Contemporary Australian Indigenous Women’s Life Writing

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1. Introduction of Australian Indigenous Literature

The original inhabitants of Australia, Australian aboriginals, have been existing in the Australian continent and nearby islands for over 40,000 years with more than 16,000 years of aboriginal cultures. With over 200 oral languages but not any written form of their own languages, they descend their legends, myths, stories, poems and songs depending on oral forms. As an important carrier of aboriginal peoples keeping knowledge, history and culture, oral literature is now still taking its position in some remote areas, and massive oral literary materials haven’t been recorded as written forms. During the period of the domination under the “Genocide Policy”\(^{(1)}\) and “White Australia policy”\(^{(2)}\) since the colonists boarded on the Australian continent as well as the assimilation policy adopted in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, the aboriginals were persecuted and excluded as “others” that caused a great loss of their history and traditional culture, certainly, the only way of descending their history and culture was still story telling. Definitely, indigenous literature, like aboriginal people’s life and social status, had been in the situation of being neglected for several hundred years even it is an indispensable part of Australian history and culture.

Till 1986, indigenous literature was mentioned in A History of Australian Literature for the first time in which four pages were covered to introduce the aboriginal authors Kath Walker, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson and Archie Weller. In this book, indigenous life writing was firstly mentioned as an important part of indigenous literature by the author Ken Goodwin.\(^{(3)}\) Strictly speaking, indigenous literature began in 1950s because of the implementation of Australian multicultural policy through which Australia government provided aboriginal people a protection and integration policy under which circumstance aboriginal people could keep their own cultures and the opportunity to pursue equal rights and living condition.

As the carrier of history, indigenous literature records aboriginal people’s life and reflects the core of aboriginal culture through connecting with the history which was neglected and buried by colonists and it has been raising up to awake more educated Australian aboriginal people to recognize their own identity, history and culture. Actually, the rising up indigenous literature can be reckoned as a self recognition and remodeling process of Australian literature itself. More and more aboriginal works were published since the 20th century like David Unaipon’s Native Legends (1929), Ursula McConnel’s Myths of the Munkan (1957) and so on. In 1964, aboriginal female poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) published her poetry...
collection *We Are Going* which aroused broad attention of the main stream society and literature field for the first time. In her works, Kath described vividly the aboriginal people’s traditional life and culture and the natural environment where the aboriginal people are living, and opened the new channel to accuse the racial discrimination and oppression from the white society.\(^4\)

The first indigenous novel was Colin Johnson’s *Wild Cat Falling* which was published in 1965. In this novel, Colin figured an image of an aboriginal young guy who was isolated by the main stream society based on his own life experience.

### 2. Indigenous Female Life Writing

Compared with the emerging of aboriginal female writers, there were less aboriginal male writers. The main reason is the government’s policy of genocide. The famous aboriginal people’s right activist Roberta Sykes once pointed out that in the 1960s to 1970s, every one of four male aboriginals died at the age of 30, and two of the other three would be put into prison.\(^5\) That’s the reason why aboriginal females took important roles in their daily life as the backbones of their families and naturally it was a trend that more and more works were written by female aboriginal writers. Of course, the aboriginal female writers kept their tradition to record their womanhood, motherhood and sisterhood from the most primitive and real stories that expressed themselves directly and independently in which feminist theories and principles including their identities, communities, culture, education and security and other elements are presented and advocated. Therefore, indigenous women’s life writings had gradually become a form of literary genres which is different from the white people’s classic literature and established its own status in Australian society. Since the first indigenous female life writing was published in 1970s, it has been developing gradually from the forming stage to a mature stream.

In 1970s, works such as Yvonne Goolagong’s *Yvonne! On the Move* (1973), Margaret Tucker’s *If Everyone Cared* (1977), Monica Clare’s *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (1978) and Ella Simon’s *Through My Eyes* (1978) appeared in the public’s eyes. Most of these stories reflected aboriginal people’s real life and the racial discrimination and oppression they suffered from the colonists in 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries. Since 1980s, more and more indigenous women’s life writings came out such as Shirley Smith’s *Mumshirl: An Autobiography* (1981), Marnie Kennedy’s *Born a Half-Caste* (1985), Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl* (1987) and so on, among which Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) which will be analyzed in the following part, and Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1989) were treated as the representatives and a milestone in the development of indigenous life writing.

Doris Pilkington is the representative of aboriginal female writers in 1990s till now, her trilogy *Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter* (1991), *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996), and
Under the Windamarra Tree (2002) are life writings that reflected the special Australian history of “the stolen generation” and for herself, these works are the recording of her own experience of pursuing her root. In this period, more works of life writing appeared such as Alice Nannup’s When the Pelican Laughed (1992), Jackie Huggins’s Auntie Rita (1994). Works in this period had been mature no matter on the level of the writer’s expression of their thoughts or the level of art and aesthetics. They more focused subjectively on the aboriginal people’s life itself but not the relationship between aboriginal people and the white society, and some of the stories even depicted the inner conflicts of the aboriginal organizations.

3. Feminism and Indigenous Women’s Life Writing

Since Australian women were granted the right to vote in federal elections in 1902, the increasing awareness of women’s problems have resulted in a large, specific body of self-conscious feminist literature emerged. As an important carrier for feminists and some modern historians and sociologists to express feminism, feminist literature, in particular, saw women as inevitably reduced to the margins of the national life and advocated the independence and privileges of women in their different forms of writings. Feminist themes have dominated women’s writing since the 1970s as women’s writing generally has emerged into much greater prominence, if not dominance. Radio series, TV programs, novels, essays, drama, poetry as well as autobiography concentrated on women’s issues and a great number of female writers sustain their political and personal aspirations, cultural, sexual and racial assumptions from a modern perspective. For example, In Katharine Susannah Prichard’s novel Coonadoo which depicted about the aboriginal girl-- Coonadoo’s tragic life, it can be easily found out Prichard’s advocating for the equal rights between white and aboriginal women.

1) Indigenous Women’s Life Writing in the Early 20th Century

In the early 20th century, stories are almost about aboriginal women’s tragedies to accuse racial oppression under the background of the period of the domination under the “White Australia” policy. Indigenous people’s life stories are mementos of both aboriginal people’s individual fates and of the global process of Indigenous population; they are the raw historical and cultural material for Indigenous social development. In most indigenous female writer’s “life writing” works which are based on the background of the period of the domination under the “White Australia” policy, stories are almost about aboriginal women’s tragedies to accuse racial oppression. In their story telling, we can find that the aboriginal women were living under control of the strict social hierarchy without any social status, both white men and women, even aboriginal men, took the aboriginal women as working and sexual tools even they were with the qualities of diligence, braveness, simplicity, intelligence and honesty. In fact, the racial identity
decided that their life must be end as tragedy. On the one hand, most of the aboriginal women were simple and hard-working, full of passion towards life, on the other hand, they were passive and weak under the colonists’ strong power although they had the awareness of the unfair treat. They lost their own homeland with their life mode being disturbed and living environment being destroyed; they did not have the right to accept education and didn’t have any freedom, they were treated as the images of backward, primitive and ignorant race. Actually, the white and aboriginal men just took advantage of their simplicity and purity to treat them disgracefully so as to emphasize the superior male authority.

Taken Ginibi’s Don’t Take Your Love to Town as an example, Ginibi referred that her identity as an aboriginal woman meant suffering torment. Like her ancestors, she lived in tribes and kept the living traditions as other aboriginal people. In most of her life, she had to take the responsibility of supporting the whole family and feeding her nine children. In her lifetime, she suffered from being betrayed by her lover, her daughter’s death in car accident, and her sons being put into the prison because of the white police’s prejudice. Her life represented most aboriginal women’s traditional life, and it had been changing in the white society and it had caused great conflicts between the black and white cultures.

2) Indigenous Women’s Life Writing in the Middle of the 20th Century

Since 1940s to 1970s, Australian government changed their “white policy” into the policy of assimilation, which aimed at assimilating the aboriginal people. The so-called protection actually meant to dominate and change the nation of aboriginal people totally so that it would extinct on the Australia continent. The government established original people protection committee and took away aboriginal children from their parents and sent them to white families or charity houses where they were forbidden to speak their own languages but had to learn white people’s language, thoughts, value as well as life style. They were forced to serve and work for their masters when grew up to 15-16 years old and they were called “the stolen generation”.

The assimilation policy was actually with great racial discrimination upon aboriginal people that even made it harder for this generation to melt into the main stream society and their sufferings are depicted deeply in many indigenous women writers’ life writing works. For example, in Hilda Jarman Muir’s life writing work Very Big Journey: My Life as I Remember It, Hilda told us her own story to accuse strongly the racial discrimination and oppression and exposed the truth of the assimilation policy. Hilda was sent to the charity house when she was a child, here once they spoke their own language they would be lashed. The children slept on the floor with only a carpet. The room had no windows and there was nothing except a desk and chairs in the room. They were locked in the room and could not have enough food, most of the time they children were starving. In order to refute the government’s so called saying that the aboriginal
children could get good education, Hilda described her own experience:

_We girls can only accept education for three or four years, then we will be forced to work for our white masters. Boys are forced to be the worker, gardener or cowboys. We are half-caste, not black not white, we also can only get half education._" (9)

In Glenys Ward’s life writing work _Wandering Girl_ which was published in 1987, racial discrimination was reflected incisively through the contrast description of the aboriginal girl and her white master. The aboriginal girl worked in the white mayor’s house as black servant, she had no name, she was be whistled to do work, she could not use the tea cup or bowl but only the iron cup which was used to feed horse. (10) Definitely, _wondering girl_ is a work that revealed the racial discrimination and conflicts between black and white people. It shows the inner desire and some optimism of the aboriginal women to have equal right, to get respect and to get education.

3) Contemporary Indigenous Women’s Life Writing

In the contemporary famous aboriginal woman writer- Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara, 1937-)’s trilogy: _Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter_ (1991), _Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence_ (1996) and _Under the Windamarra Tree_ (2002), we can find the core of her life writing works is to reveal the profound connotation of aboriginal culture, tell the truth of this part of history and remodel their own cultural identity. Of course, the trilogy can be taken as a process for her to seek for her root and cure her own trauma.

① _Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter_ was Doris’ first life writing work which was published in 1991. It got the David Unaipon National Award in 1990 before publishing. As the history of Kate Muldune-Williamson’s three-generation family, the story described this aboriginal family’s life on the pasture, depicted the relationship between aboriginal women with white and aboriginal men. It also record aboriginal women’s struggling with the social custom to keep their own traditional culture. In this story, feminist thought on women’s intelligence, ability to support family and their actions to struggle with the white main stream society for their own rights are reflected through Doris’ words. Lucy Muldune, Kate’s grandmother, married with an Irish immigrant, was a quiet and hardworking. And Kate’s mother, Peggy, like her mother, married an aboriginal man and was an honest housewife. But Kate was taken away by the white government to receive the so called “civilization education”, she got four years’ education and was influenced by Christian doctrine; she was trained to be a servant and accepted the Christian fundamentalist education that she believed the aboriginal culture and value were evil and immoral and hated it thus in confronted with her husband’s violence and betraying, she chose to be yield to the reality. (11) In this story, it’s easy to discover Doris’ feminist thoughts, she
criticized sharply the Christian, she accused that white people impressed brainwash education upon aboriginal women that led them be weak to endure violence and oppression and hate their own identity and abandon their aboriginal culture.

② Doris' second life writing works Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence which was published in 1996, created great influence internationally after being produced as the movie Rabbit-Proof Fence in 2002. It has also been translated into 11 languages and made more people all over the world learn about the truth of the Australian aboriginal history and culture. Certainly, the story itself represents Doris' feminist thoughts. The characters in the stories are all with strong awareness of freedom and home; they were brave, strong-willed enough to endure untold hardships and sufferings with the only one purpose of going home. Finally, the girls did it. The 14 year-old girl Molly (Doris' mother in real life), and her two little sisters Daisy who was 8, and Gracie, 10, were sent by the Perth government to the "Moore River Native Settlement" which was about 1,200 miles from their tribe to receive the white education. The girls decided to escape back home. Then taking the other two little girls, Molly started her journey along the long rabbit proof which was through the desert. With the help of a white countrywoman and her servant, the girls finally arrived home where there was no danger any more.¹²) Definitely, it was a long and hard way home without compass, without food, the aboriginal girls had not only to struggle with the bad natural environment and avoid beast but also escape from the aircrafts and police following to arrest them. However, it was their firm conviction of going home that encouraged them to conquer various kinds of dangers and finally arrived at home.

③ Under the Windamarra Tree is Doris' third life writing work which was published in 2002. The leading role of the story is Doris herself. Windamarra is the traditional name of mulga tree in Pilbara area, and it stands for her birth place Balfour Downs Station. Doris grew up in the "Moore River Native Settlement" and left the settlement when she was 18 and finally became the first aboriginal woman who was qualified to be the assistant nurse in Royal Perth Hospital. This turning point changed Doris' life, she had her family with four children in Geraldton and then studied in Curtin University majoring in journalism and worked in W.A. Institute of Film and Television and she began her writing career at the age of 50.¹³) Once in an interview, Doris said,

_We aboriginal women can only take the position of three kinds of jobs: nurse, teacher and missionary, but I hoped to become a writer since I was a child. I believe it will never be late to write for anyone if she has enough encouragement to pursue her dream! _¹⁴)

From Doris' words, we can see an aboriginal with her strong will to struggle with her fate and fright for the identity recognition, basic human right and the respect in the main stream society.
4) Aboriginal Women’s Devotion into Political Activities
After 1980s, aboriginal women began to have the awareness that the improvement of their political and social status depended on the devotions into political activities. They began to realize that it was necessary for them to struggle for their equal rights and social status, a lot of aboriginal women devoted into political movements to advocate the government grant aboriginal people the same right and opportunity as the white people. Monica Clare, Gibini, Hilda Jarman Muir are the representatives. On the other side, aboriginal women writers began to be aware of the dark side of the aboriginal people like deceive or betraying and the inner conflicts and sightings among aboriginal people themselves.

4. Narrative Forms and Thematic Innovations Presented in Contemporary Indigenous Women Life Writing:

1) Narrative Forms of Indigenous Women Life Writing
Life writing is a broader term rather than ‘autobiography’; it incorporates autobiography account, collaborative oral history projects, confessional and trauma narratives, testimonies, as well as collective and communal life narratives. Indigenous women kept their tradition, and through the form of story telling, to express their own thoughts and the history of colonization and long-term oppression that permeates implicitly or explicitly in their life. In contemporary Indigenous women’s life writing, narrative strategies like oral forms of recording historical stories, autobiographical portraying, information presenting resourced from archival documents and records, using a typical narrative structure or narrator in telling stories are adopted to construct the re-writing of Indigenous women’s life and history, and reveal the development of feminist thoughts of aboriginal women writers. For example, Jessie Street in her memoirs, Truth or Repose (1966), provides an account of feminism in Australia in the 1940s. Fighters and Singers, edited by Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (1985), is an important collection of biographies of Aboriginal women. Diane Bell has written an important anthropological revisionist study of Aboriginal women in Daughters of the Dreaming (1983), Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland (1975) by Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, and Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation (1992), edited by Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans, include a pioneering account of the degradation of Black women under colonialism. Several essays on the specific problems faced by Aboriginal women, both now and in the past and in both White and Aboriginal society, have been published as well as a collection edited by Fay Gale, Woman’s Role in Aboriginal Society (1970). Feminist concerns, especially in the work of Sneja Gunew,
have also helped to illuminate the migrant experience in Australia.

Autobiography has become an increasingly popular genre with women writers; several autobiographical accounts of aboriginal feminist experience which depends partly on interviews and autobiographical accounts have appeared including: Glenysse Ward's Wandering Girl and Una You Fullas (1991); Dymphna Cusack's A Window in the Dark (1991), Ruby Langford Ginibi's Don't Take Your Love to Town (1988).

Among these works, Sally Morgan's My Place which was published in 1987 is thought as the most influential life writing works. New York Times Book Review commented it is a book for everyone: a book with the form and texture of a novel and the complexity and pace of a mystery not solved until the final pages. It is wonderfully entertaining and a luminous prose poem. My place combined for narrators with the core of Sally's family. When she was a child, she was often asked by others "where are they from?" With great confusion, and just like a detective clue, Sally began her journey to find her root Corunna Downs. With Sally's narrative as the main thread, this book combined other three independent stories: Arthur Corunna, Gladys' uncle (1893-1050), told his story about how he became a successful farm owner an aboriginal people through his great endeavor under the history background of the government's assimilation policy. Gladys Corunna (11931-1983), Sally's mother, told her experience of been taken away from her mother to Parkerville Children's home to be trained to work and learn the white culture. She even once hated her own identity and wanted to be a white person, but finally she realized the connection of her aboriginal identity and her land. Daisy Corunna(1900-1983), Sally's grandmother, described her life experience under the control and oppression of white people. She saw "white people beating the native to teach them not steal, but the white people's kids did worse and no one touched them." Daisy had a baby before Gladdi, but the white master did not allow her to keep it. Daisy was forced to separate with Gladdi when the little girl was three years old. And she said she did a lot of work in her lifetime without any repay.

Sally Morgan's My Place can be thought as the history of Australia from the lens of Aboriginal people. It answered the questions of "what does the identity of being aboriginal people mean?", "why Aboriginal people hide their identity on purpose in their daily life?" and "What happened to the aboriginal people in the past decades?" of course, aboriginal women's living situations in different periods, their eagerness for being treated as human being, accepting education, rising their economic status, as well as keeping their own culture and tradition are all reflected in this great works.

2) Thematic innovations presented in contemporary Indigenous women life writing

Aboriginal women's life writing is Australian original and localized literary form that stands for its native nation. It keeps its own form that is different from traditional western classic literary
form and with profound significance and influence to Australian literature. Firstly, aboriginal women’s life writing is different from the traditional white people’s autobiography. The aboriginal women narrators became the core of the literary form; they broke through the normal form of white people’s autobiography and named their way as “life writing”. They record their communities’ sufferings under the oppression of colonists control and their struggles with the colonization domination and the development of their awareness as women. The aboriginal women narrators not only write their own experience but also their families’, tribes’ and communities’. However, the western autobiography is usually limited to record individual’s experiences and mainly advocate individualism and heroism.

Secondly, traditional western autobiography is written with strict and formal language and form, but aboriginal women’s life writing usually adopt oral narrative to tell their stories. They melt the oral narrative into their writing and created a different way of story telling which keeps the features of their identity cause the aboriginal people do not have written form of their language, and most of aboriginal women did not accept much education, so they usually record their stories and edit the materials with the help of white editors who actually did not know much about aboriginal women and their life, tradition and culture, definitely it results that some aboriginal women’s life writing can not keep their original form and be with some of objective thoughts of white people. For example, Elsie Roughsey’s An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New (1984), My Place or Don’t take your love to the city were all edited and modified by white editors. Fortunately, after 1980, less and less white editors’ edition were used with better education of aboriginal women writer and their wring experience, they preferred to choose aboriginal people who had better education background to help them modify their works.

In a word, as an important literary form, aboriginal women’s life writing has shown it strong power and creativity in the past two decades and become a key channel for the communication of white society and aboriginal tribes. Through aboriginal women’s life writing, more people including aboriginal young generation and other people all over the world began to learn more about this nation and understand more about their tradition and culture. We can say that aboriginal women’s life writing definitively is a significant literary form to keep aboriginal people’s cultural views and record the true history from the lens of the special community. It also provides new opportunities for Australian post-colonization literature. In the future, with the development of aboriginal people living standards and better education, the women writers will pay more attention to their development on other aspect like political, economical and social rights and status.
Notes:

(1) Sir Ronald Wilson was once the president of Australia's Human Rights Commission. He stated that Australia's program in which 20-25,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly separated from their natural families was genocide, because it was intended to cause the Aboriginal people to die out.

(2) The term White Australia Policy comprises various historical policies that intentionally favored immigration to Australia from certain European countries, and especially from Britain. Australia's official World War One historian Charles Bean defined the early intentions of the policy as "a vehement effort to maintain a high Western standard of economy, society and culture.


(6) The Stolen Generations (also known as Stolen children) were the children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families by the Australian Federal and State government agencies and church missions, under acts of their respective parliaments. The removals occurred in the period between approximately 1909 and 1969, although in some places children were still being taken until the 1970s.


Reference:

(2) White Australia Policy : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Australia_policy