



## RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN NATIVE LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECT TEXTS OF DORIS PILKINGTON AND LOUISE ERDRICH

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### Abstract

The paper intends to explore the resistance and resilience of the native people of Australia and America in the face of colonization, displacement and forced assimilation. The Native people of Australia and America met oppression and destruction at the hands of the white people from the first interaction. They showed resistance and resilience in efforts to retain their cultures, traditions, rituals, and languages. The argument put forward in the paper is that the three sisters in Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, and Fleur Pillager in *Tracks*, show courage, resistance and resilience in their rejection of the culture of the colonizers. The post-colonial theory will be applied to the texts in order to understand the nature of their resistance and resilience and their efforts to rewrite their history from a Native perspective. The paper focuses on how the select writers, Pilkington and Erdrich, represent the complexities of their respective tribal communities and their resilience in preserving their customs and traditions.

Keywords: Rabbit-Proof Fence, Nativity, culture, colonization, resilience, resistance, aboriginality.

### Introduction

Native people across the world faced colonization and consequent mass displacement from their lands during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Native people of America, Africa and Australia faced danger of extinction at the hands of the European colonial powers. Patterns of colonization and domination were not the same across the world

due to different geographical, social and political conditions in these continents but the fates were same- displacement and destruction. The treatment meted out to American and Australian native people was an effort to negate their existence on the part of the colonizers. The policies of removal of these people to far off reserved areas reserved them to reservations away from civilized society, ensuing fierce battles for existence between the two. Their

resistance and resilience are reflected in their present writings which are replete with the memories of their painful past. Most Aboriginal writings in the form of memoirs, autobiographies, novels and poems, have become tools in their resistance and resilience to the colonial powers.

#### **Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence- Resistance and Resilience of the Aboriginals:**

*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a true story of extraordinary courage and struggle for survival of three girls- Molly (14), Daisy (11) and Gracie (8) by defying the government and going back to their home and culture. The Mardujara people, to which the three sisters belong, the original inhabitants of the continent, are scattered, devastated, marginalized on the distant Jigalong station in 1900. They are dependent on government supplies of food due to the lack of their natural resources, "There was also a government store at Jigalong, which gave out free food, clothing, and blankets to the local people....It became a new home, a 'sitting down place' for their people." (Pilkington 3) They are not allowed to follow their rituals, traditions, and other cultural practices. However, Many elderly people show resistance and resilience against the government in practicing their old ways of hunting, traditions of day dreaming and dancing in the bushes.

Pilkington's story begins before 1930, depicting the simple nature of the Aboriginals who assumed that the British have come with good intentions of coexistence on shared resources. This optimism, however, soon turns into despair as the colonizers destroy ecological balance of the region with their foreign animals and usurp their lands. One tribal leader observes, "There are huts and farms all over the place. Soon they will drive us out of our land." (Pilkington 14) Open land is also not spared as Pilkington points out, "The world's longest track, the 1850- km Canning Stock Route, was built in Western Australia for cattle droving.... Among the chain of wells along the Canning

Stock Route, many were built on existing Aboriginal waters or rock holes." (21) The rabbits brought for the purpose of hunting, soon, destroyed the eco system, necessitating the construction of rabbit- proof fence in 1907 to prevent invasion of rabbits in further parts. The author describes the scenes of conflict between the whites and Mardujara tribe, "the droving team rested and watered their herd at the same rock hole the group intended to visit... It had become a government well that provided water for the drovers and their stocks." (21) The aboriginals were decimated and marginalized in their own land now and their resistance failed. It became clear that "Aboriginal social structure was not only crumbling, it was completely being destroyed." (15)

#### **Cultural Resistance and Resilience of the Three Sisters:**

Yu-wen-Fu observes in her essay how, "contemporary Australian Aboriginal storytelling, exemplified by Doris Pilkington Garimara's book *Rabbit Proof Fence* and its film adaptation by director Phillip Noyce, transcribes the various experiences of displacement and resistance of Aboriginal peoples and provides a basis for a collective listening/rereading of the nation's complex colonial history." (167) The story of resistance and resilience of the three sisters begins with the birth of Molly at Jigalong with an Aboriginal mother and a white father as she has to face discrimination as "half-caste" in the world of whites and the Aboriginals. during the process of colonization, many half caste children were born, Molly's birth being reported as the birth of first half-caste child in Australia. Other children used to shun and shout at her, "You are not Mardu, you not wudgebulla! 'You nothing! You just a mongrel dog!" (4) Thus, for the three sisters, their training in resistance and resilience began from the time of their birth with no playmates as they are thought of inferior to the Aboriginal children. The government also took notice of their light skins and wondered, "Where did these children belong? To their

black Aboriginal families? Or to the white man's world?" (4) They deduced that the half- caste children were superior to the pure bloods, therefore, they must be separated from the Aboriginals and sent to school "to learn how to become domestic servants and farm workers." (4) The government passed The Aborigines Protection Act of 1897, empowering government to provide "for the care, custody and education of the children of the Aboriginals and prescribed the conditions on which any Aboriginal or half-caste children may be apprenticed to or placed in with suitable person." (198)

Molly, Daisy and Gracie suffer separation from their families as a result of this policy, leading to the double marginalization of these children. The whites reject them while they themselves reject the Aboriginals as their inferior. The three sisters show their resistance and resilience towards any efforts to teach them new ideas and ways of life. They see buildings everywhere on their journey from home to the settlement and it was, "too mad for the girls. They knew they could easily get lost in this man made environment with so few trees and only small patches of bush." (Pilkington 58) They arrive at the camp, "they suffer the second dimension of the removal project: namely, a process of imposed cultural assimilation." (Yewen Fu 177) They are forced to forget their culture, language, religion, habits, and traditions. Molly rejects the abysmal condition of the school in Moore River Settlement and resolves on the first day to return to her home, showing her resilience against the cultural colonization. The school with stale food, thin blankets, and squalor resembles a jail to Molly, "When entering the dormitories for the first time, they notice- the door is locked with chains and padlocks...bars on windows just like a goal." (Pilkington 63) These schools are meant to destruct the Aboriginal culture and suppress any feelings of resistance in the Aboriginal children. They are brought there to be "educated to be servants and then marry them to the white

colonizers in an effort to breed the blackness out of them and eradicate their culture." (Campbell 189-90) The children are given severe punishments even for small mistakes and efforts to abscond, as Martha tells the sisters, "Lots of people tried to run away, but that black tracker has always caught them and brought them back. They then get beaten and locked up in the "boob". Sometimes they're in there for fourteen days." (74) Eventually, the children would be too dispirited to raise their voice or revolt and do the bidding of the colonizers without resistance. Molly, however, is formidable in her resilience and could not be restricted by such incidents and decides to leave immediately for their home almost 1600 km away.

In the process of domination, marginalization, breeding out, cultural assimilation and destruction of the Aboriginals habits, the colonizers introduced the English language. The terrified girls are warned not to "talk blackfulla language here...you gotta forget it and talk English all the time." (72) Molly retorts, "We can't talk in our own language? That's awful." (72) The emphasis on the English language was to eliminate their mother tongue to make sure that these children lose communication with their community to eliminate their culture. English language was in fact an important factor in the process of adaptation and cultural destruction of the Aboriginals. Molly, however, is not ready to accept the civilization which prohibited her from speaking her mother tongue. Molly contemplates, "We can't live in this place. We're gunna get away from here, we're gunna go home, home to Jigalong." (72) Molly and her sisters represent cultural resistance and resilience when they continue to talk in their mother tongue in the face of imminent danger of punishment. Post colonial theory looks at another aspect of cultural resistance through the colonized people's emphasis on the importance of their languages, traditions, and rituals. The attitude of Molly and her sisters towards the

English language is a reflection of the resistance against imposition of a foreign language.

The poignant power of the text lies in the depiction of the three sisters' escape. Molly decides to take her sisters back home with her willpower, courage and resilience. Therefore, the next day, they leave the settlement and start the 1600 km journey back home on foot which tests not only their surviving skills but also their formidable attitude to elude their captors trailing them. In their escape, Molly has nothing but the knowledge of the land, and of nature. Yu-wen Fu asserts, "The escape signals a journey of reconnection- the Aboriginal peoples' will and ability to reconnect to their native communities and cultures despite all that has been forced upon them." (179) Her sisters are terrified but Molly, with tremendous courage and resilience pacifies them, "I know it's a long way, but it's easy. We'll find the rabbit-proof fence and follow it home.... It goes all the way from the south to the north. We just gotta find it." (73) She has learnt the surviving skills from nature and uses them on her incredible journey back home. The journey is full of dangerous rivers, vast desert and thick bushes. Despite the hardships of the journey, the prospect of possible freedom motivates them and they oppose the might of the colonizers with their resilience. The unknown journey cannot weaken Molly's resistance to the authority, maintaining her sanity and to not let go so near home. In fact, she shows her true Aboriginal skills and instincts to save themselves from the authority and severe weather conditions. Her inferior Aboriginal ways against the superior modern ways of the colonizers' present resistance and resilience unheard of.

Molly's natural instincts save her and her sisters from starvation and being caught in their nine weeks' journey back home. Her knowledge of the land assures her that nature "always provided shelter, food and substance....she had learned and developed bushcraft skills and survival techniques from an expert, her step father, a former nomad from the

desert." (Pilkington 82) They sleep in the bushes and get their food from nature by killing lizards and rabbits in their traditional ways. Molly is clever enough to know which way to have the opening of the hole to save themselves from rain during their sleep at night. She ascertains the right direction by the direction of the sun. For water, they rely on the hoof marks of cattle. They get their food by killing rabbits and lizards with traditional hunting skills. Molly's resilience is also reflected in her refusal to tell anyone their route for fear of capture. When Gracie wants to leave them to meet her mother at a station, Molly warns Gracie against leaving them, "Somebody's gunna see you there, report you to the police. Then they are gunna send you back to Moore River... you want to go back to that place?" (90) Gracie, however, leaves them and soon caught and sent back to the school. Molly's resistance and resilience takes her successfully to her home and they move to the hinterland in the bushes in order to keep her safe from pursuers. She escapes recapture for almost a decade until she is recaptured along with her daughters Doris and Anabelle in 1940. After few months on the settlement, she once again runs away with her daughter Anabelle. The postcolonial theory of cultural resistance is applied to the text to bring out the strength, resistance and resilience of the Aboriginal people against the sweeping tide of colonialism. The main argument of the paper is that the Aboriginals might be displaced from their lands, they were able to survive in harsh conditions through their resistance and resilience. The rabbit proof fence, symbolic of displacement of Aboriginal people, also becomes a symbol of their resistance and resilience.

#### *Tracks:*

The story of *Tracks*, centers on the history of the Ojibwe tribe, their experiences of colonization and displacement to reservations in the early twentieth century and their struggle for survival and resilience. The reservations became representatives of cultural boundaries

by the colonizers. From their first interaction with the colonizers, the Natives had to face cultural domination, which ultimately led to forced assimilation of the native Americans. The assimilation policy began an era of displacement of the Native people even from the reservations and their cultural genocide. Lauren Cotham writes,

The loss of culture took place at varying degrees on the macro and micro level. At the macro level is the destruction of the tribal social structure; at the micro level is a declassification of identity within the individual. *Tracks* problematizes the inner workings of the Ojibwe as a duality of identity forced upon them through European American enculturation." (culture clash)

The novel is based on the history of the Ojibwe people, focusing primarily on their resistance and resilience against the colonial power.

For years, Native Americans were presented in literature from white people's perspective. From the 1960s onwards, the period of Native American Renaissance, there has been a surge in Native American literature from their perspective. Amedee NAOUNOU observes, "For some scholars like Vizenor, the understanding of cultural survival is not simply a matter of dismissing the dominant culture or returning to a tribal past; it also reflects an active and continuous process of resilience to surmount decades of dominance, persecution, and eradication." (26) The story opens with Ojibwe people suffering from disease and starvation as Nanapush tells Lulu, his granddaughter,

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the South, our long fight west to Nadouissieux land where we signed the treaty, and then a

wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible. (Erdrich 1)

The opening lines describe the physical and spiritual loss of the Natives. Nanapush, the narrator of the first part of the story sees dismal future for the Anishinaabe. They have faced diseases, loss of land, forced assimilation, issues of identity, unemployment, violence, and starvation after their removal to reservations.

#### Resistance and Resilience in *Tracks*:

The colonization has destroyed the culture and traditions of the Chippewa people as many characters in the novel have abandoned their old ways and adopted the ways of the whites. Pauline, another character and narrator in the story, longs to be loved and respected, therefore, she turns to white religion. She is half blood and considers herself whiter than the Natives:

I wanted to be my mother, who showed her half white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language. In English....he scorned me when I would not bead, when I refused to prick my fingers with quills, or hid rather than rub brains on the stiff skins of animals. (14)

Young people have already either denounced traditional ways or are contemplating denouncing their culture as they starve and die of diseases. Further, they are forced to leave the reservation to the lands allotted to them in far off areas. Margarate laments as her "older children were all gone, moved to their allotment land in Montana." (57) Later, her youngest boy, Nector also shows inclination towards the city life, "She couldn't rely on Nector, whose love of

town ways seemed to head him so clearly for the off reservation schools." (57)

People are forced to leave their traditional ways because of starvation as they are forbidden from hunting, fishing, and follow their traditions. The Natives seem to have forgot their tribal ties in these conditions as greed and corruption has infiltrated into their lives. Nector and his mother cheat Fleur, and Nanapush by paying fee for their land only while all of them had worked hard to collect money. As a consequence, Fleur loses her land but she refuses to leave the place. Most of the characters in the novel have already lost hopes of survival and nobody has strength left for resistance and resilience against the might of the white men. Nanapush points out, "We lose our children in different ways. they turn their faces to the white towns, like Nector as he grew...Worst of all is the true loss, unbearable, and yet it must be borne." (170)

There are, however, characters of Fleur, Nanapush and Eli to some extent earlier, who still follow their traditions and show resilience against the colonizers. Nanapush and Fleur are the carriers of their culture to the next generation. He is an elderly man and a lone survivor from the disease, which wiped away his clan and tribe but he still shows resistance and resilience. Through the character of Nanapush, the art of storytelling, dreams, and songs is preserved. Nanapush tries to transmit the history of the tribe, its culture, and traditions to Lulu in order to make her understand the importance of their culture and warn her of the world outside the reservation. He has worked as a guide to the explorers and a government interpreter, and understands their policies, "I had my reputation as a government interpreter, that is, until the Beauchamp Treaty signing, in which I said to Rift- In- A- Cloud, "Don't put your thumb in the ink." (100) He knows the value of the land as he believes, "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. (33) He has witnessed people selling their lands, "In past, some had sold their allotment land for one

hundred poundweight of flour. Others, who were desperate to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like pattern of straws." (8)

The whites have not spared even the reservations as they are shrewd enough to know the commercial value of Fleur's land and lake. Nanapush has "spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake." (2) Land is their identity and the losing it will mean loss of identity. Winnie and Rebecca observe,

He refuses neither to change nor abandon his identity showing his deep rootedness towards his culture and his land. As a representative of the Chippewa tribe, Nanapush intends to protect his tribe and its people. This is evident when he gives Moses Pillager a fake white man's name to protect his identity. He also refuses to allow a white doctor to amputate Lulu Nanapush's feet that froze when she was out seeking help during Fleur's second labour." (25)

Nanapush is the lone survivor of his clan and the oldest man of his tribe. His attempts of survival and resilience are different from that of Fleur. He becomes the chairman of the tribe so that he can get back Lulu from boarding school, he tells her that he became tribal chairman as to "become bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home." (225)

All the characters in the novel slowly abandon their traditions and culture with the exception of Nanapush and Fleur. Thus, the resistance and resilience of the tribal people is reflected in the characters of Nanapush and Fleur. The act of resistance begins from

reclaiming what is lost. Fleur and Nanapush, both have lost their families in the disease, still they fight back and survive. He fights against all odds and continues to live and holds on to his Native identity. Nanapush, being old, ultimately, feels tired but Fleur has an indomitable will which is not to be subdued. She is starving but not ready to accept government food, fishing and hunting through the day for food. But ultimately as Nanapush says, "It was the government commodities sent from Hoopdance in six wagons" (171) that saved them. But the ration has its price as well, as the tribal people are supposed to pay money for their own lands.

Fleur is the most important and formidable character and a representative of the Chippewa community. Winnie and Rebecca point out, "Through Fleur, Erdrich brings out the tribe's ancient legends and beliefs into the contemporary world, allowing Native history and myths to retain its significance." (25) The Pillagers were powerful medicine people "who knew the secret ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them." (Erdrich 2) Her resistance and resilience are awakened by the lumberjacks moving into her land to cut down trees. Fleur's strength and resilience is remarkable as she is not ready to leave her land, standing alone to fight the white men and their greed. She becomes an epitome of her Indian identity, culture and tradition. Though, the whites have lost many lives in their fight against Fleur and nature, they do not flinch and ultimately, she has to withdraw. She shows her resistance and resilience by cutting down her trees and disappearing with them into the deep forest in a wagon. For this purpose, she has to leave her daughter at the mercy of the government in a boarding school. Nanapush calls her "the funnel of our history." (178) She tries to save not only her land but also her culture and traditions from extinction. Nanapush tries to console her by telling her that she is not to be blamed for the loss of culture, land or values but she is adamant in her resilience. Fleur represents the strongest

connection the Ojibwe have with their past, culture and traditions.

Lulu is another character who shows resilience under negative circumstances in her young age. In the school, her dress is always shameful orange for efforts to run away from school. Her hair is cut and "knees are scabbed due to punishment of scrubbing long sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling hours on broomsticks." (226) Still, she has a broad grin like her mother, which is a reflection of her resilience. She has adopted a fierce nature like her mother. Fleur presents the will to survive in the terrible assaults inflicted on her person, family, and her culture as a result of colonization. Fleur lives apart from the rest of the tribe on an island and shows her resistance and resilience to save her values, family, tradition, and culture. "Fleur Pillager is one of the most haunting presences in contemporary American literature.... *Tracks* may be the story of our time (Review of *Tracks*, Los Angeles Times)

### Conclusion

A thorough study and analysis of the two novels, throws light on the efforts of the governments in Australia and America to destroy the Native people and their culture replacing it with the culture of the whites. The three girls in *Follow the Rabbit Proof fence* and Fleur in *Tracks*, are persistent in returning to their home and culture, reflecting their resistance and resilience to sustain their culture and tradition. Their journeys are a form of resistance against colonialism, cultural subjugation, while going back to their culture and traditions, represents resistance against the colonial dominant power and culture. Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*,

This overlapping is not a small or negligible point, just as culture may predispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of

overseas domination. These changes cannot occur without the willingness of men and women to resist the pressures of colonial rule, to take up arms, to project ideas of liberation, and to imagine a new community. (Said 241)

Molly and Fleur's resilience set an example for their people to follow them, leading them to reject the culture of the colonizers and go back to their own culture, tradition and people. The colonizers with the whole might of the government and resources at their back fail to catch three little girls who had nothing but their Aboriginal skills, sheer will and resistance and resilience to help them. Their victory reflects victory of the cultural superiority of the Aboriginal people which helps them in their fight for survival. The resistance and resilience of the Native Americans can also be seen in their flourishing despite the socio cultural challenges in the present. The Native cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs have resisted the colonizers through their story telling and writings. The characters strive to revive their culture and beliefs through their cultural resistance and resilience and continuous practices of their traditions and rituals make these cultures resilient. The act of writing itself presents a resistance against the colonial power and brings out the resilience of these people. People telling their stories in defiance of the authority is another way of resistance and resilience against suppression.

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