



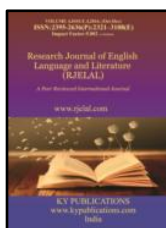
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## AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES IN NATIVE SETTLEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Australian aborigines are believed to be the oldest race in the world. Their arrival into the continent must be for more than 1,20,000 years ago. They lived close to nature on the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They depended on natural fruits and tubers for their survival. They used basic tools of stone-core hammers, knives, scrapers and axe-heads which were chipped or ground into shape, to hunt. All the aborigines had an intimate knowledge of their surroundings. They were familiar with the food plants, animals, different species of flora and fauna. By the time of the arrival of Europeans in 1788 there were nearly 3,00,000 aborigines divided into over 500 tribes. The Europeans claimed ownership of the discovered land; thereby the aborigines were not given any right. In the long run the education was a matter of concern. The missionaries took up the Christianizing of the aborigines. The children were separated from their parents and put up in the missionary to be trained by the whites. Later, the parents would never get a trace of the whereabouts of their children. This paper is an attempt to study the struggle of the aborigines during native settlement. *Rabbit Proof Fence* is one such novel that portrays the daring step of an aborigine girl who escapes from the Native Settlement and unites with her mother.

The colonial intrusion into Australia in 1788 has disturbed the aboriginal life. Australian aborigines lived in diverse ecologies, ranging from seashore to woodland, river banks and desert. They depended on nature for food. They prefer to move from place to place rather than settle in permanent residences. The people of Gamaraigal, the aborigine tribe of Sydney were bewildered when Europeans invaded their land. The Europeans behaved like savages: they felled trees, cleared the ground; the life around Sydney was pierced by noise, activity and shout.

All those who arrived with Captain Stirling, and others who settled before 1830, had the right to choose an area of land wherever they fancied. The best land was taken up by the more wealthy, influential people who had the responsibility of

maintaining their customs. They were advised to "keep up their Englishness" at all costs. ...The more adventurous settlers discovered that further up and beyond the Swan River colony there was an abundance of fertile land in which they could grow anything (13).

In 1820's the missionaries took up the Christianizing of the Aborigines. They translated their Christian ideas into rules and regulations in the hope that the aborigines could become Christians by simply following them. By the 1830's they had become dependent on the European invaders since their land and food sources were gone. As time passed the aborigines realized that the Europeans were permanent intruders who aimed to use their land. While the aboriginal people saw the land religiously

as an intimate part of themselves and all life, the Europeans saw it economically, as a commodity to be taken, exploited, bought and sold. The population of British immigrants in Australia became nearly 2,00,000 during the years 1832-1850. Following, the aborigines were quickly outnumbered in their own land. The increasing number of the Europeans made difficult for the aborigines to get their traditional food.

The aborigines realized the arrival of the European settlers as the destruction of their traditional society and the dispossession of their lands. 1900 Western Australia showed signs of progress and prosperity, especially in the mining and agricultural industries. The farming of sheep, cattle, and wheat flourished, so the boundaries of white settlement were extended to meet the demands of the growing overseas markets. This expansion brought many changes (18).

**Rabbit Proof Fence** is a true tale written by Garimara about her mother Molly Craig who was called "half caste" and thrown into "missionary" to be educated. Molly Craig, 14 year old, her sister Daisy Kadiball, 8 year old, were taken away from their mother in Jigalong, in west Australia along with their 10 year old cousin Gracie Fields to the distant Moore River Native Centre, in 1931. These children are called "half caste" and were brought up in camps and homes, in an attempt to "advance" them into white society. Apparently thousands were forcibly removed from their aboriginal mothers during 1900-1971. Molly's tremendous escape from the clutches of the white men captures the heart of every reader.

Doris Pilkington Garimara unveils the adventurous escape of her mother Molly from the clutches of the white men in the camp. This is a real story which took place in 1931. Until 1970 the "half caste" children were snatched from their mothers and were brought up in camps and homes, in an attempt to "advance" them into white society, as domestic servants and farm laborers. The misguided policy was the element of compulsion. Thousands were forcibly removed from the aboriginal mothers.

Jigalong was established as a government depot in 1907. It was the base for the

maintenance men who travelled up and down the rabbit-proof fence, clearing away branches of trees and tumbleweed that may have been blown against barbed wire. Food rations, clothing, tobacco and blankets were distributed amongst the Mardu people who came in from the desert (34).

Jigalong is the place where the white settled, and made a store house, brought clothes, food, tea, tobacco. They built the long fence. They gave food as station to the aborigine. Molly's father is a white man working on the fence, so they call her half caste. As she is half-caste there is always a fear of being taken away by the white men to camp. Nevertheless, she enjoys with the family.

The elders decided that Jigalong would be their base camp for holding their sacred and secret ceremonies. Sacred objects were brought in from their hiding places in the desert and buried there, thus signifying a permanent "sitting down place".....They remained where the food supply was plentiful and continuous and to supplement they went out to hunt and gather the traditional food (35).

The aborigines were dark black in color. Due to the European invasion the aboriginal women were raped and the subsequent generations are half white and half black, so they are called "half caste." A.O. Neville, was appointed as the chief protector of Australia, the legal guardian of every aborigine in the state. He had the right to remove the half caste from their families anywhere in the state and to relocate them to educational centers to give the culture of the white man.

The officials concerns were on the half-castes who were being born all over the country. "The common belief at the time was that part-Aboriginal children were more intelligent than their darker relations and should be isolated and trained to be domestic servants and labourers. Policies were introduced by the government in an effort to improve the welfare and educational needs of these children.....Eventually the Western

Australia government decided to establish two institutions for Aboriginal children with white fathers: one at Carralup Settlement near Katanning in the South-west, and the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth and 13 kilometers west of Mogumber (40).

The writer begins the narration describing the hunting trip by Molly, her mother and sister. Hunting is an important art the aborigines learnt right from their childhood. Molly's mother points at the flying "Eagle" and says that it is called the spirit bird and that the bird will always look after them. The aborigine believes that eagle is their spirit God. The hunting trip enables them to learn how to trace the footprints of any animal. "They soaked bunches of flowers in a bucket of water to make a sweet, refreshing drink. The other bush foods, such as the girdi girdi, murrandus and bush turkeys, were shared amongst the community" (42). Molly enjoys the hunting expedition but her joy is short lived. Because, A.O. Neville gets the information of Molly being half-caste and writes a letter to the policemen saying that Molly, her sister Daisy and her cousin Gracie are not full blooded and they need to catch them immediately.

As the white policemen are on their way in search of the half caste kids, the mother senses the sounds of the jeep and signals the children to hide. In the words of the writer,

A tall white man comes Constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke his voice was full of authority and purpose. He said, "I've come to take Molly. Gracie and Daisy, the three half-caste girls, with me to go to school at the Moore River Native Settlement," he informed the family (44).

The white man arrives at Jigalong Depot where the kids are playing. Looking at the white man with his papers the mother runs hysterical with her kids. Not far off, the white police catches them and throws the kids one after the other in the jeep. Both the mother and the kids are helpless. The entire situation is pathetic as the grandmother, unable to defend them, hits her head with a stone and the mother weeps loudly. This is how the children were snatched from their mother.

The Europeans assumed that the aborigines were 'primitives' who had to reach the standards of the more advanced Europeans. According to A.O. Neville, the half caste child is a big concern in the near future. He discusses with other white men, the plight of these children; he argues that the third generation of these half-caste kids would not have a trace of aboriginal features, so it is a question should they be full-blooded or black, to accept marriage or reject. So he decides that they cannot be left by themselves and they need to be taught our custom, tradition, culture. As a result, hundreds of half-caste children were sent to the camps set in Moore River. The three girls were transported to the camp which is roughly about 1200 miles from Jigalong.

The three girls passed through Ethel Creek and Roy Hill stations and were on the main road to Nullagine. They were so exhausted that they could not cry anymore. They were taken to Port Hedland by train. From there Captain Freeman took them by ship to Moore settlement. They had a pleasant experience sailing down to Western Australia. After five days of travel they reached the port of Fremantle. They were taken to Perth. The girls saw everything in an interesting manner (58).

The girls were always interior in the wilderness and were not accustomed to the city. For the first time they visualize the new buildings, busy places.

It was over a century since the foundation of Western Australia and Perth was not a bustling, thriving capital. There were industrial and commercial buildings everywhere and two and even three-storey department stores and offices.....There were many cars and trucks coming and going in this big place. It was too mad for the girls. They knew that they could easily get lost in this man-made environment with so few trees and only small patches of bush. To them the city was a noisy and unfriendly place, they didn't like it one bit so they were glad to arrive at the East Perth Girls Home (58).

The three girls reach the camp after a very tiresome journey by train and truck. A nun approaches and puts the girls in the dormitory along with the other girls. All the three girls lay tired in a single cot clogging to one another. The very next morning a nun gives a complete shower to the girls and they are adorned new clothes, preparing them for the new house. In the dinning hall, irrespective of their hunger and tiredness they could not eat the food served to them but was forced to eat. When the three started speaking, they were instructed not to speak in their language but only in English. Thus they were forced to speak English and not the aboriginal language. The condition in the camp was not congenial.

Instead of a residential school, the Aboriginal children were placed in an over crowded dormitory. The inmates, not students, slept on cyclone beds with government-issue blankets. There were no sheets or pillow slips except on special occasions when there was an inspection by prominent officials. Then they were removed as soon as the visitors left the settlement and stored away until the next visit. On the windows there were no colourful curtains, just wire screens and iron bars. It looked more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children (72).

The next day A.O. Neville inspects the camp to see Molly. Molly participates in the activities like prayer in the morning; they sing 'All things bright and beautiful.' All the girls have their appointed duties in the camp. In spite of being in the camp Molly thinks only of escape from this new place. Incidentally, a girl who runs away is caught by the aboriginal trucker and is punished in the room. Molly dares to go and sees the girl who is helpless but is found weeping in the shut room.

Molly decides that she is not going to stay here. The three will escape. Although Jigalong is a long way, Molly says we'll find the rabbit-proof fence and reach home. "The task of finding the rabbit-proof fence seemed like a simple solution for a teenager whose father was an inspector

who travelled up and down the fences, and whose grandfather had worked with him. Thomas Craig told her often enough that the fence stretched from coast to coast, south to north across the country. It was just a matter of locating a stretch of it then following it to Jigalong (78).

Molly decides to find the fence in order to reach home. She is very familiar with the fence as her father worked in building the fence. Rabbit Proof Fence is the longest fence in the world built in 1901, in order to keep the rabbits out along the border with South Australia. Rabbits were introduced in Western Australia at Fowlers Bay in 1891, and later in Eyres Patch in 1896. The cause of the plague was generally accepted to be the introduction of rabbits. In 1901, a Royal Commission decided to build a fence from 80 mile beach on the North West coast to the starvation Harbour on the south coast. The fence runs to about 1,139 miles. Camels were used for the transportation. They were ideally suited for the largely waterless country of the outback. Because of their ability to live off the country and to go for long periods without water they were bought into the service for the maintenance of the fence.

Unable to accept the new house Molly dares to take the lead to escape when all the kids leave to the prayer, she boldly accompanies her sisters and takes the adventurous run. Molly places a bucket full of water in the bathroom, pretending as though she is inside and runs, with her sister. Daisy stands there clutching her nose tightly to avoid inhaling the unhygienic smell of the toilet. Gracie hesitates for a while to follow and then proceeds. The absence of the three girls comes to the notice of the nun when she takes the attendance. Immediately, an expert aboriginal "tracker" is appointed to trace the girls. He captures any kids that escape the settlement. He follows the footprints to an extent but the showers of the rain have left the girls safe to escape. On the next day, being a sunny day the tracker tries to locate the girls. Molly senses that the tracker is somewhere around and places their bag near a small plant and proceeds on the other direction so that the tracker may be misdirected.

Now the question is how does they keep the travel in a northerly direction. "Well,

Molly, this fourteen-year-old girl, had no fear because the wilderness was her kin. It always provided shelter, food and sustenance. She has learned and developed bushcraft skills and survival techniques from an expert, her step-father, a former nomad from the desert. She mentioned the direction in which they had travelled: it was north by car from Perth to Mogumber siding, then west to the settlement. Also, she had caught a glimpse of the sun when it appeared from behind the rain clouds at various intervals during their tour of the place on their first day. That enabled her to determine that she was moving in the right direction (82).

Molly's daring adventure with her sisters exhibits hope and togetherness. They happen to meet few people who help them in their journey. The girls walked and took shelter under the tree. They were fascinated by the bright orange and white, red and yellow conical shaped banksias flowers. "It was almost impossible to find a patch of clean, white sand amongst all that for the girls to pass through without scratching or stinging their legs on the prickly acacia bushes. Although, it wasn't too bad when it was raining because the cool drops washed and soothed the scratches on their skins" (84).

Incidentally, they happen to meet an aboriginal man who was carrying a roast lamb on his shoulders. In order to help the girls the aboriginal man hands over a piece of roast and a match box which would survive them for the adventurous long journey. On their second day they came to the section of bushland that had been ravished by fire. All the trees and the grass under them were burnt black. On their way they met two Mardu men, who were on their way home from a hunting trip. They spoke to the girls and warned them to be safe as the policemen are around, and gave them a kangaroo tail.

Molly stood courageous throughout, she instilled confidence in her sisters. "The most important thing on her mind was distance; the more land covered in this weather, the less chance they had of being captured. Getting lost or walking around in

circles may have signaled the end of their escape but Molly kept reminding them to be brave and to conquer their fears. There was little danger in this part of the country, as there were no poisonous snakes lurking about at this time of year (93).

Day and Night the girls walk untiringly across harsh desert landscape. Apparently, the younger one is exhausted and falls on the ground. Molly carries her sister and prepares to walk. They walked over the sand hills through the banksias woodlands. The drier conditions made the bushes grow thick and Molly was pleased that they could hide under the shrubs. Later, they reached coastal heathlands where there were no tall trees to hide.

The girls were still in the coastal heathlands among scattered tall shrubs and low trees, having passed through the tall trees and open grasslands of the marri woodlands. Molly, Daisy and Gracie had grown used to the landscape of the coastal plains.....This drier, more northerly section of the heathlands, with its pure white and grey sandy soils, put the girls at a disadvantage. There were no tall trees with dense foliage under which they could hide from search parties (101).

Thus the girls walked all the way from south to the northern part. A.O. Neville, is worried about Molly's escape and surveys the map of Western Australia and locates the place where the girls must be and appoints people to trace the girls. Although they have thorough knowledge of the fence and its direction they fail to trace the girls. Neville is worried about the future of the half-caste kids in the years to come. They are lost in the colonized land. The whole state was told about them when their item appeared in the West Australia on 11 August 1931.

#### MISSING NATIVE GIRLS

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A.O.Neville, is concerned about three native girls, ranging from eight to 15 years of age, who a week ago, ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, Mogumber. They came in from the Nullagine district recently, Mr. O'Neville said

yesterday, and being very timid, were scarred by their new quarters, apparently, and fled in the hope of getting back home.....We have been searching high and low for the children for a week past, added Mr. O'Neville, "and all the trace we found of them was a dead rabbit which they had been trying to eat. We are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush." (102).

Once the rain had ceased and the girls had plenty of food, but they were experiencing another problem. The scratches on their legs from the prickly bushes had become infected and sore, causing them great discomfort.

The three girls had been on the run for over a month. They had left the landscape of red loam, mallee gums, acacia trees and green fields and found themselves in a very different countryside; one of red soil, tall, thick mulgas, gidgies and the beautiful, bright green kurrajongs trees that stood out against the grey-green colours of the other vegetation (106).

They happen to meet an Aboriginal lady who dries her clothes. Molly asks for some food, the lady provides shelter and food. At mid night a jeep arrives in which the white man and tracker are in search of the kids. The girls escape through the back gate and Molly very intelligently rubs her footprints by using a dried branch. The girls hide themselves and escape miraculously. On the way they happen to meet a person who says Gracie's mother is waiting for her and that she can catch a train from here. Gracie is tempted and waits in the station to board the train. The man also says that lots of people are looking for the girls and the police are also looking, Molly does not pay any attention. Molly and Daisy proceed and hide in a bush; they observe Gracie being caught by the white men in the train station. She claims "I want to catch the train to go to mummy" they said mummy is here. Later, we do not hear anything about Gracie. Towards the end when the "tracker" fails to capture the girls, he lets out a glimmer of admiration at the ability of the three girls to escape so successfully.

On their way Molly sees an old house. She hides her sisters under the bush and enters in the house and picks up eggs and bread to eat. A white lady observes her and hands over few sandwiches and coats for them to cover themselves. Food was never refused, and this sustained them for a long time. Molly learns from that lady the direction in which to proceed. So they all walk a long way to identify the fence. The girls walk a long way to capture the sight of the Rabbit Proof Fence, their only source to guide them - the pathway to their home. The girls become exhilarated by looking at the fence and derive new strength and courage to walk 1,200 miles to reach their home. On the other hand at Jigalong, orders have been issued to catch the missing girls. The correspondence concerning the girls continued.

I heard from the Constable in charge at Nullagine that the three half-caste girls have not yet been recovered. I am afraid you will never get them now as by this time they will be back in their own country and well and truly Camou-flaged; even if you did fluke them now, I do not thicken you would ever keep them unless you separated them all or locked them up, but of course that latter course would be worse than their being in the bush I guess. -Arthur T. Hungerford *Protector of Aboribines* (124).

At Jigalong depot, the storekeeper informs Molly's mother that her daughters have escaped from the camp. She feels happy and expects her kids to return. Unaware of the direction, and very tiresome the girls keep walking. Their only hope is to follow the Rabbit Proof Fence which will take them to their Native place.

"We followed that fence, the rabbit-proof fence, all the way home from the settlement to Jigalong. Long way, alright. We stay in the bush hiding there for a long time," remembers, Molly who is in her late seventies. When she was only fourteen years old she decided that she wanted to have a part in planning her own destiny. "Long way" sums up rather understatedly what was, without a doubt, one of the longest walks in the history of the



Australian outback. While other parts of this vast country of ours have been crossed on horses or camels, these three girls did their exploring on their bare feet. An incredible achievement in anyone's language. The vastness and the diversity of the Western Australian landscape would always be respected and appreciated by them-they trekked across it and conquered. This historic trek had taken almost nine weeks (130).

Molly and Daisy after their long journey are completely exhausted and are in tatters and faint due to the scorching sun. The girls are awakened by the noise from the Eagle, which remains the only source to guide them. At Jigalong the aborigine are waiting for the kids to arrive. They sing songs, and perform rituals to God. The white man is in search of the girls with his gun. In the climax we see the mother, grandmother approaching with a spade and the white man with his gun. The white man fears the sight of the mother approaching with the spade and runs away. Molly in order to indicate her arrival whistles to her mum. The mother returns the whistle and the kids are united with their mother. Molly cries 'I lost one,' signifying the loss of Gracie. Soon the mother applies a black dye on both of their kids, so that they are not called "half caste" and are not caught by the white men. Towards the end when the "tracker" fails to capture the girls, he evinces a glimmer of admiration at the ability of the three girls to escape so successfully, however, redeems his essential, good nature.

Neville makes a note that 'at present we are lacking the funds to catch Molly and her sister and will recover them in near future.' He ensures that one must be protected from them and that they are facing an uphill battle especially with the native bush hunters. He is worried that the Aborigine will never understand what they are trying to do for them. According to him the entire process is for their better future. At last Molly, her mother and grand mother went into the forest and lived there. She got married and had two kids. The hunt for Molly continued and she was taken from Jigalong along with her kids to Moore River. Molly again made the adventurous trip and walked back to

Jigalong. When her daughter was 3, again the daughter was taken away by Mr. Neville. Molly never saw her again. This is the real struggle of Molly's life from the white man.

Neville was the chief protector of aboriginal Australia in West Australia for 25 years, he retired in 1940. Until 1970 many aboriginal Australians were forcibly removed from their families. They grew up under the white men and had no knowledge about their siblings and their parents. In the year 2008, 13<sup>th</sup> Feb the prime minister of Australia Kevin Rudd apologized to the aborigines. Apparently, even today the aborigines are still in search of their parents, brothers, uncles and aunts. Aboriginal Australians have a history of loss - loss of land, loss of culture, loss of pride, loss even of their own children. It was the history of a people who were told that they should be ashamed of the color of their skin and should keep to their side of fence, like the rabbits.

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