

## A Critique of Western Educational Policy for Aboriginals in Australia as Represented in Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Caprice: The Stockman's Daughter*

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**Article History:** Received: 10 January 2021; Revised: 12 February 2021; Accepted: 27 March 2021; Published online: 10 May 2021

### Abstract

This article examines the role of education in the lives of aboriginal women, as represented in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Caprice: The Stockman's Daughter* written by Doris Pilkington within the theoretical frame work of Aileen Moreton Robinson whose writings reveal the double standards of the Australian government's educational policies. In both the novels, there is representation of the Australian Law Reform Commission that was gradually introduced to each State and Territory along with their formal and extensive policies of protection during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These policies classified Aboriginal people in terms of race as full bloods, half-bloods, mixed bloods and half-castes. By denoting their aboriginal ancestry, the role of education is represented from the Aboriginal women's perspective.

This article analyses the experiences of Kate Muldune in *Caprice: The Stockman's Daughter*, and Molly Craig *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* who are coincidentally linked to the Moore River Native Settlement. Molly chose the way out from the Moore River Settlement never to return where as Kate chose freedom by staying there and getting educated. The representation is done as a framework that explores women experiences and perceptions of education which create a small opening for a new way of looking at the ingrained failure of the education system to serve and support aboriginal women.

**Keywords:** Half-caste and Mixed Race, Racial Cleansing, Aboriginal Women's Education, Stolen Generation, Moore River Native Settlement.

The 'problem' of educating aboriginal people is a concern of the Australian Government from the time when aboriginal children began to be educated by colonists and missionaries. However, experts suggest that it was not until the 1960's that Australia 'discovered' the problem of profound educational disadvantage among its indigenous people, especially women. Education had different purpose for White Australians and Aboriginals. White people in Australian used education as a tool for colonizing the aboriginals whereas aboriginals used it record their past and to produce solidarity among their own community.

Ethnic and cultural discrimination at schools were the major obstacles to equal access to education, causing poor performance and higher dropout rates. Aboriginal girls, in particular, experienced difficult problems related to unfriendly school environments. The aboriginal girls experienced loss of identity, caught in no man's land. When indigenous school children were introduced only to the national discourse at the expense of their native discourse, they were in danger of losing part of their identity, their connection with their parents, predecessors and, ultimately, being caught in a no man's land.

Doris Pilkington Garimara (1937 - 2014), an Australian Aboriginal writer concentrates more on the stolen generation, the generation of children who were separated from their parents and schooled in the ways of the white Australian society to integrate them into the society by civilizing them. In her book, *Home to Mother*, (2006) Doris Pilkington states that:

"The 'stolen generation' is that the consequence of domineering and imperialistic acts during which "half-caste" or "mixed-race" children were strategically removed from their families in indigenous communities and placed in "Native" settlements where they were trained and educated to be servants to white families. (Pilkington 16)

Doris Pilkington strived for unity within the diversity of genres and voices and the need to recognize aborigines as a non-homogenous group. She implored her readers to understand the history of colonization

in Australia and often presented aboriginal life which was tainted by racism, cruelty, and colonialism. Pilkington with her gripping style of storytelling in the two books, *Caprice, A Stockman's Daughter* (1991) and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) encapsulates the trials and tribulations of aboriginal women, who have been ruthlessly uprooted from their native land and culture and their yearning to return to their roots.

The “Stolen Generation” children received little or no education and whatever little they received it was certainly not of any value. Children were taken away from their parents with the idea that these children could be provided with good education. However, in reality, the children never received such an education. The standard of the schools where the children of stolen generations were being educated was low. Moreover, attending schools were not compulsory and therefore students had a tendency of not attending classes.

Aileen in her book, *Talkin'Up to the White Woman*, (2000), she discusses the provocative interrogation of feminism in representation and practice. Being an indigenous woman herself and an academician, she provides a unique cultural standpoint and a compelling analysis of the white Australian feminism and its effects on indigenous women. She also pointed on how indigenous women have been represented through the publication and the teachings of white Australian Women. In her writing, Moreton explains how the white middle-class women enjoy a racist privilege based in colonization and dispossession of the indigenous nations of Australia. She also touches upon the notion of the white race continuing to legitimate theft of aboriginal land, and subsequently, the existence of the state known as Australia. Moreover, she points out that in the name of the white feminist movement, the whites were actually trying to control the lives of the aboriginal women. She mentions the three 3D's being- Dispossession, Domination, and Domestication. The first stage of colonization included the most vicious kinds of murders and psychopathic mutilation, such as castration along with using scrotums for making a tobacco pouch. Sometimes there were infant heads used in substitute for polo balls. After the murder and massacre in the early stage of settlement came assimilation into the white society. This meant removal of the aboriginal children from their parents, forced servitude and specific laws based on an ideology of the cultural and racial inferiority of Aboriginal people.

The white feminist agenda, addressed only white feminists' concerns like their equality with white men, access to resources and jobs anti discrimination legislations. Though there were two waves of historical feminism, aboriginal issues were not notable from the beginning to end. So aboriginal women decided to make their own movement grounded in their issues. In theory the policy of assimilation was aimed at re-socializing and educating aborigines to be able to function in the white man's world. However, in practice, it involved cruelty, discipline and punishment for indigenous girls and boys who received minimal training to become indentured indigenous servants for Australia's emerging white middle class. Aileen Moreton-Robinson incorporated race and colonization in her teaching and gender in Australian history. She sees her role as a medium to understand what happened in terms of education and training while bringing it to other people's knowledge so that they can come to terms with Australia's collective past.

For aboriginal students, education was often irrelevant. Aboriginal students frequently found that the education offered by the state promoted individualism and a competitive atmosphere, rather than communal ways of life and cooperation that they were accustomed in their native environment. They were not taught relevant survival and work skills suitable for aboriginal economies, and they often returned to their communities with a formal education that was generally irrelevant or unsuitable for their needs.

Australian governments have, at various times, adhered to policies of separation, assimilation, wardship, and tutelage. Underlying these policies have been clearly stated beliefs about the nature of Aboriginal society and the locus of the “Aboriginal problem”. Indeed, the very term “Aboriginal problem” identifies the source of the difficulty .... To the extent that the Aboriginal group differed from the mainstream white society it was considered to be deficient. (Richard 20)

The Moore River Native Settlement was established by the Government of Western Australia in the year 1918. The Moore River Native Settlement was opened with the support of the Chief Protector of

Aborigines, A. O. Neville. This camp was located 135 kms north of Perth and 11 kms west of Mogumber in Western Australia, on the banks of the Moore River originally intended to be a self-supporting farming settlement for young aboriginal people. Later it became the forced home of many children from the stolen generation who were torn from their families on the misguided promise of education and training. The living conditions at the settlement was inhumane and degrading. The settlement was finally closed in 1974.

On 26<sup>th</sup> May 2018, hundred years later, the Moore River Native Settlement opened. A ceremony was held as a remembrance of the people who lived and died there. The speakers told the despairing history of the settlement, each explaining their links to those buried there as well as those who were born there. Australia's first Aboriginal federal minister Ken Wyatt, and his nephew Ben Wyatt, Australia's first Aboriginal state treasurer, were among the speakers who came to acknowledge their own family history at the settlement. Ken Wyatt's great aunt Molly was one of the little girls immortalized in the novel *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* – told the true story of a family which was torn apart by Australian legislation that allowed the forcible removal of half-caste Aboriginal children from their parents. The fictional account of Kate in *Caprice: The Stockman's daughter* also contextualized in Moore River Settlement.

Doris Pilkington's novel *Caprice, A Stockman's Daughter* (1991) is a fictional account of a half-caste woman's journey to seek out her family and heritage. The gradual emergence of aboriginal women writers in 1980's inspired Doris Pilkington to write down her mother's tale in the book *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996).

The story narrates the lives of three generations of women who belong to Mardu tribal group. Kate functions as a narrator of the story and she narrates the story of her life that begins with the story of Lucy, her grandmother and the story of her tragic mother Peggy. Kate was born in the Moore River Settlement, an institutionalized world created by the white people exclusively for stolen generation. She was given the Christian doctrines and well trained by the whites to become a good worker. Gradually she breaks the prescribed identity given by the white people and finds her roots.

Australia's history and her aboriginal people typically collide with the Australian constitution on two fronts: sovereignty and racial discrimination. The European invasion in 1788 had a definite impact the lives of aboriginal people of Australia. They never tried to understand the lifestyle of aboriginal, instead Whites imposed their lifestyle to them. The aboriginal people were uprooted from their soil and forced them to inhabit in the reserve land. They were forced to follow the laws of whites replacing their own tribal laws. The laws of white was causing injustice on the aboriginal people. When the whites accepted them as human beings, there happened miscegenation which led to the birth of half-castes in Australia who live within Torres Strait Islands.

The settler assumption that the aboriginal population would 'die out' by a policy of assimilation implemented due to an increasing number of people born with Aboriginal and European heritage. Remote communities of Aboriginals were largely left to their own devices, and children of the mixed descent were pushed to assimilate into mainstream Australian society. Reynold and Richard states about the purpose of education for aboriginal people thus:

Education was, at best, perfunctory. Many believed that Aborigines were a dying race and there was little point in educating them. For the next hundred years Aboriginal education was the responsibility of the churches and welfare groups who operated on missions and reserves established. ... They did however, share one major agenda, to eliminate the remaining traces of Aboriginal culture and replace it with an Anglo-European faith and work ethic: what Charles Rowley has described as "civilization by tuition". (Reynolds 19-32)

The removal of these "half-caste" children is named as "Stolen Generations". English men preferred the term 'half-caste' children to the aboriginal children because they believed that the half-caste children were more intelligent and it had been easy to coach them as domestic workers and labourers. In the recent years there was an immense pressure on the Australian government to take process of national Apology. On February 13, 2008 then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented the apology to Stolen Generation

In between 1869 and 1911 all territories, with the exception of Tasmania, had passed laws and created institutions giving the Chief Protector or the Protecting Board the extensive power to control

Indigenous people. The Chief Protectors were even made legal guardians of all Aboriginal children. Under the impression of protecting them, they ended up taking complete control over the lives of Aboriginal people. In several reserves they tried to convert the children to the Christian religion. By placing them in dormitories, they limited the contact to their families and distanced them from Aboriginal lifestyle. In highly regulated reserves and missions, children were taken away at the ripe age of four.

The main idea behind choosing children of young age was to have a faster assimilation process into “white” society. These procedures often happened without any documented records of where and when the child was taken and where it was brought to. This made a reunification almost impossible.

Doris Pilkington’s two novels, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter* provide great insights into the conditions under which the aboriginal girls were educated along with highlighting the role of education in the life of the aboriginal women. These books deal with numerous obstacles faced by the indigenous women in getting proper education. *Caprice, A Stockman’s Daughter* (1991) is a story, set within the towns, pastoral stations and orphanage-styled institutions of Western Australia, that brings together the lives of three generations of Mardu women. Kate is the narrator of the story and her story is intertwined with the story of her grandmother Lucy and her tragic mother Peggy. She was born in the Moore River Settlement, an institutionalised world aborigines created by the Whites. She lost connections with her family as the government failed to provide her with proper details about her family. She traced her ancestry only with the help of her grandparents’ aborigine friends Jack and Phyllis Donaldson.

Peggy was good in her studies as she successfully completed six primary levels and two secondary grades. She was widely acknowledged because of her godparent’s Dr John Callahan and his wife Matron Margaret Callahan, who were highly responsible for her high grades and standard in the half-caste government school. She spoke on how the white settlers were taking an interest to educate the half-caste for their own agendas.

Lucy agreed with Mrs Anne Forbes to send Peggy to Kinsley, when Lucy came to know about Peggy’s relationship with Danny, who was a full-blooded aborigine because she was aware of the consequences. She took a drastic step to prevent her daughter from marrying the full blood aborigine man, whom she considered unsuitable. In the Moore River Settlement Peggy gave birth to Kate and after the twenty fours of her delivery, she lost her life. Kate also mentioned that the authorities of Moore River discouraged the parents of the half-caste children to visit them, saying that their visits would disturb their education. She spoke about her traumatic experience where the small toddlers were restricted, and in due course of time they wiped out all the memories of their parents. They appointed non-aboriginal staff or half-caste children only. A.O Neville, chief protector of aborigines saw this scheme as a positive move and the final solution of the part of the aborigine problem. They visualized to create Australian society with total segregation that ensured complete restrictions of physical contact with an aboriginal adult.

Fortunately for these children, they had at least some interaction and contact with adults even if it was under controlled conditions. These adults were the nursemaids, cooks, laundry dresses and surrogate mothers at the settlement. Breastfeeding motherless babies was a common practice among nursing mothers. Kate was one of the babies among them. On arrival at the settlement, the newcomers were told not to speak “native language” as it was forbidden and in due course it became an unwritten law in Moore River settlement. Those who misunderstood or knowingly disobeyed the instruction were intimidated and victimized by others. With their mothers, grandmothers, and other blood relations behind an invisible wall of silence and obscurity, all traces of their existence vanished. All links to their traditional, cultural, and historical past were erased. White settlers never imagined or perceived the consequences it may bring upon the aboriginal people. By calling the future generation aboriginal kids as the children of the settlements they attempted to erase their native identity.

When Kate was seven years old and she was shifted from the kindergarten to the school girls dormitory. It was an overcrowded, dilapidated, vermin-infested building. The beds were covered with mattresses filled with coconut hair or husks while there were no bedsheets. During the winter, spare mattresses were thrown over the blankets for extra warmth. The senior girls said that the dormitory was built on a cemetery and a ghost wandered around the dormitory who would take revenge if the rules of

schools were violated. Near the toilet, a small fire with coconut husks or fiber were lit, while the night brought in a scary atmosphere. The girls were locked in every evening at six o'clock and confined until the morning. They were offered food only for survival and not for their health needs.

Most of the girls enjoyed attending classes in the two-room schools. But Kate had a difficult time with the teachers. Despite all the hardships she took the education not as a privilege but as a right to replace the birthright that was taken away from them. All children looked forward to school because it was a place where people could forget their degrading living conditions and their horrible meals and concentrate on knowledge gaining process. The children in the dormitory were given bedtime stories filled only with European heroes such as William Tell, Robin Hood, the Scarlet Pimpernel and others. There were tales of "Black Beauty", "Robinson Crusoe", and "Treasure Island". Myth and legends of foreign countries replaced the mythical beings of their traditional culture. These mythical characters occupied their psyche and they attained the 'level of civilization' set by white society.

Kate recalled her fear when the government decided to promote Kate and the other children to a new phase in their lives. It was the when the government introduced the new assimilation policy. The policy expected aborigines to attain the same standards of living as their white counterparts and they would transform the aborigine into mainstream Australian citizens. Kate gave brief glimpses about Roeland's Native Mission Farm which was different from the Moore River settlement conditions. The buildings were always clean and sparkling, almost sterile in fact with highly polished floors, snow-white sheets, tablecloth and curtains in the dining room with the fruits of the spirit sewn in green cotton on the frills. Compared to the settlement conditions the food was wholesome and good. There was faith, hope, love, peace, joy and righteousness.

Religion was used as a tool for restricting aborigine children in the name of discipline. They were forced to forget their native religion, rituals and persuaded to read Christian scriptures. The religious heroes were different from the legendary heroes. The biblical heroes were real and seemed to be either punished severely for wrongdoings or highly praised or rewarded for their achievements. Her Christian education progressed in Roeland's Native Mission. With no formal education, there were no formal examinations. Whilst half-caste children made satisfactory progress and advancement in the Christian faith, they gained no further knowledge of the world. In the mission they were trained by unqualified teachers and these children in due course were taken over by the Department of Education.

When Kate was seventeen, she was sent to Dorrington in the central wheat belt to work as a domestic help to Bill and Betty Hammond. At that time, she was not able to understand why she was separated from her mission and friends. Every half-caste girl who planned a career in nursing were ignorant and naïve as well. They were not given sex education. The reproductive system was not included in the health, hygiene and physiology course that they studied. Her friend Beth Keeley a first-year student nurse at the Royal Perth Hospital was alarmed when a male patient indicated that he was sexually aroused. Later they were given lectures on reproduction only in the form of a film which are not based on scientific methods.

Kate realizes that the aboriginal culture, which was the lasting genius and dignity of her race, should not be allowed to disappear. She balanced her mind and heart and strengthened to begin a new life. She realized that the past wounds cannot be healed by violence, nor the current injustices removed by resentment. Her Christian faith and settlement education made her become the best of aboriginal women with a strong identity and personal awareness. It was not possible for her without the basic education what she got in the settlement to engaged in decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of her life and to pursue higher education.

In *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* Pilkington gives glimpses about Jigalong, a dwelling place of Mardu tribes from the period of 1907 to 1931. In her life narration she describes the life of the aboriginal girl Maude and her relationship with white man and her daughter Molly who was the first half child in the Mardu tribe. Pilkington reveals how the white settlers were meddling with the half caste children believing that half caste children are more intelligent than the full blood aboriginal relatives. The half caste children were shown glimpses of education to get trained, but not educated. They were stripped of their heritage

and their foundation. Elizabeth V. Spelman (2002) cites James Baldwin's (1963) comment on the racist effects of white centered education on aboriginal children who :

...lack deep knowledge of the harms caused by the history of slavery and other manifestation of racism; they lack awareness of and interest in what it is about them and their institutions that has wrecked such havoc in the lives of Blacks and other non-whites; and they have not developed the imaginative skills that would allow them to envision a world in which such horrible powers would have to be tamed (Baldwin 94-95)

Doris Pilkington describes the truth of Moore River Settlement where Matron Campbell receives Molly and her sisters from the car and took them to a building which resembled more like a prison. They were afraid of the place and they lost the bond with their family. They never separated themselves from one another and ensures togetherness throughout their stay in Moore River Settlement.

In the morning they encountered Martha Jones, who was staying in the settlement from a year. She was kind, welcoming, and eager to help the girls. Though Martha tries to offer students friendly environment to make them think that Moore River settlement as the right place to get education, the inmates Molly, Gracie, and Daisy long for home and the comfort of the family. The three girls were astonished by the groomed beauty of the settlement but they longed only for the rugged landscape of their place.

Every bit of information that they received from the inmates haunted them and the "boob" literally terrified them as it was the place of punishment for the runaway children. They gave severe punishment to the runaway children by looking them inside a week and shaving their head and paraded them without providing adequate food. Pilkington draws a parallel between Moore River Settlement and Concentration camps.

In Moore River Settlement the inmates were not allowed to speak in their mother tongue as an unwritten law. The poignant image of the girls who instructed other girls not to speak in mother tongue is well represented in the work. Pilkington critiques the expanded scope of language which meant for more than communication. The Whites believed strongly that by eradication of a community is not possible without erasing the language of that particular community. Pilkington presents Molly as a fearless spirit who was refusing to give up her language, culture, identity. Pilkington's writes about degrading and inhumane condition of Moore River Settlement.

The escape of Molly and her sisters from the settlement become an issue of prestige for the government authorities. They deployed bush trackers and the police force to catch these escapees and return them to the settlement. To quote Chief Protector A.O. Neville; "I would like the child to be recovered The School at Strelley : The Case for Autonomy in Australian Aboriginal Education , Richard J. Reynolds. Source : Journal of Thought, if no great expense is to be incurred; otherwise, the prestige of the Department is likely to suffer".(Marie 78) Clearly, the balance in which Molly's safety and well-being is monetized within an economy of colonial relations that values prestige over "protection". (Marie 68-86)

Drawing out and comparing the two instances of Kate and Molly who were somehow connected to the Moore River Settlement, Molly chose the way out, never to return. She sought freedom from the very place, but Kate chose freedom through staying there and getting educated. Though she learnt the white way of life, she believed that this education broke her shackles and proved everyone around her of her capabilities as nobody believed in her. The hidden purpose of establishing settlements as places of education and training of the half-caste children was to "civilize" them, so that the white people can communicate with them, while they work at the homesteads and farm stations of the white people as the real intent was not to educate them. The authorities did not pay any attention to the quality of education received by the half-caste children at the settlements. Hence, the quality of education at the settlements was really poor by any standards. For the half-caste children, the education provided was so intimidating and overwhelming that all of them dreamed of escaping the settlement but only a handful succeeded.

Kate was one such victim of this diabolical education policy. Even though the 'education' she received at the settlement provided her with a sense of purpose and pride, it was always an education meant to keep her subservient to the white people. Relatively Kate obtained a better 'position' in life, but comparatively her achievements were lesser than the white people. On the whole, it can be summarized that the education provided to the half-caste children at the settlement was a kind of indoctrination of the

‘western’ culture and values, which instead of fulfilling the stated purpose of assimilation, it alienated the aboriginal people. Hence, the education policy of the whites in Australia only accelerated the process of subjugation and dispossession.

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