

**THE RABBIT ROOF FENCE: GIVING A VOICE TO THE MARGINALIZED***Shreya Mozumdar, B/6 - P.R.D.A. 302, S.K. Puri, Hazari Singh Lane, Boring Road, Patna, Bihar***Abstract:**

*The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial studies describes Aboriginal/Indigenous people as “those 'born in a place or region'(OED). The term 'aboriginal' was coined as early as 1667 to describe the indigenous inhabitants of places encountered by European explorers, adventurers or seamen.” While the terms 'aboriginal' and 'aborigine' have been used from time to time to describe the indigenous inhabitants of many settler colonies, they are now most frequently used as a shortened form of 'Australian Aborigine' to describe the indigenous inhabitants of Australia. The adjective 'aboriginal' has been more frequently used as the generic noun in recent times, the term 'aborigine' being considered by many to be too burdened with derogatory associations. Furthermore, the feeling that the term fails to distinguish and discriminate among the great variety of peoples who were lumped together generically as 'aborigines' by the colonial white settlers has been resisted with the assertion of special, local terms for different peoples and/or language groups such as the use of South-Eastern Australian terms like Koori, Queensland terms such as Murri and Western Australian terms such as Nyoongah. So far, though, no single term has been accepted as a general term by all the various peoples concerned, and the generic term most frequently used for the descendants of all pre-colonial indigenous is 'Australian Aboriginal peoples'.*

**Key Words:** *Aboriginal, Nyoongah, Pre-colonial, indigenous.*

*Rabbit Roof Fence*, a novel written by Doris Pilkington and published in the year 1996, is a story based on a true account of an indigenous Australian family's experiences as part of the Stolen Generation. When the White men came to Australia, they brought with them a lot of different and new things, things that amazed and frightened the people who lived in that sun baked land. They brought new tools, new metals, new clothes, new foods, and new weapons and new laws. But not everything the white men brought was good for the country. The new weapons killed many who resisted the whites. The natives were forced to adapt to the white idea of how the world works. The common belief at the time was that part-aboriginal children were more intelligent than their darker relations and should be isolated and trained to be domestic servants and laborers. Policies were introduced by the government in an effort to improve the welfare and educational needs of these children by establishing two institutions for Aboriginal children with white fathers. The story follows the lives of Molly, Daisy and Gracie who along with thousands of other mixed-race children were forcefully removed from their families during the early 20th century. Mixed race children are looked down upon by both the races- be it the Whites or the Aboriginal. Australian whites called such children “half-castes”; the natives called such children “muda-mudas”.

Marginality is one of the privileged metaphors of postcolonial studies. It is from the margins of colonial subordination and oppression on the grounds of race, class, gender or religion that postcolonial writers and theorists claim political and moral authority to contest or oppose the claims of a dominant European imperial culture. As Graham Huggan explains, 'marginality represents a challenge to the defining imperial “centre” [. . .] The embrace of marginality is, above all, an oppositional discursive strategy that flies in the face of hierarchical social structures and hegemonic cultural codes' (Huggan 2001: 20). The problem with such claims for marginality is that it is the elite political classes of postcolonial societies who often uphold marginality as a representative subject position from which to assert the

emancipatory claims of national liberation in former European colonies. Such a problem is articulated by the proletarian revolutionary character, Joseph D'Costa, in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, who says of India's national liberation that 'this independence is for the rich only' (Rushdie 1981: 104).

Many socialists have used the term social stratification. The term stratification connects with all the components of social inequality such as age, ethnicity, gender, caste, power, and class. Social stratification appears similar to rock that is made of various stratas. Each stratum interlinks with the other and becomes rigid. The kind of rigidity does not exist in the hierarchy of social structure.

The theory of social stratification was first proposed by Kingsley David and Wilbert Moore in 1945 in the article entitled, 'Some Principle of Stratification'. They screen the existence of Stratification in society. Regarding social stratification, Marxian perception is very clear on some ground. "Marxists" focus on two major social groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class indicates power through the control over production mode. It exploits the subject class at every possible level. The Marxian perception is that the system of social stratification derives from the relationship of social groups to the forces of production.

Doris Pilkington's "Rabbit Roof Fence" is a story which deals with marginalization. But the marginalization works at three levels- the first level is that of gender, the fact that Molly, Gracie and Daisy are females raised mainly by females creates the first level of marginalization. Nana Wilson-Tagoe says that "there is a fundamental level at which the critical and political perspectives of postcolonialism, feminism, and womanism converge." Postcolonialism, according to her, is inseparable from feminism. She further has to say, "A foregrounding of women's experiences and confrontations with sexual ideologies have, in addition, worked to decentre the normative male subject at the heart of postcolonial theory and challenge its conceptual ground."

In its very beginning, feminism sought to create a homogenous women's standpoint that had its basis in commonly held epistemologies about women. There was the assumption that women shared a common history of patriarchal oppression through 'the political economy of the material conditions of sexuality and reproduction; that even where these conditions varied, the knowledge through which women responded to their common oppressions remained uniform. Making gender a category of analysis in all areas of knowledge helps feminists to uncover power structures, biases, and exclusions in the construction of knowledge and to rethink almost all the disciplinary paradigms. It is feminism's revisions of existing knowledge and its theorizing of gender that moves the notion of gender itself beyond biological difference into the arena of culture, history, politics and religion. The idea that it is societies and cultures that constitutes meanings around sexual difference seems a logical way of understanding and probing hierarchical power relations in politics and culture. It helps feminists in all the disciplines to probe the historical roots of assumptions about women and interrogate their meanings. Feminist discourse locates constructs like masculinity and femininity in day-to-day cultural, social, and political interaction and wants new ways of understanding and rethinking them.

In the book, Maude has a relationship with a white man, a man who leaves her as soon as he gets what he wanted from her and leaves her with their child. We see how it is Maude who takes up the responsibility of raising her daughter mostly on her own.

The second level of marginalization occurs because of colour, because of racism. The central characters of the story are not only females, they are females of colour. It is due to their skin colour that the native Australians are looked down upon. The "half-castes", who are considered by the white Australians to have more intelligence than the natives, are still looked down upon. They are not accepted as a part of the white community as they are considered to be inferior. The sense of racial superiority is so deep rooted that it doesn't allow the white Australians to comprehend that a native can be more intelligent than them, a fact that is clearly proved otherwise when Molly and Daisy successfully reached Jigalong from the settlement school even after having the entire government after them.

American feminist scholar Bell Hooks objects to the very notion of a common oppression of women. Hooks' critical response to the work of Betty Friedman, a principal architect of contemporary feminist thought, exposes the contradictions of Friedman's own political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. Her essay, 'Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory' (1984), challenges feminism's mystification of social and class divisions as well as its failure to make meaningful connections between race, class, and gender in its theorizing. Making the plight of middle-class white American women synonymous with a condition that affected all American women, hooks argues, only serves to deflect attention from poor non-white women 'who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually . . . [and] are powerless to change their condition in life'. To feminism's simple conceptualization of women's oppression, hooks points to diverse other sources of oppression class, race, religion, sexuality that could determine how sexism itself is institutionalized as a system of domination.

More than an attack on Friedman and feminism, Hooks' essay speculates on how the unique social status of black women as the objects of racist, classist, and sexist oppression could challenge the prevailing social structure and its ideologies. Black women, she argues, had 'no institutionalized "other" that [they] may discriminate against, exploit or oppress and often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology.' As Hooks argues further, 'This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world-view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the system)' And, as a way of contributing to a real liberatory ideology and movement, "It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony"

The third and final level of marginalization that takes place in the story is because of age. Molly, Gracie, Daisy and all the other "half-castes" stuck in the settlement are children and are more helpless than adults. The central characters are females, are of colour and are not even adults. Children who are finding their identity, children who lack a sense of belongingness in a community as both the white and native Australian community refuses to acknowledge them as their own, children who are removed from their family and home, the only place they feel a sense of belongingness. These children are exposed to inhuman treatment hidden behind the facade of civilization. They are taken away from their home, their family and placed in a settlement school where they are prohibited to use their native language and forced to use English.

The "boob" was a place of detention; it was a small, detached concrete room with a sandy floor, with only a gleam of light and little ventilation coming through a narrow, barred opening in the north wall. Every inmate of the settlement dreaded being incarcerated in this place. Some children were forced to spend up to fourteen days in that horrible place.

Children who tried to run away from the facility were sent into the punishment room with little food and water, forced to parade in front of everyone with their heads shaved and whipped and strapped as a form of punishment.

Frank Fanon holds the belief that colonialism and its handmaiden, racism, strike deeply into the social and individual psychology of the colonized. The colonial regime re-enacts on a grand scale the drama of the incident on the train by substituting a society's 'corporeal schema', as it were, with an image of alienation and domination where the colonial looks at the world and sees only a reflection of imperial power which has replaced an enabling sense of otherness. The colonial condition prevents, therefore, the formation of workable forms of social and cultural life by creating psychological dependence on these substituted images of domination and inferiority. In other words, colonialism attacks the very essence of identity in its subject peoples by inducing a form of mental illness.

The children who are kept in the settlement are told from a young age that they are not good enough

to be equal to the whites and not bad enough to be with the natives. They are conditioned into a state where they start losing their identity.

The story tries to bring the three layers of marginalization to the centre and tries to show the irony of the civilized world through the lenses of children who play fundamental roles in the story. In spite of being thrice marginalized, the young Molly and Daisy manages to break the barriers and the shackles of the suffocating society and attain freedom.

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