

ASSIMILATION USED AS A TOOL FOR COLONIZATION WITH REFERENCE TODORIS PILKINGTON'S *RABBIT-PROOF FENCE*

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Abstract:

Rabbit-Proof Fence by Doris Pilkington is an autobiographical narrative of three Aboriginal girls who battle against the perpetrators and break free from the clutches of the colonizers. This narrative does not stop there. It also sketches the trajectory of assimilation used as a tool to exploit the entire aboriginal race. The colonizers take over or colonize a land for benefits such as human resources, expansion of territories, industrial growth and economic growth.

Key Words: *Assimilation, colonization, aboriginal community, whiteness.*

By the 1900s, Western Australia was showing signs of progress and prosperity, especially in the mining and agricultural industries. The framing of sheep, cattle and wheat flourished, so the boundaries of white settlement were extended to meet the demands of the growing overseas markets (Pilkington 18).

In order to pave way for colonization, the colonizers used assimilation as tool to force people to adapt to the 'white' tradition and culture such that the native's tradition or lifestyle does not stand as a barrier in their progress. The Aboriginal community is a threat to the colonizers and their attempt to colonize Australia. Therefore, they propagate 'whiteness' in their ideologies, education, beliefs and law.

The idea of assimilation had been around since the 1930s but was not adopted as an official government policy towards the Aboriginal peoples until the 1950s. It became official government policy in Australia not just for Aboriginal peoples, but for all foreign migrants as well. In the late 1940s, Australia was still a very 'British' country, 97 per cent of the population was Australian, or British- born. The National Anthem 'God Save The Queen' was still sung after films in the cinema (Aguirre 595).

The core motif of assimilation was to make the natives believe that they are an inferior race and white is always superior. It was used to convince them that they need to be civilized (colonized) with the help of the white rule over them and by adapting to their practices. Therefore, assimilation was used to exploit the natives and aimed for complete submission to the whites. Assimilation is traced as a step-by-step process starting from violent and forceful imposition of rule to mental manipulation.

Gun power

The key reason for the British to have controlled and colonized the world was the gun power. No one could stand up against the British because they had the strongest weapon in control therefore the perpetuated or the colonized always surrendered to the trigger. Gun power forced them to assimilate and adapt to the 'whiteness'. Gun power threatened them from disobeying the colonizers and forced them to surrender in order to survive. The helpless condition of the Aboriginal people under the threat of gun power is described in the narrative-

The elders realized that their weapons of wood and stone were no match for the white man's guns. Their spears and boomerangs were effective only in a surprise attack at close range; otherwise their weapons were useless in direct conflict with a group of white avengers (Pilkington 20).

And soon after establishing a paranoid climate among the natives, the British began to assimilate them, first by force by taking over their land and rights. The colonizers took over the entire country by first denying them the right on their mother land.

Imposing law and Restriction

After the arrival of the British in 1850s, Australia was under fast colonization. The British restricted the natives within the reserved areas but later they were forced into the cities for manual labour. The British arrived at Australia in 1780s and in 1850s they drove the aboriginals into the reserved area. Most of the New South Wales was taken over by the whites. The whites not only marked boundaries for them, but imposed their law and discipline on the natives. There was law against hunting and other traditional practice. They were not allowed to possess flock or cattle or any other animal. In the narrative, there is a mention about the Nyungar tribe facing this conflict-

The Nyungar people were hurt and confused when they were punished for carrying out their own traditional laws, handed down to them by the Dreamtime spirit beings... The Nyungar people who once walked tall and proud, now hung their head in sorrow. They had become dispossessed; these teachers and keepers of the traditional Law were prevented from practicing it (Pilkington 15,16). •

Policy of assimilation also includes lack of citizenship. Before 1940s, the Aboriginal people could not be counted as citizens of Australia. However, after World War II, they were counted as citizens at the cost of disowning their native identity, that is, their heritage and cultural practices. To claim an 'exemption' certificate one has to give up on all the ties with indigenous community including their family, which in turn, gives them the right to vote, to buy liquor and to make independent decisions. The government saw citizenship as a lure to make Aboriginal people assimilate. They promoted the certificates as a good thing and encouraged those who were 'civilized' enough to apply for them.

Keeping up with the “Englishness”

In order to propagate a new ideology and inculcate a new way of thinking, purgation from the former belief system was mandatory. The colonizers tried to convince the natives that they have to leave their traditions, customs, values and belief system behind. The colonizer kept up with their Englishness such that assimilation becomes a gradual and natural process: “They were advised to “keep up their Englishness” at all cost. This meant having picnics, fox hunts and ball” (Pilkington 13). They were not even allowed to have Aboriginal names. (The three aboriginal girls in *The Rabbit Proof Fence* were Molly, Gracie and Daisy who had English names). The British believed that by encouraging them to be more 'white' they are improving their treatment and condition. Assimilation for Aboriginal people was seen as a positive policy and a way of 'civilizing' them: “The Aboriginal Protection Board said they had to develop from 'their former primitive state to the standards of the white man’” (Said) Aquirre 616). Imposing education was also considered as favor, which the colonizer extended towards the aboriginal people in order to civilize them.

Due to Assimilation many children were taken away from their families and placed in foster care. Those Aboriginal people who have been forcefully assimilated in the name of education are known as the 'Stolen Generations'. In this narrative the main focus was on the half cast Aboriginal children.

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 brush rather than in a hospital where they believed their babies would be taken from them soon after birth (Pilkington 40).

Moreover, the colonizers also imposed the British lifestyle on the Aboriginal people. They were forced to give up on their lifestyle, which was habitual to wilderness. They were made to cover their nakedness. They were preached the importance of clothing in order to lead a civilized life. The Aboriginal people were baffled with the idea of embarrassment or offense linked to nakedness. But, they adapted to it in order to please their boss and missus. This is also evident in the narrative- “These people who were used to walking

around the desert without clothing could not understand why or what covering one's nakedness had to do with seeking and the acceptance of food and sanctuary” (Pilkington 31). •Slowly and gradually, the Aboriginal accepted all the imposed rules and regulations.

They gave into to assimilation because they were bribed with the goodness of 'Englishness'. After assimilating them physically, the colonizers invaded their minds and assimilated them mentally. The Aboriginal people were convinced that the whites are the superiors and the indigenous race is inferior and uncivilized. They were trained and used laborers for anything that involved manpower. They voluntarily submitted themselves to be governed by the whites because they believed that being civilized under there is for their welfare since they received food and other goods in favor. •“The station owners and managers trained them to be stockmen and domestic •help on their stations and they were soon regarded as excellent horsemen and cattlemen. The women proved to be loyal servants, housemaids and cooks, and during mustering time they displayed other skills such as horse riding and took •their turn watching the cattle at night. They did not see this work as exploitation •but as a form of kindness.” (Pilkington 15) •The impact of soft power was that the Aboriginal people started to believe that they were under the solace of white rule that was primary functioning to civilize them and if they deliver their duty as laborers they will receive benefits in return.

As a further insult by the white invaders, an act of goodwill in the form of an annual distribution of blankets to the Aboriginal people was established. This generally occurred on Queen Victoria's birthday,” this event is described as “a sorry return for millions of acres of fertile land of which we have deprived them. But they are grateful for small things and the scanty supply of food and raiment doled out to his miserable remnant of a once numerous people, is received by them with the most lively gratitude (Pilkington 17).

The 'small things and the scanty supply of food' can never consolidate for the loss of their tradition and culture and depriving them the rights in their own lands. However, the colonized are convinced with the illusion of satisfaction, which is brought to them by the colonizers.

Conclusion

Assimilation is seen to fail because of racial discrimination and racial segregation. The colonizers never get over the superiority complex and they consider the Aboriginal race as the inferior and the downtrodden. Assimilation fails because the motive behind assimilating a race is not to civilize or uplift a community or to propagate one's culture to the other. The motive of assimilation is manipulation, such that the 'nativeness' does not barricade colonization. In this narrative, it just proves as just another way of destroying the Aboriginal culture.

The process of assimilation hence, proves to be contradictory because the Aboriginal people are said to be more 'white' but they are never given the freedom to change. Assimilation never gave Aboriginal people the same rights as other Australians, even though they were supposed to act like them.

Assimilation proves to be a part of exploitation in postcolonial context. It is used to convince the colonized that the 'change' is for the well-being of the community. The narrative is about the three girls who escape from the foster homes to get back to their family. It is not just them but the entire Aboriginal community that is witnessed to be under the shadow of assimilation.

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