

Revealing the Stolen Lives, Stolen Culture in Doris Pilkington's Follow the Rabbit – Proof Fence.

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INTRODUCTION

Human life is prone to changes and accommodating changes is a way of life for humans in today's scenario. In the current age of neo-revolution, the social concepts of discrimination and difference has vanished to some extent. But still the discrimination has paved way for a life of combat for a group of oppressed people who were slandered and attacked. These people were not always known to the world and their continuous resistance against the oppressors were hidden. Their life of pain and angst forms the crux of human history and the people who spearheaded such oppression are destined to face the real conditions.

Twentieth Century has been the century of colonial demise. This was attained through the process of 'decolonisation' which brought about the decline of the 'Empire.' There was a shift in power in the colonised nations. One consequence of the Empire's decline was the emergence of protests of the commonwealth countries with a history of colonialism. Rebellion from the commonwealth countries took different forms and one among them was voicing out their protests., giving rise to Commonwealth Literatures which resisted and retaliated through writings. These writings were an antecedent for Postcolonialism. John Mcleod in Beginning Postcolonialism defines the features and purpose of Commonwealth Literature. He records Lamming's motif in Season of Adventure as, "Indeed, Lamming's achievement is to make us hear the scream of the humiliated and persecuted and to make it simultaneously a metaphor for the damage universal in mankind" (14). Depiction in the works of any commonwealth writer was to focus on which the then-colonised countries were concerned.

This paper "Revealing the Stolen Lives, Stolen Culture in Doris Pilkington's Follow the Rabbit – Proof Fence" deals with Australia's Stolen Generation's pain as depicted by Doris Pilkington in Follow the Rabbit – Proof Fence through the postcolonial concepts of marginalisation, double marginalisation, subaltern, centre, margin, colonial discourse and colonial desire. In 1931, the Australian white government decided to remove the black aboriginal children and children of mixed marriages from their homes to various settlements. The aftermath is a sad song about the stolen aboriginal children and the plight of the sad native (Aboriginal) families. It has been accurately documented in a YouTube documentary Bringing them home – Separation of Aboriginal Islands Children, where Mick Dodson, Social Justice Commissioner shares his testimony with a background song:

This story's right
This story's true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep
Said to us, 'Come take our hand'
Set us up on mission land
Taught us to read to write and pray
Then they took the children away
Took the children away
Snatched from their mother's breast
Said, 'This is for their best'
Took them away
Taught them that
Taught them this
And others taught them prejudice
You took the children away
The children away... (Clayton 00:28:30)

The above song visualises the tragic history of the stolen generation and its devastating past. It portrays how the colonisers framed and trapped their generation in the name of civilisation and executed by introducing policies and laws.

Sebin Justine in *Culture Imperialism vs Cultural Preservation* records:

. . . The Stolen Generation was a phenomenon that characterized relations between the Australian Government and the Aborigines in Australia. The Aboriginal girls . . . were taken away . . . This was consistent with the official government assimilationist policy of the time decreeing that ‘half-caste’ children should be taken from their kin and their land, in order to be made white. (116)

The above is not the ancient history of Australia but it is today’s reality of suffering, pain and loss that the Stolen Generations have faced and are still encountering. Doris Pilkington is one of the Indigenous writers who had experienced forced separations. The present chapter elaborately analyses Doris Pilkington’s novel *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* as a personal documentation of an indigenous Australian family’s experiences as victims of the forced removal that devastated the aborigines. It portrays the story of three Aboriginal girls: Molly, the author’s mother, Daisy, Molly’s half-sister and Gracie, their cousin. Karl Quin in *Molly’s Story* reiterates:

Doris Pilkington Garimara, 65, is Molly’s daughter. She was born in Jigalong but separated from her mother when she was four years old. She had to wait 25 years to see her mother again and a decade after that to hear her story of the rabbit-proof fence. (2)

These three girls were snatched from their families at Jigalong and taken to the Moore River Settlement. Their great escape from the government settlement in 1931 trekking over 1600 kilometres home is the highlight of the novel. The girls follow the rabbit-proof fence, a massive pest-exclusion fence that ran through Western Australia from north to south. There were ten billion rabbits across Australia in 1859. The longest rabbit-proof fence was the unbroken fence in the world. It was proposed to stop rabbits from getting into Western Australia from different parts of the eastern states. It was a massive problem then. The YouTube documentary *Along the Rabbit-Proof Fence: The Incredible Journey* registers:

They [Rabbits] arrived in Australia with the first fleet and became a widespread pest after twenty-four wild rabbits were released for hunting by an English farmer Thomas Austin on his property at Barwonpark near Geelong Victoria in 1859. The rabbits quickly spread through the newly cleared farmland and began to migrate across Australia at a rate of 120 kilometres a year reproducing at a rate of 18 to 30 per single female rabbit per year . . . farmers used poison and trap to exert some control. . . in 1901 a Royal Commission decided to build a fence across the country to divide pastoral land from dry Bushlands. (Kent, 00:03:26)

The idea was a crazy attempt to control on a national scale. It seemed ludicrous because rabbits could jump high and burrow underground. But the attempt was made and lots of money was lost doing it. Similar unwise decisions were made to control the future of Aboriginal children of mixed descent. The tragic story illustrates the consequences of the government policy that went wrong and created what Australia now refers to as ‘The Stolen Generation.’

Doris Pilkington has portrayed the socio-political background of Seventeenth Century Australia before the agonizing escape of the three Aboriginal girls in the 1930s. Molly, Daisy and Gracie were the girls who trekked back home. Molly was Pilkington’s mother; Daisy was Molly’s sister and Grace was their half-sister. The novelist shares the task of reconstructing the trek back home in which she had to walk the same paths to give a vivid description of the geographical, historical and political records which helped her to trace the great escape.

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence opens with the serenity and peaceful environment of the Aborigines. Chapter One of the novel ‘The First Military Post’ reflects the peaceful lives of the fisher folk and hunters of Western Australia. The novelist depicts the general and broader picture of coloniser free Western Australia. She portrays the scene by introducing an Aborigine named Kundilla an old man with a big family. She says that the dawn was her favourite time of the day. Pilkington recaps:

How peaceful it was, with the sounds of birds twittering high above amid the leafy branches of the giant gums, and the occasional splash of the fish in the river. . . As the sun rose, he could meditate and reflect on the events of the past few days but, more importantly, he could plan future activities without interruption and distraction. (1)

Kundilla wasn’t aware that soon devastation and desolation would shatter this tranquil environment and that this pristine forest would echo the anguished cries and the ceaseless weeping of thousands of people. T.S. Goethe in *Voicing the Voiceless* writes, “The happy life of the Aborigines died, when Sir Arthur Philip, the Captain of the first fleet, brought into the island the convicts and soldiers” (29). The natives didn’t know that their tranquil serene life would be shattered by the newcomers. Kundilla with his family sat together having breakfast under the shade of a large eucalyptus. Behind them, the sounds of normal everyday camp life continued. Pilkington tells how the white intruders got into Australia, she recalls:

. . . an ominous sound reverberated through the forest. The peace and tranquillity were shattered by a loud boom. Alarmed and frightened, the women snatched up their babies and toddlers and ran to the men. “What was that?” the people asked their leader. Even the flocks of birds were squawking loudly as they sought refuge in the high canopy of the forest. (3)

Kundilla and other members of the Nyungar clan, a southwest Australian Aboriginal clan try to find out where the sound came from. Their leader confirms in a voice filled with passion, anxiety and fear that they had come back to take away the native women. The other men of the Nyungar clan remind Kundilla of what happened when the white raiders had come earlier. Kundilla and his family had heard how their brothers and uncles were killed by the ruthless white pirates, desperados and escaped convicts when they tried to abduct their women.

The men recollect the ruthlessness as:

Those cruel and murderous men came ashore and stole Aboriginal women and kept them on board their ships as sexual slaves, then murdered them and tossed their bodies into the ocean when their services were no longer required . . . Although the brave Nyungar Warriors fought gallantly and fearlessly, they were no match for the evil white invaders with their muskets, swords and pistols. (4)

Asafa Jalata in *The Impacts of English Colonial Terrorism and Genocide on Indigenous / Black Australians* restates:

. . . The use of sexual violence is a tactic of terrorism and genocide that a dominant society practices in destroying the dominated communities . . . Some settlers held indigenous women and used them for sexual gratification . . . In addition to raping . . . the English settlers killed them whenever they wanted. (21)

The violence against the Aborigines took sexual forms as well. The Nyungar men were absolutely no match for the white settlers. They were defenceless in saving their women. Initially, the Nyungar people believed that the white men were gengas. "Gengas was the spirit of their ancestors. 'Surely they must be gengas,' whispered Kundilla" (6). The Aborigines couldn't understand the language of these strangers. These white strangers had the same pale skin but had different coloured hair. They had set up a campsite and settled in. Kundilla had a strong belief that this batch of white strangers was not in their way to harm them. Kundilla tells his sons, "These strangers are not here to cause harm . . ." (6). He assures his people that the visitors would not endanger their lives. Asafa Jalata quotes Richard Broomes' quote from *Aboriginal Australians*, "Had they known the implications, the arrival of these strangers would have for their future, they may have met the intruders more frequently with violence and less curiosity" (13). The irony was that the Aborigines had helped the European explorers without any idea of them being loaded with weapons to settle down in their own land. Pilkington also shares the fact that Major Edmund Lockyer, a white man with a Detachment (a military unit) of eighteen soldiers from the ninety third regiment and fifty convicts were sent to King George Sound by Governor Darling of New South Wales, to establish a military base. Their aim was to deter renegade convicts, whalers and sealers. But in the course of time, Captain Lockyer felt that they didn't really have the weapons to withstand an attack from the whalers and sealers. He thought that he and his people were vulnerable. Eventually, they returned to a lively city Sydney from the set military outpost at Albany. These were different groups of Europeans who entered Australia, an army of soldiers and officers who had come there to set up a military outpost, the convicts who were sent to Australia as a penal colony and then the whalers and sealers. Among the above set of men who visited the coast of Australia, the convicts, whalers and sealers were devious men who killed and kidnapped the Nyungar people. Pilkington writes:

At first, the Aboriginal men welcomed the sealers and whalers. The unsuspecting men were invited to visit the beach camp as a gesture of friendship and goodwill; the women stayed behind, out of sight of the strangers . . . The Nyungar made it known to the sealers that they wanted to be taken to an island to collect bird eggs . . . the request could not please the devious men more; it was just what they wanted. They readily agreed and took six men to the island and left them there, stranded without food or water. Meanwhile, they [the sealers and whalers] returned to the mainland . . . they found the Aboriginal people's camp and kidnapped six women who were taken back to the whaling ships where they were brutalised and later murdered. (4-5)

Andrea Smith in "Not an Indian Tradition": The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples" analyses that, "Within the context of colonization of Native nations, sexual violence does not affect Indian men and women in the same way. However, when a Native Woman suffers abuse, this abuse is not just an attack on her identity as a woman, but on her identity as Native" (2). Women of colour experienced bio-political violence interwoven with their bodies and socio-politics.

The second chapter of the novel brings in memories of how their country got named by white strangers. She highlights how the white people met the Aborigines and tried to communicate through sign language. She states, "The Captain told the men, the traditional owners who had gathered on the muddy banks of the river, 'My government has advised me to meet with you and discuss this matter before giving your country an English name'" (9). Captain Fremantle realised that his words were not being understood, so he decided to try sign language. This language barrier prevented a formal discussion. With this ongoing confusion and frustration, Captain Fremantle assumes that the Aborigines had agreed and announced in a loud voice, "I name this land Western Australia, then he raised his eyes to the limestone cliffs and saluted smartly at the flag fluttering in the wind; the red, white and blue of the British Empire" (10). Yellagonga, a leader of the Nyungar people says that the next white strangers arrived on the shore and brought their women, livestock, furniture and their trunks remaining silk gowns, fine china mementos and other personal belongings. Robert Hughes, a historian in his book *The Fatal Shore* records:

For the European settlers the Australian terrain appeared unproductive – thick, tangled creepers grew underfoot and when the weather fined up, they were plagued by the swarm of mosquitoes and other pests. But still, beyond these inconveniences, all those who arrived and others who settled before 1830 had the right to choose an area of land wherever they fancied. The best land was taken up by the wealthier, influential people who had the responsibility of maintaining the customs. They were advised to ‘keep up their Englishness’ at all costs. (13)

To keep up their ‘Englishness’ meant that the newly landed gentry had come from working-class backgrounds and wanted to stick on to their English culture and tradition. They delighted in dressing up for different occasions and had been regarded as members of a social group that in the past had only observed and perhaps envied from afar. It is obvious that the then settlers of Australia from Europe were the bourgeois - the whalers, the sealers and the convicts. It is appropriate to quote Frantz Fanon’s words in *The Wretched of the Earth* regarding the cultural consciousness of the settlers, “The settlers make history and are conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country” (16). This quotation clearly explains the attitude of the white settlers who with great efforts tried to maintain their ‘Englishness’.

The Nyungar people and indeed the entire Aboriginal population meanwhile grew to realize what the arrival of the European settlers meant for them. It was the destruction of their traditional society and the dispossession of their lands. In the words of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* the land, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because of the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring the bread and, above all dignity” (18). To the natives, the land is a significant part of their lives. When the land is abducted from them, they feel helpless and pushed to the margins. The truth is that the white settlers occupied the centre. The writer focuses on two Aboriginal brothers, Bidgup and Meedo complaining to Yellagonga their clan leader about several attempts at unsuccessful hunting trips. Bidgup tells, “We can’t go down along our hunting trails, they are blocked by fences” (14). An irritated Meedo said, “And when we climbed over the fence, one of those men pointed one of those things - guns – at us and threatened to shoot us if we went in there again . . . There are huts and farms all over the place. Soon they will drive us all from our lands” (14). Yellagonga had no answer or words of encouragement for his cousins. He wasn’t certain about anything anymore because where there was once bush, there were now tents, huts or houses now. The Nyungar people were cut off from their natural food source, so the Aborigines expected these white settlers to share some of their food with them. Bidgup told Meedo, “We will take a sheep they have plenty they won’t miss one... If there isn’t going to be any sharing of food, we’ll help ourselves” (14). Bidgup and Meedo were caught spreading a sheep and were the first to be sentenced under English law. They received several years of imprisonment and were transported to Rottnest Island Penal Colony. The brother’s family wailed as they both sailed to prison:

Their people stood on the banks of the muddy river as they sailed away to their prison. Their elderly parents and wives and children wept and wailed, while others watched silently as they were shoved roughly, their legs in irons into a boat and sailed down the river, out to the open sea. They were never seen again. Hundreds of others followed them, bound in chains, across the waters into the unknown. A few escaped, others served their sentences and were returned to their homelands, while others were dropped off in strange towns along the coast. Some men remained incarcerated on the island for the rest of their lives. (14-15)

It became apparent that any aborigine breaking the white man’s law was penalised brutally. It was true that the Aboriginal social structure was not only crumbling but was totally destroyed. Hayley Simpson in *Rabbit-Proof Fence and its connections to Australian History* recounts: “Historical documents from the 19th and early 20th century indicated that people believed the Australian Aboriginal population was inferior and that they should be allowed to “die out” in a natural elimination process” (3). Another Aborigine named Moody added, “It seems . . . that our laws are not being recognised by these strangers” (15).

The Nyungar people were hurt and confused when they were punished for carrying out their own traditional laws. The Aborigines’ plea for justice was turned a deaf ear by the white Judiciary. This is true, when Udja, an old Aborigine complained to the Magistrate that a white man stole his wife and the reaction was to pacify Udja with a bag of flour and was told to go home. His justice was denied. There were two sets of laws that confused the Nyungar people to understand and accept. There were unending conflicts between the traditional owners and the white invaders. ‘Might is right’ prevailed throughout the colony. The Europeans spread like wild bush fire which was out of control. The novelist writes:

Driven off their traditional lands, the Aboriginal people of all areas became a dispossessed and devastated race. The people discovered too late, that the white invaders were human beings and not spirits. The colonists took advantage of the Aboriginal cultural beliefs to further their own gains. The Nyungar people who once walked tall and proud now hung their heads in sorrow. (16)

The aborigines had become dispossessed. They were prevented from practising their traditional law. They had to fight to find ways to return to their secret and sacred sites to perform their dances and other ceremonies that were crucial to their culture and whole way of life.

Sadly, throughout history unscrupulous leaders have subjugated and uprooted innocent people and defenceless nations in an attempt to control them. Indigenous writers like Doris Pilkington have voiced out to the world that it necessarily doesn't mean the end. Her novel *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is an acknowledgment of the trauma caused by abduction and alienation from their families and culture. The novel is a ray of hope to the distressed as the healing journey towards reconnection begins.

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