

## A Study on Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Cultural Assimilation in Tara June Winch's *The Yield*

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Chennai – 30**Abstract:**

Tara June Winch is a successful contemporary fiction writer from Australia. Winch, an Aboriginal writer, belongs to the Wiradjuri, an Aboriginal community from Australia. The Wiradjuri Aboriginals live in the northern suburb of Wollongong, New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. In her novel *The Yield*, she depicts the life of Wiradjuri Aboriginals living under colonial supremacy. She documents the brutal colonial practices of separating Aboriginal children from their families. Colonial settlement has disconnected Aboriginal cultural memory by separating Aboriginal descendants from their families and communities. Albert Gondiwindi, the protagonist and the first-person narrator of the novel, is separated and taken away from his sister and mother. Later, after several decades, his granddaughter Jedda also becomes a victim of the stolen generation. Intergenerational trauma continues from Albert to his descendants. This paper intends to analyse the intergeneration trauma and the effects of cultural assimilation during the colonial period.

**Keywords:** *The Yield*, Wiradjuri Aboriginals, Cultural assimilation, Stolen Generation, Gondiwindi.

**Novel outline**

The novel begins with the narration of August, who is travelling to Gondiwindi to attend the funeral ceremony of Albert Gondiwindi, a Koori Wiradjuri Aboriginal man and August's grandfather. The narration then shifts to Albert's cultural discovery of Aboriginal knowledge from his ancestors through dreamtime. He records every bit of cultural information, knowledge, and the effects of trauma faced as a victim of the stolen generation in the form of a dictionary. His dictionary also enlists the instances of colonial advancements, long suffering, forcible separation, and trauma caused by the removal of individuals from their families and communities. In the latter

part of the novel, Albert's dictionary serves as a tool of cultural awareness among his descendants and his people.

### **Separation and cultural discontinuity in the colonial era**

Throughout the world, the invasion of settlers marginalises, oppresses, and shatters the Indigenous people. The imperial regime aims to destabilize the existing communities and targets to subjectify the Aboriginals. In the colonial era, the colonized nations become the products of exploitation. The white supremacy declasses, stigmatize and alienate the Aboriginal communities to dysfunction and to lose its power. The colonial power completely detains the existence of the colonized. As Fanon points out, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the Native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 169). The Indigenous people are also considered "weak-willed, inferior, secondary, effeminate, and unable" to perform their own duties to survive (Boehmer 351).

Amidst all the prevailing atrocities, the Europeans execute the operation of assimilation to dilute the Aboriginal culture, and thereby capitalize the Aboriginal land to make profits. As per the historical report, "[t]he aim of assimilation was to make the 'Aboriginal problem' gradually disappear so that Aboriginal people would lose their identity in the wider community" (Assimilation (1940s to the 1960s)). The practice of separation and removal sweeps the native culture away without any trace of its existence. In the words of Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the condition of Aboriginal people dysfunctions due to colonialism.

The appearance of the settler has meant in the terms of syncretism the death of the aboriginal society, cultural lethargy, and the petrification of individuals, For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler ... By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces it and separates them. (Fanon 93-94)

The sovereign power intends to break down the diversified culture of the Aboriginals. It cultivates European practices among the separated and removed Aboriginal children, youths, and adults from their families. Through division and detachment, the Aboriginal community has become a minority group in their own land. By doing so, the settlers gain power over the Aboriginal community. Due to the assimilation, the Aboriginal cultural knowledge, practices,

tradition are disconnected from the ongoing lineage. Holohan and Siobhan point out the situation that the minority groups in their article “Assimilation”, “minority groups are expected to adapt to the everyday practices of the dominant culture through language and appearance as well as via more significant socioeconomic factors such as absorption into the local cultural and employment community” (“Assimilation”).

The colonial settlement in the Wiradjuri region expands and reinforces colonial strategies to enslave Aboriginal people. To achieve the goal, the prime objective of settlement is to break the existing cultural continuity and lineage among the Aboriginal groups. The whites separate the Aboriginals from their families and either put them in homes or take them as slaves. In the novel, Albert, through his dictionary, highlights the bitter truths and practices of the European settlers. He recalls how the whites demolished the Aboriginal tents in Tent Town. The authorities turned their tents into a station by flattening them.

Albert is separated from his family when he is three years old. Along with him, his sister, and “all the other kids were taken away” (*The Yield* 23) from their parents. As an elder brother to his sister, he recalls the memory of separation from his sister and mother. At such a young age, Albert’s sister is not even aware of what is happening to her and so are the other infants and children. Albert and his sister are put in boy’s and girl’s homes, respectively. The entrance to their homes has a board that says, “[t]hink white. Act White. Be White” (*The Yield* 23). This shows the Eurocentric attitude of the white settlers.

Racism is a major factor in the separation of Aboriginals from their families. The settlers do not value Aboriginal Wiradjuri culture, language, or everything else that belongs to the Aboriginals. The Aboriginals are viewed as primitives and criminals. Once the Aboriginals resist assimilating them, the settlers attempt to wage war against the Aboriginals in order to forcibly remove them from their own lands.

The racist colonial practices discriminate and marginalize them in all aspects. The descendants of the stolen generation are influenced by its impacts. The effects of psychological trauma permeates through the Aboriginal communities. Albert Gondiwindi himself a separated Aboriginal from his family, in his dictionary highlights the numerous stigmas associated with the Aboriginal community. In the novel, Aborigine Eddie describes the settlers’ instigation of ‘race wars’. He thus says, “even if we all had the same skin tone, it’d be language, and then even if we spoke the same language, it’d be eye shape, nose length, people with thick hair...” (*The Yield* 203).

Parallel to Eddie's feelings, the protagonist Albert makes a remark about the stigmas that exist in the Aboriginal community:

That's what we were—isolated—from our family, from our language, from our cultural ways, and from our land. ... we were brutalized, we turned to each other, we were isolated in our humiliation but we couldn't leave neither ... we weren't really all together in one place, ... we were criminals by birth, inmates since we could walk. Together and isolated at once. (*The Yield*277)

The disappearance of a family member traumatises the remaining members of the family. For instance, Albert's granddaughter August runs away from her family and returns after ten years only to attend Albert's funeral. August is devastated by her sister Jedda's disappearance. She has become vulnerable to the trauma caused by cultural assimilation. One day in the past, ten-year-old Jedda does not return home after school. Albert's family awaits her arrival and anxiously expects her to be home one day. But Jedda never turned back. This profound wound has a psychological impact on August. She ends up having suicidal thoughts. She feels lost in her own place. She daydreams about ending her life in Massacre Plains and finally runs away from her homeland. However, away from home, she is often taunted by a series of incidents.

*Hang myself, choke on diesel fumes, drown in the manure pumps, suffocate in the hay bales, sink into the wheat seeds, get sucked into a thresher, tumble down an abandoned wall, fall in a mining shaft, a horse hoof to the head, trampled by a cow, crushed by a tractor without a roller bar, crushed by a tractor with a roller bar, a grain bin without a harness, an aerial sprayer falling from the sky, killer water disease, killer viral disease, dying of thirst, dying by infection, a gun to the heart, a gun to the head, drowning in the dam, burned in a wildfire, snapped by a venomous snake, swallowing poisonous berries, deadly spider bites, a swarm of wasps, a murder of crows, buried in a silo. (*The Yield*184)*

The generation affected by assimilation fails to manage their balance physically and mentally. In the above passage, August experiences personal trauma, and the wound that she encountered has left her with social consequences.

The disappearance of Aboriginal youth impacts families more than the Australian government. Because the laws and policies of the government go hand in hand with white supremacy. Though the people of Massacre Plains, Gondiwindi live in a close-knit society, the Aboriginal Protection Board fails to address or show courtesy upon the loss and removal of the

children. The novel describes that the disappearance of Jedda does not leave any trace of desperation to the Aboriginal representatives but only to their kith and kin.

The thing about a small town in a place like Massacre Plains is they love their own. Or if they don't love them, they at best stick by them; defend them against the outside world if troublemaking out-of-towners, tourists, big money. But the Gondiwindi weren't their own ... Jedda, like the kids who went missing, the brown-skinned children like her, became a mystery manufactured to forget about. (*The Yield* 28)

The removal of Aboriginals repeats as a cycle in short intervals. The letter of a Persian clergyman named Reverend Greenleaf discloses the painful acts of the stolen generation for almost two centuries in the 1800s and 1900s. He reveals how the white authorities forcibly carry the infants, children, and youths in wagon vehicles. Children of two and seven years of age are forcibly separated from their parents. Some of the Aboriginal parents try to save their children from the authorities by hiding inside the bush. They “ran away, choosing to conceal their infants with them in the bush, though most of them were captured and divided” (*The Yield* 216). In particular the novel highlights the missing of Aboriginal children born between 1908 and 1914. It is during this time that Jedda went missing while returning from school. There are also other kids who went missing at the same time.

At the same time, instances in the novel record the slavery practiced by the white settlers. In most cases, the natives are forcefully taken to “fill the industrial labour force” (*The Yield* 68). Through assimilation, the settlers gain authority over the people and land. The natives are treated like slaves and the whites as masters. As H ABulhan mentions in his book *Franz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, the whites maintain a “master-slave relation[ship]” with the Aboriginal people (Bulhan 121). The wagon vehicles typically arrive to take the children away from their parents. By removing them from their families, the authorities train the children to be slaves and employees. However, these Aboriginal children are not fully trained as skilful employees, rather, they are only trained as menial workers. Instances like chaining the necks and ankles of Aboriginals, clothing them with rags, imprisoning them for no offence and no crime, forcing them into slavery happen between the two centuries of 1800s and 1900s. The bush huts of the Aborigines (gunyahs) who resist are speared and razed.

The stolen children are not only detached from their families but also from their communities and identities. For instance, Albert, who is taken away from his family at a young

age, has no knowledge of his identity, culture, traditions, or people. It is his ancestors who teach him all aboriginal things through dreamtime. Similarly, in the case of August, she is unaware of the cultural history and background of the Wiradjuri community. None of her generation is exposed to any of the cultural traditions once followed by her forefathers. They are also ignorant of their own language because “English [has] changed their tongues, the formation of their minds” (*The Yield* 300). On the whole, these stolen Aboriginals are alienated from their cultural background by forgetting and losing their ethnic values, cultural origin, cultural heritage, cultural mores, songs, identity, language, land, people, and family. This leads to cultural breakdowns and social disintegration.

By achieving the cultural dysconnectivity, the whites gain sovereign power and a Eurocentric mindset to assimilate everything that belongs to Aboriginals. As Cora Thomas mentions, the settlers first attempt is to “reject the worth of Aboriginal culture” and “force[ful] separation of children from their families” (Thomas 21). The Australian Human Rights Commission, in their report *Bringing Them Home*, expresses the traumatizing effects of cultural assimilation: “The removal of ‘Stolen Generations’ people from their families has, in the majority of cases, prevented them from acquiring language, culture and the ability to carry out traditional responsibilities and in many cases, has prevented them from establishing their genealogical links” (HREOC 178).

As Colonialism longs to erase the identity of the Aboriginal community. It also wishes to claim autonomy as one. In the novel, Reverend Greenleaf discloses the sovereign intentions of the white man with regard to Australia’s diversity: “Australian nationalism was growing ... Some people had an unwavering conviction that Australia should be united under a common identity, founded on the pioneers, the geography, the flora and fauna—not the immigrant, not the Native” (*The Yield* 215).

In a glaring observation, the colonial advancement among the Wiradjuri Aboriginals has broken the ties of cultural connectivity and harmony that once existed. Cultural assimilation has caused psychological disorder and discord in the Aboriginal community. Hence, the violent effects of dispossession and cultural discontinuity have devastated the Wiradjuri Aboriginals in Gondiwindi.

## Conclusion

The Aborigines suffer generation after generation due to assimilation. Cultural assimilation has resulted in painful experiences among the Aboriginal community. The cultural histories are erased, and the Aboriginals are made incapable without roots. The survivors and victims of the stolen generation are immersed in long suffering, trauma, and grief. They become forbidden to their own traditional values, customs, languages, and practices. Assimilation has forced them to forget their cultural history and prevent them from socialising with the Aboriginality. Thus, the study has examined intergenerational trauma and the effects of cultural assimilation.

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