

**PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: ABORIGINAL WOMANHOOD AND COLONIAL RULE IN
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ABSTRACT:

This paper critically examines Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin* through the lens of the feminist maxim "the personal is political," situating Aboriginal womanhood within the broader context of colonial governance in Australia. The narrative, rooted in Kartinyeri's lived experience as a member of the Stolen Generations, reveals how colonial policies—under the pretence of protection, assimilation, and religious doctrine—systematically disrupted Indigenous culture and weaken Aboriginal women. By exposing the demoralizing impact of authorized child removals, sexual exploitation, cultural erasure, and forced servitude, the text challenges the public-private divide, demonstrating that Aboriginal women's personal traumas are deeply implanted in political histories. The paper further argues that Kartinyeri's autobiographical resistance functions as a political act, reclaiming voice and agency in a system designed to silence. In reinterpreting her life through memory and testimony, *Kick the Tin* not only documents the legacy of colonial violence but also asserts Indigenous womanhood as a site of survival, resistance, and reclamation. Thus, the personal narrative becomes a powerful critique of colonial rule and a call for justice, remembrance, and decolonization.

Keywords:

Womanhood, resistance, assimilation, reclamation, colonial, indigenous

Personal is Political: Aboriginal Womanhood and Colonial Rule in *Kick the Tin*

The personal is political, also called the private is political; is a political slogan that expresses "a common belief among feminists that personal experiences of women are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality" (Kelly n.pag.). There are many ambiguities about the origin of the phrase, 'personal is political' but it became more popular in 1970s when American feminist Carol Hanisch used this title in her essay. The slogan/phrase "the personal is political" created impact across the world under the second-wave feminism. It tried to shape the social analysis and theories, encouraging new types of activism and extending the scope of issues that could be brought under the umbrella of feminism by and large. 'Personal is political' phrase, on the one hand directly hits the universal power structure of patriarchal society, on the other it also provides opportunity to evaluate the life experiences of indigenous women under the colonial system of governance.

The paper doesn't go into the debate of different phases, dynamics and dimensions of feminism but only attempts to analyze how the British colonial policies transplanted European patriarchal power structure and disordered the traditional position of Aboriginal women in Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin*. The text subtly reveals Aboriginal women's relationship with the white and black men under various policies of 'protection board'. The text exposes the ways adopted by Christian missionaries, colonial administrators and policy makers to destroy the structure of Aboriginal culture and society. In the text all the Aboriginal women and Men have no personal choices, personal space and personal life; everything is controlled through the religious, cultural and colonial strategies of politics. The traditional indigenous women used to be the nub of family, community, culture and economy of Aboriginal world. In this context Mohawk activist Patricia Monture comments that the positive portrayals of traditional gender relations are not enough to understand the position of Aboriginal women in traditional Aboriginal society:

The anthropologists describe us as a matrilineal society, but that doesn't really cover the way our culture is and our traditions are. Women are very much valued and that's more about there not being a gender hierarchy in the traditions of my people" (Qtd. in Grey n.pag.).

Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin* takes the readers to the eras of protectionism, assimilation and self-determination under commonwealth and state government policies. Under such policies the life of Doris Kartinyeri and many other women were largely brought under colonially constructed power structure imposing on them the western interest of marriage and servitude. The text records the life experiences of women from the establishment of 'protection board' to the assimilation policy. When they resist by writing against the system the "self presentation by the indigenous women" becomes "a political act" (Moreton-Robinson 13).

Politics, in broader sense, is an enterprise through which people form, preserve, and amend rules and regulations to make their life more smooth, systematic and sustainable. There are myriad ways through which politics can be defined or analyzed. One of the definitions through which black-white relationship in Australia could be analyzed, is the exercise of power that claims to allocate resources, to improve living standard of the Aboriginals through Christianity, European cultural, economic and social values. The introduction of the new politics of ruling Australia, which had begun in 1788, completely changed and obliterated the already existing Aboriginal system of governance which was clearly opposite to the European ways of governance. When Australia became 'Federal Country' in 1900, several policies were made to govern and control the lives of Aboriginals. More than three hundred years of the Aboriginal and White relationship have gone under several policies like 'Protectionism', 'Assimilation policies', and 'Multicultural Policies' etc. where the Aboriginal socio-cultural set up has largely been devastated.

Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin*, therefore, clearly indicates that how the politics or governance of white dominating democratic nation has shattered the personal lives, dreams, mental freedom and individual choices from the Aboriginals and particularly women. The title of Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin*, stipulates the idea of 'personal is political' because the title itself symbolizes the life which has been kicked around. 'Kick the Tin' is the name of a game played by children at Colebrook Home. In the game all the children stand around the tin and a person stands next to the tin. When the person kicks the tin all children are supposed to run away and hide. "The idea of the game" Kartinyeri says, "was for 'It' to tag the kids found and for the others to make it back to the tin without being caught" (*KTT*, 2). Kartinyeri's correlation of her life with the game symbolizes that the children of stolen generation had no life of their own. They could be utilized for religious purposes, housekeeping and as sexual objects because they had no connections with their parents, culture and relatives. Kartinyeri's comment on her own life, in the introductory page of the book, reveals her life having no personal life, choices, which could be correlated with game of tin:

My life has been literally kicked about, just like the tin we used to kick around. I believe that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters experienced much suffering because of the abusive behavior of white fella governments and regimental, oppressive institutions. By running and hiding we escaped white fellas' way. (*KTT*, 2)

Doris Kartinyeri's narrative belongs to 'Stolen Generation' which reflects the colonial politics of replacing the Aboriginal culture into white culture of Europe. The politics of 'Protection Board' steals the childhood of Doris Kartinyeri as she was removed permanently from her parents when she was of one month. The policies of 'Protection Board' supposedly legalized the indigenous child abduction to make Australia a complete white nation. The policies of 'Stolen Generation' caused huge mental and psychological disturbances for Aboriginal half-caste children throughout their life and *Kick the Tin* is the mouthpiece of such devastations. She writes that she was born on 8 September, 1945 at Raukkan, a Ngarrindjeri community at Point McLeay on the shores of Lake Alexandria. But her fate was determined by the politics of 'Protection Board' and she was not allowed to go to her father's house. She describes her removal from the hospital under the Board's policies:

My mother died of complications in Murray Bridge Hospital on October 8, just one month after my birth. Within a few days of the death of my mother, I was stolen from my family. Welfare officers from the Aboriginal Protection Board removed me from the Murray Bridge Hospital and place me in Colebrook Home without my father knowing. (*KTT*, 6)

She spends her childhood without parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and culture at Colebrook Home. She is taught to hate the natives, love the Christianity and was turned to be an obedient servant in the upper class white households. She is never asked to meet and go to her own people:

I stayed at Colebrook Home until I turned fourteen years old. I was never told that I was removed from my family. I was never told that my mother had died. In all of my childhood, I was never taken back to my family. (*KTT*, 6)

Kick the Tin presents a strong critique of colonial education policies which made to annihilate the Aboriginal culture and society. Since 1788 the colonial government had no objective of making the natives aware and educated. They only tried to train their minds for working in the middle and upper middle households and farms as servants. After the federation of

Australia as a state it was considered essential to educate the Aboriginals. The different policies made under the supervision of state government or government sponsored policies of 'Protection Board' turned to be racially discriminated, full of partiality and devastating for Aboriginals' socio-cultural set up.

This book provides a detailed discourse on the education system provided to the stolen generation under the policies of 'Protection Board'. It takes the readers to understand the colonial missions, objectives and medium of spreading Western education among the Aboriginals. Kartinyeri's narrative factually argues that colonial education system, which has religious roots, had no concerns with the welfare of the natives.

The removal of the Aboriginal children from families was sanctioned under the Aborigines Protection Act 1909, and in the same period mission of making Australia a white nation was legalized. "This system sanctioned a debased curriculum that focused on teaching manual skills under the assumption that Aboriginal people would be better suited to work as domestic for 'white' masters or employers" (Burridge and Andrew, 12). In missionary homes, where stolen children were kept, focused only on the Christianity that led to the total annihilation of the Aboriginal culture, art and social structure by and large. Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin* describes that there was no Aboriginal's participation that could talk about the syllabus, objectives and outcomes of the education system. She is kept at a Colebrook Home until she gets fourteen. She shares an episode of her childhood when a new superintendent and his wife took the charge of Colebrook Home:

Because religion was so important to the new superintendent, his wife and their family, we were made to practice at the home and whenever we went out. It was all in the hands of the Lord. Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! It was God's will to practice religion, wherever we went, whether it was to the beach or the zoo or any other public place. We found this most embarrassing and humiliating. (*KTT*, 30)

All such experiences and regular forced and imposed ideas of bible made her sick of school and education. She regularly went to school but failed in making interest at studies:

My feelings about school were negative and not productive. Again, where is the guiding hand a child is meant to have? My attendance was good but my grades were not successful. I did not like the academic part of school. I was teased at school. (*KTT*,57)

The life narrative of Doris Kartinyeri, *Kick the Tin*, is steeped in sexual oppression, dejection and domestic violence. Her life narrative is a revelation of sexual exploitation in colonial houses where stolen children are kept under the rules and regulations of 'Aboriginal Protection Board'. It is a strong voice that defies the conception of so called 'protection' ensured for Aboriginal stolen girls under 'Protection Board. Doris' life is entirely shaped under the rules of 'Protection Board' where different levels of sexual oppressions hit her life. The text exposes the hidden face of the 'Christian Missionaries' for whom the young stolen girls were the easy prey for sex. The episode of the text titled, 'Shunted About', focuses on her removal from Colebrook House and her going to Girls Technical High School. When she is taken to 'Coromandel Valley', which was also a missionary house for the stolen girls. Here she boldly shares her experiences when she is attempted to sexually abused by the Church Minister:

Here was this lay minister of the Church who I soon experienced as a man who constantly exposed himself to me. At night I could hear him at my bedroom window. I was too terrified to tell his wife as I knew that she would not believe me. For the first time in my mind I wanted to leave. I felt unsafe and insecure. I wanted to leave but because of my age I didn't. I did not have contact with any of my family, my uncles, my cousins, my father, my aunties, and my brothers and sisters at the time. (*KTT*, 61)

She further shares her horrendous experiences of Coromandel Valley where she regularly tortured by the minister. "I ran from the chook shed dropping the bucket, this man with his erect penis violating my vulnerability. I was forced to his marital bed with his hand mauling me" (*KTT*, 62). There are many instances in the text that reveal the sexual vulnerability of children in the institution where stolen children are kept. N. Musgrove in, *The Scars Remain, A long History of Forgotten Australians and Children's Institutions*, published in 2013, has stated that:

It is acknowledged that the risk of a child being sexually abused in the historical residential institutions was particularly high; it is difficult to determine exactly how many of these children experienced sexual abuse while in institution. When allegations of sexual abuse were made, official records were rarely made or retained. (130)

The incidents of sexual objectification of Aboriginal women, domestic violence, victims of male tortures and racially structured society, documented in *Kick the Tin*, factually disclose that Aboriginal women's personal lives are badly affected by colonially organized politics in Australia.

The other most dominating issues covered by Doris, are loneliness, escapism and alcoholism. These issues can evidently be correlated with the colonial politics that not only broke the social-structure of the Aboriginals but also created a gulf between the customary relationship of men and women of this community. In this sense the issues of Aboriginals' falling into the habits of alcoholism and escapism etc. are purely political in nature.

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There was alcohol abuse though, and I had to adjust so that, which was the hardest thing to do. I wasn't used to seeing drunks falling all over the place. There were lots of times when fellas were drunk and falling around. How it affected me was that I was scared. It was frightening ...(*KTT*, 75)

To conclude, *Kick the Tin* presents the severe critique on the colonial politics that not only decimated personal lives of Aboriginal women in Australia but also trapped them into the colonially endorsed patriarchal politics. The text, with its international reach, strongly put facts before the readers that colonialists' invasion of Aboriginal land and the subsequent colonization of Australia has made a disastrous effect on Aboriginal women, leaving them disadvantaged and disempowered. It restricts their social, spiritual, and ceremonial domains that existed prior to colonization. The text also depicts that the inhabitants have entirely lost their traditional legacy of personal independence and have been forced to live on the mercy of Western laws which have strong patriarchal roots of controlling women.

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