



# Identity, Memory and Nostalgia in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington

JoydeepChakraborty, Ph.D research Scholar in English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh

Dr. A. Vijayanand, Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh

**Abstract** - Doris Pilkington represents the current generation of Indigenous authors emboldened to share their own dark and painful stories, which reveal to us the deep humanity and resilience of an amazing culture unacknowledged by white Australian for so long.

## **Analysis** -

From the late 1800s to around 1970, the Australian federal and state governments forcefully removed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. These Aboriginal children were often taken thousands of kilometres away to live in orphanages, or in church missions, or they were adopted by white families.

The aim of this removal was "assimilation": according to Australian Federal Government, in future, the children would adopt white culture and forget their Aboriginal language and heritage. Many of these children never saw their families again. For years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families lived in fear that authorities would try to take their children forcibly. Parents often disguised or hid their children in order to prevent them from being taken.

The events explored in Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, take place in 1931, 26 years after the introduction of the Western Australian Aborigines Act under which all Aboriginal people were made 'wards of the state', with the Chief Protector of Aborigines becoming their legal guardian.

Molly Craig (who will become the mother of Doris Pilkington Garimara) and her cousins, Gracie Fields and Daisy Kadibil, are taken from their Aboriginal homes [Jigalong] in 1931, because they are biracial. Each girl has an Aboriginal mother and a white European father, and the Australian federal government is day-by-day becoming increasingly uneasy about these half-caste children. Racist beliefs held that biracial children are more superior to Aboriginal children. The three girls are transported to a distant settlement where biracial children are nurtured to be educated and prepared for jobs. Fourteen-year-old Molly realizes immediately that the settlement is compared to prison life and decides to escape. On their second day at the settlement, they pack their few possessions and sneak off school grounds. It's the beginning of a thousand-mile trek that will ultimately bring back the girls home to their families.

The three girls undergo an endless journey of short trips and overnight stays as they make their way south. Finally Molly, Gracie, and Daisy reach Fremantle, from where they board a ship to Perth before being driven to their new home. They reach at the settlement at night and are quite surprised to see no other residents outside. They are taken to padlocked dormitory and asked to find a bed. The mattresses are dirty; each been given only one blanket, and the room is unhygienic. Condition deteriorates the next morning, when the residents are served scanty portions of insect-infested porridge. Another girl takes them on a tour of the place, which Molly thinks looks like a cage than

anything else. The girls become hopeless learning that English is the only language for communication and horrified when they pass the "boob," where disobedient residents are locked up for up to a week at a time. Lying on her bed that night Molly hears the door being bolted and padlocked, and she decides to escape the place as early as possible.

Focusing on the escape of the three girls from Moore River settlement, the true story highlights the despair experienced by others whose children are forcibly taken and the terror and confusion of those children, snatched from familiar surroundings and forced to adopt European culture. Led by Molly, these three girls defy all odds to travel 1500 miles through unknown territory to return to their homeland in North-Western Australia, with the authorities chasing them all through their way.

As the girls press on, the rigors of the trek begin to take a toll on them. Scratches on their feet become infected to such a point that often Molly and Gracie must carry Daisy. The authorities are still eager to catch them, and they have a couple of narrow escapes. Not too far from the endpoint of their journey, Gracie decides she can't take any more walking. Hearing that they're near the station where her mother lives, she abandons Molly and Daisy and sets off to find her mother. (She will soon be caught and taken back to Moore River.)

In telling the truth about the reality of many Aboriginal families' lives, Doris Pilkington has created a narrative that is brilliant both in its sheer literary attainment and for the story she has to tell. In conclusion, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* depicts accurately the terrible loss of identity that the characters had to go through after their land was colonized.

**Keywords** - Identity, Memory, Nostalgia, Aboriginal Australia, Doris Pilkington, Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence

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*Rabbit-Proof Fence* 2002, motion picture, Becker Entertainment, Australia.