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PLIGHT OF THE 'HALF-CASTES': A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF DORIS PILKINGTON'S *RABBIT PROOF FENCE*

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Abstract:

*This article sets out to demonstrate Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* as a counter narrative in a post-colonial context. After defining the term "half-caste", it provides an overview and an understanding of the different aspects of the conditions of the half-castes and hence steers the argument towards understanding the "Half-caste problem". By placing them in the same grounds of dis-functionality, the study aims at establishing a metaphoric relationship between the rabbit proof fence and Australian White government's failure in solving the "Half-caste problem". The article further uses the definition of a 'narrative', in a post-colonial context, to define a counter narrative and establish Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit proof Fence* as a counter narrative in the post-colonial world.*

Key words: *Rabbit Proof Fence, Half-castes, Aborigines, Australian white community, Post-colonial, Counter narrative*

In Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the fence's dis-functionality becomes a symbol, metaphorically representing the Australian White government's failure in solving the 'Half-caste problem' and becomes a counter narrative in a post-colonial context. This article firstly defines the term 'half-castes' explaining their plight in a post-colonial context. It further elucidates on the 'half-caste problem' created by the Australian Proper (White community) and hence points the discussion at 'the fence as a metaphor for the failure of the Australian government's 'Breed out the Aborigines plan'. Finally by defining 'the' narrative in a post-colonial context, the article explains, how Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* becomes a counter narrative. It is important to first understand the 'half-caste problem' before discussing about the fence as a metaphor and Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* as a counter narrative.

Half-Caste (Part-Aboriginal) is the term widely used to by the White colonists to refer to Molly, Daisy, Gracie and other children at the Moore River Native settlement. In the book *Australia's Coloured Minority*, written by the ex-Chief Protector of Aborigines Mr. A O Neville, anthropologist A.P Elkin, in his introduction to the book, defines and explains the usage of the term 'Half-Castes',

Australia's population includes nearly 30,000 people of mixed White and Aboriginal descent, usually referred to as "half-castes". Better terms would be mixed-bloods, part-Aborigines (part-Whites!) or Coloured Folk. Strictly speaking, half-caste means having equal proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry (11).

Having explained the term, A P Elkin divides the Australian population, firstly, into Australian proper which includes the white people, secondly, into full-blood which includes the pure Aborigines and lastly, into half-castes who, as Elkin explains "These last are in our midst, and partly of our blood, but they are not yet 'of us.'" (Neville 11) While Mr. Elkin further explains the half-castes not being a part of the Australian White community yet, in the book *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the author Doris Pilkington states "Molly often wished that she didn't have to have to play by herself... The Mardu children insulted her telling her she was neither Mardu or wudgebulla but she was like a mongrel dog" (38) which highlights the plight of Molly and the other half-castes who were neither dark enough to be a part of the pure Aborigines nor fair enough to be accepted by the Australian proper community. With the half-castes falling into an interstitial passage

between the Whites and Aborigines, Mr. A O Neville foresaw the emergence of a new race. A race with white genes and hence higher intelligence seemed a potential threat in the near future. Therefore, terming it as the 'half-caste problem', as the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. Neville sought to solve the problem while it was at an arm's length.

Referring to the 'half-caste problem', in the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence*, directed by Phillip Noyce, Mr. Neville raises a question asking the audience if the government should allow the creation of an unwanted third race or with some rigorous training let the half-castes be advanced to a white status. He is seen representing distorted white views of the Aboriginal population. With an ideology based on science and western culture, he not only believes in the superiority of the white culture but also in Aborigines being an unwanted, subhuman race. Using the Darwinian theory of evolution, he further continues to state, "Post-inter-marriage, at the third generation, the continuing infiltration of the white blood finally stamps out the black colour. Thus, the Aboriginal is simply bred out" (Dir. Noyce). As the Chief Protector of Aborigines, he believes, it is his duty to 'help' the half-castes and hence plans to breed out the Aborigines by removing them from their culture to 'assimilate' them into a far more superior western culture. Based on the power vested in him by the government and a fallacious reasoning he introduces the Moore River Native Settlement where hundreds of half-caste children are 'educated' and as he says, "given the benefit of what our culture (White culture) has to offer" (Dir. Noyce). As stated in the biography of Mr. Neville,

The ostensible purpose was to bring about permanent segregation of Aborigines of full descent; and temporary segregation and training of those of part descent who would re-enter society as domestics and farm-workers, eventually blending with the white population through intermarriage (Haebich and Reece 1).

In his book *Australia's Coloured Minority*, Mr. Neville talks about the necessity of such an institution. As he recalls, "In the early days of my administration I began to appreciate the necessity for places of refuge for the training and the upbringing of the half-castes" (Neville 75). The half-castes stuck in a liminal space between the two races were forced to follow the dominant one. As explained in his book, Mr. Neville states "The native must be helped in spite of himself! Even if a measure of discipline is necessary it must be applied, but it can be applied in such a way as to appear gentle persuasion" (80). The white community sought to solve the 'half-caste problem' by any means necessary. As stated in the book *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the Department of native affairs used brute force to separate the half-caste children from the Aboriginal mothers. According to the new amendment made in the law, all Half-castes belonged to the Department of Native Affairs. The authority was stern and the law was so severely followed that "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" says Pilkington in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (40). As Mr. Neville writes in his book *Australia's Coloured Minority*, decades later, one of his major objectives was the eradication of the term 'Aboriginals'. With fallacious reasoning, he believed the Aboriginals to be diseased in 'blackness' and stated his opinion: "It seems to me that in time we must cease calling people who are nearly as white as ourselves, 'aboriginals'" (Neville 245). Although the half-castes were a minority and were relatively smaller in number, the Department of Native Affairs was aware of their growth potential considering the level of interaction between the Aborigines and the white population. In the conclusion to *Australia's Coloured Minority*, 'on behalf' of the coloured minority, he pleads:

Let us not be deluded into believing that this minority is too small to be worthy of notice. As one speaker said at the Canberra Conference: "We do not wish to have collateral growth of an untouchable population in Australia." It is surely better to take the matter in hand when the numbers are still small and it is comparatively easy to deal with the problem, which if neglected, may grow quite out of control (261).

Hence, afraid of the emergence of an unwanted third race, the government quickly acted and set up institutions such as Carralup Settlement and Moore River Settlement to 'train' these aboriginals thus

attempting to assimilate the half-castes into the White culture. The plan not only failed to 'contain' the Aborigines in the institutions, to which Molly, Gracie and Daisy from *Rabbit Proof Fence* stand witness, but also invited major criticism from the White working population. By showcasing the inefficacy of the government, these factors not only escalated the 'Aboriginal problem' Neville's department wished to solve but also marked the failure of Mr. Neville's 'Breed out the Aborigines' plan

In Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the fence becomes a symbol metaphorically representing the inefficacy of the government in solving the 'half-caste' problem. The construction of the rabbit proof fence began.. in Western Australia in the early 1900s and was completed in 1907. Designed to keep the invasive rabbit populations of the eastern bush from entering Western Australia, the 1100 mile long fence. stretched from north to south and served as a major landmark for the Aboriginal populations who lived nearby. When Molly, Gracie, and Daisy escaped internment at the Moore River Native Settlement, Molly's plan for. returning them all home safely is to follow the rabbit proof fence all the way north to Jigalong. The fence was constructed to keep out the quickly multiplying rabbits from entering the farmlands in the west, which were introduced originally to Australia by English settlers themselves; but the fence proved to be dysfunctional and hence failed to keep the rabbits away from the lush farmlands of the west. This serves as a metaphor for the failure of the government's solution to the 'Half-caste' problem. White settlers decimated the Aboriginal lands and raped the Aboriginal people. They systematically prevented Aboriginal tribes from practicing their own laws, culture, and traditions, and from speaking their own native languages. The horrors of colonialism forever transformed the Australian landscape not only physically but also psychically, and created an environment in which Aborigines, stripped of their culture, resources, and history, were often forced to assimilate or die. Just as the English settlers created the problem of the rabbits (by bringing the invasive species from Europe in the first place) and later sought to contain them in east by erecting the rabbit proof fence, they invaded Aboriginal lands, raped them, created unspeakable and unimaginable strife for the Aborigines by inventing the 'half-caste problem', and then sought to keep them contained in internment camps in the hopes of assimilating them to the western culture but failed in doing so. As Doris Pilkington writes in *Rabbit Proof Fence*,

There was much excitement when the girls at last reached the rabbit-proof fence. The fence cut through the country from south to north. It was a typical response by the white people to a problem of their own making. Building a fence to keep the rabbits out proved to be a futile attempt by the government of the day (109).

The irony of Neville's administration was that in aggregating the power to assimilate the half-castes through economic and social absorption, as mentioned in Mr. Neville's biography

He accelerated the pauperization and segregation evident since the 1900s. Closer settlement in the south-west, competition from white workers, and the racial prejudice of rural communities worried by increase in the Half-caste population, all helped to elevate the 'Aboriginal problem' that Neville wished to solve (Haebich and Reece 2).

Thus with resistance from the Half-caste and other Aboriginal population, criticism from the white workers, and because of other severe governmental economy problems, Carrolup Settlement closed in 1922 and Moore River Native Settlement became a repository for juvenile and adult offenders, unmarried mothers, children, and the elderly. Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* stands witness to this scenario. With the story developed only around the half-castes, in a post-colonial context, the book develops as a counter narrative.

In context to Australian literature, in an era of Post-colonialism where the narratives were structured around the English settlers suppressing the Aborigines, Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* focuses on the Half-castes, a minority smaller than the Aborigines themselves. Primarily, it becomes important to define 'the' narrative structure in a post-colonial context in Australia. As Graham Huggan explains in his review of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's *Dark Side of the Dream* and Julia Emberly's *Thresholds of*

Difference,

The Post-colonial narratives offer windows onto fascinating "foreign" cultures-even as those cultures are made accessible through the effects of global shrinkage. In a standard exoticist move, these writers are called upon to supply what the "main- stream" culture lacks; in another, they are invited to fulfill the role of assuaging Western liberal guilt, at the same time as their writing "rejuvenates" the dominant culture to which it is assimilated (3).

In the Australian context, the post-colonial narratives structured around the Aborigines being suppressed by the English settlers. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra in their book *Dark Side of the Dream* take Post-colonialism to task for its failure to account for the particular histories of Australian indigenous cultures. As Graham Huggan says, "Wide-ranging postcolonial studies such as those of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin and, in a different context, Edward Said, are singled out for their involuntary attraction toward a unified colonial subject." (4) In *Rabbit Proof Fence*, by focusing on the Half-castes, Pilkington is referring to the interstitial space created between the two dominant communities The Australian white community and the Aborigines. As Homi Bhaba explains in *The Location of Culture*, "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy." (4) Unlike the other narratives which focused either on the Australian whites dominating the aborigines, making it a story of the dominant white race or on the conditions of the aborigines making it the story of the suppressed, *Rabbit proof fence* is a work that entirely focuses on a community or rather a new race that was entirely neglected before. Resonating Spivak's idea of "epistemic violence", the narratives were still focused on becoming an asset to the knowledge of the west and only bothered about the two ends, the Australian white community and the aborigines. What lay in between was ignored, neglected and forgotten. "The middle passage," says Bhaba, "is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience." He further continues to explain, "'National' cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities." Hence by replacing the usual narrative structure, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, which revolves around the plight of the Half-caste minority, redefines the term 'national' to become a counter narrative.

The article by defining the term half-caste, uses the life story of Molly, Gracie and Daisy from Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, to illustrate on Neville's 'Half-caste problem.' By elaborating on the problem of the rabbits, created by the English settlers, and the disfunctionality of the fence, the article calls it a metaphorical representation of the failure of Australian government in breeding out the Aborigines. Thus by discussing the plight of the half-castes, Pilkington's *Rabbit Proof Fence* takes the structure of a counter narrative in a post-colonial context.

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