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Wandering Girl

Glenyse Ward

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Abstract

Wandering Girl¹ by Glenyse Ward is one of the first books to be published by the newly established Aboriginal press Magabala Books. It is an autobiographical account, featuring so many of the aspects which have become part and parcel of Aboriginal lives as late as into the 60s: Forcible removal from home, growing up on a Mission Station, being sent out to work as a servant. Glenyse Ward describes the loneliness and injustices of such a life, but she also celebrates the human warmth she met amongst friends and the will to survive which finally led to her escape.

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INTRODUCTION

*Wandering Girl*¹ by Glenyse Ward is one of the first books to be published by the newly established Aboriginal press Magabala Books. It is an autobiographical account, featuring so many of the aspects which have become part and parcel of Aboriginal lives as late as into the 60s: Forcible removal from home, growing up on a Mission Station, being sent out to work as a servant. Glenyse Ward describes the loneliness and injustices of such a life, but she also celebrates the human warmth she met amongst friends and the will to survive which finally led to her escape.

The principle behind the selection of the extracts from *Wandering Girl* is to highlight the importance of self-affirmation in Aboriginal writing. In an article called 'New Directions in South African Literature'² the South African writer and critic Njabulo Ndebele discusses the importance of writing beyond protest in the literature of a colonized people. He sees the first step in such writing as stating what he calls 'the moral position'. 'To know' becomes to know how badly you are treated, and the statement of this in the form of creative writing becomes the goal. It lays bare to the world the glaring injustices and cruelties, and it believes in the persuasiveness of the morally superior standpoint. This is the essence of much protest writing, and it is an important and necessary step, but it also has its limitations. It can create a 'rhetoric of moral embitterment' in the colonized people, and it pre-supposes a colonizer with a conscience willing to be disturbed by a confrontation with his own evil. It is in essence, a liberal, rather than a radical genre, despite its often violent nature, and it – sometimes unwittingly – gives a lot of space and thought to the 'other', the whites and how they might think or feel.

A further step in the evolution of the literature of an oppressed people, Ndebele suggests, is to dislodge the whites from the centre of the scene of imagination and celebrate – or lament – black lives in their interaction with one another. These extracts do just that. They are a celebration of survival.

They create a counter-image to the misused, oppressed black servant, cowering at the edge of white family photographs. This one, at least in these passages, holds centre stage, whether in the shower, in the dining room or at the piano. The whites are, however, not totally absent. They patrol the minds of the two servants with their very real threats of punishment, reminding us how pervasive their control of the lives and imagination of the oppressed people is.

These extracts can also be read in another light. They are the nightmare of the oppressor. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*³ Franz Fanon describes the colonized people, his people, as 'an envious people'. They want to live in the colonizer's house, sleep in his bed etc., and this is the worst fear of the colonizer. Acting out the fantasy of the reversal is putting a utopia into reality – if only for a limited space of time – and it is clearly more subversive than protests or complaints. It celebrates affirmative action and creates an insubordinate role model.

The extracts also point out the difficulties of total liberation. Even in a temporary utopia the Aboriginal servant sings 'Do you Ken John Peel?'. Cultural liberation is obviously much harder than political liberation. However, the celebration of survival in these extracts and their implied vision of a world after liberation are important steps taking 'protest' into the realm of self-affirmation. Moving on to write the book takes this vision squarely into reality, and the present volume bears witness not only to survival, but to cultural liberation.

NOTES

1. Glenyse Ward, *Wandering Girl* (Magabala Books, Broome, 1988).
2. Njabulo Ndebele 'Beyond "Protest": New Directions in South African Literature' in *Criticism and Ideology* ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1988, pp. 205-17.
3. Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1968.

Kirsten Holst Petersen

EXTRACTS FROM *WANDERING GIRL*

I was all alone again. Off I went to the cleaning cupboard. Out with the tin of Bon Ami and the scrubbing brush – to go and do the job I had saved up. I used to hate scrubbing her shower recess because every line between the tiles had to be scoured and polished!

Quietly, I entered the bedroom, which I must say was absolutely beautiful, decorated out with pale pink wallpaper in flower patterns. The curtains were a deep pink colour that blended in with her lovely fluffy white carpet.

I never minded cleaning down her dressing table, as I used to love picking up her figure ornaments and her bird shaped ones, and just gazing at them. They looked so real with the reds, greens and blues splashed over them.

And smelling all the different shaped bottles of perfume! Some were so strong I just about passed out with the whiff of them.

I put the Bon Ami down on the floor of her shower recess. This was one morning that I wasn't going to scrub those tiles. I would get myself cleaned up instead. I trotted off to her linen cupboard and picked out her best fluffy pink towels, with the aroma of lavender through them, went back to her room and laid the towels out on her big brass bed, waiting for me there.

Then I slipped my clothes off, selected one of her fine soaps and stepped into the recess. It was my best shower since being at the farm, oh it was a far cry from the dog house dribble I usually stood under.

That soap smelt really sweet as I rubbed it all over me, then opened up her shampoo and emptied half the bottle on my head. There were soap suds everywhere. I got so carried away.

After my shower I pranced out on her fluffy white carpet, not noticing the wet footprints I was making. At the dressing table I just about tipped over one of her bottles and splashed perfume all over me. Then I decided to sprinkle on some powder!

I finished getting dressed and looked around – I'd given myself a double cleaning job. There were splashes and powder all over the place. The beautiful bedroom looked like a whirlwind hit it. I didn't mind. I was smelling so nice, it made me feel so good. And when she came home I would be smelling like vinegar again, for I had plenty of work to do.

Alone for the day, I could ask my old friend to come up for lunch. It was too late for morning tea. Reaching the orchard, I cupped my hands over my mouth and sang out his name a couple of times. I heard him answering back, 'Down here, lassie,' so I wandered down the land nearest to the river, and spotted him picking pears and oranges.

'Hi,' I said to him as if I had known him for years. He stood up and asked me how I was feeling. I told him I was on my own, as everybody had gone to town. I told him that she wanted more fruit to be picked and bottled.

He offered to help me straight away. I thanked him and asked eagerly if he would like to come up to the house and have dinner? He said he could. I told him that I'd go and get things ready. He said he'd be there at twelve o'clock and would bring the buckets of fruit up with him on the old tractor and trailer.

I felt so happy within myself that I skipped all the way back to the house. Even the mess those boys had left behind didn't dampen my spirits as I went about cleaning the kitchen and getting this particular dinner ready.

I set the table with her finest crockery, which she only used for very important guests – I felt that her workers were just as important and after all, it was a special occasion, old Bill was a friend of mine. I was buoyant now that I had someone I could talk to and laugh with about things. It was a far cry from walking around gloomy all day.

I laid the cold meats and salad on the table as I heard the tractor stop outside. Then I went to help Bill bring in the fruit. We put it on the sink, and I directed Bill out to the old wash house to wash his hands as I went back into the kitchen to make the tea.

Bill came in and I told him to go through to the dining room. He sat down and sang out to me, 'Hey lassie, have you got the King and Queen coming for dinner?' He gave out one of his boisterous chuckles which echoed all through the house. I took the pot of tea in to find Bill already helping himself, so I took my place at the table.

I copied her fashion, and spread the serviette across my lap. I didn't want my scraps to fall on my good clothes. I laughed out aloud. What a joke! Bill must have seen the funny side too, as we both went into fits of laughter.

Was it possible that a slave girl in second hand clothes and an old handyman could sit up to a table laid with the best of crockery eating a meal fit for a queen?

He sensed that I was deep in thought and said, 'What's up, lassie?' I looked up and said that I didn't want to rush my cup of tea, then explained to him about the jobs she had lined up for me.

His wrinkled old hands still clasped around the cup, his melancholy eyes gazed up at me as he said. 'Shosh lassie, while you are getting the fruit ready, I'll go out to the shed and chop the wood and stack the woodboxes for you.'

I thanked him and said it was very kind of him. Bill said he'd have another cup of tea, so I hopped up gladly and went to make a fresh pot. When I returned I sat down and poured his cup, then asked him if he liked music?

A big smile spread across his face. He leaned his frame into the back of his chair and said, 'I sure do.' He let out a bit of a chuckle and I noticed a sparkle in his watery eyes.

'Oh, it's been a long time since I sat around the old piano. When I was a little boy back home mother used to play in the comfort of our lounge, with an open fire spreading warmth from the hearth to every corner of the room. We used to feel so cosy as we sang to our heart's delight – but that was a long time ago, lassie!'

We both had tender memories of childhood but I never asked him where his home was or where he was from. I guessed in time he'd let me know. He sat there with a faraway look in his eyes. I interrupted his thoughts, when I asked him, if he knew songs like. 'Do You Ken John Peel' and 'Waltzing Matilda?'

We both sat back and laughed, then stood up from the table. Bill said he'd go and get the wood chopping done, I said I'd go and get the fruit done – then we could sit back for the rest of the afternoon and entertain ourselves at the piano.

Now that we both had finished drinking our tea we cleaned up our mess and went into the visitors' room. I lifted off the pure white linen cloth she had draped over the antique chairs and drew them up to the piano. Bill sat there, rubbing his two old bony hands together as his weary eyes scanned every corner. 'My, lassie, isn't this a grand room?'

'Yes Bill,' I sighed, wishing my bedroom was as beautiful as this; but I knew this could never be.

As I ran my fingers over the piano keys, I felt real glad that I had some company. It was so much more fun! Before when I used to come in here on my own, when she went into town, I had never felt as glad as this.

It was more human having someone to answer you back, than you answering only yourself back. I found I was getting into that habit since I'd been working for this boss.

Bill startled me out of my thoughts, when he began clearing his throat. He asked if I knew a song called, 'Little Brown Jug?' He started to hum the tune to see if I could recognize it.

'Oh, of course I know the song, Bill.' And I started to play it straight away, not waiting for Bill to sing. When I played one verse, I looked at him to see if he was ready to sing. I kept right on playing.

He had his mouth wide open in lockjaw fashion, but no sound was coming out. I just let it rip!

The old man looked so astonished. He peered up to the ceiling with his hands outstretched and cried out, 'Where's it gone?'

I could not stop myself from laughing at him and apologizing at the same time. In the end the old man was cracking up himself and wiping the tears from his eyes. I think that both of us were suffering with a bad case of nerves.

After we had a few more songs and laughs, our nerves settled down and our voices began to come loud and clear. Then I said to Bill, 'I'll play you one of my favourite songs, one I learnt in the mission. It goes, 'I love to go a'wandering, along the mountain track...'

After I finished, Bill gave me a clap. I felt very honoured, stood up and curtsied to my one-man audience as I accepted his appreciation, then laughed as I could see the funny side of it all. If the boss knew that we had turned her V.I.P. room into a concert hall while she was in town on business - I shuddered to think what would happen...

We spent the rest of the afternoon use singing and enjoying ourselves. Bill had a couple of goes on the piano. I must say he didn't do too bad. Then I asked him what the time was? He said it was four o'clock! I said, 'Gee, doesn't time fly when you are having fun.'