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Voices of the Past: Recovering Aboriginal Histories in Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling occupies a significant position in the preservation of Indigenous histories, cultural memory and collective identity. For Aboriginal communities in Australia, narratives serve not merely as forms of cultural expression but also as important means of resisting colonial domination and reclaiming suppressed histories. This paper examines storytelling as a reclaiming practice in Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise, focusing on the ways in which narrative representations recover Aboriginal experiences that have been marginalised by colonial historical accounts.

The paper explores how Wright employs fragmented narratives, multiple perspectives, personal experiences and intergenerational memories to challenge colonial systems of representation. The paper further investigates how the representation of Aboriginal women, family relationships and community histories contributes to the recovery of Indigenous voices and the preservation of cultural memory. It argues that storytelling functions as an act of resistance by challenging the silencing of Aboriginal experiences and restoring the significance of Indigenous perspectives. Ultimately, Wright demonstrates that reclaiming the past through narratives is essential to recover historical memory and the continuing revival of Aboriginal identity.

Keywords: Storytelling, Aboriginality, Cultural Memory, Indigenous, Resistance, Identity, Stolen Generations.

1.INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a significant medium through which marginalised communities articulate their histories, preserve cultural identities and challenge dominant structures of power. For Indigenous communities, literary expression extends beyond artistic representation and becomes a means of recovering historical experiences that have been suppressed, distorted or excluded from dominant narratives.

In Australia, Aboriginal literature occupies an important position in expressing the consequences of colonisation, including dispossession, cultural displacement, family separation and the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems. Within this literary tradition, storytelling assumes particular significance because it enables Aboriginal communities to preserve ancestral memories, communicate cultural values and maintain connections with their histories and identities. It also provides an alternative means of interpreting the past from Indigenous perspectives rather than accepting the authority of colonial historical accounts.

The colonisation of Australia fundamentally transformed the lives of Aboriginal peoples through the dispossession of their ancestral lands, the disruption of traditional practices and the imposition of colonial systems of administration and social control. Colonial policies affected Indigenous family structures, cultural relationships and the transmission of traditional knowledge. The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families further intensified the disruption of cultural continuity and intergenerational relationships. These historical interventions produced experiences of displacement, loss and marginalisation that continue to influence Aboriginal communities. Moreover, colonial representations frequently positioned Aboriginal people as subjects of historical observation rather than as individuals possessing the authority to narrate their own experiences. Consequently, the recovery of Indigenous histories requires not only the recognition of historical injustices but also the restoration of Aboriginal voices and narrative authority.

In this context, storytelling becomes an important practice of cultural resistance and historical recovery. Indigenous storytelling preserves experiences that may remain absent from official historical records. It connects individual memories with collective histories and allows communities to transmit knowledge

across generations. Unlike conventional historical narratives that frequently depend upon linear chronology and institutional documentation, Indigenous storytelling may incorporate multiple voices, ancestral memories, oral traditions and interconnected experiences. Such narrative practices challenge the assumption that history can be represented through a single authoritative perspective. They also demonstrate that cultural memory is sustained through the continuous sharing and reinterpretation of stories.

Alexis Wright, an influential Australian Aboriginal writer, explores these concerns through her literary representations of Indigenous experiences. Her writings examine the historical and contemporary consequences of colonisation while foregrounding Aboriginal cultural knowledge, identity, memory and relationships with Country. Wright challenges dominant literary and historical conventions by incorporating complex narrative structures and multiple perspectives. Her works demonstrate that Indigenous histories cannot be adequately understood through colonial interpretations alone. Instead, they require attention to the experiences, memories and knowledge systems of the communities whose histories have frequently been marginalised.

Wright's novel Plains of Promise (1997) offers a significant exploration of the relationship between colonial intervention, family histories, memory and Aboriginal identity. The novel presents the experiences of Aboriginal individuals and families within the historical context of institutional control and cultural disruption. Through its portrayal of St Dominic's Mission and the lives of its characters, Wright examines the consequences of colonial intervention in Aboriginal communities. The narrative exposes the ways in which institutional authority interferes with family relationships, individual autonomy and cultural belonging.

Wright employs multiple perspectives, shifts in narrative time and interconnected personal histories to demonstrate how the past continues to influence the present. The experiences of Ivy Koopundi and Mary Doolan are important to this discussion because their lives reveal different dimensions of colonial disruption and the struggle to maintain a sense of identity. Ivy's experiences within the mission system expose the consequences of institutional control and the separation of Aboriginal individuals from their cultural and familial environments. Mary's experiences further contribute to the exploration of identity, family relationships and the continuing effects of historical displacement. Through these character experiences, Wright presents personal histories as part of a larger collective narrative of Aboriginal suffering, resistance and cultural continuity.

The present study approaches the novel through this specific connection, examining how its narrative structures, character experiences and representations of family histories challenge colonial authority and restore the significance of Indigenous perspectives. Rather than considering storytelling merely as a literary technique, the study interprets it as a cultural and political practice through which suppressed histories are recovered and Aboriginal identity is reaffirmed.

The history of Aboriginal communities in Australia is deeply connected with the experiences of colonisation, dispossession and cultural disruption. European colonisation transformed Indigenous social structures by introducing systems of authority that undermined traditional relationships with land, family and community. Aboriginal people experienced the loss of ancestral territories, restrictions on cultural practices and the marginalisation of their languages and knowledge systems. These historical interventions affected not only the material conditions of Indigenous life but also the ways in which Aboriginal communities preserved and communicated their histories. Colonial authorities frequently established institutions and policies that attempted to regulate Indigenous identities and assimilate Aboriginal people into European social structures. Consequently, the preservation of Aboriginal historical memory became an important means of resisting cultural erasure and reclaiming Indigenous identity.

One of the significant consequences of colonial administration was its interference in Aboriginal family relationships. Government policies and institutional practices subjected Indigenous families to external control, disrupting the transmission of cultural knowledge between generations. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities caused long-lasting emotional and cultural consequences. Children separated from their parents were frequently deprived of opportunities to learn traditional languages, customs and community histories within their original cultural environments. These experiences affected the continuity of Indigenous identity and created divisions within family structures. The history of the Stolen Generations demonstrates how colonial intervention extended beyond the occupation of land and affected the intimate relationships through which Aboriginal culture was sustained.

Mission institutions played an important role in this process of social and cultural control. Established under religious and administrative authority, missions frequently attempted to reorganise Aboriginal lives according to European religious, educational and social expectations. Although their stated purposes were often associated with welfare, education and religious instruction, their institutional practices could restrict Indigenous autonomy and weaken traditional cultural relationships. The regulation of family life, restrictions on cultural expression and the separation of individuals from their communities contributed to the marginalisation of Aboriginal knowledge systems. The mission environment therefore became a significant setting in which colonial power operated through everyday institutional practices.

Alexis Wright explores these historical consequences in Plains of Promise through the representation of St Dominic's Mission. The mission functions as more than a geographical setting in the novel; it represents an institutional structure through which Aboriginal lives are controlled and cultural identities are disrupted. Wright examines the relationship between institutional authority and individual experiences, revealing how colonial systems influence family relationships, personal freedom and cultural belonging. The experiences of the characters demonstrate that the effects of colonialism cannot be

understood solely through political or historical events. They must also be examined through the personal memories, emotional experiences and disrupted relationships of the people affected by these systems.

Ivy Koopundi is one of the most significant characters through whom Wright explores the consequences of colonial intervention. Her childhood experiences at St Dominic's Mission reveal the suffering of Aboriginal children who are separated from their families and placed under institutional control. Ivy's story is central to the novel because it demonstrates how the removal of children affects not only their immediate lives but also their relationships with their families, communities and cultural backgrounds.

Ivy arrives at St Dominic's Mission with her mother. However, their relationship is immediately interrupted by the institutional environment. The separation of mother and daughter becomes one of the earliest experiences through which Ivy encounters the authority of the mission. Instead of receiving the protection and affection associated with family life, she is placed in an environment where her childhood is shaped by institutional restrictions. The loss of her mother's presence creates an emotional distance that continues to influence her later life.

The experiences of Ivy are closely connected with the history of the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal children were removed from their families through government and institutional policies, resulting in the disruption of cultural relationships and the loss of opportunities to grow up within their communities. Wright represents this historical experience through Ivy's personal circumstances. Her story illustrates how the removal of a child produces consequences that extend beyond physical separation. It also interrupts the transmission of family memories, language, cultural practices and ancestral knowledge.

Ivy's mother is equally important to understand this experience. Her suffering represents the emotional consequences of separation from her child. The relationship between mother and daughter becomes a reminder of the family connections that colonial institutions attempt to control. Through their separation, Wright reveals how colonial intervention affects Aboriginal women, particularly mothers whose ability to protect and raise their children is taken away.

Ivy's experiences also demonstrate the way in which the mission environment creates lasting emotional and social difficulties. The loss of her family connections influences her understanding of herself and her place within the community. Her childhood memories are marked by experiences that she cannot easily escape. The past continues to exist in her later life, showing that the consequences of colonial interference do not disappear when the immediate circumstances change. An important aspect of Ivy's characterisation is the way her experiences are gradually revealed through the narrative. Wright does not present her life as an isolated account of individual suffering. Instead, Ivy's story is connected with the experiences of other Aboriginal people and with the wider history of the mission. The narrative allows her personal circumstances to become part of a collective historical record.

The significance of Ivy's story becomes even more apparent through her relationship with her daughter, Mary Doolan. The circumstances surrounding Mary's birth and upbringing demonstrate how the consequences of colonial violence continue across generations. Ivy's experiences as a child influence her later experience as a mother. The family history therefore becomes a continuous narrative in which the suffering of one generation affects the identity and experiences of the next. Ivy's character reveals that reclaiming the past requires more than remembering historical events. It also involves recognising the people whose lives were shaped by those events. Her story gives attention to the experiences of Aboriginal women and children whose voices were frequently excluded from official accounts. Through Ivy, Wright restores importance to the memories of those who experienced family separation and institutional control.

At the same time, Mary Doolan occupies an important position in the narrative because her journey towards understanding her family history connects the past with the present. As Ivy's daughter, Mary inherits a family history shaped by colonial intervention and separation. However, unlike her mother, whose childhood is directly marked by the mission experience, Mary approaches the past through the process of discovery. Her search enables Wright to examine how younger generations recover cultural identity through the stories and experiences of their ancestors.

Mary's involvement with a city-based Aboriginal Coalition increases her awareness of Aboriginal social and political concerns. Her growing understanding of Aboriginal issues encourages her to revisit the old mission in the northern Gulf region. The visit becomes an important moment in her personal journey because the place contains the history of her mother and grandmother. Through her return, Mary begins to understand the circumstances that shaped her family's experiences. Her journey is not simply a physical movement from the city to the mission. It also represents an attempt to recover the family history that has remained incomplete. The past becomes meaningful to Mary when she begins to understand the suffering experienced by the earlier generations of her family. The mission, which might initially appear to be an abandoned institution, becomes a significant location of remembrance. Mary's search is important because it demonstrates how historical knowledge can be recovered through family relationships and community memories. The stories connected with her mother and grandmother help her recognise that her identity is linked with experiences that existed before her own birth. Her understanding of herself becomes inseparable from the history of her family and ancestral community.

The relationship between Mary and Ivy is therefore central to the novel's treatment of storytelling. Ivy's life contains experiences that Mary must come to understand in order to recover her own history. Although the two women belong to different generations, their lives are connected through the consequences of colonial intervention. Their relationship demonstrates that the past continues to influence the present through family memories and inherited experiences. Mary's return also reawakens concerns within the community. Her presence at the mission brings forgotten experiences into renewed

attention and causes the Council of Elders to turn towards their spiritual world. The community's response demonstrates that the recovery of history is not merely an individual activity. It also involves the wider community and its relationship with ancestral knowledge.

Through Mary, Wright presents the importance of younger generations taking an interest in their family histories. Her journey demonstrates that cultural identity cannot be fully understood without recognising the experiences of earlier generations. The knowledge of family suffering, ancestral relationships and historical displacement becomes essential to understanding her cultural belonging. Mary's character also highlights the importance of returning to places associated with family history. The mission represents a painful past, but it also contains memories that must be acknowledged. By returning to this location, Mary confronts the historical circumstances that have shaped her family. Her journey creates an opportunity to recognise the experiences of her mother and grandmother rather than allowing them to remain forgotten.

The significance of Mary's character lies in her role as a link between generations. Through her search, the experiences of the past become meaningful to the present. Her journey demonstrates that storytelling is not limited to the preservation of memories already known. It also involves discovering missing histories, listening to the experiences of earlier generations and recognising the connections that sustain cultural identity. Mary's search for her family's history therefore becomes a significant part of the novel's larger concern with the recovery of Aboriginal experiences. Through her, Wright demonstrates that the younger generation can reclaim cultural belonging by learning about the lives of their ancestors. The process of remembering becomes a means of maintaining continuity between the past and the present.

St Dominic's Mission is a central location in Plains of Promise because it contains the memories of several generations of Aboriginal people. The mission is associated with the institutional control of Aboriginal families, the separation of children and the disruption of traditional community life. Through this setting, Wright demonstrates that historical experiences remain connected with the places in which they occurred. The mission is significant in Ivy's story because it is the place where her childhood is shaped by separation and institutional restrictions. Her arrival with her mother marks the beginning of a difficult period in her life. The physical environment becomes associated with the loss of family relationships and the experiences that influence her later identity.

For Mary, the mission represents a place that must be revisited in order to understand her family history. Her return enables her to recognise the connection between the location and the experiences of her mother and grandmother. The mission becomes an important source of historical knowledge because it holds memories that cannot be understood through distance or silence. The significance of the setting also extends to the wider community. Mary's return reawakens community anxieties and draws attention to the memories associated with the place. The response of the Council of Elders demonstrates that the mission's history is not limited to the experiences of one family. It is connected with the community's broader relationship with its past.

Wright's representation of the mission reveals the difference between the institutional meaning of a place and its significance to the people who have experienced it. For the colonial authorities, the mission may be understood as an institution established to control and manage Aboriginal populations. For Aboriginal characters, however, it represents a place associated with family separation, suffering and memories that remain part of their collective history. The landscape surrounding the mission also carries significance because Aboriginal identity is closely connected with ancestral places and community relationships with the land. The characters' memories cannot be separated from their geographical and cultural surroundings. Their experiences are shaped by the places in which their families have lived and the histories associated with those locations.

The novel therefore establishes an important relationship between storytelling and place. Stories preserve the memories connected with particular locations, while those locations provide a physical connection with the past. The return to St Dominic's Mission allows Mary and the wider community to recognise the historical experiences that have shaped their lives. The mission consequently becomes more than a setting for the events of the novel. It represents a historical space in which memories of colonial intervention remain present. Through this location, Wright demonstrates that recovering Aboriginal history requires acknowledging the experiences of people whose lives have been shaped by colonial institutions.

One of the important achievements of Plains of Promise is its ability to give narrative importance to individuals whose experiences have been neglected in dominant historical accounts. Wright presents the lives of Aboriginal people not simply as victims of colonial intervention but as individuals whose memories, relationships and cultural experiences deserve recognition. Through storytelling, the novel restores attention to their personal histories and presents their experiences as an essential part of Australian history. The characters in the novel represent different dimensions of Aboriginal experience. Ivy's childhood reveals the consequences of family separation, while Mary's search illustrates the importance of recovering ancestral history. The experiences of the older generation provide an understanding of the suffering that has shaped the lives of younger characters. Together, these experiences create a narrative in which individual memories contribute to a larger account of Aboriginal history.

The importance of storytelling is particularly evident in the way Wright gives attention to the experiences of Aboriginal women. The lives of Ivy, her mother and Mary reveal how colonial intervention affects women through the disruption of motherhood, family relationships and cultural belonging. Their experiences demonstrate that the history of colonisation must also be understood through the lives of women whose personal suffering has often been overlooked.

The novel also challenges the absence of Aboriginal perspectives in the recording of historical events. The mission's history cannot be understood entirely through the activities of its administrators. It must also include the experiences of the children who lived there, the mothers separated from them and the communities affected by institutional control. Wright's narrative shifts attention towards these individuals and establishes their experiences as important historical knowledge.

The significance of this narrative approach becomes clearer when Mary's journey is considered. Her return to the mission enables the experiences of earlier generations to become part of her present understanding. The memories associated with Ivy and her grandmother provide an alternative account of the mission's history. These memories reveal the difference between the institutional representation of colonial history and the lived experiences of Aboriginal people.

Storytelling also creates an opportunity to acknowledge experiences that have remained unspoken. The characters' lives contain memories of separation, loss and suffering that cannot be adequately understood through official historical descriptions alone. By presenting these experiences through narrative, Wright gives importance to the emotional and cultural dimensions of colonial history. The novel consequently establishes storytelling as an act of historical restoration. It enables Aboriginal characters to occupy a central position in the representation of their own experiences. Their memories become essential to understanding the past, while their stories ensure that the consequences of colonial intervention are not forgotten.

The recovery of Aboriginal identity is one of the central concerns of Plains of Promise. Through the experiences of Ivy and Mary, Wright demonstrates that cultural identity is closely connected with family history, ancestral relationships and community belonging. Colonial intervention disrupts these connections by separating children from their parents and removing individuals from their cultural surroundings. Nevertheless, the novel presents the recovery of these relationships as an important part of maintaining Aboriginal identity. Ivy's experiences reveal the difficulties created when a child is separated from her family and placed within an institution. Her life demonstrates that cultural displacement involves more than physical removal. It also affects an individual's understanding of family relationships and ancestral belonging. The loss of contact with earlier generations creates difficulties in preserving the knowledge that normally passes between family members.

Mary's experience presents a different dimension of this struggle. Rather than experiencing the same childhood separation, she approaches her cultural history through discovery and remembrance. Her return to the mission becomes an important step in understanding her family's past. Through the experiences of her mother and grandmother, she begins to recognise the historical circumstances that have influenced her identity. The relationship between these two characters demonstrates that cultural identity is maintained through connections across generations. Ivy's past becomes part of Mary's inheritance, even though Mary did not directly experience the events that shaped her mother's childhood. This relationship shows how historical experiences can influence later generations through family memories and inherited cultural knowledge.

Wright also connects cultural belonging with the ancestral landscape. The return to the northern Gulf region is important because the land carries memories of the community and its earlier generations. The characters' relationship with the place is connected with their family histories and cultural experiences. The landscape therefore becomes an important element in the recovery of identity. The community's spiritual relationships further strengthen this connection. The Council of Elders and their response to Mary's return demonstrate that Aboriginal cultural knowledge continues to exist beyond the institutional experiences of the mission. The community's relationship with ancestral knowledge provides a sense of continuity despite the historical disruption caused by colonial intervention.

The novel consequently presents Aboriginal identity as something that cannot be understood through colonial descriptions alone. It is connected with family relationships, ancestral memory, community knowledge and the land. Through the stories of its characters, Wright demonstrates that reclaiming identity requires recovering the histories that have been interrupted or suppressed. Storytelling becomes essential to this process because it allows younger generations to understand the experiences of their ancestors. The narration of family histories preserves the connections that colonial institutions attempted to disrupt. Through the relationship between Ivy and Mary, Wright illustrates how remembering the past can strengthen cultural belonging in the present.

Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise presents storytelling as an important means of reclaiming Aboriginal history, preserving cultural memory and restoring the voices of individuals affected by colonisation. Through the interconnected experiences of Ivy Koopundi, Mary Doolan and the wider Aboriginal community, Wright demonstrates how colonial intervention disrupts family relationships, separates children from their parents and interrupts the transmission of cultural knowledge. The novel gives particular importance to the experiences of Aboriginal women and children whose personal histories reveal the continuing consequences of historical injustice.

The narrative structure of the novel strengthens these concerns by bringing together different characters, memories and historical periods. Through this arrangement, Wright presents the past as a continuing influence on the present. The stories of individuals become connected with the larger history of Aboriginal communities, allowing personal experiences to contribute to a collective account of survival and remembrance.

Ultimately, Plains of Promise demonstrates that storytelling is more than the narration of past events. It is a means of preserving family histories, recognising forgotten experiences and maintaining cultural connections. Through the lives of Ivy and Mary, Wright reveals that reclaiming the past requires remembering the experiences of earlier generations and acknowledging their continuing significance. The novel establishes storytelling as an important means of restoring silenced

Aboriginal voices and preserving the cultural memories that sustain Aboriginal identity. By giving narrative importance to the experiences of Aboriginal individuals and communities, Wright ensures that their histories remain an essential part of the present and the future

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