

The Voices of the Stolen Generations: A Study of Indigenous Identity and Displacement

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Sujitha, D. "The Voices of the Stolen Generations: A Study of Indigenous Identity and Displacement." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S3, 2026, pp. 137–40.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS3-Apr.10865>

D. Sujitha

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
Hindustan College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore*

Abstract

*This paper analyses Indigenous identity and cultural displacement in *Stolen* by Jane Harrison. The play presents the experiences of five Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families under the Australian government's assimilation policies. These policies, associated with the Stolen Generations, aimed at separating Indigenous children from their cultural roots in order to absorb them into white society. Such removal resulted in the loss of family bonds, language, cultural practices and connection to ancestral land. Through its non-linear structure and multiple stories, the play reveals how cultural displacement leads to identity confusion, emotional trauma and a lasting sense of not belonging. The idea of "home" runs throughout the play and reflects the characters' deep longing to return to their families, land and connection. Each character's life reflects a different response to displacement, showing that the effects of colonial policies are both personal and collective. This paper argues that *Stolen* not only exposes the historical realities of Indigenous suffering but also emphasizes the importance of reconnecting identity through memory and storytelling.*

Keywords: Identity, Displacement, Stolen Generation, Assimilation Policies, Aboriginal.

Jane Harrison's *Stolen* occupies an important place in Indigenous Australian drama because it presents history through lived experience rather than official records. The play focuses on the Stolen Generations, a period when Aboriginal children were taken from their families under government assimilation policies. These removals were not isolated incidents but part of a larger system that aimed to reshape Indigenous communities by separating children from their cultural background. Through dramatic storytelling, the play brings attention to the emotional and cultural damage caused by these policies. The removal of Aboriginal children began in the late nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth century. Authorities believed that Indigenous children would have better opportunities if they were raised within white society. However, this belief ignored the importance of family, language and land in shaping identity. Children were often placed in institutions where strict discipline replaced affection. Many were trained for domestic or manual work rather than being encouraged to pursue education freely. This created long-term social and emotional consequences.

In *Stolen*, Harrison presents five characters whose lives represent different responses to removal. Ruby, Jimmy, Shirley, Sandy and

Anne do not share identical experiences, yet they are connected by the same policy that disrupted their childhoods. The play does not follow a traditional linear narrative. Instead, it moves between past and present, allowing the audience to see how childhood trauma continues to influence adult life. This technique makes the emotional impact more powerful because the audience witnesses both the innocence of childhood and the consequences of displacement.

Ruby's life reveals the deep emotional and psychological damage caused by forced separation and institutional abuse. As a child, she waits with hope, believing that her mother will come back for her. Although that hope slowly fades as she grows older, her longing for her family never disappears. During her time in the institution, she experiences harsh treatment and abuse, which further weakens her emotional strength. By the time her father and sister finally find her, the trauma has already affected her deeply. The reunion cannot undo the years of pain and neglect. Ruby's mental breakdown shows how separation and abuse together can destroy a person's inner stability. Her story makes it clear that identity depends on love, security and family bonds, and when these are taken away, the damage can be lasting.

Jimmy's character reflects the silent suffering caused by separation and neglect. As a child, he is taken away from his mother and grows up believing that she has abandoned him. This misunderstanding slowly shapes his personality and self-worth. He feels unwanted and rejected, even though the separation was not his mother's choice. The institution does not provide emotional support; instead, it creates distance between him and his family. Letters and attempts to reconnect are blocked, which deepens his sense of isolation. Over time, Jimmy becomes withdrawn and hopeless. His inability to rebuild a relationship with his mother leaves him emotionally broken. Even when he learns the truth, the years of separation cannot be repaired. Jimmy's tragic end shows how loss of family connection and emotional neglect can destroy confidence and purpose. His story reveals that identity depends on belonging and understanding, and when a child grows up without these, the damage can become permanent.

Sandy's story shows how displacement affects both identity and belonging. As a child, he constantly lives in fear of being taken away. Even after removal, his thoughts remain connected to his land and community. Unlike some of the others, he remembers cultural stories and traditions, which give him inner strength. His longing to return home is not only about family but also about reconnecting with his roots. Sandy's struggle reflects the deep bond between Indigenous identity and land. Though he feels lost at times, his desire to go back shows that cultural memory can survive even after separation.

Anne's experience reflects a different side of displacement. She is brought up in a white family where she receives care and opportunities, yet something feels missing. When she later learns about her Aboriginal origins, she begins to question her identity. She finds herself caught between the life she has known and the heritage she was separated from. This realization creates uncertainty within her. Anne does not face the same visible hardships as the others, but she struggles quietly with questions about belonging and self-understanding. Her story shows that even when material comfort is provided, the loss of cultural connection can leave a lasting sense of confusion.

The idea of home appears throughout the play as a powerful symbol. For the children, the institution is called a home, yet it lacks warmth and love. Their real home exists in memory and imagination. This contrast between institutional home and ancestral home deepens the theme of displacement. Home represents safety, kinship and cultural continuity. Without these elements, identity becomes unstable. The play also presents the emotional silence surrounding removal. Many characters struggle to express their pain openly. Their memories appear suddenly and disappear without clear transitions. This reflects the nature of trauma, which often interrupts daily life unexpectedly. The structure of the play mirrors this emotional reality. By shifting between time

periods, Harrison shows that trauma is not confined to the past. Although the play addresses serious themes, it avoids exaggerated language. The dialogue remains simple and direct. This simplicity increases its emotional impact. Instead of long explanations, the characters share brief moments of memory that reveal deeper pain. This technique makes the audience reflect rather than merely observe. The role of storytelling is central to the play. By narrating their experiences, the characters reclaim their voices. For many years, official history presented removal as a protective measure. *Stolen* challenges this view by showing its human consequences. The act of telling these stories becomes a form of resistance. It allows Indigenous experiences to be recognized within public space.

Cultural displacement does not affect only a single person; it also harms the wider community. When children are taken away from their families, the natural flow of culture from one generation to the next is disturbed. Language, customs and traditional knowledge are usually learned within the family and community. When that connection is broken, the transfer of heritage becomes difficult. The play shows that this disruption has lasting effects. Even if individuals later try to return to their roots, the years of separation leave a gap that cannot be fully filled.

The theme of identity in the play is closely related to memory. Characters remember fragments of their childhood, songs, stories and family moments. These memories help them maintain a sense of who they are. Even when institutions attempt to reshape their identity, internal memory resists complete erasure. This shows that identity is not easily destroyed, though it may be deeply wounded. The emotional tone of the play moves between hope and despair. Some characters attempt to rebuild their lives despite loss. Shirley, for example, demonstrates resilience. Though she suffers separation, she continues to search for connection. Her strength suggests that survival is possible even after displacement. The play does not end with complete resolution, but it leaves space for recognition and healing.

By focusing on personal stories, *Stolen* avoids reducing history to statistics. It presents removal as a lived experience rather than an abstract policy. This approach encourages empathy. The audience sees the children as individuals with dreams and fears. Their suffering becomes real rather than distant. The play also invites reflection on contemporary society. Though the removal policies have ended, their effects continue. Many Indigenous families still deal with the consequences of separation. Identity confusion and social challenges remain visible. The play therefore connects past events with present realities.

Language in the play remains accessible and honest. Harrison does not rely on complex theory to communicate her message. Instead, she allows emotional truth to guide the narrative. This makes the play suitable for diverse audiences, including students and community members. Another important aspect is the shared space on stage. Though each character has a distinct story, they occupy the same environment. This staging suggests collective memory. Their voices overlap, reinforcing the idea that removal was not isolated but widespread. The audience becomes aware of the broader social impact.

The play ultimately emphasizes dignity. Even though the characters experience pain, they are not portrayed as powerless. They express anger, confusion and hope. Their ability to speak transforms silence into testimony. Through this process, Indigenous identity is not only remembered but also affirmed. In reading and performing *Stolen*, one becomes aware that displacement is not simply about movement from one place to another. It is about the breaking of relationships. Identity grows within family and community. When these relationships are disrupted, the individual struggles to locate themselves within society. The play communicates this struggle clearly.

The significance of *Stolen* lies in its ability to combine history with human experience. It does not offer easy answers, yet it encourages understanding. By presenting voices that were once unheard, it contributes to a broader discussion about justice and recognition. The strength of the play is

its honesty. It neither romanticizes Indigenous life nor simplifies suffering. Instead, it presents complex individuals shaped by historical circumstances. Through careful storytelling, Harrison ensures that the experiences of the Stolen Generations are neither forgotten nor misunderstood. *Stolen* stands as a reminder that policies made in the name of progress can cause lasting harm. At the same time, it shows that identity can survive even under pressure. Through memory and storytelling, the characters reconnect with parts of themselves that institutions attempted to erase. In doing so, the play affirms the endurance of Indigenous identity despite cultural displacement.

References

1. Harrison, Jane. *Stolen*. Currency Press, 2000.
2. Kamala, B. Devi. "The Plight of Stolen Generation in Jane Harrison's *Stolen*." *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, 2009.