

Indigenous Australian Women: Towards a Womanist Perspective

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Abstract This article discusses the historical presentation of Indigenous Australian women as depicted through the 1980 paradigms of Euro-Australian feminist and anthropologist Dianne Belle. While Belle's paradigms, *Man Equals Culture*; *An Anthropology of Women*; and *Towards a Feminist Perspective*, provide a comprehensive history of written accounts of the lives of Indigenous Australian women, such accounts are always written by someone else; an onlooker or outsider. The accounts are mainly written by white anthropologists, both male and female, and are based on a white perception. In this article, I argue for the establishment of a fourth paradigm: *Towards a Womanist Perspective*; one which focuses on the life writings of Indigenous Australian women themselves. I support my argument through an in-depth study of both Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992) and Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Aunty Rita* (1994). I discuss both autobiographies in the light of womanism, a concept separate to that of mainstream feminism. While feminism is necessary, it can unintentionally overlook the needs of some women, in particular, the needs of Indigenous women. In her book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (2000), Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson states that unlike white women, Indigenous women have to deal with two patriarchies: that within their own societies and that of the overarching colonial power. I discuss this double patriarchy in the light of Alice Nannup's and Rita and Jackie Huggins' life writings and argue for a womanist-based approach to future academic study.

Key Words: Womanism, Indigenous Women, Double Patriarchy, Aboriginal Australia, Autobiographies

Introduction

Euro-Australian feminist and anthropologist Diane Bell spent the majority of her life researching the lives of Aboriginal women as well as advocating for their rights. She has also advocated for Aboriginal land rights. Some of her books include: *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983), *Generations, Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters* (1987), *Law: The Old and the New* (1980) and *Religion* (1984). In chapter two of her PhD (1980) and later in her book *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983), Bell outlines the approaches to the anthropological study of Aboriginal groups and their cultural practices. She categorises these approaches into three research paradigms: Man Equals Culture, An Anthropology of Women and Towards a Feminist Perspective (Bell, 1980).

A considerable amount of time has passed since the establishment of Dianne Bell's paradigms in 1983 and that space has brought with it great change. All of Bell's paradigms are based from the perspective of the outsider, the one looking in. In more recent years, however, Aboriginal women have themselves been writing about and documenting their own biographies and stories (Koskoff, 2014). Over the last four decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have published a wealth of literature from autobiographies to novels, poetry and plays. These publications include *Song of the Crocodile* by Nardi Simpson (2020); *Mullumbimby* by Melissa Lucashenko (2013); *The Boundary* by Nicole Watson (2011) and *Butterfly Song* by Terri Janke (2005).

Presently, in this article I will focus on Jackie and Rita Huggins' (1994) *Auntie Rita* and Alice Nannup's (1992) *When The Pelican Laughed*. In doing so, I hope to apply a fourth paradigm drawing on the theories of Hill Collins (1996), Moreton-Robinson (2013) and Walker (1981, 1983), one with a view from the inside, where Aboriginal women write about themselves. This insider view is based on Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory. As I am myself an outsider, I hope to create a paradigm where women outside of Australian Aboriginal culture can work with Aboriginal women to give voice to their particular historical and cultural experience. I call this fourth paradigm 'Towards a Womanist Perspective', with a focus on womanism more so than feminism (Hill Collins, 1996).

Womanism

Womanism is a social theory which focuses particularly on present and historical struggles of black women. It allows Aboriginal women to break free from the imperialism they frequently experience via the concepts of Western feminism. Novelist and poet Alice Walker first coined the term womanist in 1981 in her short story *Coming Apart* (Walker, 1981). Since then, it has evolved as a theory and a concept through the literary works of Clenora Hudson Weems and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Unlike feminism, the focus of womanist theory is on race and class-based oppression, as opposed to gender equality. Walker's (1983, p. 12) phrase 'Womanism

is to feminism as purple is to lavender' suggests that feminism is a theory which is situated within the broader context of womanism.

Womanism also focuses on unity, in one sense the unity between women and men, but also the unity between all women black, white, red, or otherwise. With this united focus in mind, I argue that Rita Huggins and Alice Nannup took a womanist approach in their biographic writings. I will argue that it was the wish of Rita and Jackie Huggins and Alice Nannup to create unity between the Aboriginal and white community. Each of the women had the common goal of working towards the establishment of a mutual respect between Indigenous and white Australians. I suggest that this form of womanism acts as a Garma in writing; the unity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Hill Collins, 1996; Huggins, 1994; Liddle, 2014; Nannup, 1992; Suzack, 2010).

A Complex History

There is little historical knowledge of pre-contact Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition suggests that women held an important status in their community. Giving birth and rearing children was viewed as a position of respect. Children were raised primarily by their mother and were taught to behave well until they were old enough to learn the roles specific to their gender. The role of motherhood was not thought of merely in the biological sense, but rather was seen as a position of power; the power to look after others. Women were respected for their spiritual and mental strength; the spiritual and mental strength to carry-out the role of motherhood (Anderson, 2010; Hill Collins 1996; Kaberry 1939). Europeans had little, if any, understanding of this gender complementary system. During the time of the European invasion of Australia in 1788, European women had very few rights. They were merely viewed as possessions by their husbands and fathers and the Colonial powers extended this viewpoint onto Aboriginal society (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Smith et al., 2017). This was the beginning of the double patriarchy: Aboriginal women were already discriminated against within their own society because of their sex. While in one sense the gender complementary role systems respected Indigenous women as mothers, Liddle (2014) highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were often subject to polygamous marriages arranged from birth and subject to specific punishments designed only for women. These punishments are dependent on the law of each individual tribal group and often remain unspoken, as they are sacred (Ginibi, 1994). They were now also discriminated against because of their race and gender by a colonial power. This experience was also felt by other Indigenous groups, such as Native Americans and members of the First Nations in Canada. As a result, Indigenous women have become the most marginalised social group, even more so than Indigenous men (Suzack, 2010).

In her book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, Moreton-Robinson (2000) highlights how the first wave of Australian feminism brought with it the attitude that women needed to be saved from the foul behaviours of men. The idea of feminism in this context veered more towards protection for women than emancipation. They thought they were literally saving Aboriginal women from the primitive nature of their own race and 'civilising' them for their own good. Unwanted male behaviour, such as drinking, gambling and predatory sexuality undermined civilisation and

jeopardised the welfare of women and children. Feminist campaigns were focused primarily on the protection of women (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Although this was in itself an expression of masculinist society, in terms of the protectionist aspect, it was viewed by white women as a step forward for Aboriginal women. This viewpoint was extended onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The sexuality of Indigenous women was policed and Aboriginal girls were separated from their families and brought up by white missions, where they learned to behave like white women. It was as though Indigenous girls were being 'saved' from the uncivilised nature of their 'native' cultures (Moreton-Robinson 2000; Smith et al. 2017).

Discussion

In response to this double patriarchy Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 332), states:

'An Indigenous women's standpoint generates problematics informed by our experiences. Acknowledging that Indigenous women's individual experiences will differ due to intersecting oppressions. Produced under social, political, historical and material conditions that we share consciously or unconsciously. These conditions and sets of complex relations that discursively constitute us in the everyday are also complicated by our respective cultural differences and the simultaneity of our compliance and resistance as Indigenous sovereign female subjects.'

Moreton-Robinson (2013) discusses Australian women's standpoint theory as a methodological research tool. She does so by highlighting two previous research methods; Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory and Martin Nakata's Indigenous standpoint theory. Similar to Bell's third paradigm *Towards a feminist perspective*, Harding's (2004) feminist standpoint theory suggests approaching sociological research from a feminist point of view. Moreton-Robinson (2013) argues that a feminist standpoint theory is not suitable for conducting research on the lives of Indigenous women, as feminist ideology is stemmed from capitalism. She stresses that the universities in the United States and Canada, where feminist theory has evolved, are situated on Indigenous lands; lands that were taken and used without any consideration for those that lived there. She suggests that feminism is based on the constructs of middle-class white society, such as land ownership. In contrast, Moreton-Robinson (2013) discusses Nakata's Indigenous standpoint theory. She suggests that Nakata's method is more suited to research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is based on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. She does however, suggest that being a man, Nakata has universalised the Indigenous male experience as the norm. In order to tackle this, Moreton-Robinson (2013) suggests an Australian Indigenous Women's standpoint theory as a more effective method for research with Indigenous Australian women.

Keeping Moreton-Robinson's Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory in mind, I consult the life writings of Rita Huggins and Alice Nannup. Both Indigenous Australian women whose life experiences have been very different, and yet the two have a shared experience of both an oppressive Aboriginal male dominant and also a white imperialist social structure. Alice

Nannup was born on Pilbara Station in 1911 to Aboriginal mother Ngulyi and white father and station owner Tom Basset. Rita Huggins was born in a cave near Carnarvon Gorge in the ancestral home of the Bidjara Pitjara people where she and her family lived in a humpy until they were forced to move to Cherbourg Station. Both women were sent to work as domestic servants far from their families when they were just young girls.

In her book, *When the Pelican Laughed*, Alice Nannup (1992, p. 21) describes her background and childhood on Kangan station:

‘Kangan was owned by an Englishman, Tom Bassett. I didn’t know it at the time but he was my father, he was from Roebourne and he originally started out as a mailman. I see Kangan as my home because that’s the main station I grew up on.’

She goes on to describe her mother and father and family background: ‘My mother never told me who my father was but I knew he was a white man because I was fair like my grandmother’ (p. 18); ‘I’m Aboriginal, English and Indian, a real international person’ (p. 20).

Rita Huggins (1994, pp. 7-8) describes her family background also:

‘My born country is the land of the Bidjara-Pitjara people ... also the land of the Kairi, Nuri, Karingbal, Longabulla, Jiman and Wadja people. In our land are waterfalls, waterholes and creeks where we swam and where the older people fished ... the men hunted kangaroos, goannas, lizards, snakes and porcupines with spears and boomerangs. The women gathered berries, grubs, wild plums, honey and waterlilies, and yams and other roots with their digging sticks.’

Although Nannup’s and Huggins’s early childhood memories and family backgrounds are in stark contrast with one another, they do bear certain similarities. Both women share a clear concept of kinship and belonging. Nannup is proud of her mixed-race background and of the fact that she had so many grandmothers in the Mulba tribal sense. Huggins is proud of the land she comes from and the culture of her people. Unlike Nannup who was born on a mission station, Huggins was born free. It was some years later before Huggins and her family were taken and brought to Cherbourg station. Huggins (1994, p. 9) describes the day she and her family were taken:

‘One winter’s night, troopers came riding on horseback through our camp. My father went to see what was happening, and my mother stayed with her children to try to stop us from being so frightened. One trooper I remember clearly. Perhaps he was sorry for what he was doing, because he gave me some fruit, a banana, something as unknown to me as the Whiteman who offered it. My mother saw, and cried out to me, “Barjun, Barjun” (poison poison) ... What was to appear next out of the bush took us all by surprise and we nearly turned white with fright. It was a huge cage with four round things on it which when moved by the man in the cabin in front, made a deafening sound, shifting the ground and flattening the grass, stones and twigs beneath it. We had never seen a cattle truck before. A

strong smell surrounded us as we entered the truck and we saw brown stains on the wooden floor.'

When I say that Nannup was not born free, I simply mean that she spent the early years of her life in Kangan station. Mission Stations, such as Kangan were set up by religious individuals and organisations from the early 19th Century and latterly affected by Australian government policies resulting in the 'Stolen Generations' 1910s-1970s. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People were placed on these stations where they worked for little or no pay. They were housed together regardless of where they came from – peoples that would never have associated with one another up to that point – they existed together in a form of indentured slavery. They were Anglicised as well as Christianised. It seems from her writings that both she and her mother's status at Kangan was somewhat unclear. She describes her childhood there with her half-sister in a positive light: 'Ella and I had our own nanny goats, they were ours and the milk from them was just for us' (Nannup, 1992, p. 22). She describes the relationship between her and her father and that between her father and her mother. She appeared to have had a close relationship with her father Tom Bassett, the station owner. She was able to go up to her father's house, which would have been the main house of the station, to spend a night or so if she wanted to: 'About Tommy, I think my mother must have had a talk to him and asked if I could go up there from time to time, and that's what I'd do for some peace' (Nannup, 1992, p. 22).

She also describes her father's distress at her and her mother's decision to leave Kangan:

'One night her and Tommy were playing crib when I heard him break down and start crying. I was in bed and I didn't know what they were talking about, but I just buried my head because I didn't want to hear him cry' (Nannup, 1992, p. 37).

It is interesting to note that it was Alice's mother's decision to leave the station. In discussing her mother's relationship with her father, she describes how they would both play cards together at night: 'I remember they got on quite well together and they played a lot of cribbage. At night id [sic] hear them laughing and growling at one another, you know cheating and things like that' (Nannup, 1992, p. 25).

She does however state that her mother was only fifteen when she was born: 'She did tell me that she had me on Abydos station, she was fifteen and we left there when I was a baby' (Nannup, 1992, p. 18). She goes on to describe how they did not live in the same section of the houses as him:

'I don't think my mother was with Tommy because he had his own section of the place and we had ours. I think they must have come to some arrangement that she'd look after him and the house but they'd keep separate lives' (Nannup, 1992, p. 25).

She describes her mother's role in Kangan, how she would look after Tom and the other men: 'My mother used to cook for all the working men there, she used to go back and forth into Roebourne' (Nannup, 1992, p. 21). It is clear that there was a colonial patriarchy at play in

Kangan, as there was at other stations throughout Australia. One can see glimpses of this system through Nannup's description of her childhood.

This form of colonial patriarchy is much more evident in Nannup's description of her removal from her mother through deceitful and forcible means. She describes how she and her sister Ella would have to hide as the scouts came around looking to remove mixed race children from their families:

'It was when we were back on Malina that the scouts started to come around. They were sent up from the Aboriginal Affairs in Perth to come and look for the half-caste kids. My mother would say, "The scouts are back so you'd better be careful," and she'd tell us to stay in the bunkhouse all day. She was working in the kitchen so she'd bring down a sandwich and a bottle of water and say, "If they come around, get under the bed and don't talk, just keep quiet"' (Nannup, 1992, p. 38).

She goes on to discuss how her mother was tricked into thinking that she would be returned to her when she was eighteen:

'I'm older, I often think back to this time and I think everything was arranged before we ever left the North. It was a cunning way to get me, to trick my mother by telling her I was going off to be educated, then brought back to be with them when I turned eighteen' (Nannup, 1992, p. 45).

Nannup not only experienced the imperialism of the white man, but also experienced the patriarchy within her Indigenous Mulba culture. She describes how her mother had to be married to a Mulba man, as the elders did not think it appropriate for her to work at Kangan without having an Aboriginal husband: 'that's how she met old Roebourne Ned. See the elders reckoned she shouldn't be living there without an aboriginal husband; that was the law' (Nannup, 1992, p. 21). Nannup also describes how her mother was confronted by a council of men for breaking Mulba law:

'It is law that when a woman's Nyuba (partner) dies she's got to have all her hair cut off to make herself ugly for someone else but mother didn't do this and she didn't explain why ... we got to the meeting place and that evening they made a big fire and mother had to kneel down in a circle of men. They started asking her questions and rattling their spears and asking her in language (Mulba), why didn't you carry out the law? Mother wouldn't talk, she just knelt there quietly and they kept jabbing her in the leg ... they said to her she thought she was white because she had Tommy behind her but mother didn't think that at all and she was very upset. Later that night the women came and cut Mothers hair off. She was allowed to keep it, of course because if anybody got a hold of it they could sing (curse) her with it' (Nannup, 1992, pp. 25-26).

Nannup (1992, p. 35) also highlights aspects of this male dominant social structure in relation to herself. She describes how the men made the decisions when it came to marriage; that a man would choose his wife by deciding who he would like as a mother-in-law:

‘When I was born they gave me to an old man ... it was never the old women that chose, it was only ever men. A woman used to walk about 4 or 5 yards behind her man, carrying a baby on her hip, a bundle of wood or something on her head, another bundle on her back, and have children walking along with her ... while the man was walking along carrying a few spears. I tell you what, the men had it made.’

This male dominance was evident later in her life when Nannup was a young teenager working at Moore River. She highlights how it was only the men who were allowed to send notes to the women; that the women were not allowed to send notes, but were expected to respond to them:

‘A boy wrote a note to me once saying he wanted to see me but I didn’t want any part of it so I just ripped it up ... well he grabbed hold of me by the neck and pushed me down onto the fence. He was nearly choking me and I couldn’t get away. When I write notes to girls I expect an answer, he said and I could hear how angry he was’ (Nannup, 1992, p. 74).

Rita Huggins had a similar experience of this double patriarchy. Firstly, she experienced the oppression of the *Migaloo*. She describes what her life was like for her and her family on Cherbourg Station:

‘If we used our own language in front of the authorities we would face punishment and be corrected in the Queen’s English ... The authorities tried to take away all our tribal ways and to replace them with English ones ... my parents Albert and Rose were given English names by their white station owners. In turn, my parents called their children: Barney; Clare; Margaret; Harry; Thelma; Rita; Violet; Jim; Ruby; Oliver; Lawrence; Isobel; Albert and Walter. It is known that at least the three eldest had tribal names as well as English ones, but we don’t know any more what they were’ (Huggins, 1994, p. 17).

She also describes her first job working as a domestic when she was only thirteen. She highlights how this work shaped her way of thinking for the rest of her life:

‘My first job was from dawn until the late hours of the evening, a daily routine of cleaning, washing, ironing, preparing food and caring for the children ... It is my background as a domestic that has in many ways shaped my whole life ... There was no more schooling for me ... I was only thirteen but they thought I’d had enough education’ (Huggins, 1994, pp. 37-38).

Huggins (1994, p. 33) highlights how Aboriginal people had no choice as to when or where they would be working; that the authorities would simply decide that for them:

'In the late 1930s and the 1940s, control of Aboriginals' work was made law under the Queensland Aborigines' and Torres Strait Islanders' Preservation and Protection Acts of 1939-1946 which empowered the minister, acting through a system of superintendents and police, to enter employment contracts on behalf of Aboriginal people, to hold any funds they might have had, and to supervise spending. The Acts essentially legislated a system of enslaved labour'.

Secondly, Huggins experienced the patriarchy within her own family. She describes her father and his dominance over her and the rest of the family: 'Dada had a volatile temper which would erupt into full-scale fury and war when stirred ... His word was law and we dared not speak back or challenge him' (Huggins, 1994, p. 22). Another aspect of the double patriarchy was experienced by Rita and her daughter Jackie in the 1990s when they went to retrieve Rita's records from the authorities. The authorities had kept records of Rita regarding her childhood in Cherbourg, all of her children and on every job she had had up until the 1970s. Jackie was not even allowed to turn the pages of the written records herself: 'When I first made enquiries about seeing my mother's file, I was made to watch across a huge desk as two white public servants turned the pages' (Huggins, 1994, pp. 4-5).

In her article, Celeste Liddle (2014) calls herself a womanist. She states the importance of the publication of the life writings of Aboriginal women. Jackie Huggins also describes this as a means of breaking a double fold of silence:

'The writing of this book (*Auntie Rita*) was an attempt to reclaim the history of our people. To do this is to encounter a double fold of silence. Each fold is of the same cloth – two centuries of colonisation. There are the acts of violence that attempted to alienate (with varying degrees of success) black people's access to knowledge of their own culture and its history; taking people from their lands, separating children from their parents, insisting on the surrender of traditional languages and customs and the adoption of European ways' (Huggins, 1994, p. 4).

Moving Bell's paradigms

Through the publication of their life writings, both Rita Huggins and Alice Nannup reclaim and preserve their history in a womanist way. Their writings provide non-Aboriginal people with a greater understanding of the historic and current positions of Aboriginal people. Both books reflect a non-bitter attitude towards the white coloniser. Huggins (1994, pp. 3-6) proclaims:

'Much has been done to me and my people that we find hard to talk about. One of the things that amazes people is that we have managed to survive without a huge amount of outward bitterness.'

Similarly, Nannup (1992, p. 20) states: 'You hear people run down the English but I never do, because that's a part of me, just like having Indian blood'. Life writings of those, such as Alice Nannup and Rita Huggins, not only act as a preservation of Aboriginal history, language and culture, but call for a stronger relationship between Indigenous and white Australians. Their

lack of bitterness makes space for a longing to be recognised by white Australian society; to build a relationship of mutual respect between cultures. Their biographies provide a glimpse into Aboriginal culture, historic and present day, that cannot be captured through a feminist standpoint.

In this article, I have highlighted the research paradigms of renowned anthropologist Dianne Bell as outlined in her 1983 book *Daughters of the Dreaming*. These paradigms are entitled 'Man Equals Culture', 'An Anthropology of Women' and 'Towards a Feminist Perspective' (Bell, 1980). Based on the theoretical research of Hill Collins (1996), Moreton-Robinson (2013) and Walker (1983), I suggest a fourth paradigm: 'Towards a Womanist Perspective'. This new paradigm focuses on the writings of Aboriginal women themselves. I therefore make reference to the life writings of both Rita Huggins and Alice Nannup arguing the complexity of the double patriarchy at work in both their lives: the patriarchy of the male dominance within their own families and cultures and that of the imperial white man. I make this argument through Aileen Moreton-Robinson's Aboriginal Woman's standpoint theory and by discussing Huggins's and Nannup's different experiences of the double patriarchy in their respective lives. A Womanist perspective also calls for a relationship between white and Indigenous women: a friendship and an understanding for one another.

I conclude by arguing that Aboriginal women's life writings not only preserve Aboriginal culture and history, but also create a greater understanding and respect for Aboriginal women and their perspectives. I argue that these biographies are written through a Womanist perspective, as they declare no bitterness towards white Australians. I have found that through their biographies, Huggins and Nannup call for a better relationship between white and Indigenous Australian women; one not of an imperial Feminist perspective, but rather one of a Womanist understanding, and one of mutual cultural respect. This article is part of that relationship given that I as a white woman have the ability to work with the life writings of these Aboriginal women.

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