

Devastated throb of the Stolen Generation in Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence: A Study*

1. Colette Sharmila,

Assistant Professor of English,
Research Scholar

Reg.No. 17222214012002

PG & Research Department of English
St. Mary's College (Autonomous)
Thoothukudi.

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapati, Tirunelveli-
627012. Mail Id. colettesharmila@gmail.com

2. Dr. A. Josephine Alangara Betsy,

Supervisor & Assistant Professor of English,
PG & Research Department of English,

St. Mary's College (Autonomous),
Thoothukudi, Mail Id. alangarabetsy@gmail.com

Abstract

“Kill the Indian and save the man”

(Capt. Richard. H. Pratt)

Culture means people's pattern of life customs, ethics and their social behaviour. Culture is passed on from the ancestors to the next generation. It has a strong influence on who we are. This pattern of life of the Australian Aborigines was disturbed with the advent of the English Convicts and Mariners. Among the colonies of the British, Australia was a different colony. It was initially considered as a penal colony, an open prison. Australia became a distant colonial territory where the English sent the convicts. This created devastating impact on the indigenous population which had developed their culture 60,000 years back. As part of the colonising process several policies were formulated to civilize the aborigines. One among them was the Assimilation Policy. It was a policy that was thirsted on the Aborigines to adapt western culture.

Under the pretext of civilization, the Aborigines were forced to lose their land, religion, children, language and culture. This horrible process of assimilation also forcibly removed half caste Aboriginal children from their mothers and were taken to be civilized in Welfare Homes and Boarding Schools. The stolen children were called as the stolen generation. A generation bereaved of its family and a precious past with its culture and religion in it. The deliberate efforts of the colonisers detribalized the indigenous population. The Australian Aborigines were systematically detribalized in order to modernise and the Christianize them. As a result the indigenous people were subjugated to an unimaginable extent.

The enormous hurt which the Aborigines experienced will be analysed in this paper. It will foreground on the agonizing history shared by Doris Pilkington in her novel *Rabbit Proof Fence*. As a stolen generation writer, she has portrayed the twinge of being stolen of their children, culture, language and tradition. The paper will also delve into the horrible condition and plight of the stolen generation being stripped of their cultural heritage.

Key Words: Colonialism, devastation, trauma, marginalisation

Full Paper

Culture means people's pattern of life, customs, ethics and their social behaviour. Culture is passed on from the ancestors to the next generation. It has a strong influence on who we are. This pattern of life of the Australian Aborigines was disturbed with the advent of the English convicts and Mariners into Australia. Australia was also then considered as a penal colony, an open prison for the European convicts. Thereby the arrival of the European settlers slowly impacted devastation on the Aboriginal population which had emerged several years back. As part of the colonising process several policies were formulated to civilize the

aborigines. This was the beginning of acculturation in the Australia colony. Acculturation is assimilation to a different culture, typically the dominant culture, in the colony, that is the white Australian culture. In this process four acculturation strategies have been identified: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization (Berry, 2010). Under the forced acculturation process the Assimilation policy was thrust upon the Aborigines to adapt western culture and religion.

In a web page titled 'Australians together' assimilation is policy is explained as, "Assimilation is pressured that indigenous Australians could enjoy the same standard of living as white Australians if they adopted European customs and beliefs and were absorbed into white society... Embedded within the policy of assimilation was a clear expectation of cultural extinction of indigenous people." (www.australianstogether.org.au)

Under the pretext of civilization, the Aborigines were forced to lose their land, religion, children, language and culture. This horrible process of assimilation and forced acculturation initially removed Aboriginal children from their mothers and were put up in Welfare Homes in order to educate them. These forcibly removed children were called the stolen generation. The white settlers focused primarily on children because they were more adaptable to the white society than indigenous adults. Half – caste children were particularly vulnerable to the removal, as it was thought that they could be more easily assimilated into the white community because of their lighter skin colour. With such deliberate efforts the colonizers detribalized the indigenous population of Australia and were subjugated to an unimaginable extent.

The enormous hurt encountered by many Stolen generation writers like Jack Davis, Jane Harrison, Sally Morgan, Archie Roach, Bob Randall, Ruby Hunter, Stan Gran, Bobbi

Sykes, Doris Pilkington and many others have reacted to the acculturation that had left a legacy of ethnocide upon the indigenous communities. As a contra-acculturation retaliation these writers have started voicing out through their writings. This paper will foreground on the agonizing history portrayed by Doris Pilkington in her novel *Rabbit Proof Fence*. As a stolen generation writer, she has depicted the twinge of being stolen of their children, their past, culture, language, tradition, religion and family in this novel. This research article will also delve into the horrible condition and the plight of the stolen children being stripped off their cultural heritage.

Rabbit Proof Fence a 1996 novel is based on a true story. Doris Pilkington shares a personal account of an indigenous Australian family's experience as members of the stolen generation. It tells the story of three young Aboriginal girls Molly, Daisy and Gracie, who are forcibly removed from their families at Jigalong and taken to Moore river settlement and their great escape from there by following the rabbit proof fence, which was constructed to keep the rabbits from the east, out of western Australian pastoral areas.

Doris Pilkington is the narrator as she has documented the entire story from the information collected from the reminiscence shared by her mother Molly, who is one of the three young girls in the novel. She throws light on the socio political background of the novel when she shares that all the Europeans who with Captain Stirling, and others who settled before 1830 in Australia had the right to choose an area of land wherever they wanted. The white settler's focus was to keep up their Englishness intact. Doris Pilkington writes, "The best land was taken up by the more wealthy, influential people who had the responsibility of maintaining their customs. They were advised to "keep up their Englishness at all costs. This meant having picnics, foks hunts and balls". (Pilkington 13)

Contradictory to the above mindset of the white settlers, systematically ruined the Aborigine's traditional society. The entire natives of Australia began to realize this trauma fact. Pilkington narrates, "The Nyunger people, and indeed the entire Aboriginal population, grew to realise what the arrival of the European settlers meant for them: it was the destruction of their traditional society and the dispossession of their lands" (13).

The confrontations between the Nyungars and the invaders became very frequent. Like the bushfires out of control the whites could not be stopped. Driven off their traditional lands the Aboriginal people of all areas became a dispossessed and devastated race. Pilkington reiterates,

The Nyungar people who once walked tall and proud, Now hung their head in sorrow... 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. They remembered the corroborees and songs that they were forbidden to dance and sing unless commanded by government officials. (16)

Their pain and suffering remained hidden and repressed, silent and deep. No longer the corroborees were shared and danced by scores of feet. Warriors with painted bodies and plumes of feathers on their ochre – covered heads became faded images, buried in the past. The important dates on their seasonal calendars were forgotten forever.

Acculturation may be categorised into two kinds voluntary and forced. Forced acculturation happens to minorities, refugees and the marginalised. In other words acculturation can also be termed as Ethnocide. Acculturation and Ethnocide were the strategies adopted by the colonisers in Australia to separate the Aborigines and marginalise

them. Settler colonialism was eliminatory in nature. In *Rabbit Proof Fence*, Pilkington brings out how the children were abducted from their families and ultimately were separated and distanced from their culture and tradition. We understand this better when Pilkington portrays that the fatal day of abduction had finally dawned on Molly, Daisy and Gracie when at last they had to encounter Constable Riggs, the so called Protector of the Aborigines had come to take them away from their families forever. She recollects, “Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realised that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last... when constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke, his voice was full of authority and purpose... I have come to take Molly, Gracie and Daisy, the three half-caste girls, with me to school at the Moore River Native Settlement,” (44)

The natives knew without a doubt that he was the one who took their children in broad daylight. The members of the family just hung their heads and silent tears welled in their eyes and trickled down their cheeks, Pilkington laments that their anguished cries echoed across the flats carried by the wind, but no one listened to them, no one heard them also. They knew they were the hapless voiceless lot.

The forcibly removed Molly, Gracie and Daisy were placed in an overcrowded dormitory at the Moore River Native Settlement. The windows of the dormitory had no colourful curtains, it was covered with wired screens. Pilkington expresses in the novel, “It looked more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children” (72). These children were marginalised to a great extent that they were not allowed to converse in their native tongue. Pilkington shares what Molly confessed to her, “You girls can’t talk blackfulla language, you know, came the warning from the other side of the dorm. You gotta forget it and talk English all the time...” (72). Molly couldn’t believe what they had just heard. They were not allowed to speak their old wangka. It was really awful.

These forced acculturation strategies created a deep rift between the Aborigines, and the whites. It was the darkest chapter in Australian history. In an attempt to kill nativeness in them and save the man the white settlers ended up with ethnocide, assassinating their precious culture. The intergenerational trauma of colonisation still runs deep among stolen generation who have experienced the pain of loss not only of their loved ones but also of a more valuable culture and traditional.

Works Cited

- Berry, W. John. "Acculturation: When Individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds Meet". Sage Publications, David. L.Sam, Vol 5 No. 4, July 2010, 472 – 481, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41613454>.
- Brock, Peggy. *Outback Ghettos: A History of Aboriginal Institutionalisation and Survival*. Newyork: Cambridge University Press. 1993.
- Edwards. D. Justin. *Postcolonial Literature : A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Basing stoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Fanon, Frantz . *The Wretched of the Earth*. France: Penguin Books ltd. 2001.
- Haebich, Anna. *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800 – 2000*. Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press. 2000.
- Pilkington, Doris. *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press. 1996.
- URL. www.australianstogether.org.au.