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**INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE IN NUGI GARIMARA'S**

***FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE***

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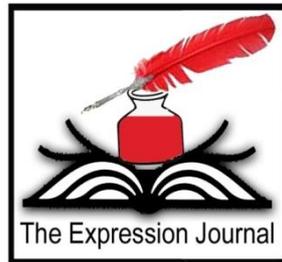
**Abstract**

Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara) is a key member of the indigenous writers group of Australia whose stories focused on their communities' struggle against the marauding forces of European colonisation. Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is the incredible story of three girls who defied human limits to walk a 1600 km trek to their freedom from the colonial forces, who had taken custody of them in the garb of civilisation. These "Stolen Generation" girls' journey, now engraved in history through the namesake movie, is an example for the resilience of indigenous communities against natural and human-made forces. This paper attempts to highlight the indigenous resilience displayed by the three girls in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

**Keywords**

Resilience, Indigenous Literature, Martu People, Aboriginal Literature, Australia

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## **INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE IN NUGI GARIMARA'S**

### ***FOLLOW THE RABBIT-PROOF FENCE***

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Australia was the final frontier in colonisation – one of the last landmasses on the face of the earth to be ‘discovered’ by the European settlers. The European narrative forced people to believe that Australia was ‘terra nullius,’ meaning uninhabited land despite the fact that Australia has had its first peopling at least 50,000 years ago and had remained off-contact with the majority of the world till 1606 when it was officially discovered by Dutch explorers. European settlements in Australia began much later, in 1788, after James Cook mapped the region. Australia was settled as a British penal colony and the European arrival in Australia disrupted the lives of the hitherto undisturbed natives of Australia, popularly referred to as Aborigines or Aboriginals. Numbering up to a million at the time of European contact, the Aborigine population declined for around 150 years till it went down to 93,000 in the year 1900. This rapid decline of population was mainly due to the introduction of European diseases like smallpox and indiscriminate murders by the settlers. The Aboriginal women were forced into sex slavery and prostitution.

Being traditional owners of the entire landmass, the Aborigines practised an animistic practice called Dreamtime which heavily depended on the land. The arrival of the settlers, however, has resulted in Christianity becoming the dominant religion, even among the Aborigines. The Aboriginal languages, all of them oral, that numbered around 500 at the time of European arrival has declined to half with only 13 of them not facing immediate extinction. English has become the everyday language of the Aborigines though the varieties they use have a heavy admixture of their respective languages. The social and cultural lives of the Aborigines have also undergone drastic changes since the arrival of the settlers.

Beginning in the 1860s, the state governments in Australia started passing legislations regarding the custody of Aboriginal children. The Victoria Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869 was the first that authorised the removal of Aboriginal and half-caste children, especially 'at-risk girls' from their parents to forced custody in government and church run homes and schools. The Northern Territory Aboriginals Act of 1906 appointed the Chief Protector of Aborigines as the legal guardian of all Aboriginal and half-caste children up to the age of 18 years, thus sanctioning enforced segregation. The families were also forced or coerced to move into 'stations', effectively ending the nomadic lifestyles of the communities and bringing them under the supervision and control of a white superintendent. Their lives, including marriages, became regulated by law. The children, thus removed from the families, were trained to be domestic servants in white homes, assimilating into the mainstream society and were expected to lose their indigenous identities in a few generations. Research suggests that the children – referred to as Stolen Generations or Stolen Children – numbered between 25,000 and 100,000. They were held in terrible, overcrowded living spaces; handed corporal punishments; sexually abused; and denied contact with their families. The children, after their training period, were given to foster families where many of them encountered horrible lives.

Decades of the implementation of these acts decimated the Aboriginal families before the acts were challenged, argued against, and nullified. In the last few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, efforts were made to trace the families and reunite them with the children. This culminated in the national apology issued by the Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd in the year 2008 after his predecessor John Howard had refused to do so in 1997. A National Sorry Day observance is held every 26<sup>th</sup> of May to commemorate the country's mistreatment of its indigenous population.

### **The Martu People of Australia**

The Martu people, also known as the Mardu or Mardudjara, are an aboriginal tribe in Western Australia. Among the last Australian Aborigine communities to encounter the western settlers, the various groups of the nomadic Martusen countered the European settler sat different times varying from 1800s to the 1960s. Traditionally, the Martu people have lived lives very closely associated with their lands, practising animism and spirit worship. During the years of settler contact, the Martu people experienced what many native communities around the world experienced – persecution, dispossession of lands, rapes, destruction of traditional practices, and racial intermixing.

A considerable number of Martu people were removed from their homelands for missile tests conducted in the region in the 1980s. After a protracted struggle for the legal right over the ancient lands, the Martu people were given native title rights to 13.6 million hectares in the year 2002. Numbering a few thousands, the Martu people are now the protectors of their sacred sites and proponents of traditional knowledge. Despite settling down in the 'stations' for their safety and for availability of provisions, the Martu people are now back in their homelands, pursuing nomadic and semi-nomadic lives just like their

ancestors did for centuries. Since they are not an organised group, consisting varying traditions, languages, and degrees of western exposure, Martu people are difficult ones to be defined.

The Martu people speak different languages belonging to the Wati subgroup of the Pama-Nyungan language family. At present, most of the Martu people are proficient in English and everyday conversations occur in a mixture of the languages and English. The Martu people follow a kinship system in which a person is not allowed to marry inside his skin group and children are assigned a different skin group from their parents. They are among the infamous 'Stolen Children' of Australia.

### **Nugi Garimara (Doris Pilkington)**

Doris Pilkington Garimara was born as Nugi Garimara in the 1937 and was given the anglicised name Doris by her mother's white employer. Her mother Molly was the eldest of the three half-caste Martu children who escaped from a training centre for the Aborigine children run by the government to train them as domestic servants in the year 1931. She was later recaptured along with her two children Doris and Anna. While Molly escaped again, this time with Anna, Doris lived in the camp and had to wait for 21 years to see her mother again. Unaware that her mother had twice escaped from the same settlement which was her home, Garimara was told the story by her aunt Daisy (one of the three escapees), which spurred her on to do a research on the episode. The result was her most famous work *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, published in 1996. She had previously published another novel *Caprice, a Stockman's Daughter* (1991) and followed up on her masterpiece with two more books: *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002) and *Home to Mother* (2006). Garimara died in 2014.

### ***Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence***

Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is the fictionalised biographical account of the escape of three half-caste Martugirls –Molly, Gracie, and Daisy – in 1931 from a native settlement where they were forcibly taken to be trained as domestic servants for white settlers. Based on the real-life narratives of her mother Molly and her aunt Daisy, Garimara recounts the historic 1600 kilometre walk to freedom. The book was published in the year 1996, carrying Garimara's native name as well as her English name Doris Pilkington. The novel was made into a hugely successful film by Philip Noyce under the title *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002).

The narrative begins with a few chapters recalling the transformation of the nomadic Martu community into a settlement at the Jigalong station in Western Australia. During the early years of the arrival of the whites, Kundillaled his extended family-tribe as they encounter stories and experiences of indiscriminate looting and killings of the Aborigines apart from the capture of Martu women to be sex slaves in the ships of the whites, only to be brutalised, killed and thrown into the ocean. A few decades later, the community elder Dayup is perplexed by the settler's language which they encounter in mutually incomprehensible conversations and agreements. What follows is the appropriation of the entire

landscape by the settlers who fence the land, cutting hunting trails and imposing colonial laws to capture and punish the violators.

By the 1900s, the nomadic tribes start falling in line with the new government's wishes of making the tribes settle in 'stations' and adopt western lifestyles including clothing, food, new imported animals and the fear of guns. At Jigalong station, Maude, the young Martu girl trained to speak English and work as a domestic help to the whites, gives birth to the first muda-muda (half caste) child, fathered by an Englishman.

Fifteen years later, the now grown up Molly and her half-caste cousins Gracie and Daisy are taken to the Moore River Native Settlement near Perth to be trained as domestic servants as they were considered more intelligent than the full-blacks by the government. The families of the three girls start a wailing period, mourning the separation which could not be stopped even by their white fathers. Withered by grief and the travel on horseback, car, train, and a steamer, the girls arrive at the settlement, which reminds them of jail.

At the camp, they despise the food, practices, and the English-only rules. Despite mortally afraid of ending up in the punishment cabin for days, the girls escape from the camp, hoping to find the rabbit-proof fence than ran north to south, closer to their camp in Jigalong. Pursued by an Aboriginal worker employed for this purpose, the girls survive eating wild rabbits and farm emus, stolen food from homes and camps and the occasional supply from strangers, both blacks and whites. Meanwhile an elaborate hunt for the missing girls spreads throughout the region, involving police, informants, and search planes, commanded by Mr. A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines. As they reach another station, Gracie is lured by the promise of meeting her mother at another station by train and is taken into custody. Molly and Daisy reach the home of Molly's aunt before being escorted by her relatives to their families at Jigalong, completing a historic, extraordinary 1600 kilometre walk across remote Western Australia. The families go into the bush in order to prevent the children being recaptured.

Years later, Molly is captured and sent to the same Moore River Settlement along with her daughters Dorris (the author) and Anna. Once again, Molly walks for months along the same route with Anna to reach Jigalong where she settles down to set up her family. After her training at the camp, Gracie ends up becoming a servant and marrying a station-hand. Daisy was never recaptured and moved around with her family, working as a servant before retiring at Jigalong.

## **Indigenous Resilience**

A key characteristic feature of indigenous communities around the world is their incredible resilience in extremely adverse situations. The natives of the world were not easy targets for the coloniser as they exhibited extraordinary survival skills. This is true in the case of the three Martu girls who defied human logic and reasoning to embrace the rigours of the 1600 km long expedition with the sole goal of reaching home. As Anne Brewster notes, "in much indigenous literature, the figuring of a decolonised, mythic space is an important political and imaginative act providing indigenous people with a sense of autonomy and solidarity and

enabling their survival amidst a continuing legacy of dispossession and loss.” (Brewster)

The three girls removed from their families under the government policy arrive at the Moore River camp to realise that the doors are locked with chains and padlocks and windows with bars. They realise that it was “just like gaol” (FRPF63) where they would be served meals that were “the most unappealing fare ever served to any human being.” (FRPF66) Other children who had earlier tried to run away from the camp had been immediately recaptured, beaten and put inside a ‘boob’ for up to seven days with just bread and water and their hair would be shaven before being paraded around the compound. Garimara calls the camp “more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children.” (FRPF72) When the girls arrive at the Moore River camp after their capture, they are promptly warned against talking in the ‘blackfulla language’ and are advised to “forget it and talk English all the time.” (FRPF72)

Any attempt to portray the actions of the government to recapture the girls as ‘noble’ and ‘for their welfare’ (especially those made by Mr. A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines) is falsified by the officer’s wish that the girls should be recaptured “if no great expense is to be incurred; otherwise, the prestige of the Department is likely to suffer.” (FRPF126) Even in correspondences after the search had been called off, Neville remarks that the girls had put the department’s finances in an ‘unfortunate position’.

Clifton Gargiba, a Martu Parnngurr ranger, remarks that “For Martu people who live in this land, it’s the songline and the land around this area, it’s so special to them. We connect with the land – it’s our dreaming, our spirits, our culture. It’s my life. It’s all Martu people’s ancestors, our great grandmother’s and grandfather’s. What the old people told me – to try and look after our culture, law and the land. So we need to protect Martu culture and the land and the community that lives around it.” (“Why Martu Country is Special”)

A life close with the elements of nature helps the three girls survive the arduous journey across the Australian desert. Though the younger ones Daisy and Gracie get scared of the elements on their historic return journey, Molly “had no fear because the wilderness was her kin.” (FRPF82) Garimara also devotes some space in the narration for descriptions of the girls’ admiration of “the heathlands of Western Australia (that) contain(s) some of this country’s most beautiful and unusual wildflowers.” (FRPF83)

Molly, the leader of the girls, uses all her survival skills learnt from her white father and her nomadic step-father to reach home through a seemingly impossible journey. The Protector of Aborigines Arthur T. Hungerford calls the nine-week long journey “their most wonderful ‘trek’ . . . [completed] in record time considering they had to most of the time provide their own food” (FRPF125). Brewster remarks, “this alternative history of Aboriginal resistance is a history of heroism, triumph and survival against all odds.” Through their survival, the girls prove the failure of the Aboriginal removal acts aimed at providing a ‘better life’ for the half-caste children through training as domestic workers.

Garimara points that out that “when she was only fourteen years old she [Molly] decided that she wanted to have a part in planning her own destiny” (FRPF129). Molly stands tall, despite being a typical teenaged girl, as a symbol of indigenous resistance to the colonial ways of looking at life and culture. She takes us the leadership role without any hesitation and leads the two other girls to an incredible story of resilience.

As Tony Stephens remarks, “The journey of 1600 kilometres took nine weeks and ranks as one of the most remarkable feats of endurance and courage in Australian history, and dramatised a dark side of the Australian story.” (Stephens) He summarises the travails as follows: “The girls crossed a flooded river, sand dunes, heath lands, wheat belt, mallee country, gibber plains, red dust and mulga country, spinifex country, clay pan and salt lake. They slept in dugout rabbit burrows, caught and cooked rabbits, and ate bibijali, a kind of sweet potato, and karkula, a wild banana.” Martin Renes’ remarks capture the essence of the girls’ resilience: “Not surprisingly, the girls’ 1,600 km journey on foot has become a symbol for the diaspora and mistreatment of the Stolen Generations and a remarkable homage to their resilience and resistance to policies of absorption and assimilation.” (Renes 40)

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence stands as a testimony to indigenous resilience. It is a tale of extraordinary grit and resilience in the face of adverse conditions, both human-imposed and natural. The episodes of the escapade included sightings of the mythological marbus, hostile animals and terrain, days of hunger and the need to employ survival skills and the constant threat of being taken into custody once again by the evil policies of the colonial government. The novel and the wonder-girls that form the core story are thus standing testimonies to indigenous resilience.

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