

**Eileen Harrison and Carolyn Landon, *Black Swan* (Allen and Unwin, 2011)**

In this recently published Memoir, Carolyn Landon depicts the life of Eileen Harrison, a hearing-impaired Koorie Aboriginal woman, as Harrison narrates it through stories from her childhood to the present times and also through her paintings. Drawing from the rich tradition of Aboriginal life in the Australian sub-continent, the authors create a central imagery of the revered 'black swan' in the book as they weave a magnificent tale of joy, loss, pain, grit, courage, survival and the seeking of one's self. Owing to the contemporary changes in the socio-political scenario affecting the Aboriginal peoples in Australia, this book brings to the forefront voices silenced in the past. Touching upon issues that range from governmental betrayals to domestic violence and Aboriginal spirituality, *Black Swan* deliberates on life lived as an Indigenous woman in contemporary Australia.

Divided into five self-sufficient parts along with a prologue and an epilogue, the text definitely creates a postmodern account of twentieth century Aboriginal life in Australia. As storytellers drawing from both memory and tradition, Harrison and Landon make sure to touch upon the most significant aspects of Aboriginal life such as the pleasures of community living, seeing the world through stories, Aboriginal food and dress habits, the patterns of Nature prevalent in Aboriginal works of art, the problems of alcoholism, the impact of assimilationist policies on the fabric of Aboriginal life, and so forth.

As it charts Eileen's journey from childhood to adulthood, the text alternates between her experience of the two recurring themes of 'shame' and 'pride.' Written in the circular pattern of an Aboriginal tale, the text in Part I starts with several stories Eileen was exposed to as an Aboriginal child growing up in the Lake Tyers Mission Station. The tone is fresh and vibrant with a child's happy perspective of a close-knit family that lived contently within the resources available to it. In this part of the text, the Mission and the church, in spite of their 'civilising' objective, are portrayed as compassionate and real, as a system that did not attempt to overwhelm the Aboriginal mindscape.

Part II is about Eileen's teenage years and there is an increasingly evident sense of comprehending the bias prevalent in the mainstream about Aborigines, be it the attempt to demean them through white education, or to create a sense of misery and shame among Aboriginal children by sending them away from their families to white people for vacations. Harrison and Landon look upon the policy of assimilation as a strategy to uproot Aborigines from their land and their traditions. The text focuses on how such governmental practices ultimately result in reinforcing the stereotypes of a fallen native ashamed of their being. This part also throws light on the growing sense of discontent among Aboriginal peoples about the oppression in Mission life and a sincere effort from the Aboriginal leaders to establish their political rights.

With shame comes alcoholism that afflicts Eileen's otherwise doting father and thus leads to the ultimate ruin of the family fabric. This, in turn, leads to feelings of fear and anger in the young Eileen who witnesses her parents go astray as the family disintegrates beyond repair. Loss of pride and self-esteem follow a loss of self-image. Eileen's painful rendition of saving herself even at the cost of betraying her

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little sisters is simultaneously courageous and poignant. Eileen is also utterly aware of the corrupting capacity of the welfare and hence opts to stay as far away from it as possible. But these are also the times when she develops the grit to stand up for her long-suffering mother against her by now terribly abusive father.

From here onwards, the text dwells on hope and survival. Eileen, married by now and pregnant with new life, takes it upon herself to 'gather the pieces' of her family structure to make it whole again. But it has to be done with a deep sense of understanding that the long years of assimilation have made them displaced, uprooted and wasted as they became marginal in their own land. This part of the text also focuses on Eileen's Aboriginal lineage from both her parent's side. As Eileen learns more about her father's difficult childhood, she forgives her dead father for the pain he inflicted on her mother and her sisters. As she attempts to rejoin the threads of togetherness in the extended family, tragedy strikes again in the shape of loss of her own family to separation and the death of her young son.

Towards the end, the text focuses on Eileen's conscious efforts to overcome alcoholism and family violence as she works towards regaining the Aboriginal sense of being. Along with her new-found sobriety and a college education she takes up in order to help her daughter continue studying, she also experiences the miracle of hearing for the first time in her life. Healed by friendship and her own reckoning as an Aboriginal artist, Eileen overcomes her traumatised selfhood to find herself in her paintings and storytelling sessions inspired by the bitter-sweet memories of her life. Having thus gained her voice and negated the effects of the 'Great Australian Silence' (224), Eileen, in the Epilogue, talks about the erasure of self-doubt and regaining the pride of being an Aboriginal woman. Guided in her dreams by the mythical 'Black Swan' and the 'Nargun,' Eileen talks about her growth as a revered community elder.

The book is further enriched by the miniature graphical versions of Harrison's paintings, as these underpin the stories being told in the text. The reader is treated to a visual appreciation of Aboriginal life as it occurred in twentieth-century Australia. Several motifs such as Lake Tyers, the Mission, the black swans, the Nargun, and Aboriginal footprints recur in the paintings, as these are in the text itself. The Harrison family pictures add further emotional value to the memoir. *Black Swan*, a book so honest, so deeply personal and warmly touching without being voyeuristic, is definitely a worthy contribution to the volume of Australian Aboriginal literature.

Resonating with *Halfbreed*, the 1973 autobiography of June Stifle, a Canadian halfbreed woman, written under the pseudonym Maria Campbell, this book brings to the forefront the most important issues concerning the Aboriginal woman in Australia, such as selfhood, community identity, and keeping alive the Aboriginal traditions under all circumstances. A must read for readers of memoirs, scholars of Aboriginal literature, and the general public alike.

## **Punyashree Panda**