

Loss, Identity, and Resistance: The Impact of Assimilation Policy in Jane Harrison's *Stolen*

Dr. K. Minnaa
Assistant Professor of English,
St. Mary's College (Autonomous) Thoothukudi
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli

Thesis Statement

Jane Harrison's *Stolen* exposes the emotional and cultural trauma caused by Australia's assimilation policies by portraying the lives of five Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families; through fragmented narratives, symbolic scenes, and powerful characterization, the play reveals how colonial authority attempted to erase Indigenous identity while simultaneously highlighting the resilience and survival of Aboriginal culture.

Abstract

Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1998) is a powerful dramatic representation of the experiences of Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families under the Australian government's assimilation policy. The play focuses on five characters—Sandy, Ruby, Jimmy, Anne, and Shirley—whose lives are shaped by the trauma of separation from their families and communities. Through episodic scenes and fragmented storytelling, Harrison reveals the psychological, cultural, and emotional consequences of the policies that created what is now known as the “Stolen Generations.” This paper examines how the play portrays the loss of identity, the struggle for belonging, and the resilience of Aboriginal people in the face of systemic oppression. By analyzing characterization, symbolism, and dramatic structure, the study demonstrates how *Stolen* serves as both a critique of colonial authority and a tribute to Indigenous survival. Ultimately, the play highlights the importance of memory, cultural continuity, and collective healing in confronting historical injustice.

Introduction

The history of colonialism in Australia includes policies that deeply affected Aboriginal communities. One of the most controversial policies was the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, which occurred from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s. These children were placed in institutions or foster homes with the intention of assimilating them into white Australian society. This policy resulted in the creation of what is known as the “Stolen Generations.” Jane Harrison's play *Stolen* provides a dramatic representation of the human consequences of this historical injustice. Commissioned by the Aboriginal theatre company Ilbjerri in the late 1990s, the play was written to bring attention to the experiences of Aboriginal people who were affected by the assimilation policies.

Unlike traditional plays that follow a linear storyline, *Stolen* presents a series of episodic scenes that depict the lives of five characters: Sandy, Ruby, Jimmy, Anne, and Shirley. Each character represents a different experience of removal, loss, and survival. Through their stories, Harrison reveals the emotional impact of separation from family and the struggle to maintain cultural identity. This paper examines how *Stolen* portrays the trauma of the Stolen Generations and explores the ways in which the play uses dramatic techniques to convey both suffering and resilience. By analysing the characters, themes, and structure of the play, the study demonstrates how Harrison transforms historical experience into a powerful work of political theatre.

To fully understand *Stolen*, it is important to consider the historical context in which the play is set. For many decades, Australian government policies aimed to assimilate Aboriginal people into white society. Authorities believed that Aboriginal culture would eventually disappear and that Indigenous people should adopt European customs and lifestyles.

As part of this policy, thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in government institutions, missions, or white foster homes. These children were often denied contact with their families and were discouraged from speaking their native languages or practicing their cultural traditions. The consequences of these policies were devastating. Many children experienced emotional trauma, identity confusion, and lifelong separation from their communities. *Stolen* brings these experiences to life by focusing on individual stories rather than abstract historical facts. Through the voices of the characters, the play reveals the human cost of colonial policies.

The five central characters in *Stolen* represent different responses to the trauma of removal. **Sandy** represents the pain of a child who longs to return to his family. Throughout the play, he repeatedly attempts to escape from the institutions where he is held. His constant efforts to return home symbolize the deep emotional bond between Aboriginal children and their families. However, his repeated failures illustrate the power of the institutions that controlled their lives. **Ruby's** story highlights the psychological consequences of separation. She experiences emotional instability and struggles to cope with the loss of her family and cultural identity. Her character demonstrates how the assimilation policy caused lasting psychological trauma.

Jimmy's experience reflects the institutionalization of Aboriginal children. Raised in a mission, he grows up isolated from both his culture and mainstream society. His story illustrates how the policy created individuals who felt that they belonged nowhere. **Anne** represents a different experience of assimilation. Raised by a white family, she grows up unaware of her Aboriginal heritage. When she eventually learns the truth about her identity, she experiences a profound sense of loss and confusion.

Shirley's story illustrates the perspective of a mother whose children have been taken away. Her grief represents the suffering experienced by countless Aboriginal parents during the era of the Stolen Generations. Through these characters, Harrison portrays the wide-ranging impact of assimilation policies.

One of the most significant themes in *Stolen* is the loss of cultural identity. The forced removal of children prevented them from learning their language, traditions, and cultural practices. Without these connections, many characters struggle to understand who they are. For example, Anne's discovery of her Aboriginal heritage forces her to question the identity she had accepted throughout her life. Similarly, Jimmy's upbringing in institutions leaves him disconnected from both Aboriginal and white cultures. This loss of identity reflects the broader cultural damage caused by colonial policies.

Harrison's use of episodic scenes is one of the most striking features of *Stolen*. Instead of presenting a single continuous story, the play moves between different moments in the characters' lives. This fragmented structure reflects the disrupted lives of the characters. Their memories and experiences appear as scattered fragments rather than a coherent narrative. The structure also allows the play to represent multiple perspectives simultaneously. By shifting between characters, Harrison shows how the assimilation policy affected individuals in different ways.

While *Stolen* exposes the injustice of colonial policies, it also celebrates the resilience of Aboriginal people. Despite the trauma they experience, the characters continue to search for identity, belonging, and healing. The play serves as a form of political protest by bringing attention to a painful chapter of Australian history. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of remembering the past and acknowledging historical injustice. By presenting these stories on stage, Harrison gives voice to individuals whose experiences were often ignored or silenced.

Jane Harrison's *Stolen* is a powerful dramatic exploration of the experiences of the Stolen Generations. Through its portrayal of five characters affected by assimilation policies, the play reveals the emotional, psychological, and cultural consequences of forced removal. By using fragmented storytelling and symbolic scenes, Harrison captures the complexity of trauma and identity loss experienced by Aboriginal people. At the same time, the play highlights the resilience and survival of Indigenous communities in the face of oppression. Ultimately, *Stolen* serves both as a critique of colonial history and as a tribute to the strength of Aboriginal culture. Its powerful representation of loss, identity, and resistance ensures that the stories of the Stolen Generations will continue to be remembered.

Works Cited

Harrison, Jane. *Stolen*. Currency Press, 1998.

Brewster, Anne. *Literary Formations: Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*. Melbourne UP, 1995.

Heiss, Anita, and Peter Minter, editors. *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2008.

Hodge, Bob, and Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*. Allen & Unwin, 1991.

Shoemaker, Adam. *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*. University of Queensland Press, 1989.

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.