

**Writing as Social Activism: Aboriginal Issues in Doris Pilkington's
*Follow The Rabbit- Proof Fence***

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Literary textuality has remained a location of debate and contestation not only for the hegemonic powers but also for the resistance voices challenging these powers. The dominant controlling structures have used literary writings to manipulate the subalterns, whereas the subalterns have used the site to protest, question and challenge the practices as well as ideology of oppressive hegemonies. The same has been experienced and seen in the settler country Australia. The mainstream Australian writings have negated the presence of Indigenous people and their works. The mainstream white writers do not recognize the literary productions of the Indigenous people as standards of/in literatures. However, since 1960s the protest literature by the Aboriginal people has made a very strong presence. All the Aboriginal writers are determined to retrieve their past and mark their cultural presence. Writings by them are concerned with the deliberations about not only the self but also their Indigenous communities. These writings are contextualized in the contraries of personal and collective history and experience of the Aboriginal people. For these writers, aesthetics assume the form of social activism, responsibility towards the community and even the notion which has marginalized them. Their works progress from individual to community laying emphasis on respect for diversity within the Indigenous tribes. In fact “In the absence of political, economic or social power they find an empowering site in literary textuality to express their anger, to interrogate their exploiters and to assert their humanity”(Singh 11-12) . The aim of these writers is to amalgamate writing as self-healing exercise with social response/protest (which borders on socio-ethical duty) to the still ‘colonized’ state of the Indigenous people in post-colonial Australia.

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Since the last few decades in Australia, Aboriginal life writings—biographies, memories, letters and autobiographies—have emerged as an influential distinct literary genre. These inscriptions with a strong political stance fulfill the function of both the literary and historical textual discourses. This genre questions the notion of national identity (especially for Aboriginal People as Aboriginality) and Aboriginal people's commitment to the sense of belonging to both place and people. However, this does not undermine the fact that Aboriginal stories were still being created much before the others took a keen interest in them, especially the stories portraying the injustices practiced on the Indigenous people. These life - writings bring to the fore knowledge and information about the Aboriginals which had been deliberately hidden by the 'White' Australia. As Philip Morrissey comments, "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 ...[they] not only depict the events which accompanied the subjugation of a nation but also... introduce history into Aboriginal life"(11). Also, notion of Aboriginality remains central to the life writings of Indigenous Australians. This concept remains complex and polysemous wherein for the Indigenous it is located between their own perceptions and the perceptions of the state. "In an attempt to assimilate or integrate Aboriginal people with their very different culture into non-Aboriginal culture, government policies have defined what Aboriginal people were and how they should behave"(Brewster 13). In fact, the Aboriginal identity has been stereotyped—barbaric, primitive, naïve in their system of beliefs, unmannered, and uneducated. However, acknowledging their link with the land, the Aboriginals consider connection with the land as central to their Aboriginality. In addition to descendance, identity and acceptance as per anthropological definition of Aboriginality, race, culture and history are also integral component of Aboriginal identity. Aboriginals also believe that Aboriginality can be attained as well as retrieved. According to Jackie Huggins, "Aboriginality cannot be acquired overnight. It takes years of hard work, sensitivity and effort to come back in" (63). With the advent of Aboriginal writings, the perception of Indigenous people by non- Indigenous Australians has changed by notion of Aboriginality and the way Aboriginals define themselves . The long held opinion that

Indigenous identity resides in colour, blood and physical characteristics is being replaced by flexible ideas—recognition by the community, spiritual ties with land, connection with people, and negotiations with non-Indigenous people. It has taken a social dimension rather than remaining a racial one. As Anne Brewster points out, “This relationship was defined in terms of segregation in the first few decades of this century, then in terms of assimilation from the late 1930s through to the mid 1960s, then of integration in the 1960s, and self-determination from the early 1970s to the present”(16).Hence, Aboriginality has emerged as comprising of Aboriginal ancestry, traditions, customs, beliefs, language and kinship system, and political acceptance by the white Australians—a continuing process of negotiations, reconciliation and redefinition.

Bringing to the fore the Aboriginal issues, the women writers of Aboriginal descent have played a major role. Their works are testimonies to the atrocities done by the whites on the Indigenous people. These emotionally drafted stories contradict the acuity that women are outsiders sitting on the margins while retelling their experiences to interpret and record what happened to their families. In her essay “Presenting Aboriginal Women’s Life Narratives” Amanda Nettlebeck asserts that life writings by women are “not only testimonies of individual experience but also accounts of mission life, government surveillance, stolen childhoods, and other forms of twentieth-century race politics”(43). Doris Pilkington (Aboriginal name Nugi Garimara)is one such writer. The present paper focuses on Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit- Proof Fence* to show how the text addresses the social reality of stolen generation—the forced removal of the Indigenous children in the name of assimilation. Simultaneously, the journey of three children back home records the history of resistance as a fact of human (particularly Aboriginal) grit, triumph and survival against all odds. This work belonging to the genre of life writings remains a deliberate act of social activism towards the white supremacy and establishes Aboriginal writing as a socially conscientious political practice.

Follow the Rabbit- Proof Fence (1996)_retells the experience of Pilkington with the government. It recounts her mother’s and her two cousins’ escape from the Moore River Settlement (1931). Three Mardudjara girls from East Pilbara, Western Australia were

taken away from their home Jigalong to the Settlement as part of assimilation policy. After a very short span the three girls - Molly (14), Daisy (11) and Gracie (8) –escaped and walked some 1600 km along the rabbit –proof fence to reach home. The need to report the story arose from the fact that Pilkington herself had been removed (stolen generation) from her mother at a young age and taken to the Moore River settlement north of Perth. Pilkington did not desire to remain silent any longer and wished to inspire other Aboriginal people to come out with their own personal stories on their varied familiarities with white settlement- “for inspiration, encouragement and determination”(1). This, she emphasizes would ensure the non-Indigenous readers to examine their past assumptions and their prejudices. Her book serves to inform non-Indigenous Australians from diverse locations about heterogeneous Indigenous people.

Introduction to the book lucidly acquaints the reader with the culture of the Aboriginals and Indigenous interpretation of varied elements in nature time - “Consistent with Aboriginal storytelling style, seasonal time and the features of the natural environment are more important to recounting this journey, than are the western notions of times and distance” (xiii).Also Pilkington’s task of reconstructing the story posed so many difficulties – reconstruction of a landscape which had “either changed considerably or disappeared completely” (xii), the reliance on the memory of her mother and numbers -“Nature was their social calendar, everything was measured by events and incidents affected by seasonal changes” (xii-xiii). Pilkington writes, “The task of reconstructing the trek home from the settlement has been both an exhausting and interesting experience. One needed to have a vivid imagination”(xi). The first three chapters are partly fictionalized constructions of per-colonial life and the arrival of the Whites in Western Australia. These sections depict the traumatic encounter of the Aboriginals with the white settlers “There are huts and farms all over the place. Soon they will drive us all from our lands.”(14), the daring resistance of the Nyoongars to the colonizers and eventual decline of their traditional life style, “[it] became apparent then, that the Aboriginal social structure was not only crumbling, but it was being totally destroyed”(15). After this begins the detailed description of the removal and the eventual escape of the ‘stolen generation’—an emotive true story of three daring girls.

Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal people have been denied a presence in Australian society as well as literature. Being on the periphery of society as well as consciousness of White Australia, the Indigenous Australians have had restricted facility and access to the writing of Australian literature and history. How Australia was invaded and how Aboriginals were mistreated did not find any space in Australian writings. This absence denied them a historical and political context in social structure as well as writings. Aboriginal history especially the account of 'stolen generation' has been hidden from public. The Aborigines Protection Act of 1897 allowed the white people in government structures to provide--"for the care, custody, and education of the children of Aboriginals and prescribed the conditions on which any Aboriginal or half-caste children may be apprenticed to, or placed in with, suitable person"(198). Half-caste children (half Aboriginal and half white) were the first to experience this atrocity. In 1905, the Aborigines Act was passed in the Western Australian Parliament which out-rightly held prejudice against the original inhabitants. It removed the legal guardianship of Aboriginal parents and children who were to be in the custody of the government. It repressed the human rights of the Indigenous people: their travel, whom they married, where they worked, etc was supervised. As a part of policy the government could remove half-caste children to place them in institutions to teach them the ways of the whites. Peter Read, a renowned historian, explains "In the first two thirds of the twentieth century the removal of children was neither the subject of many stories told in Aboriginal communities nor central to their historical consciousness" (185). The absence of historical records exhibits the fact that the Aboriginals were not included in official Australian historical writings and this remains an attempt to erase Aboriginal memory and identity on both individual and communal levels. Process of colonization was concealed even from the Aboriginal public. Also many Aboriginals were ashamed since the belief propounded - their parents could not take care of them or worse still did not want them. This made them unable to articulate the pain and humiliation of being separated from the family. However, these narrations now have a historical dimension and remain central to Indigenous collective memory and Australian consciousness.

Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence details this phenomenon discreetly. Removed from family the three girls undergo a staunch feeling of uprootedness. A lot of

psychological, emotional and mental trauma is experienced because of this non-belongingness. Not only the children, but the whole family along with community pine for the homes which could not be built, for the friendships which could not be made. “The ... frightened and miserable girls began to cry, by the lamentation of their loved ones and the visions of them sitting on the ground in their camp letting their tears mix with the red blood that flowed from the cuts on their heads.”(*Rabbit-Proof Fence* 45). There is an irreparable loss of relationships. The whole process leads to pain and anguish. The inhumanity is expressed brutally when even children around two years are taken under Church mission control or sent to government institutions. Pilkington states this plight, “Every mother of 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”(40-41). Besides the gross violation of human context, this phenomenon of ‘stolen generation’ remains a political act of imposing white value system in the name of civilizing the original inhabitants. Children of mixed parentage are forcefully uplifted from their mothers, compulsorily sent to government institutions to basically be trained in superior (?) European ways of living. In some cases, the white order entered the Indigenous living making them doubt their own capacity to bring up children—thus surrendering before a powerful oppressive system. The fact however, remains that young bairns were forcibly rather cruelly removed from their parents without even giving the parents the right or a chance to appeal in a court. The law made by the whites, supported the whites. It unjustly described the Aboriginal parents incapable of raising their children. This impacted the young lives of these removed children as they were raised to be whites. It did not matter even if one of the parents was white. The text shows how despite the fact that Molly’s father, Thomas Craig, is a white as well as an employee as an inspector at rabbit-proof-fence is unable to protect his children from being removed. He is unable to stop the uplifting of Molly where she is forcibly taken to the Moore River Native settlement along with her half sister Daisy Kraig Kadibil and their cousin Gracie Fields. The intention was/is to make this settlement their home (?) so that “they would be educated in European ways” (16) and the conviction (right or wrong) “...that they will grow up with

a better outlook on life than back at their camp” (47). The European adoption implies negation of their traditional customs and acceptance of being culturally also white so that the Aboriginal children could be saved from their very own “primitive savagery” (31).

The means into European way of living was passed on in the garb of education— education which would give Aboriginal children a place in white settlement but it harshly demolished this notion, this hope. As Jackie Huggins states, “Certainly schooling was to be the prime way that Aboriginal children could be socialized and imbued with European values.”(43). This arrives from the concept that half-castes were more intelligent than the full blood. This stereotypical view finds expression in the text, “... part Aboriginal children were intelligent than their darker relations and should be isolated and trained to be domestic servants and labourers” (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* 40). The statement brings out the farce of education. Education which is to be impartially imparted to all the children has different goals for dissimilar children – disparity is evident. Perception of Indigenous children being subnormal, incapable of learning makes whites treat them subhumanly. Placed in institutions away from home in a state of emotional upheaval, the Aboriginal children experience the physical neglect as well. In the residential schools they are placed in overcrowded dormitory which are even locked. Molly, Daisy and Gracie notice: “When entering the dormitories for the first time, they notice- the door [is] locked with chains and padlocks....bars on the windows...just like a gaol”(63). Even the place to rest is improper. Three girls from Aboriginal homes find the room uncomfortable and difficult to “...sleep on the hard mattress...feeling cold and lonely”. (64). Usually there are no sheets or pillow covers except on special occasions whenever there is an inspection. “On the windows there were no colourful curtains, just wire screens and iron bars. It looked more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children” (72). The mere sight of the institution makes Molly resolve to escape. She is the one who encourages her other sisters also to pick up the challenges and undo European undertaking.

Elimination of indigenous language and establishment of English as a superior language also remained a reason for the ‘stolen generation’. By giving the Aboriginal children lesson in English not only is there loss of native language, but also a loss of

connection with communities. Once put in educational body they are denied the right to visit their own people and forbidden to speak the language of their family. Molly, Gracie and Daisy... “ only sometimes ... talk whispering in Mardu wangka. Other girls in the dormitory warn them not to - talk blackfulla language here ...you gotta forget it and talk English all the time”(72). However, Pilkington makes a deliberate effort to use native words to revive a language and acquaint the reader with a different linguistic pattern.

All the readings amply illustrate how the main purpose behind ‘stolen generation’ was actually the assimilationist policy. The whites spread the notion of their own superiority and tried to erase not only the Aboriginal skin colour but also the Indigenous identity of the original inhabitants, as “...identity would be bred out of indigenous people by whitewashing them with superior European blood”(124). This notion of whiteness built in among the Aboriginals developed an inferiority complex and view their on social structure as lesser and subordinate. Pilkington mentions, “Soon, the Aboriginal people all over the state learned to acknowledge the white man’s brutal strength and their cruel use of superior weapons and were forced to accept the white system of justice and punishment” (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* 15). In fact, brutality extended even to the children. The half-caste bairns could not mingle with their Indigenous families, even if the father was a white. In Western Australia, the Chief Protector of Aborigines implemented strictly the policy of separating the children from parents and the original culture. In *Follow the Rabbit -Proof Fence* a real historical figure, A.O Nelville concerned himself with breeding out the colour. He was the man “...obsessed with issues of miscegenation and the (literal) purity of skin”(117). It was Neville who was responsible for the violence against Aboriginals during his tenure (1915 - 1940) as Chief Protector of Aborigines. As Smith points out half- caste children were encouraged to “grow out of their Aboriginality and assimilate into settler society by adopting the appearance, the identities and the value of the colonizers, they could leave behind their primitive Aboriginality and become modern subjects of history” (527). This policy allowed Nelville to even govern human relationships. It required the Aboriginals to seek permission of the Native Commissioner even to get married. Efforts to breed out the Aboriginal race were evident in this inhuman practice. Also this policy represents the history of subjugation and subordination under the premise of benevolence and protection.

This assimilationist policy had dire consequences. It could not even reach its little philanthropic agenda (to re-establish the Aboriginals) - there was no improvement in the social position of the Aboriginals, they remained on periphery in education and employment. Moreover, no historical records were maintained leading to loss of awareness about Aboriginal culture and traditions rather of esteem and well-being as well. Psychologically damaged this generation faces problems in their parenting as well. Doris Pilkington's work expresses a victory over government's policy and resists the racial oppression debating strongly the race relations in Australia. The girls show determination to escape and in the escape lay their victory. Being treated with harshness Molly, the eldest one, realizes the need to run away to rejoin family. She is cognizant of awful outcome if caught. The punishment borders on heartlessness: "... seven days punishment with just bread and water. Mr. Johnson shaved their heads bald and made them parade around the compound so that everyone could see them. They got the strap too." (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* 17). Still this could not deter the young girls. Without any map and barefoot, they are guided only by a rabbit-proof fence, one of those constructed to keep rabbits from destroying the farmlands. The young girls had to adapt various tactics to escape the White gaze, "The girls were clever enough to avoid routes near larger towns and ...knew they that would have been too exposed to the white population and their where about would have been immediately reported to the local police" (xiv). Familiar with landscape, they were able to gather food and feed themselves. Still crossing the desert, many times they collapsed with heat and hunger. The white police continuously searched for them. They asserted, "We are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush"(102). This is significantly countered as Pilkington describes the girls' constant vigilance and stealth on fast track, their awareness that "they were not safe from the authorities"(112) stating that it is this protection that terrorizes them. Also, however, this act becomes a pretence as all the efforts to locate them are abandoned as it incurred "undesirable publicity"(125). Their barefoot journey, however, also acknowledges the goodness of non-Aboriginal people who provided them with food and clothing. Finally, they succeeded in finding home except Gracie who got tempted to climb the train and got recaptured. Molly and Daisy "...had overcome their fears and proved that they could survive. It took a strong will and a purpose -they had both" (119).

Doris Pilkington's narrative does not arise entirely out of her own life experience but emerges from her mother's story that not only describes an arduous physical journey but also establishes the importance of relationship between land and maintenance of Aboriginals cultural identity and memory. Pilkington, thus, through her life-writing contributes to the awareness of non-Indigenous people of Indigenous issues and injustices done to them. In fact, *Follow the Rabbit- Proof Fence* invokes feeling of pride in being Aboriginal and contributes greatly towards collective healing of the Indigenous people in Australia. The three trekking girls achieve freedom—freedom desired and hoped so much for by the Aboriginal people. In spite of episodes of grief and sadness the work that exhibits the Aboriginal life and experience throughout the twentieth century gives a human face to various issues of the Aboriginals, especially the Stolen Generation. This because past remains crucial to these people contributing/being instrumental to/in their identity and presence in the contemporary Australian society. It emerges from the testimony and memories of the childhood, the three girls had no real education, inadequate food and severe punishments when placed in government institutions. Being educated to think and behave in European ways, they are forced to unlearn their native language. The book takes a strong call on despair experienced by mothers whose children were snatched and shows the terror and dilemma of family uprooted from their familiar surroundings. In the struggle of the girls and their eventual victory, history of resistance and protest is also recorded the aboriginal assertion of their being, their humanity.

Follow the Rabbit- Proof Fence has become successful in making Indigenous people prepared to accept their Aboriginal roots and take pride in their Aboriginality without the essence of stereotypes propagated by the whites. This has also arisen from the fact that the characters in the book are the ones the Aboriginals can relate to and their being real makes the story convincing, exciting and poignant. This life- writing has also become an instrument of relief for many Australians who felt shame for what their forefathers did to the Aboriginal people. It has also made guilty white Australians understand the need to respect the Aboriginals and their right to their own land and a humane living. Very sensitively has Doris Pilkington in *Follow the Rabbit- Proof Fence* approached a highly controversial and emotional issue of Stolen Generation. The history - harsh reality of part Aboriginal children being removed from their parents to be put into

government institutions-had been invisible. It was not taught in schools, the claims to land rights were ignored and about all, Indigenous communities had no access to each other's stories. Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers perceive/respond to this kind of books differently arising out of their distinct experience in respective societies and cultures. Still, it has led to consciousness rising among the non-Aboriginals and instilled a sense of belonging among the Aboriginals, also healing the damaged psyche and esteem of the Indigenous people. The book's celebration of escape gives the victims of Stolen Generation hope for their future lives and helps them recover from past injustices. It makes a strong assertion of writings being political and also rightly so as without activism it has no meaning.

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All the subsequent references to the book are from this edition and have been incorporated in the text.

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