

FLYING TOWARDS THE NEST; CONSCIOUS RACISM IN DORIS PILKINGTON'S FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

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New literatures in English emerging from the colonized continent of Australia are replete with Post-colonial musings on problems of “lost homeland” and “identity” and in such a context, the role of historical fiction as a mode of self-discovery is developing into a writer’s tool for creation of “a focal point of cultural consciousness and social change”. Such an act is undeniably a symbolic “writing back” to the hegemonic centre and is latent with a myriad of complexities in an increasingly multicultural world. The colonized continent of Australia practices multiculturalism in the sense that it has demographic conditions for ethnic and cultural diversity, though in reality, it is just the opposite leading to a number of writers like Sally Morgan, Kim Scott and Doris Pilkington writing about the multicultural past. Thus Doris Pilkington in her FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE (1996) tells a true story concerning her mother and two other “mixed-race” aboriginal girls who were taken away forcefully from their native land Jigalong to the Moore River Native Settlement (far north of Western Australia). From the late in nineteenth century to the late 1960s, about 70 years State Govt. started removing the mixed-race Aboriginal indigenous children from their families often by force. It became the controversial issue of “Stolen Generation” (it became a hot topic because it deals with the separation of the children from their parents—an emotional business).

Most of the children were usually between two and four and in some cases they were removed just after their birth, *“Every mother of a Part-Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time and they were powerless to stop the abductors. That is why many women preferred to give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where they believed their babies would be taken from them soon after birth”*. (Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence 40-41).

The architect of “the removal policy” in Western Australia was the chief protector (A.O. Neville) of Aborigines. He called his scheme “the breeding out of colour” a process called “miscegenation”. Neville focused his removal effort on so-called “mixed-blood” children because their numbers were evidently growing. It is notable that the apparent simplicity of Pilkington’s text is indeed deceptive inasmuch as she self-consciously and paradoxically brings about an “intertext” of Post-colonial studies and impregnates the “hypertext” FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE with her own meanings conducive to the Post-colonial scenario. Hence the focus of the project proposal is to discover the excruciating condition of the neglected and marginalized Australian aborigines by their ruling-class masters or White peoples who came to establish their colonies and simultaneously wanted to civilize the “Mardu People” (indigenous people). Phillip Morrissey expands the notion that Aboriginal stories give Indigenous people a strong sense of their own history, *“The psychological and physical brutality which attended the expansion of European interests in Australia into 20th century is being documented in increasing detail and thoroughness in contemporary histories”*. (Morrissey 11)

The concept of post-colonial hegemony finds an echo in this text when A.O. Neville, the

chief protector of aborigines wanted to present their own interest as the “common interest”. He calls his scheme “the breeding out of colour”, a process of “miscegenation”. His policy encouraged the marriage of “half-caste” or “quarter-caste” girls to European men. He wanted to turn ‘Black’ into “White” over two or three generations.

The popularized concept of Hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha is aptly applicable in true sense, for when Molly, the mother of Garimara was born then she was considered as the first “half-caste” child of the entire Jigalong, their native land. By keeping the half-castes children in the Moore River Native Settlement the ruling class wanted to constantly expanding to include an “other”, thus enabling the re-negotiation of boundaries and cultural identities. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.

In the Moore River Native Settlement the three girls feel isolated and scared for they are under strict observation which immediately recalls another crucial concept namely the concept of Panopticon, adopted and developed by Foucault. It is the awareness of some clandestine surveillance that makes the prisoners maintain perfect discipline within the prison. But what is tellingly important about Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon is that Foucault tried to extend it from the confines of prison to other institutional buildings and in a broad sense to the “entire society”. Molly does not like the place where they are kept under furtive vigilance. She is convinced that this place is a “marbu country” where “flesh eating” people are living. The language which Foucault uses – “everyone locked up in the cage” (196) has resemblance with Eliot’s lines in “The Waste Land”.

The colonial power tries to recast the native as one of themselves, but contrariwise tries to reiterate the irreducible difference of the other. From this point of view “mimicry” comes to play a vital role in this text of Pilkington. The half-castes children used to mock their protector A.O.Neville as “devil” which indicates their hatred for the White Colonizer and mimicry becomes an “active resistance” which reflects a “distorted image” of the masters.

Central among all interests seem the writer’s intention at revealing and reshaping her own identity in an ambiguously fashioned multicultural world. “Multi” cultures never can exist side by side as Siamese twins but always create hegemonic formation with parasitic intention. Literature should function to enhance cultural understanding and encourage a multicultural society. Now-a-days literature is moving towards presenting a multiculturalists perspective which is composed of the creative interplay of three important and complementary insights namely the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability of cultural plurality and the plural and the multicultural constitution of each culture. From this perspective Doris Pilkington’s text helps one realize that every culture needs other cultures to understand itself better, expand its intellectual and moral horizon, stretch its imagination, and finally save it from narcissism to guard it against the obvious temptation to absolutize itself.

Follow *The Rabbit-Proof Fence* reflects the Post-colonial culture which is nothing but the historical phenomenon of Colonialism. The three aboriginal girls are the living example of various post-colonial theoretical concepts such as transportation, slavery, displacement, emigration, and finally racial and cultural discrimination. Even more importantly the claim that they might exist independently without Britisher’s subjugation and colonization which allowed them (the Aborigines) to come into a precise formation is to assert a point of considerable controversy and debate.

Inside the Moore River Native Settlement the three aboriginal girls with other companions feel psychological asphyxiation by the rigid rules imposed upon them causing internal and external disturbance as well. Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" finds a revelation by the excruciating and devastating condition of those "stolen" girls in Moore River Native Settlement.

Spivak questions whether any possibility exists for any recovery of a subaltern voice. Although she expresses her considerable solace and empathy for the project undertaken in contemporary scenario to give a voice to the subaltern but she raises grave doubts about the theoretical legitimacy.

The Mardu people in Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence are like subaltern and they are taught to speak with the language of their ruling fathers. Edward Said termed the "permission to speak" by going behind the terms of reference of "elite" history to incorporate the perspective of those who are never taken into account (the suppressed ruled, colonized people).

Recognizing and praising the endorsement of the heterogeneity of the colonial subject, Spivak is concerned intensely to articulate what she observes as the difficulties, problems and contradictions involved in constructing a "prominent speaking power and position" for the subaltern.

Nobody can categorize of the Australian aboriginal that has a distinct effective voice clearly and unproblematically audible above the present multiple reverberations of its inevitable heterogeneity. According to Bhabha the Colonizer in the South Australia controls even the imagination and the aspirations of the colonized because of their supreme authority but ironically enough such powerful authority simultaneously creates colonial ambivalence.

The aboriginal people become decidedly "unfree" so far as their mental freedom is concerned and even to some extent physical too. In spite of the unwillingness the aboriginal girls remain captivated as domestic animals by their masters (British colonizers). The idea of freedom from the stolen three girls is in fact ignoring the plight into which globalization has made people disadvantaged by class, ethnicity, tyranny. The stereotypical Aborigines within Australian society and culture are also criticized in the essay of Marcia Langton :

All Aborigines are dirty, drunk and useless, and they are going to die Out anyway, say some white people without hesitation and qualification.

Three girls felt themselves as "Other"; the other with the capital "O" has been called the grande autre by Lacan, the great other in whose gaze the subject gains identity. In Post-colonial theory it can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by Imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and perhaps crucially become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ego.

"The girls had never seen so many white men in the one place before" but still "the city was for them a noisy and unfriendly place". They never knew that their every single gesture, movement will be minutely observed by the guards immediately reminding the furtive vigilance of the "Big Brother" of George Orwell's novel 1984.

Molly was convinced that the place is a "marbu country", means a place where "flesh eating" spirits live. In addition their supervisor frightened them that if they try to flee then they will be

caught and punished severely.

At the very beginning of the book Doris Pilkington writes “*The task of reconstructing the trek home from the settlement has been both an exhausting and an interesting experience*” (Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence xi). The first three chapters provide the readers with historical ambience of early Western Australian Indigenous experience and their contact with the white Europeans who came for ruling and dominating the entire locally united Indigenous people. Next the author gives a sharp and vivid insight of how the Nyungar people of Southern Australian realm responded emphatically to the arrival of the Europeans and how gradually the Settlers started displacing the Indigenous Aboriginal from Swan river area :

It was the destruction of their traditional society and the dispossession of their lands.

The controversial and crucial issue of “stolen generation” get reflected when Molly, Daisy and Gracie were forced to abandon their heritage and taught to be culturally “White”, they were being treated badly by their colonial rulers. They suffered from every day-to-day life needs and requirements:

Instead of residential school, the Aboriginal children were placed in an over-crowded dormitory. The inmate, not students, slept on cyclone beds with government-issue blankets. There were no sheets or pillow slips except on special occasions when there was an inspection by prominent officials. Then they were removed as soon as the visitors left the settlements and stored away until the next visit. (72).s

What is tellingly important for the three female protagonists of this book is the question of “national identity” and the “sense of belonging” both to a place and to the people around. The “stolen generation” narrative suggests:

Stories of the separation of Aboriginal children which had previously been told in various ways by some Aboriginal people and largely in local or community setting, increasingly became a more homogenous stolen generations narrative that was produced and circulated in regional and national forums. (Attwood 195)

The “sense of belonging” and quest for identity are conspicuous ideas that have attracted readers’ imagination and interest all over the world. This particular text of Pilkington is replete with the indelible and indomitable spirit of the Australian aboriginals represented by the three girls. Simultaneously it represents the aboriginal cultures and a spontaneous and deliberate technique within the aboriginal literary productions.

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