



# Strong Australian Aboriginal Families Made Vulnerable: An Analysis Through *King Hit*

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**Abstract:** The Australian Aboriginals are the people with their own culture, traditions and practices that have been richly woven and transferred from one generation to the other. They are close knit communities educated through their available and established oral literature. This oral literature binds them together as kins, clans and communities. The Aboriginals living in Australia are divergent in accordance with their languages, traditional practices, ceremonies and other factors but they have very strong family bonds. For generations, their families have been the source of knowledge, wisdom, education, love and care. Through their families, the Australian Aboriginals received skills, arts, care, warmth, love, affection and also protection. Their families have been the happiest places for them. Their communities enabled them become as strong, bold, wise, caring and affectionate individuals. Being surrounded by such a conducive environment, the Australian Aboriginals grew up as more potential and confident individuals. Such individuals, families and communities were at once made vulnerable with the colonisation which had a devastating effect not only on their cultural practices, traditions or ceremony but also on their physical, emotional and psychological health. The individuals, families and communities were made vulnerable on account of colonisation and they are the victims of psychological trauma. In order to make these communities weaker, many legal policies were made against the welfare of the Aboriginals, by the Australian government. The implementation of such policies tore the Aboriginal families and communities into parts, affecting the individuals permanently. *King Hit* is an epitome to such an experience of the Australian Aboriginals. The present paper discusses about the irreversible damage caused to Geoffrey Narkle, his family and the Australian Aboriginal community.

**Index Terms:** Australian Aboriginals, Family-bonds, Psychological-trauma, Vulnerable, Colonisation, Policies, Communities.

The Australian Aboriginals are the native people who inhabited Australia for some thousands of years. These people are of different clans, languages and cultural groups with unique traditional practices specific to their kin and clan. These Aboriginals are the people with very strong bonds governed by their oral traditions in the form of cultural practices. They give much importance to family and communal relationships and are well aware of their own land and natural resources. To the Australian Aboriginals, their land, people, families, communities are the sources of healing. They enjoyed their land in all possible ways but were at once restricted their freedom completely with the colonization of Australia that took place in 1788.

Since then, the Australian Aboriginals have been undergoing exploitation as children, teens, adults and even as elderly people. The British colonisation left deep painful and unhealing wounds in the lives of the Australian Aboriginals. They have been so damaging and incurable that the impact of colonisation victimized them for generations. The government policies, programs, methods implemented against the Australian Aboriginals are so cruel and devastating that each and every Aboriginal is harmed and bear the traumatic consequences for their life time along with lasting effects on the future generations. As a result the people become helpless, destitute, hopeless and insecure.

Tracing out the lives of the Aboriginals before and after colonization, a *YouTube* video by the Healing Foundation states,

“Our families, our children were happy with strong minds and hearts because they were where they belonged... colonization came, bringing wars, disease, famine, violence, and the destruction and violation of our cultural laws, sacred sites, families and communities. We were denied our knowledge, language, ceremonies, and identity. The very things that tell us who we are and where we belong, and our connections with each other, and the land grew weak. And then, our children were taken from us. They had their names changed and their identity stripped away. They were told that Aboriginal people were bad. Worse still, they were told that Aboriginal people were bad. Worse still, they were told that their parent and grandparents did not want them. For years this happened, and those children became known as the Stolen Generations. Our children were denied love and experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. This left very deep, very complex, and very real wounds, leaving a scar that are still being felt personally, socially, spiritually, and collectively. In the time when our story started, we were able to parent in the cultural way that has seen our families survive and thrive for generations. Our people were strong, and our culture flowed and healed us in times of hurt. But since the trauma of colonisation and the Stolen Generations, we have not been able to heal in the same way, and we have unknowingly passed this trauma onto our children through sharing our sad stories and having them witness and experience our pain. This is known as Intergenerational Trauma, and we see symptoms today in broken relationships, disconnected families, violence, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse. But this is not where our story ends. We still have strong minds and hearts, and we still know who we were and where we belong. By creating safe and strong communities together, supporting our families to be free from pain, returning to our culture and building a strength of identity, we can stop the cycle of trauma and bring about positive intergenerational change...”

The above narration is evidence to the changes colonisation brought into the lives of the Australian Aboriginals.

Geoffrey Narkle's autobiographical drama *King Hit* puts light on the result of programs and policies implemented by the Australian government, against the Australian Aboriginal communities as a whole. Through the play one comes across the effects of British colonisation, the impacts of the laws and policies of the Australian government on the life of Geoffrey Narkle, on each and every member of his family, the Noongar community and the Australian Aboriginals. Geoffrey Narkle was born in 1951 to Largy Narkle and Bella Kelly in Narrogin, Western Australia. He along with his three younger sisters enjoyed the care and love of their parents and relatives. As children Geoffrey and Caroline enjoyed the Aboriginal games like knucklebones, two up and catchy in their wooden cottage located in Clayton Road Reserve. Located a mile away from the town of Narrogin, the Noongars were confined to this reserve which was surrounded by a rubbish tip on one side where the white people of Narrogin discard their town's waste, a wire fencing on the next side, Clayton Road on the other side and the entrance of the reserve had a big white sign board. Here, the Noongars lived in fear of the white police and insecurity is their everyday experience. To the Aboriginals the white means insecurity, alcoholism, stealing of their children, restrictions, violence, rape, poverty, cultural loss, punishments, exploitation, marginalization and many more struggles.

Geoff's father Largy earns for his family by taking up various jobs like sheering, clearing and burning, helping in the canteen and tanning the possum skins. Geoff's mother Bella helped her husband Largy in tanning the possum skins and she always kept their two roomed wooden cottage in good condition because any untidiness means to lose their children. The white police would carry away their children with the reason that they are not brought up in hygienic conditions. If the children don't get good facilities even then, the Australian Aboriginal parents have to forego their children on the excuse that they are unfit to be parents. In order to meet the family needs and provide the children the best possible facilities, Largy moves from place to place and takes up the available jobs with the approval of the Native Welfare and it becomes easy for him with his 'dog licence'.

“The 'dog licence' was a licence to live in a white man's world. It allowed an Aboriginal person to move freely in town and be served in pubs. But to receive the certificate, you had to prove that you were 'respectable', and effectively renounce your Aboriginality.” (Milton, Vanessa)

Though he gets the dog licence, there is no change in the way they are treated except for being considered as citizens of their own land. The family is affected by various rules implemented by the government in order to violate the freedom of the Australian Aboriginals.

“The colonisers made different laws for natives in order to subjugate them. By these laws, the freedom of the Indigenous people was totally curtailed. So many inhumane restrictions were imposed on them. They were not allowed to enter the city after the sunset rather kept in ‘Reserved Stations’. They were not allowed to speak their native language or follow their tradition and custom. Their religious practices were totally banned. The notion of superior and inferior race, according to their colour was introduced to divide them among themselves. The so called ‘Protection Boards’ were introduced to protect their rights but basically, the purpose was altogether different.” (Lakshmi, Rajya. 17)

The family faces racism. While walking on the road, they must get down the foot path, letting way for the white to pass by and then move on. At the movie, they are restricted to the first three rows. They are not supposed to enter into the white’s house and any violation invited severe punishment. When Geoff enters into a white’s house that is being painted and tries to paint it, they have to appear before the court of law and his father Largy has to pay a fine of five pounds as a parent, for not exercising control over Geoff. As it is a huge amount for him to pay, Largy has to take up different jobs and travel to different places. Even when they were to be shifted to a larger reserve, they were not treated with dignity or as mere human beings.

LARGY: I was talking to Mr. Flower today. He says the Native Welfare are moving us to a bigger reserve at Coolballing Road.

BELLA: Nice of Native Welfare to tell us. I suppose we’ll find out when the bulldozers turn up and they load us onto the back of a cattle truck. (*Contemporary Indigenous Plays*. 93)

Geoff’s family members are the victims of Stolen Generations. On the same day, Geoff and his three sisters were stolen as their parents go to Perth to attend a funeral. This raises curtains to the tragic incidents in the family such as Largy’s death, separation of Bella, Geoff and his sisters. Consequently, they could never share the same house thereafter. Poverty becomes inevitable and hunger, their common experience. Condemnation, insult, pain of separation haunts Geoff every moment of his life thereafter. In a helpless situation, the year of separation develops anger and ill feeling in Geoff towards his mother. Seeing his mother come for him, after several years, Geoff could not overcome the internal struggle and locks him in a room.

GEOFF *sees* BELLA and FATHER LUMEN *approaching*. *He goes to his room and closes the door.*

LUMEN: Open the door, Geoffrey.

BELLA: it’s me, Geoffrey, your mum.

LUMEN: Open the door, Geoffrey!

BELLA: I just want to see you.

LUMEN: Your mother is here to see you.

BELLA: You’re still my boy, Geoffrey.

LUMEN: You had better leave, you’re only upsetting the boy. You’re wasting your time, the boy’s not interested.

BELLA: You’re still my boy, Geoffrey. You’re my boy.

GEOFF: [*to the audience*] When Mum came to visit me, I went into shock. All the years that I had hoped we could live together as a family again had turned to anger and resentment. There was only one door

separating me from my mother's arms and I wanted to open it but I couldn't. (*Contemporary Indigenous Plays*.104, 05)

This incident demonstrates the psychological suffering that children like Geoff went through in the missions. In the due course of time, Geoffrey Narkle develops interest in boxing which would later become his profession for some years. The boys on the mission have to secretly manage listening to the live boxing commentary broadcasted with the aid of a transistor radio. The match is between Lionel Rose and Harada. Lionel Rose is an Australian Aboriginal boxer and Harada is a Japanese boxer. As Lionel Rose wins the fight, Geoff and his friends celebrate by skipping around as if they have won it themselves. There is no freedom for the children to do and enjoy what they like to. They are not fed healthy and sufficient food; they should not eat from the kitchen when hungry or go out for a drive. In the case of violation, severe punishments were given. Every walk of their life is controlled by the authorities on the missions and training centers.

When eighteen year old, Geoffrey's love for a girl named Kerry gets portrayed as a sexual relationship between them by a priest named Lumen, their in-charge. With this accuse, Geoffrey Narkle who could not tolerate the false blame decides to leave the Palatine Training Center where he is trained as a farm laborer.

"What education was provided generally aimed at completion of their schooling at the level achieved by a ten year old child in the State education system. It emphasised domestic science and manual training, thus preparing the children for a future as menial workers within the government or mission communities or as cheap labour in the wider community (Loos and Osanai 1993 page 20)." (Brining them Home. 148)

Coming out of the mission, he could not go anywhere and so, joins a group of destitute boys. There, he gets used to alcohol, takes up boxing and gradually establishes himself as a tent boxer, nicknamed as Barker Bulldog. Though Geoffrey Narkle becomes popular as the strong Barker Bulldog, he is still childish on the inside and struggles as a person belonging to the stolen generations. Geoff continues his career as a boxer because he "got three square meals a day, polony, dry bread and Coke" (*Contemporary Indigenous Plays*. 111). Though life was hard for a tent boxer, Geoff continued with boxing as it also brought him respect.

"Going home is fundamental to healing the effects of separation. Going home means finding out who you are as an Aboriginal: where you come from, who your people are, where your belonging place is, what your identity is. Going home is fundamental to the healing process of those who were taken away as well as those who were left behind (Link-Up (NSW) submission 186)." (Bringing them Home. 202)

In order to share the pain that the stolen children have undergone, they want to reunite with their families and get healed. But, as the stolen children who were away from their families for a long time wanted to reunite with their families, their family members seem to doubt their ability to mingle with them. Becoming strangers to each other due to their long standing separation develops an insecure feeling within them and they would not welcome them. Having been rejected even by their own family and not accepted by the white community, these stolen children have nowhere to go and develop resentment against the white people because they understand that the white men made law and policies are the reasons for such horrible situations in their lives, families and communities. Such children are found to undergo traumatic conditions that make them develop hatred for the white.

Being rejected to stay with his mother on their reunion, Geoff lives in an abandoned building, opposite to the Fremantle Prison. He develops deep hatred for the white to such an extent that he shouts at the white tower guards on duty at Fremantle Prison every day. He also expresses his anger against the white by attacking a white passer by almost to death. The following lines from the play give a clear picture of the mental agony and suffering Geoffrey Narkle undergoes, each time he sees a white man. He wanted to avenge the loss caused to his personal and family life. In a helpless situation, finding no way out, he shouts at and attacks the white men.

GEOFF: [*to the audience*] Hotels and parks became my boxing tent, and an abandoned house opposite Fremantle Prison became my home. Every morning I gave the tower guards an early morning call. [*To the guards*] Up yours, ya dogs! Come down here and fight!

NOONG enters and tries to pull GEOFF back.

NOONG: Give it a rest, Geoffrey. You've been doing it every morning for a fortnight.

GEOFF: Come down out of your tower and have a go, ya dogs!

NOONG: Geoffrey, they got guns!

GEOFF: And bring ya guns with ya! You don't scare me!

NOONG: You kartwarra, Geoffrey! You're gonna get us in big trouble!

GEOFF: You tell them boys in there Geoff Narkle says hello, and I'll see you tomorrow!

NOONG: Here, have a drink, it'll settle ya down.

GEOFF *pushes* NOONG *away as a* WHITE MAN *walks past.*

GEOFF: What are you staring at?

MAN: Aah! I wasn't staring at anything.

GEOFF: Take a good look!

MAN: I don't want any trouble, okay!

GEOFF: You never seen an Abo before, nigger, boong. Have a good look. Come on, have a good look! You can't help yourself, can ya?! You're just like those bastards in the tower.

MAN: Hey, look! I don't want any trouble, okay?

GEOFF *forces the* MAN *backwards along the path and starts*

*chipping him. Drumbeats in the background.*

GEOFF: [*to the audience*] After nearly killing a man I realised I'd forgotten who I was and where I'd come. I had to talk to Mum about what was eating me up inside so I headed back to Mount Barker to try and talk to her again. (*Contemporary Indigenous Plays*. 113,14)

Visiting to his mother again, he would try to talk about their past. It takes time to Geoff and his mother to open up and talk to his each other after having been separated for a long time. Before Bella dies, they share their experiences and sufferings with each other. Their conversations are all about the bitter experiences that taunted them for year and they cried a lot more than they talked. Geoff and his mother seem be relieved from their pains to some extent due to their sharing with each other though not completely healed.

Thus the play *King Hit* gives a picture of the troubles, sufferings, insults, breaches, physical and mental problems brought into the lives of the Australian Aboriginals as individuals, families and communities as a result of colonisation. Had not the Britishers arrived into Australia, there should have come up Aboriginal individuals, families and communities that were enriched with strong individuals and families enabling them enjoy every walk of their lives even to this day.

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