

RECLAIMING FEMALE IDENTITY AND AGENCY THROUGH STORYTELLING IN *FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE*

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Abstract:

Storytelling is a vital aspect of the lives and the identities of native aboriginal women from Australia. The stolen generation underwent experiences of erasure and control which forced the aboriginal feminine away from her culture and its rituals of storytelling which gave her both rights and identity. This paper examines how female identity and agency is reclaimed through the form of life writing by studying Doris Pilkington Garimara's book 'Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence'. The book, with its rich ethnographic details of the relationship between nature and aboriginal tribes, also enables an insight into the deep roots that aboriginal cultures share with nature. The paper explores the power of storytelling in reclaiming the cultural roots and identity for both the stolen generation and those that are descended from the stolen generation.

Keywords: *Stolen generation, storytelling, Australian Aboriginal Women, identity, postcolonial study, feminism.*

Much Aboriginal history is difficult to relate because it is literally unspeakable. (Longley, 370)

It is essential to consider the denial and erasure of Aboriginal narratives and Aboriginal recollections in the process of colonisation and the period that comes after it. One must also note that the erasure of aboriginal history and suppression of aboriginal culture mirrors the way that female voices are not recorded in historical documents. Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner referred to non-Indigenous Australians as a “cult of forgetfulness or disremembering”. While Doris Pilkington Garimara's book *'Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence'* was made into a major motion picture titled *'The Rabbit Proof Fence'*, a conscious choice was made to study the account of this historic escape in its original form - from an aboriginal perspective rather than the film, which was directed by a white film-maker. The voices of three aboriginal girls, recounted by an adult aboriginal woman mark the text not just as a postcolonial text but also one that deals with gender. Considering the unique features of the aboriginal sense of identity and way of life, this study aims to establish that the women's narration of the invasion and exploitation of aboriginal land and culture play an important role in enabling aboriginal women to reclaim their identity.

Diane Bell's *Daughters of the Dreaming* explains the rights and responsibilities of women- one of which is protection of the 'dreaming'. Tom Calma, an Indigenous Australian theorist, explains the Dreaming the word used to denote aboriginal spirituality, an essential part of daily life. The Dreaming contains important spiritual knowledge- of the origins of the community. He further explains that the land is an essential part of the dreaming as “Land, sea and sky are the core of all Indigenous spirituality and relationships” (pp. 324) He states that the land is the source of life, law and lore. The women thus have both rights and responsibilities when it comes to the land, along with spiritual positions. Bell also states that women have a high degree of control over their own lives “in marriage, residence, economic production, reproduction and sexuality”

Longley adds that men can be punished by women for violation of the sacred spaces and rituals. Additionally, she explains: Obviously, much of the content of these ceremonies is unavailable to a general

reading public, but the structures are being revealed because of Aboriginal women's desire to publicize the strengths of their cultures to as wide an audience as possible. (pp. 373)

Story-telling forms an important part of aboriginal life as it is through stories that the spirituality of the tribes and communities are practiced and preserved. It is a social instance, markedly different from its colonial counterpart which was primarily individualistic. Women thus possess autonomy and hold places of respect in the tribe. They are charged with preserving these stories through sacred and secret ritual ceremonies. These ceremonies are completely the domain of women, inaccessible to men and outsiders. Thus, one can rightfully state that storytelling when undertaken by aboriginal women assumes a twofold importance- preserving culture and asserting identity and rights as an aboriginal woman in a postcolonial, patriarchal world.

With the loss of their land Australian Aboriginal women also faced a loss of their traditional tribal power base. Through recollections and by means of autobiography Australian Aboriginal women construct and reclaim not only identity but attempt to establish the bond the share with their land which forms a crucial part of aboriginal culture and identity. Longley states that contemporary life narratives are being written to consolidate or re-establish links with Aboriginal communities, and to restore crucial links with traditional tribal lands. She elaborates upon the importance of the stories that aboriginal people are sharing with the world and their place in the reclaiming of culture "they look backwards not just to "preserve" their recent history but with the more urgent need to justify their demand for a revision of all Australian history to incorporate crucial Aboriginal histories into ways of reading the contemporary world" (pp 372).

In the introduction, Pilkington establishes the tight bond that the aboriginal people share with nature by introducing and explaining the traditional way of marking time - 'Nature was their social calendar, everything was measured by events and incidents affected by seasonal changes.' Time was also calculated by activities that were culturally significant. Aboriginal storytelling used seasonal components in recounting events unlike its western counterpart which counted time mathematically. Pilkington establishes that the knowledge of the flora and fauna is a fundamental part of the collective knowledge in Aboriginal cultures as its people lived on and with the land.

This makes it important to consider Pilkington's narration- the story is essentially pieced together by the bits and pieces recollected from memory by her mother and her aunt, who are "anxious for their story to be published before they die" as stated in the introduction. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* thus becomes memory work and carries on the traditional role played by women in the aboriginal culture of tracing origin, roots and the relationship with the land. The collaboration between three women also brings back the element of story telling as group activity as carried out in traditional aboriginal society.

Pilkington firmly establishes that the reader must obtain an insight into the historical and cultural content to understand the gravity of the story of her mother and her aunts. In the first few chapters the invasion of Australia by white colonial forces must be viewed from two distinct perspectives. The aboriginal community is nomadic and peaceful, relying on the land for their sustenance. They work alongside nature to obtain only what is necessary for survival, never taking more than what is needed. Examples include using the rain to their advantage while hunting. Spirituality forms a crucial component of their way of life, as shown by their welcoming of the 'gengas', the white men to their land and sharing what the land has to offer with the 'gengas'. It is through this kindness that the white colonizers exploit the aboriginals first by taking the women and then the lands.

For the aboriginal communities the land is a source of life and is to be taken care of and respected. In contrast to this perspective, the white colonizers see the land as a resource to be used and exploited for their own gain. The invasion of Aboriginal traditional hunting land showed the ignorance of the colonizers. Additionally, the imperialist, anthropocentric view of the colonizer factored heavily in the introduction of non-native species such as horses, cattle, foxes and rabbits for the convenience of the

colonizer. Rabbits thrived in the land and caused ecological damage and posed a threat to the native species of flora and fauna. This foreshadowed the damage that was to be done by the whites, another non-native species, to the land and its inhabitants. The rabbit proof-fence was built in 1907 in an attempt to contain the rabbits. This led to establishment of Jigalong, one of the many maintenance depots.

The second invasion by the White colonizers is that of the Aboriginal culture and of female aboriginal bodies. Ignorance and lack of respect for the aboriginal way of life factored into the violence inflicted upon the Aboriginal community commenced with rape and brutal of their woman and the violation of their lands. Restricted access to the land they had hunted and lived in caused the aboriginals to struggle in order to fulfil the very basic needs of survival. The Aboriginal culture suffered a curtailment-the observance of sacred rituals and ceremonies were regulated by the White government. These factored into the aboriginals adapting themselves into a semi-nomadic life for their own survival. This included becoming labourers and domestic help and adhering to the law of the Whites. The increase in the number of Muda-Mudas, the half white, half aboriginal children, was one of the outcomes of this invasion.

Thus, the similarities between the treatment meted out to the aboriginals, particularly the half castes and the land are important elements of the story, considering the importance that the land holds for the people, particularly the traditional place of women in society. In the novel, one can infer that the otherness of the aboriginal culture from the colonial perspective mirrors the wilderness of the land which the colonizers seek to tame. Similarly, the 'blackness' in the half-caste children is seen as something to be erased, replaced with the civilized white culture, language and laws.

Molly's story is a result of both invasions. The rabbit proof-fence is the site of meeting for her parents aboriginal mother (Maude) and a white father (Thomas Craig). It can also be noted that the fence is not a part from the natural world and yet an important landmark for the aboriginals. The rabbit-proof fence, like the rest of the natural landscape, becomes an important source of information and a tool for Molly. Additionally, the rabbit-proof Fence, like Molly, like the other half caste children, has a dual identity. The fence is a colonial symbol as well as "a symbol of love, home and security" for Molly, whose father taught her about the fence (Pilkington, 109).

However, it is the spiritual and aboriginal knowledge that Molly obtains from her tribe that ultimately helps her find her way back home to her land, to her people. Interconnectedness, co-operation and co-existence with other members of the community as with the natural environment form important principles of the aboriginal way of life. These eco-centric principles guide Molly's mindset, enabling her to read and to use the landscape, climate and the flora and fauna to her advantage. The bond of trust between the girls and Molly along with Molly's resourcefulness imparted to her by her cultural knowledge make the story a powerful narrative of not just physical survival but of subversion of power structures established by the colonial dominance. Molly, with her initiative to take charge of her own destiny, enforces her traditional right as an aboriginal woman and the reclaiming of her identity begins when she decides she is too old for 'school' if she is old enough to be a co-wife. It is thus established that the exploitation of the Aboriginal feminine is inseparable from the exploitation of nature and the Australian land as women's identity is constructed in terms of their bond with nature, with the stories they preserve about the land and the spiritual importance of their role in society.

In this context it is also of importance to note that Doris Pilkington Garimara herself underwent separation from her mother and her aboriginal roots. The effort that she put into researching her culture and writing the rabbit proof fence enabled her to not only understand her culture but come to term with her mother's resilience and an insight into a navigation of the landscape through her mother's eyes. Thus, narrating her mother and her aunts' stories functioned as a way for Pilkington to trace her aboriginal origins, re-affirm her role as a woman in aboriginal community and reclaim identity and agency as an aboriginal woman.

In conclusion, it is important for these women to tell their stories outside the aboriginal community

to banish the idea that women do not play important roles in the community and thus, reclaim their identities and their agency through their narratives.

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