



Rabbit Proof Fence: A Struggle for Cultural Existence

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Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to depict the struggle for cultural existence in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. It also reflects the cultural conflict represented in the three aboriginal girls' characters which is due to their rejection and resistance for the colonialists' culture. Besides, the paper presents the cognitive analysis of the cultural struggle and resistance in Molly's character, and it tackles the cultural resistance in *Rabbit Proof Fence* from a postcolonial point of view. Additionally, the semiotic dimension, which is based on a socio-cultural basis, is introduced in this paper.

Keywords: cultural existence, postcolonial, Australian Aboriginals, culture, national identity, colonizer, colonized, semiotic

1. Introduction

Cultural identity or existence, which can be defined as the sense of belonging and conformity to a society or a culture, in which there is socially shared knowledge among all the members of a group or a culture, is quite obvious in the Australian aboriginal literature. This is due to the problems that the Australian aboriginals suffer from such as the loss of cultural heritage, racism, the crisis of preserving ethnic identity, and harsh treatment by the whites. Besides, the Australian aboriginal writers attempt to depict their cultural heritage and identity in the Australian society through their fiction works that were an attempt to restore their ethnic and cultural identities, memories, and heritage as an opposition to the colonizers' racial acts. So, the Australian aboriginal writers find in literature a good scope to reflect and emphasize their cultural and ethnic identities and to restore their lost homeland and memories.

Pilkington's novel *Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996) which is realistic story of three aboriginal girls who were separated from their families by the government policy in order to devastate the existence of black race in Australia is clear evidence of the cultural struggle from which most Australian aboriginals suffer. This struggle is due to the white colonialists' acts against the aboriginal people. When the colonizers came to Australia and occupied the lands of the native people, the indigenous people suffered from the colonizers' discriminating and racial policies against them which led to the devastation of their society and cultural identity. Such policies led the aboriginal people to resort to alcohol which was offered to them by the colonizers in order to forget about their homeland. As a result, many aboriginals suffered from the spread of diseases because of the absence of health care. The novel is a true depiction of the imperialists' intentions towards the colonized which are based on colonizing lands and benefiting from the natural resources. Additionally, the cultural conflict between the indigenous people and the white colonialists in this novel is due to the indigenous people's feeling of being inferior to and different from the white majority, the feeling of prejudice and discrimination, as well as the hatred and refusal of the white colonizers' sexual harassment against them, slavery acts, and the policies of separating families from each other.

Additionally, the Australian aboriginal literature is a true reflection of the history of the indigenous people and long struggle with colonialization and dispossession by the white colonizers' policies which devastate the structure of the aboriginals' families by separating mothers from children. So, Australian aboriginal literature reflects the culture of "Diaspora" which refers to the people who are obliged by the colonizers to leave their native homeland and cultural heritage. This is clear from the fiction works of most Australian indigenous writers, such as Pilkington who try to reflect in their writings their cultural and ethnic identities as a reaction to the colonizers' policies which aim at devastating these identities. Thus, the indigenous people's cultural resistance against the colonizers' colonial ideology is obvious in this novel as an attempt to preserve their cultural identity and ethnic heritage.

Historically, when the British colonizers colonized Australia in 1788, they tried to civilize the indigenous people through racial policies that separate children from their mothers. The aboriginal people were stereotyped as being non humans. They were treated as criminals in their homeland (Tikka 2004). Additionally, aboriginals were viewed as "subjects" or "others" by the colonizers (Said 1993, 9). So, the Australian aboriginal writers resort to write on their autobiographical testimonies in order to depict the brutal acts by the whites against them. They use their native culture as a means of resistance to imperialism (Said 241).

Finally, it is noticed through looking at the Australian indigenous literature that it sheds light on the struggle for cultural existence. Also, it reflects the memoir of the people who witness the brutal acts of removal the indigenous people from

their culture and assimilating them into the colonialists' culture. So, the issues of cultural struggle, racism, stolen generations, cultural assimilation, and identity are the main characteristics of the Australian Aboriginal literature.

2. Rabbit Proof Fence

Rabbit Proof Fence represents the three aboriginal girls' struggle for preserving their cultural existence against the domination of colonialists and their racial policy. The struggle which is a long journey on foot towards the homeland reflects the aboriginal people's rejection and resistance for the devastation of the indigenous society and their cultural heritage. Besides, the story is about three aboriginal girls called Molly, Gracie, and Daisy who were taken by force from their families and sent to "education camp" to educate them how 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 2007, 189-190).

Additionally, the three aboriginal girls do not believe in the fruits of "civilization", in which they are prohibited from speaking their native language. All the three girls suffered from the pain of being separated from their mothers and grandmothers. Besides, they know that "their fate had already been decided by their new guardians" (Pilkington 60), in which they will work as domestics on farms and face the brutality of the slavery.

Additionally, they do not want their freedom to be limited, in which they cannot get out of their dormitory; Molly expresses her despondency about this place by saying: "I don't like this place...it's like a gaol. They lock you up at night time and come and open the door in the morning" (Pilkington 66). So, they decide to return to their homeland and culture where there is no "boob" which is a place of detention, no feeling of being outsider in the colonialists' culture. The journey "was a 1,500 mile, and basic survival was only half the battle; the girls also had to outrun the captors hard on their trail. To keep their bearings, the three followed what was then the longest unbroken line of fence in the world" (Schwarzbaum, 2007, 71). Despite the hardship of their trip, the freedom the children felt motivated them to oppose the colonizers' harsh and unfair treatment (Campbell 2007). So, the girls' journey is a struggle between the girls' will to preserve their culture and traditions and the colonialists' decision to assimilate the girls in their culture.

Besides, the aboriginal girls' persistence to return to their culture reflects their struggle for their cultural heritage, traditions and identity, so they do not care for the difficulties they may face in their journey because it is a question of "to be or not to be". Also, they girls do not have the socially shared knowledge which is represented in their cognition with these white settlers who are supposed to educate, civilize, and help the indigenous people. Therefore, the aboriginal girls' journey towards the homeland is viewed as a revolution against colonialism, imperialism, and racism.

The aboriginal girls in this novel culturally resist the colonizers' imperialism because they want to be adhered to their native culture. Thus, culture might be an effective way of resistance against the colonizers, and this is what Edward Said emphasizes in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) when he says:

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 (as Benedict Anderson has it) a new national community (241).

It should be stated here that the cultural resistance in this novel is based on breaking down the claims of colonialism by all cultural means. It is based on the ideological conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer attempts to detach the colonized from its origins because "colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content" (Fanon 37).

Cognitively, culture is stored in the "long term memory", in which one's ideology, tradition, and the tragic incidents are stored in this memory. Also, the writer resorts to his/her long term memory when he/she writes or speaks about something, in which he/she formulates a mental model of the context or situation he/she writes or speaks about. This mental model reflects the writer's ideologies and culture because the mental model of context formulated by the writer is highly related to the long term memory, in which culture is stored (Van Dijk 1979).

Cognitively, culture is a shared knowledge by a certain group and it is stored in human cognition. Cultural struggle is due to the existence of two clashing cultures in one's cognition. These two cultures cannot be incorporated in cognition without being clashed. So, the three aboriginal girls fail to find this socially shared knowledge which is represented in their cognition (Long Term Memory). Molly's words: "You heard what they'll do to us. They'll shave our heads bald and give us a big hiding and lock us up in the little gaol"(Pilkington 88) reflect the ideological conflict she has in her cognition, in which she opposes the colonialists' culture and ideology through referring to herself and her sisters as "us" and to the colonialists as "They". This ideological and cultural struggle in the three girls' cognition makes them reject to return to the colonialists' settlement and culture, and to go back to their original culture, traditions, and people.

Additionally, the cultural struggle in the three girls' cognition is due to that "the colonialists took advantages of the Aboriginal cultural beliefs to further their own gains" (Pilkington 16). So, the aboriginal people "become dispossessed ... They had to fight to find ways to return to their secret and sacred sites to perform their dances and other ceremonies that were crucial to their culture and whole way of life. Their pain and suffering remained hidden and repressed, silent and deep"(Pilkington 16). Besides, the three girls' problem is an ideological and cultural conflict which can be read from the postcolonial perspective, in which the recent postcolonial studies are based on the notion of ideology which

goes beyond the personal thinking mode to a new version of ideology that takes into account the repressed structure of domination in human mind and consciousness.

Clearly, Pilkington in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is highly related to the postcolonial notion which deals with the cultural studies and literature of colonized countries which reflect the issues of cultural identity crisis, racism and exploitation, gender and ethnicity, the inferiority of the colonized culture and the superiority of the colonizers' culture ("Post-colonial theory" Encyclopedia of Literary Theory). So, when she says: "the entire Aboriginal population grew to realize what the arrival of the European settlers meant for them: it was the destruction of their traditional society and the dispossession of their lands...the Aboriginal social structure was not only crumbling, but it was being totally destroyed...Aboriginal people all over the state learned to acknowledge the white man's brutal strength and their cruel use of superior weapons and were forced to accept the white system of justice and punishment"(qtd. in Anderson 190), she reveals how the postcolonial studies have influence her thinking which makes her write this novel as a rejection for the colonialists' culture and their racial policy. She portrays this rejection as a struggle between the natives and the settlers, racism and anti-racism and between the assimilation in the white's society and the rejection for racially integration. In addition, the three girls' journey towards homeland represents a revolution against the colonial racism, discrimination, oppression, imperialism and the inferiority of the aborigines. So, *Rabbit Proof Fence* represents a post-colonial resistance against the culture and racist policy of the Australian government.

Furthermore, the writer of this novel attempts to root the national culture in the aboriginal girls' minds, so she tries to awaken them and the native people of their own culture. She reconstructs the aboriginals' past focusing on positive elements from the past to build a new national and cultural identity (Fanon 41, National Culture). This attempt of cultural awakening is opposed by the colonizers who try to make the colonized unable to recognize their national and cultural ideologies: "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his 'nation', and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure" (Fanon 2007, 236).

Pilkington in this novel attempts to depict the process of colonization which is based on the absence of the colonizer's human conscience that motivates him to commit crimes against the colonized: "The slogan that the Westerners inherited from Hitler himself can be summarized by the acceptance of killing the 'others' but not the 'white'. Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of 'reason' or before the bar of 'conscience.'" (Cesaire 1994, 172).

Thus, it should be emphasized that reading this novel enlightens us with the strong relationship between literature and the construction of the national and cultural identity of these aboriginal people: "To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conception of the object itself" (Bhaba 1990, 3). Homi Bhabha states the importance of reading the colonized people's history, in which "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history---subjugation, domination, Diaspora, displacement --- that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (1994, 171).

Additionally, *Rabbit Proof Fence* can be dealt from a semiotic point of view, in which the relationship between the signs and their meanings is based on the cultural codes, social conventions and the traditions of the aboriginal people. In other words, there are some shared codes and symbols among the aboriginal people which are based on their cultural and social conventions and traditions. For example, "Rabbit Proof Fence" is considered as "a symbol of love, home and security" (Pilkington 109) for the aboriginal people who want to return to their home Jigalong and a symbol of colonization for the people who look at it from a post-colonial point of view. So, the view of this symbol differs from one social group to another depending on the ideologies and culture codes among the individuals of a social group. Also, the nature in the novel signifies the aboriginal people's "social calendars", in which the seasonal changes are signs of incidents and events: "summer is pink-eye time when eye problems brought on by the heat, dust and flies flare up...Pink-eye time was the common term used for weekends...The winter or rainy season is yalta or glayu time" (Pilkington xiii). Also, the sign of aboriginals' shouting and the bark of dogs when Molly reunites with her mother and grandmother indicate to the aboriginals' sign system which is shared by all the members of their society. So, most the symbols and signs that the aboriginal use are based on their relationship with nature and wild life. Also, these signs, which are shared by all the members of the aboriginal society, are based on the socio-cognitive and socio-cultural bases which make all the members of the society belong to their culture.

3. Conclusion

I think that *Rabbit Proof Fence* reflects the aboriginal people's struggle for cultural existence. This struggle is due to their feeling of not belonging to the colonialists' culture, the lack of the cultural bondage and the disability to accept the colonialists' culture. Also, this struggle results from the influence of colonialists' racial policies, in which the three aboriginal girls challenge the hardship of their journey as an attempt to return to their cultural heritage and as a rejection and resistance for the colonialists' culture. So, the struggle that we have in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is a cultural and ideological one, in which the three aboriginal girls cannot conform to the colonizers' culture in their cognition. In other words, they do not feel that they belong to white colonizers because they have a cultural clash in their cognition (Long Term Memory) which makes them reject staying in the settlement and return to their homeland.

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