

Food as a Means of Colonial Control: A Reading of Jack Davis' No Sugar

Manikandan. A¹, Dr. J. Ragu Antony²

¹Ph. D. Research Scholar (Part Time), PG & Research Department of English, V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli
Email: rajinimani2010@gmail.com.

²Research Supervisor, Associate Professor (Rtd.), PG & Research Department of English V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli

Abstract

The colonisers of Australia held and confined the Australian Aborigines in reserves so as to control them. The lives of the Aborigines in these reserves were miserable as they lost all freedom. Every aspect of their lives, including their food, was dictated by the colonial administration. The Aborigines, when they were taken away from their traditional environments were deprived of their traditional foods. Instead, in the reserves, they were given rations that were both inadequate and alien to them. Jack Davis' "No Sugar" reveals how food rationing was a part of the colonial biopolitics.

Key words: colonisers, Aborigines, food, ration, control, biopolitics

One of the most traumatic parts of an Aboriginal life under colonial rule was their life in the reserves or reservations or camps. While the reserves were large and mostly permanent settlement areas, camps were temporary stations; Aborigines were placed in camps before being moved to reserves. Thus the Aborigines were held captives in reserves their own land, with no freedom of movement.

Kevin Gilbert, the Australian native playwright spent his early childhood days in the Condobolin Aborigine Reserve, and in his *Living Black* he has documented his miserable life there: the reserve was not a haven, as the colonial administrators had often claimed; it was more a place of incarceration. So, when he was fourteen years old, he escaped from the reserve and returned to what a life of freedom and worked as a rural migrant labour. Robert James Merritt, the author of *The Cake Man* also grew up on the Erambie Aboriginal Mission Reserve.

Jack Davis himself had a first-hand, personal experience of living in a reservation. Keith Chesson informs that "In 1932, when he was only fourteen years old, Jack Davis and his brother Harold Davis were moved to the Moore River Reserve under false offers of jobs from the then Chief Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville himself" (37). In 1972, Jack Davis wrote a play titled *The Steel and the Stone*; it is a semi-autobiographical piece which explored an Aborigine's his life at the Moore River aboriginal settlement and the brutal and horrifying history of the reserve.

Though their father did not want his sons to live a dehumanized life in an Aborigine reservation, due to the financial strain caused by the Great Depression, his two children had to continue to live a dehumanised life in the reservation. At the Moore River Native Settlement, Jack Davis and his brother faced various forms of oppression and discrimination. They were

sent to work on ranches and farms in exchange for meager wages and some food. The wages were paid not to the boys, but to the reserve administrators who never gave any of them to the boys. Ann Arbor says that “The reserve isolated the Aboriginal people and prohibited the Aboriginal people speaking their native languages” (12). Jack Davis’ life and his sour experience on the Moore River Native Settlement later shaped his writings and activism.

Jack Davis’ *No Sugar* highlights the oppression of Aborigines who were held in reservations by focusing on the story of the Millimurra family, who are the ancestors of the Wallitch clan of *The Dreamers*. The Millimurras who are by force removed from their natural environment to the Moore River Native Settlement, represent the Aborigines throughout Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, who were coerced to live in confined and controlled areas far removed from the wilderness that was their natural living spaces.

In all reserves and mission stations the Aborigines had to live according to the ways prescribed by the white administrators. Traditionally, the Aboriginal tribes, before the colonisers pushed them into these mission stations and reserves, migrated from place to place seeking food and water sources. Desmond Sweeney says that

The Aborigines moved along regular food routes seasonally, moving to or returning to their usual sites, for generations. For food, the aboriginal people caught fish from rivers and the sea, hunted wild animals such as the kangaroos and hares and birds and collect roots and fruits. When the rivers dried up, or food was scarce, they moved to other places, where food was available. (13)

These sites were also familiar to them. Another significant practice of the Aborigines with their food behaviour is their concept of conservation. This way of life had continued till the colonisers arrived and the arrival of the colonisers disrupted their traditional life.

Jack Davis’ *No Sugar* deals extensively with the changed food pattern of the Aborigines in colonial reserves and how it impacted their lives. After depriving the Aborigines of their fertile lands where they collected or hunted their food, they were given a sort of weekly or monthly dole, or a ration. Tim Rowse defines Aborigine rationing as “the non-Aboriginal practice - whether based on strategy or on policy - of providing food, clothing and other goods (such as blankets and tobacco) to indigenous people” (3). The practice of food rationing was widely practised on the Aborigines held in the reserves. Here the native people received a subsistence diet of flour, sugar, tea, and meat, offal, or fat from introduced species (cows, pigs, and sheep) in lieu of wages for the work rendered by them to the colonial administration and administrators.

The Aborigines had to subsist on this fixed ration. At times, whenever there was a shortage of funds or resources for other purposes, the ration or the dole given to the Aborigines was reduced and the fund was diverted for the welfare of the Whites. In *No Sugar*, Chief Protector A. O. Neville writes to Minister of State for the Colonies suggesting such a measure:

NEVILLE: . . . [He shuffles through the files and documents.]

My dear Minister, herewith the information requested. I know I don’t need to remind your good self of the extreme budgetary constraints under which this Department operates. Item one: the native weekly ration currently costs this Department two shillings and

four pence per week. Perhaps this bears comparison with the sustenance paid to white unemployed which I believe is seven shillings per week. (NS, 20).

Here, it is seen that the weekly ration for an Aborigine was two shillings and four pence, while, an unemployed White received a sustenance allowance of seven shillings a week. The stark disparity was never talked about.

Later, in the same letter, Neville suggests an easy way to overcome the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression:

NEVILLE: Item two: Off the cuff, the proposed budget cut of three thousand one hundred and thirty-four pounds could be met by discontinuing the supply of meat in native rations. Soap was discontinued this financial year. (NS, 20)

So, as this passage reveals, when the Great Depression hit Britain, an easy way to offset the inflation was to reduce the ration for the natives.

Later, when Granny and Milly come to collect their weekly ration, they find their weekly ration of soap has been cancelled.

MILLY: Haven't got any soap yet.

SERGEANT: I'm afraid that soap is no longer included as a ration item.

MILLY: What do you mean, we got no more soap?

SERGEANT: That's right.

MILLY: But why? What am I gonna wash with? How can keep my kids clean and sen 'em to school?

SERGEANT: You could buy some.

MILLY: What with?

GRAN: What about *gnummarri* [tobacco]? You stop that too?

SERGEANT: No, Granny, you still get your stick of nigge twist.

[He gives it to her.]

MILLY: Whose idea was it to stop the soap?

SERGEANT: The idea to stop the soap, as you call it, came from the Aboriginal Department in Perth. (NS, 21-22).

A very common method of controlling the Aborigines in the reserves was this food rationing. Here, the Aborigines were provided the food of the colonisers, which was new to the Aborigines. These foods were often harmful to the health of the natives' bodies which were unaccustomed to them. The ration system was an effective way adopted by the colonisers to control the Aborigines.

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