to the interference of a few members of the 
dominant community in the name of editing and publishing. Having a coloniser as editor 
or publisher for writing about the coloniser's exploitative behaviour and legacy may be 
expected to have its own corrupting or softening or adverse impact on the narrative. 
Consider a situation in which an Aboriginal is verbally narrating and expects to be 
represented in writing by an editor; or a situation in which an Aboriginal's writing is
considered in need of ‘improvement’ by himself or by an editor, or by both. In this kind of situation, statements may end up being distorted, and even silences on the part of the narrator/writer may end up being distorted or losing their point or force. First, the editor or the publisher may want the writer to be selective about memory or oblivion even when the writer does not. Secondly, the writer herself may hold back information. There may be, in this phenomenon, other factors also such as sense of shame and pain, hesitation, fear of betrayal, doubt about reaction to revelations. There may also be an order of priorities for the writer which may urge her to be silent or eloquent on particular issues and situations. Indeed, silences may point to, eloquently, what caused them. Thus, the intermediary the writer intends to assign the task of reaching out may end up corrupting or weakening the silence, or the eloquence, or the eloquent silence in the text. Aileen Moreton-Robinson converts for us this possibility of corrupting significant silence, into an argument about texts and subtexts:

Literary relations such as these are representative of power relations between coloniser and colonised. Indigenous women's knowledge in itself can not be accommodated, but must be redefined to conform to the requirements of white literary practice. However, although white editing or scribing may influence the writing of the text, it does not erase the subtext, which is informed by the knowledge and experience of Indigenous women. (Moreton-Robinson 2)

Moreton-Robinson raises, in fact, a fundamental matter here. No doubt, writing is basically an act of communication. Yet, no communication can be complete and perfect, either. Indeed, there are bound to be missing links in any writing, depending on the
writer's purpose and familiarity of the readers with the writer's world. But, there are occasions when such a missing link becomes prominent, thrusts its absence upon the reader. For instance, there are obvious silences caused by age-old oppression and colonisation in writings on the subject. Personal and sexual oppression to which Australian Aboriginal people have been subjected for centuries will automatically raise expectations among readers that representation of these or such topics will occur in them. However, as we have seen earlier in the chapter, these issues either become focal points in Aboriginal women's autobiographies or are significantly absent. As we saw earlier in the case of Monica Clare and Sally Morgan, for instance, there are certain gaps that one cannot but notice in their narratives. These absences are a major factor in the field of writing by oppressed people in particular. Like the black cloth on a cage that covers a pet parrot, such absence raises readers' curiosity about the missing links. It is like putting up a signboard announcing a town farther along but without a road laid to reach it. Ironically, therefore, you can neither miss it nor find it! This is where absence becomes presence and silence speaks loudly.

Such missing yet "announced" subject matter becomes especially intriguing and powerful in situations that generally prevent or discourage expression. This is the case of Australian Aboriginal literature in general and it is unmistakably the case of women's writing. Now, what happens to a reader when he encounters such "speaking" missing links? He must wonder what the writer might have communicated. When the reader belongs to the 'oppressing' community, he may also feel a sense of guilt. Here our aim is to establish this provocative situation in our chosen field of study.
In this context, Stephen Muecke's "Repressive Hypothesis" is a good example of how, not frequently, the principal text remained with Aboriginal people whereas only a sub-text was available to readers. Further, Aboriginal writers have the choice to decide which subtext may be offered to readers. For instance, withholding information and experience was the strategy that many Aboriginal women writers adopted to protect the text that they might have wished to convey only to Aboriginal readers. Thus, one way or another it may not have been the same text that reached the non-indigenous and the indigenous readership. As Jackie Huggins points out in *Sister Girl*, from which we also quoted in the Introduction while discussing Aboriginal theatre, that no Aboriginal text should be completely accessible to non-indigenous readers; such is the view of at least many an Aboriginal writer. Similarly, while discussing the white intrusion and demand to speak, Stephen Muecke points out:

> But in the face of this powerful demand, could it be the case that Aboriginal people have learnt to retain a judicious silence, only giving out a certain amount of carefully constructed discourse, making sure we are aware that in their economy of discourses the first separation is between the "public" and the "secret" and that a great wealth of culture lies below the surface? (Muecke 411).

However, this judicious silence may not be a result of a choice of the writer/composer in cases where texts are translated or transcribed by non-indigenous persons; for in such cases considerable interference may be perceived, and this may lead to distortion and curtailment of intended expression. Transcription of oral literature provides the best example for this. On the other hand, the text may not be available either to non-
indigenous or to indigenous readers because it is intended to be hidden from the non-
indigenous mediator. Yet even in this case, what is not said can at times convey the
intended message to the Aboriginal people who have similar experiences to those
regarding which silence is maintained. Here, silence is no longer mute but becomes a
message and turns out to be significant discourse.

Consider a specific example of such selective silence from a different context, for
instance, Native Canadian Literature: Florence Edenshaw's autobiography as told to
Margaret Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson - A Haida Woman*
(1982), presents a good case of coexistence of overt text and subtext perhaps unavailable
to Anglo-phone or Franco-phone readers, but not necessarily to indigenous readers.
Blackman in her preface to the Revised Edition (1992) herself says that Florence's
account was subject to a number of cultural constraints. Issues of cultural representation
and representation of self are crucial in Northwest Coast Canadian societies. Blackman
says, "Florence's own editorial hand in her life history was apparent from the very
beginning. 'I don't tell everything-what's no good' she cautioned.... On more than one
occasion, she would instruct me to 'shut that things off [sic] while she related something
important that was not to be included in the book" (Blackman xiii). This gives an
impression that the published work is solely the writer's (narrator's) text. But, after a few
pages, in the chapter titled "The Life History Project", Blackman confesses that to a large
extent her own interest biased the life-history data she obtained. This completely
dismantles the concept of the narrator's text that she had earlier constructed. Anyway, the
narrator has adopted her own ways of silence and eloquence as the mediator has her own.
That way, the text that the narrator wanted to convey was partly "selected" by the mediator even though the narrator had a say in selecting parts of the narrative.

Such eloquent silences also raise questions about the very form of autobiography. If the writer's intention is to write an autobiography as a community experience, how does this silence help? How to relate the silence of the writer as an individual to the writer as a writer or as an individual who comes forward to talk to the readers about her life? If the Aboriginal writer is talking to her own people, is the detailed discussion of customs, traditions and lifestyle only a sharing or is it also a mode of informing? When the same details are also available to the whites, how is this purpose of sharing fulfilled? Does one narrative have two or even more functions and two achievements at two levels, of sharing with indigenous people and of informing non-indigenous people? How does the same narrative become silent at one place, that is, to some readers, and eloquent at some other places to others? Some of these questions have already been addressed in the Introduction while discussing the use of Aboriginal English in Aboriginal theatre. This discussion focused on the strategy of use of English so as to remain partly incomprehensible to non-indigenous people. The section on silence in Aboriginal women's autobiographies earlier in the present chapter has also discussed some of these issues at length. However, there are larger or specific questions that need to be addressed keeping in mind not only the genre, but also the particular social, political and cultural context of the texts. An attempt is made to address some of these questions in discussing of individual works in our later chapters.

If absolute silence about some aspects of life is a prominent feature of these autobiographies, a strong urge to reveal and share, a typical feature of story telling, can
also be perceived in Aboriginal women's autobiographies. Be it a description of cooking, beliefs, customs, routine-whatever may be the topic, we feel that the writers are educating the readers or sharing with them, taking them into confidence. The frequent use of "we" instead of "I" and the very personal note of addressing the reader, create a collective experience since the writer gives an impression of directly addressing the reader.

Literature is used here as a force by Aboriginal women writers to narrate the facts and express their anger and protest. It is quite clear that their battle is against racial discrimination. Loss and awareness of the loss are other important themes in their attack on racial discrimination. Their loss started with the loss of land, extended gradually via loss of livelihood, culture, motherhood, justice and reached the point of loss of identity. Нgûgî wa Thion’o's words about "mental control" can be extrapolated and used in this context:

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. (Ngûgî 16)

It is the complete loss that the Africans have suffered that is voiced by Нgûgî. A similar kind of loss have the Aborigines suffered in Australia and are trying to protest against it. They may not be able to bring back the glorious past in spite of any number or kinds of
attempts but they will definitely be able to assert that the colonised past was atrocious. They will be able to change the course of the future at least.

Let us look at the concept of loss from the perspective of Aborigines. They have, according to their literature, never believed in the ownership of land. For them, it was the land that owned them. Probably that is one of the reasons for their not demanding that the whites leave their country. They have always believed that they are only the custodians of the land. Before they could understand the nuances of the white man's concept of land ownership, they had lost their sacred earth. Thus nostalgia for the loss of land is one of the themes of Aboriginal literature in general and women's autobiographies in particular.

They have lost their culture along with the land. Roberta Sykes says that the white man entered with the Bible in one hand and a sword in another. He gave the Bible to the Aborigines and used the sword against them. With the loss of their identity as free human beings, the colonisation was complete. They remained slaves in every sense of the term and nothing was left which they could call their own. That they had no citizenship rights in Australia till 1967 is the best example for their enslavement. Loss of motherhood, as it was discussed earlier, had a multi-dimensional effect on the Aborigines. First, mothers were bewildered as their children were separated from them, a practice which was unknown to them earlier. Children became dispossessed orphans as they had no parents, no language, no religion, and no tribe of their own. Thus it caused harassment of women, alienation of children and elimination of Aboriginal culture, language, religion and Aboriginal consciousness. This is firmly resisted by these women writers. Some of them produce witnesses to such ghastly experiences. For instance, Sally Morgan finds out that
her grandmother has another daughter apart from her mother and that the grandmother
does not know the whereabouts of her daughter and vice versa. She also comes to know
about the horrendous fact about the incest, that Sally Morgan's grandmother and her
mother were fathered by the same white man.

Behind all these issues such as loss, discrimination and exploitation lies one
principle, that is, injustice. Their protest is against the injustice inflicted upon them and
they do not express any contempt for the whites as a race but only look forward to
reconciliation on the basis of equality. It is not only the liberation of the self but an effort
towards the liberation of the race. Aborigines, as a race, are imprisoned and it is not only
the oppressive past that haunts them; the suppressing present and the threatening future
also bewilder them. Autobiography becomes a vehicle to express a longing of the race for
freedom as well as a longing of the self for freedom.