

## Revisiting 'The Stolen Generation': A Postcolonial Analysis of the Film, 'Rabbit Proof Fence'

Natasha Sreeranj

2<sup>nd</sup> year M.A English with Communication, Christ University, Bangalore

E-mail : [natasha.sreeranj622@gmail.com](mailto:natasha.sreeranj622@gmail.com)

### Abstract

During the years 1910-1970, Australia witnessed a massive elimination of the indigenous cultures by majorly targeting indigenous children. These children were compulsively abducted from their families as part of the government policies which were put forth by the White settlers. This generation of children who were culturally and natively removed from their families were known as 'The Stolen Generation'. This policy of removing children continues to traumatise the indigenous communities and individuals. Removal of children from their indigenous heritage was part of the policy of assimilation. Assimilation laid its groundwork on black inferiority and white superiority which encouraged the elimination of the indigenous communities through a natural process. The aim is to assimilate the indigenous individuals into the white communities. Post-abduction, aboriginal children were brainwashed to reject their heritage and forced to imbibe the white lifestyle. Their names were changed or anglicised and they were barred from speaking their mother tongue. Some children were adopted by white parents while many were forced to reside in institutions where abuse was a ritualistic practice. The Stolen Generation had a major impact on the indigenous families and it still continues today. The children who were forcibly taken were physically, psychologically and sexually abused while living in the care of the state or with their adopted parents. In Doris Pilkington's novel, 'Rabbit Proof Fence' which was later adapted into a film directed by Philip Noyce, the plight of The Stolen Generation and their families has been highlighted.

Keywords: *postcolonial, aboriginals, the stolen generation, assimilation*

### Introduction:

Policies of assimilation targeted on children who were more acceptable to the white society than indigenous individuals. 'Half-caste' children (a derogatory term for people of Aboriginal and white descent) were the ones who were massively removed because the authorities thought that these children would be more adaptable or assimilated into the white society due to their light skin and colour. However, assimilation failed at improvising the lives of this generation. This was because the white community failed to see them as equals, in spite of their efforts to live like white people. They were intensely brainwashed to believe that the aboriginals were not fit to take care of them and shame their heritage to a great extent. Many children were misled to believe that their parents abandoned them and even today, many of them are completely unaware of who their biological parents were. The living conditions in the institutions were strictly controlled and children were punished on a frequent basis. Affection for the children was absolutely minimal. They received education on a low level as they were expected to work as labourers. Medical experts have observed depression, post-traumatic stress and anxiety among The Stolen Generation. The abduction had a profoundly severe effect on the indigenous families. Many parents were unable to come out of the grief after their children were taken and some of them resorted to alcoholism, due to their inability to cope with the grief. The Stolen Generation disrupted the oral indigenous culture and much knowledge of their culture was lost. The core theory used in this article is assimilation theory

which sees ethnic and minority groups following a 'straight-line' convergence which eventually leads to becoming more similar in norms, values, behaviours and characteristics. In 1995, the Australian Government devised a policy for child removal and the report was submitted to the parliament on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1997. Approximately, between 10% and 33% of the indigenous children were removed from their families from 1910-1970. When Kevin Rudd gained the presidency position in 2007, he promised to nationally apologise The Stolen Generation. The national apology or the 'sorry speech' was delivered on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Australians are still trying to come in terms with the existence of 'The Stolen Generation'. As white settlers occupied the lands of the Aborigines, the indigenous peoples' nomadic way of living was extinct. This came to be seen as a 'stone-age' race. (Stratton, 2002)

### Analysis of 'Rabbit Proof Fence'

Doris Pilkington's novel, 'Rabbit Proof Fence' which was later adapted into a film directed by Philip Noyce displays the plight of The Stolen Generation and their families. Aboriginal writers like Doris Pilkington have been instrumental in reviving aboriginal cultures and continue their oral tradition through writing. Learning the English language has helped the aboriginals to tell their stories to the world. Paradoxically, English becomes the medium through which the aboriginal culture survives. Aboriginal literature has helped them to evoke a sense of pride in terms of their origin and rebel their previous marginal, harsh conditions (Galvani, 2011). The Aborigines believed in two parallel worlds: the objectives process to which all of us are bound and the spiritual process or 'Dreamtime' which is perpetual in nature and are more likely to show reality than reality compared to what most humans can see and experience. The symbols, values and laws of the Aborigines are established by whatever happens in the Dreamtime and have been passed on to tribes with spiritual powers to see, read and understand the happenings of the Dreamtime, which are then taught to youngsters through oral tradition during rituals. (Fidalgo, 2009)

The extraordinary experience of the escape of three young girls from the Moore River native settlement is the main narrative in 'Rabbit Proof Fence'. The novel is biographical as the author herself had undergone a similar experience where Doris and her mother were forced to move to Moore River settlement at the age of four. Consequently, her mother escaped from the settlement some years later. 'Rabbit Proof Fence' is a short novel and consists of two important parts: a historical account of Doris' ancestors from Western Australia and her mother's escape. Her writing style is clear and simple and emits an ancient, folklore narration. The novel was set in 1931 and elucidates on the true story of Doris' mother, Molly Craig and her cousins Daisy and Grace who were forced to leave the Jigalong community. These half-caste children Molly (14), Grace (8) and Daisy (9) were abducted at the Jigalong depot in the Pilbara region and were taken to Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth. The novel then elaborates on the girls' struggle at the institution and their desperate attempt to escape from the institution and head back home. From the novel, it is observed that Molly is the protagonist as she is the eldest among the runaway sisters. She carefully takes up sensible and tactful decisions during the escape.

In 'Rabbit Proof Fence', Doris describes the pathetic conditions at Moore River as 'more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children'. There were no sheets on the bed, very minimal food and children were locked up for petty issues. If they tried to escape, they were brought back and got their heads shaved. Over 70 missions were established in Western Australia in the years 1842-1971. Mission authorities had maximum control over the lives of the indigenous people. Moore River was regarded as of the most populated settlements from 1918-1954 (Kay and Potter, 2007). The fence acts as a metaphor for division, boundary and separation of cultures. It also portrays the cultural symbolism of the girls' escape and the conflict between the two cultures. Physically and metaphorically, the fence is pivotal as means of communication and exchange. To the girls, the fence was metaphorical or symbolised love, attachment and security as it was connected to their community. For the white settlers, it symbolised separating the wild from a docile space. (Kay and Potter, 2007)

What makes the novel more powerful is the protagonist, Molly's tenaciousness, love, intelligence and immense strength which is shown by carrying the little girls on her back sometimes. It does not solely focus on lamenting the fallacies of the 'white man's burden'. The unconditional love between the mother and the children are also evident in the novel. (Downing, 2004)

Although the novel has received great admiration among the Australian community for putting the 'The Stolen Generation' and the aboriginal culture at the forefront, it had also received a certain amount of controversy. According to an article at 'The Australian', Australian historian Keith Windschuttle

dismisses the story in 'Rabbit Proof Fence' to be not true. According to him, Molly and Gracie were kidnapped from Jigalong depot because they indulged in sexual activity with the white settlers. "Running wild" was said to be a contemporary euphemism for promiscuity, which meant the girls were having sex with the white males in the area. Girls, 12 or 13, having sex with whites was a common thing and Neville, the Australian chief inspector, was appalled", says Windschuttle. 'Rabbit Proof Fence' can be viewed as an interesting analysis on the religious perceptions of certain sections of white Australia. Projection of Christian values is noticed as the whites believed that Christianity can make the half-caste children civilized. In contrast, aboriginal spirituality is predominantly significant throughout the novel which is symbolic of hope and unity. (Langford)

'Rabbit Proof Fence' is a film which connects country and family together. For Pilkington, the story is not possible without narrating the first contact and first settlement, of the eradication of security and lifestyle of the Aboriginals. Interconnectedness had been important in the lives of the indigenous people. In order to survive in a hunter society, one must work hard together which includes understanding the environment and how it could provide for your basic amenities like food, clothing, medicine and environment. Understanding the needs of each other and working together was very significant. Everything is related to everything else and in a world of reciprocity and interdependence, one cannot think of the present without thinking of the past and the future. (Behrendt, 2014). One of the main aspects in the film is that it does not ignore institutionalised racism which is evident in the process of child removal, making it strikingly clear that the aim was to erase Aboriginal blood which was articulated through the chief officer A.O. Neville. The novel is pivotal in stressing the white supremacy ideology that dominated the Aborigines throughout colonial history and continues to be a major aspect in Australia even today (Hermannova, 2017)

### Cultural Resistance

The main highlight in the film is cultural resistance, which is breaking down the views of colonialism by all means. Ideological conflict is portrayed between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer tries to detach the colonized from its roots. According to Franz Fanon, "colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content". 'Rabbit Proof Fence' is a postcolonial novel which looks into the issues of cultural identity crisis, exploitation, racism, ethnicity, superiority of the colonizers' culture and inferiority of the culture of the colonized. Pilkington reflects on how postcolonial studies have changed her thinking which made her attempt at writing the novel as a rebellion for racial policy and colonizers' culture. Moreover, the three runaways' escape to their home portrays revolution against discrimination, oppression, racism, colonial imperialism and aboriginal inferiority. Hence, 'Rabbit Proof Fence' is a postcolonial resistance against the Australia government. (Al-Momani, 2016). The film also emphasizes on the interactions between the natives and the immigrants which led to the entwinement of cultures and society where one unevenly overpowers the other, transforming their individual and collective identities. The ambiguity in the society's intention creates a tense environment which leads people to think on their identities and cultures and act upon them.

However, the book as well as the film has a flaw. Portraying child removal as an ended process was not quite true. According to The Guardian, 'state intervention into Aboriginal families has accelerated child removal in the 20 years since the 'Bringing Them Home' report. While Kevin Rudd considered The Stolen Generation as a historically finished process in his 2008 apology, he has warned recently of the 'emergence of a second stolen generation'. (Murphy, 2017). Although, 'Rabbit Proof Fence' has successfully shown the escapade of Molly and her sisters from Moore River Settlement, the harsh realities of removing indigenous children from their families continues to be a traumatic experience. Residential school survivors developed alcohol and drug problems, isolation, low self-esteem, suicidal tendencies, prostitution, gambling, homelessness, sexual abuse and violence. (Elias, 2012)

### Conclusion

However, the success of 'Rabbit Proof Fence' is largely due to the authenticity of Pilkington's writing and the elaborate cinematography of the film. It helps one to understand not only the sufferings of the Aborigine children but also the intention of the policy makers then. Pilkington focuses her work on the reconciliation between black and white societies. Pilkington currently works with the Reconciliation Council and her work requires giving lectures to various people on the history of The Stolen Generation and how it affected her life. She has said in the interview for ABC Radio National's Indigenous Arts Programme, "I can even

learn anything about my own culture, language, cultural history, where my people came from, and who they were. I'm more fortunate than most now that I have an identity, an Aboriginal name." (Wanderburgova, 2009). In order to preserve the aboriginal culture in the near future, the Australian government should make it necessary for the school curriculum to teach about indigenous cultures and their history. This will help to create awareness of the real representations of the Aboriginals and their culture rather than learning through stereotypes from different kinds of media. (Subad, 2017)

### Bibliography

1. *A Comparison Between Two Novels Portraying Aboriginal Racism Rabbit Proof Fence And Yolungu Boy*. n.d.
2. Al-Momani, Hassan Ali Abdullah. "Rabbit Proof Fence: A Struggle for Cultural Existence." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* (2016).
3. Behrendt, Larissa. *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence*. 2014.
4. Downing, Crystal. *Tripping*. April 2004.
5. Fidalgo, Sueli Salles. "For Social Inclusion through Literary Work, Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence to the Wintamarra Tree." *Universidade Católica de São Paulo*. (2009).
6. Galvani, Viola. "An Analysis of Doris Pilkington's Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence." *Corso di Laurea* (2010).
7. Hermannová, Laura. *Rabbit-Proof Fence: A Critical Analysis*. 2018.
8. Langford, Suzanne. "In Search of an Australian Soul: Reflections on Religion and Spirituality in Rabbit-Proof Fence and Japanese Story ." *Eternal Sunshine of the Academic Mind* (n.d.).
9. Potter, Kay Schaffer and Emily. "Beyond the Rabbit Proof Fence: Audience Response and an Ethic of Care." *Deakin Research Online* (2007).
10. Stratton, David. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. 18 February 2002.
11. Subad, Mahealani. *Rabbit Proof Fence Analysis*. 18 September 2017.
12. *The Stolen Generations*. n.d.
13. Wanderburgová, Lucie. "The Depiction of the Stolen Generation in My Place and Follow the Rabbit - Proof Fence." *Masaryk University Faculty of Arts - Department of English and American Studies* (2009).