The Impact of Colonialism on Family and Memory: A Study on Larissa Behrendt's *Home*

[1]Sukanya A.S and [2]Dr J.Michael Raj

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of English, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur.
Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur.

[2]Department of English and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur-603 203.

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of colonialism on family structures and memory through an analysis of Larissa Behrendt's novel Home. The novel is set against the backdrop of postcolonial Australia, and delves into the psychological, emotional, and cultural effects of colonial violence, particularly the forced removal of Aboriginal children and the disruption of familial ties. By examining the experiences of the novel's characters, this study reveals how colonial policies not only fractured Indigenous family units but also erased and distorted cultural memories. It also emphasizes how storytelling allows characters to reclaim their identities, restore connections to their cultural heritage, and assert agency over their own histories. In doing so, Behrendt highlights the enduring trauma of colonialism while also showcasing the resilience of Indigenous communities in reclaiming their cultural memory and family ties. The paper offers both a poignant critique of colonialism's lasting effects and a hopeful vision for cultural revitalization through the power of memory and storytelling. The paper also examines how colonialism has affected family structures and memory, with a particular focus on the impact of forced removal policies and their intergenerational consequences. Through a close analysis of Behrendt's characters and themes, the study will explore how storytelling becomes a tool for both healing and resistance in the face of cultural erasure.

Keywords: Colonialism, Aboriginal, Resistance, Cultural loss, Indigenous**.**

Introduction

Colonialism has had far-reaching consequences on the cultures, families, and memories of Indigenous peoples around the world. In *Home*, Larissa Behrendt, an Indigenous Australian author and legal scholar, explores the ongoing effects of colonial policies on Aboriginal families and their collective memory. Set against the backdrop of Australia's colonial history, *Home* tells the story of a young Indigenous woman navigating the trauma of displacement, familial disruption, and the struggle for identity in a postcolonial world. The novel highlights the personal and cultural impacts of historical oppression, focusing on the emotional and psychological effects of forced separations and the breaking of familial bonds. Through its narrative, the novel offers a critique of the enduring legacy of colonial violence and an exploration of how Indigenous people reclaim their memories, identities, and connections to the land.

Colonial Disruption of Indigenous Families

Colonialism in Australia had a devastating impact on Indigenous families, particularly through policies aimed at assimilation and the forced removal of children from their homes. This period, most notably encapsulated by the Stolen Generations, involved the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families by the government, churches, and welfare agencies. The goal was to assimilate these children into white Australian society, often placing them in institutions or with white families, where they were deprived of their cultural heritage, language, and family ties. These policies, which lasted for much of the 20th century, caused profound disruption in the lives of Aboriginal families, resulting in the destruction of traditional family structures and the severing of cultural connections. Larissa Behrendt reflects the historical injustices by depicting the experiences of her characters, who are directly impacted by the legacies of colonial disruption. One central theme of the novel is the emotional and psychological effects of family separation. The protagonist's experience highlights the fragmentation of Aboriginal families, not just through physical separation, but also through the loss of cultural continuity. The novel illustrates how these policies led to a loss of familial knowledge, and how, for many generations, Aboriginal people were unable to pass down their cultural practices, language, or stories.

Through characters who struggle with disconnection from their families, *Home* vividly portrays the deep scars left by colonialism. The trauma of being removed from one's family and community leaves lasting emotional and identity issues, which are passed down from one generation to the next. The children removed from their families were often told they did not belong to their culture or heritage, which further compounded their sense of dislocation. In Behrendt's novel, these characters must navigate a world that is divided between their Aboriginal identity and the societal expectations placed on them by colonial powers.

Behrendt also highlights how this disruption manifests in the generational divide within Aboriginal families. For instance, older generations, who may have experienced removal firsthand, carry deep scars of loss and grief. Their pain becomes intergenerational, affecting their relationships with their children and grandchildren. These fractures within the family unit are not only emotional but also cultural, as the disconnection from cultural teachings, rituals, and the land leaves families struggling to find their place in a world that no longer supports their traditional ways of life.

The colonial disruption of Indigenous families is a central theme in *Home*, as Behrendt powerfully explores how these historical injustices continue to affect Aboriginal people today. The novel serves as a reminder of the lasting consequences of colonial violence on families, cultural memory, and identity, and challenges readers to acknowledge and confront this painful history in order to move toward healing and reconciliation.

Memory and Cultural Loss

One of the most significant effects of colonialism, particularly in the context of Indigenous experiences, is the fragmentation and loss of memory. For Aboriginal people, cultural memory is an essential part of identity—preserving knowledge, stories, traditions, and connections to the land. However, colonial policies actively sought to sever these ties by disrupting the transmission of culture between generations. The forced removal of children, the destruction of traditional ways of life, and the imposition of

Western norms left many Indigenous people disconnected from their cultural heritage. In *Home*, Larissa Behrendt poignantly explores how these colonial policies resulted in not only the loss of tangible cultural artifacts but also the erosion of collective and individual memory.

In the novel, memory becomes a critical space for characters to reclaim their identity. The protagonist, along with other characters, struggles to reconstruct the memories of their past—memories that have been either erased or distorted by colonial violence. The effects of colonialism on memory are not limited to individual experiences but extend to the broader community, where entire histories, languages, and cultural practices were suppressed. This loss is felt deeply by characters who attempt to piece together fragments of their ancestral past, searching for meaning in a world that has largely ignored or marginalized their existence.

Behrendt employs fragmented narrative techniques—such as flashbacks, dreams, and shifts in perspective—to represent the disjointed nature of memory within the context of colonial trauma. The characters' memories are not linear; they are often incomplete, lost, or repressed due to the painful experiences of colonial violence. This fragmented memory reflects the deep scars of colonialism, as the continuity of Indigenous culture has been broken over time. As a result, characters struggle to understand where they fit within their cultural heritage, feeling as though they are adrift between two worlds—one rooted in traditional Aboriginal values and the other shaped by the colonial structures that continue to dominate their lives.

The loss of cultural memory is also tied to the destruction of traditional knowledge and practices. In *Home*, Behrendt underscores the difficulty of reconnecting with ancestral teachings and rituals that were once passed down through generations. Many of the characters in the novel, especially younger ones, are left without access to this vital knowledge because their elders were either removed from their communities or unable to transmit their teachings due to the oppressive conditions of colonization. This cultural loss leads to a sense of dislocation, as the characters find themselves searching for a home that they are unable to fully reclaim. The absence of cultural memory leaves gaps in their understanding of their heritage, which complicates their sense of identity and belonging.

Despite these challenges, Behrendt also shows that memory is not a fixed or static concept—it is an active process of recovery and reclamation. Through storytelling and the sharing of experiences, the characters begin to rebuild their sense of cultural identity. This process of remembering is a key aspect of healing, as characters reclaim their histories and reassert their agency. The novel suggests that while colonialism may have sought to erase cultural memory, the resilience of Indigenous people allows them to recover and protect their heritage through both individual and collective acts of remembering.

The novel illustrates how the loss of cultural memory due to colonialism is not a permanent state. It is something that can be reclaimed and revitalized, but only through an active effort to remember and to honor the traditions and stories of the past. Behrendt's portrayal of memory as a site of resistance emphasizes the importance of cultural survival in the face of ongoing colonial legacies, showing how memory and storytelling become vital tools for Indigenous people to reclaim their identity, resist erasure, and heal from the trauma of their past.

Storytelling as Resistance and Healing

Behrendt explores storytelling as both a form of resistance against colonial violence and a vital mechanism for healing. For Indigenous peoples, storytelling is not just a means of entertainment or expression; it is a profound tool for cultural preservation, the transmission of knowledge, and the reclamation of identity. In the face of colonialism's efforts to erase Indigenous histories, languages, and traditions, storytelling becomes an act of defiance, a way to reclaim and protect cultural memory from erasure. Behrendt illustrates how storytelling offers a means of survival, empowerment, and healing, particularly for communities that have endured historical trauma such as forced removals, cultural suppression, and family fragmentation.

One of the core themes in *Home* is the way in which the characters use storytelling to rebuild their connections to the past and to each other. This act of telling stories is a form of resistance, as it challenges the colonial narratives that have long silenced Indigenous voices. Throughout the novel, characters struggle with the loss of their ancestral stories, often unable to recall or fully understand their cultural histories due to the impact of colonial disruption. Yet, as they begin to share their personal stories—whether through oral traditions or through written expression—they assert their right to define their own identity and history. This reclaiming of narrative power is central to their journey of healing, as storytelling provides a way for them to navigate their fragmented memories and reconnect with their cultural heritage.

Behrendt uses the characters' stories as both personal and collective tools for resistance. In the novel, the protagonist and other key characters grapple with the trauma of being disconnected from their families and cultures. Their efforts to reconnect with their history through storytelling represent an act of defiance against the colonial structures that sought to undermine their identities. For example, the protagonist's search for her family's history and her attempts to reclaim her Aboriginal identity are rooted in the belief that by telling her story, she can resist the dominance of the colonial narrative that has relegated Indigenous people to the margins. Storytelling becomes an act of asserting agency, as it challenges the dominant historical discourse and places Indigenous people at the center of their own stories.

Beyond resistance, storytelling in *Home* also functions as a means of healing. The characters' stories are a way for them to process their trauma and begin to mend the emotional and cultural rifts caused by colonialism. For Indigenous communities, storytelling has long been a communal practice that fosters connection and understanding. By telling their stories, characters in the novel begin to rebuild the broken ties between themselves, their families, and their culture. Storytelling allows them to share their experiences, validate their feelings, and make sense of their identities in the face of colonial trauma. Through these shared narratives, characters find a sense of solidarity and collective healing, recognizing that their personal histories are interwoven with the larger history of their people.

Storytelling is a powerful form of cultural preservation. In *Home*, Behrendt demonstrates how the act of telling stories is integral to the survival of Indigenous cultures, especially in the face of colonialism's attempts to erase or distort these cultures. By keeping the stories alive and passing them down through generations, Indigenous people can ensure that their histories, languages, and traditions are not lost. In the novel, storytelling becomes a bridge between the past and the present, enabling characters to reclaim their

cultural roots and impart these teachings to future generations. It is through storytelling that Indigenous people can continue to resist cultural extinction and assert their sovereignty.

Behrendt's portrayal of storytelling in *Home* highlights its significance as both a tool of resistance and a method of healing. Storytelling empowers characters to resist colonial forces that seek to suppress their voices, and it offers a path for healing from the trauma inflicted by those same forces. By sharing their stories, characters begin to reclaim their identities and histories, asserting their right to define their own lives and futures. In this way, storytelling becomes a vital act of cultural survival, allowing Indigenous people to both heal from past wounds and preserve their cultural legacies for future generations. Through *Home*, Behrendt not only demonstrates the power of storytelling as a form of resistance but also emphasizes its essential role in the ongoing process of healing and cultural revitalization.

Conclusion

Larissa Behrendt's *Home* provides a powerful examination of the lasting impact of colonialism on Indigenous families and their memory. Through her complex characters and layered narrative, Behrendt sheds light on the deep emotional, psychological, and cultural wounds inflicted by colonial violence, particularly the forced removal of children and the disintegration of family structures. The novel illustrates how memory, while often fragmented and distorted by colonialism, can also serve as a means of survival and resistance. By reclaiming and retelling their stories, Indigenous people in *Home* begin to rebuild their sense of identity and restore their cultural connections. Behrendt's use of storytelling as a tool for healing highlights the resilience of Aboriginal communities, whose capacity to preserve their histories, despite colonial oppression, is an act of resistance and empowerment. Ultimately, *Home* is not only a story of personal healing but also a broader commentary on the continued effects of colonialism in contemporary Indigenous Australia. Through this study, we gain insight into the ongoing struggle for cultural continuity, as well as the central role that memory and storytelling play in the reclamation of Indigenous identity.

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