

## Colonial Violence in Jack Davis' *Barungin*

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### Abstract

Colonisation was carried out primarily through violence, and Australia was no exception to this. The Europeans used various forms of violence – both physical and psychological – to subjugate, control and rule over the Australian Aborigine people. As the entire colonial administration used violence, the police system too was violent. As the entire police administration was prejudiced against the Australian natives, custodial deaths of the natives were frequent. Jack Davis' *Barungin* explores the cruelty of police towards the natives which often resulted in the deaths of natives and reveals how the police were not held accountable for these deaths.

**Key words:** police, violence, Aborigines, colonisation, prejudice custodial deaths,

Colonisation was primarily a violent process. Colonisation was carried out by adopting numerous forms of violence that consisted of a wide range of brutal acts that were both physical and psychological. This violence included, but was not limited to direct physical violence such as custodial torture, flogging, killing, maiming, mutilation and rape. Ali Behdad calls the physical violence “cold-blooded militarism of discipline, torture and pain” (203), and that “Even castration was another common form of colonial violence” (205). However, as Tirop Simatei in “Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory” informs, white violence in Australia “included systemic oppression through forced labour, cultural erasure, and psychological manipulation and were used by colonial powers to establish and maintain control over colonized territories and peoples” (85).

It has to be noted that colonial violence is initiated by the colonial powers at the very point when conquest and control of geographical space begins. Jomo Kenyatta, a Nigerian anti-colonial theorist in “The Gentleman of the Jungle” points out that colonial powers also “frequently resorted to trickery, treachery, deception, manipulation and logic to dispossess the natives of their rights and lands” (38). Bulham Hussein Abdilahi defines colonial violence as “any process, or condition or relationship by which an individual or a group occupies another populations geographical space, and violates the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of another individual or group” (135). Pramod K. Nayar in “Fanon and Biopolitics” says that “Colonial situations frequently employ not only physical violence but also denial and deprivation” (223) to establish and uphold control over colonies and their inhabitants. Judith Butler in her book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), writes that “Colonial violence creates the Manichean binary ‘I’ and the ‘you’, the ‘they’ and the ‘we’. Both are implicated in one another, and the implication is not only logical; it is also lived out as an experience. Here violence is

integral and not an ambivalent social bond” (69) Therefore, it is apt to say that colonial violence encompasses innumerable forms and methods, and in a colonial situation it is inescapable.

Jack Davis’ play *Barungin* (Barungin meaning Smell the Wind) was published in 1989 and was staged the same year. It deals with the long-standing problem of black deaths in police custody. *Barungin* completes the “First Born Trilogy” after *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* published in 1981 and 1985 respectively. As Adam Shoemaker points out, the play is situated in a period that was seeped with “abused confidences and unfulfilled promises in Australian indigenous affairs” (122), because “the supposed advances that have occurred have not produced any visible real results and have not eradicated many inequalities and repressions that a native continues to face in his own land” (123). This frustration and despair are evidenced in *Barungin*.

*Barungin* (*Smell the Wind*), deals with the violence that pervaded the lives of the Australian Aborigines ever since the arrival of the Whites in Australia. Both the direct violence and the subtle or indirect violence enacted upon the natives by the white rulers have been examined by the play. More specifically, it deals with police violence perpetrated upon the natives. Colin Johnson in his “Foreword” to the play informs that,

The play tries to come to grips with the European dominance of Australia, a dominance which over the last few years has resulted in approximately a hundred Aboriginal men dying in police custody which has been undocumented in any white account of colonisation of the Aborigines. (vii)

In this sense, the play is a response to what W. E. H. Stanner in 1968 called “a cult of forgetfulness”:

It [the silence about the killing of Aborigines by the Whites] is a structural matter; a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. (3)

Therefore, the play may be seen as a writing back to the white coloniser’s account of Australian history.

The play is divided into two acts, and is set in Perth, Western Australia, in 1988 – the year of the bi-centenary celebrations of the establishment of a white settlement at Botany Bay and the beginning of the Aborigine sufferings and Australia’s colonial history. According to Peter Grabosky, “The writing of the play was prompted by the killing of John Peter Pat, an Aboriginal boy who, at the age of 16, died on 28 September 1983 in the custody of Western Australia Police” (80). Jack Davis wrote the short poem engraved on the public monument erected for John Pat:

Write of life,  
the pious said  
forget the past,  
the past is dead.

But all I see  
in front of me  
is a concrete floor,  
a cell door,  
and John Pat (71).

So, when the white man's religion 'the pious' wanted the Aborigines to forget the past and what had happened, Jack Davis says that all he sees before him are reminders of the cruelty in the form of "a concrete floor and a cell", both representing the jail or police custody and John Pat who died in police custody. While religion wanted the Australian natives to ignore their sufferings and think of the promised land, Jack Davis tells that the violence and the torture of the natives are more real and palpable.

John Peter Pat (1966 – 1983) was a sixteen year old Australian Aboriginal boy who died in the custody of Western Australia Police. On 28 September 1983, four off-duty police officers returned to Roebourne from a police union meeting at Karratha, where they had each consumed a lot of liquor. Upon their return to Roebourne, they called in at the Victoria Hotel, a place that was an established drinking and gambling joint. Ashley James, an Aborigine who was at that place was threatened, insulted and beaten by one of the police officers when he tried to buy a bottle of liquor at the hotel's liquor counter. Ashley James said that he fought back, and was attacked by the other officers. At this stage, John Pat who came along joined the fray, and, according to witnesses, was struck in the face by a policeman and fell backward, striking his head on the roadway. According to witnesses, one of the police officers kicked Pat in the head. Pat was then allegedly dragged to a waiting police van, kicked in the face, and thrown in. Passersby near the police station alleged that the two Aboriginal men were severely beaten as they were dragged down from the police van to the police station. Each was picked up, punched to the ground, and kicked. According to one observer, none of the prisoners fought back or resisted. Both were locked up. When a police man came to check them after an hour, they found John Pat dead. A subsequent post-mortem revealed John Pat had a fractured skull, cerebral hemorrhage, and swelling, bruising and ruptures in the brain. All these indicated that John Pat had received several heavy blows to the head. He also had two broken ribs and a ruptured blood vessel of the heart.

The police men were charged with manslaughter and were suspended from service, pending enquiry. A preliminary enquiry was conducted on 30 October 1983, but the police officers refused to testify. Yet, the court found the police men not guilty and absolved them of any wrong doing, saying they had acted on self-defense. Even their court expenditure was reimbursed. This judgment led to a strong backlash. A subsequent enquiry by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 reported that the police men were grossly guilty, but the report had no effect on the earlier court judgement. The not-guilty verdict was rejected by the Aboriginal community and human-rights activists and advocates. Today, John Pat' death is commemorated annually all over Australia as a day of reckoning for Aboriginal rights. A public monument was established at Fremantle Prison, featuring the poem by Jack Davis.

As Marc Maufort in “Unsettling Narratives: Subversive Mimicry in Australian Aboriginal Solo Performance Pieces” points out, “though the fact finding committee for the killing of John Pat had absolved the police of any wrong doing, the play creatively raises the issue, and emphasises the fact that in white-ruled Australia, indiscriminate killing of Aborigines was a way of life” (56). In this sense, the play deals with an undocumented and shameful part of Australian colonial history. Though it may be a creative rendering of the concealed issue, it is yet relevant because it is an essential part of Australian Aborigine history that has been tucked away under from the public.

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