

Symbiosis of Women and Nature: An Ecofeministic Study of Indigenous Women in Doris Pilkington's *Under the Wintamarra Tree*

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Abstract The Aboriginal people, the first people of the land, were deprived of their basic human rights, dispossessed of their native land and were doomed to live a subhuman life due to the colonial invasion. The policies of the colonial government turned out to be pernicious in the lives of the Aboriginal people. Thousands and thousands of Aboriginal children of mixed parentage were forcibly removed from their parents and family, thereby the government attempted to obliterate even the vestiges of aboriginality. Institutionalisation and indoctrination of white values made an indelible mark in the lives of the Stolen Generation people that they had to wage a life-long battle to attain redemption. Doris Pilkington, in her life writing *Under the Wintamarra Tree* brings out the horrors of institutionalisation, the agonising search for her Aboriginal identity, and the victimisation as a woman. The basic premise of the paper is that there is a strong connect between women and nature and women have an intrinsic wisdom of nature, especially the indigenous women who benefit as well as benefitted from nature. This paper endeavours to explore this symbiosis of indigenous women and nature as revealed in Doris Pilkington's *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, through the lens of ecofeminism.

Key words Ecofeminism; Institutionalisation; Stolen Generation; Aboriginal; Identity;

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Introduction

Ecofeminism “sees relations of domination and hierarchical social systems as patriarchal and phallogentric, creating significant “others” such as women and non-human nature who are at the receiving end in this dialectic” (Mutekwa and Musanga 240-241). Ecofeminists and ecocritical theorists have identified a striking homogeneity and a strong affinity between women and nature based on various factors such as physiological features of women, social and cultural practices forced upon them over the generations, and the male/science domination over women/nature. That women live in close harmony with nature and have inextricable ties with nature more than men is discernible in the lives of the indigenous women. This paper attempts to explore the symbiosis of women and nature with reference to Australian Aboriginal writer Doris Pilkington’s life writing, *Under the Wintamarra Tree*. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the meaning of symbiosis is “the relationship between two different living creatures that live close together and depend on each other in particular ways, each getting particular benefits from the other.” With their intrinsic and inherent wisdom of nature, the indigenous women not only get benefits from nature but also help in conserving nature, thus achieving symbiosis. These indigenous women with their symbiotic relationship with Nature draw strength and stoical endurance from Nature to tackle the life’s challenges posed by their double oppressors — the Whites and their own men.

Discussion

Doris Pilkington stands as the representative of Stolen Generation women through her life writing. She documents the history of exploitation, in particular, the struggles of the Aboriginal women who bear the brunt of familial, social and cultural alterations effected by colonialism. Wheeler’s insightful observation helps to understand the voice of the Aboriginal women:

Australian Aboriginal women have experienced numerous difficulties while seeking to claim an identity of their own. Before Australia was colonized by the British in 1788, Australian Aboriginal women were an integral part of their tribe and they played an important role in their children’s lives.... The legislation stripped Aboriginal women of their children and diminished their role within the community. With no chance to retaliate, Aboriginals were silenced and their culture diminished. It was not until the late 1970s, after

federal legislation was changed, when the indigenous population felt they could start raising their voices and sharing their tribal stories again without fear of retribution. (236)

The life writing of Doris Pilkington serves as a cultural and historical document of the Stolen Generation people. She portrays the strenuous life of the indigenous women, their ordeal under the protection of the Whites, their misery as institutional orphans, their determination to revive their culture and traditions and their resurrection, through her life writing *Under the Wintamarra Tree*. In fact, she gives more importance to the vivid description of the indigenous way of life, especially that of the womenfolk during the course of her documentation. The story begins with the life of Tjirama Garimara and Bambaru Banaka, grandparents of Doris. They were the desert natives who travelled across the desert based on the availability of food during various seasons. Though Bambaru was blind, “her memory and knowledge of gathering and preparing bush foods made her invaluable” (2-3). As desert natives, it was imperative for them to have “a sound knowledge of the land” and not only that, Bambaru “imparted much of her wisdom and information to the younger women because she knew it would help to ensure the survival of her children and grandchildren. They were the ones who would practice and preserve the customs of the Gududjara” (3). Thus, the indigenous women were hard working and courageous and were willing to take risky hunting tasks in order to gratify the hunger of their family.

Doris Pilkington’s *Under the Wintamarra Tree* stands as a testimony to the observation that “The literature of nature is nevertheless replete with tales of sagacious living by communities of human beings at one time in balance and harmony with nature — rife with *ecological wisdom* or rather environmental wisdom!” (Murali 21-22). It presents how the traditional culture and way of life of the indigenous people are in perfect synchronization with nature:

The Gududjara and Mandildjara people had lived in harmony with their land for thousands of years and, like other indigenous people, they were practicing conservationists, taking only what was needed. They learned from their ancestral Spirit Beings that if they took care of the land, the land would reciprocate, providing an abundance of plants and game. This practice of reciprocation and its obligations were upheld, not only by the Gududjara and Mandildjara, but by the Mardudjara people of Jigalong and, further, across the length and breadth of the Western Desert region. This was the unbroken golden thread woven through

the fabric of their way of life and it had to be preserved. (3)

The vagaries of the seasonal changes and the inclement weather made the indigenous people more sensible towards their sole provider and they proved to be the fittest to survive with this knowledge about nature. As people who relied heavily on nature for their living, starvation and meager food were not uncommon in their life. The women were adept at hunting skills and they hunted kangaroos with the help of the hunting dogs. Having realized the strength of the indigenous people, their dependence ‘only’ on nature, the Whites began their domination by controlling their source of food so that they had to depend on them for their survival. The Indigenous people were not allowed to own dogs in order to prevent them from hunting and being self-reliant. The gravity of the colonial conspiracy can be understood in these words:

Aboriginal people were not allowed to have more than one registered male dog. This legislation was introduced to prevent Aboriginal people from owning and using dogs for hunting, warmth and protection — a subtle way to control their movements and take away their independence, forcing many to leave their traditional homelands to settle on government depots and to seek employment on pastoral leases. (16)

The indigenous women were bold, industrious, caring for other lives, including flora and fauna around them, unassuming, and selfless in sharing the resources, and thus appear “to have stronger and more direct connotations with nature,” to borrow the words of Sherry Ortner (qtd. in Soper 139-140). Gossiping and exchanging information to each other were commonly present among the women: “The women and girls sat under the shade of the eucalyptus trees and shared station gossip and stories while they waited for the fire to burn so that the coals could be raked into the holes prepared for cooking” (40). If they had to fight the iniquitous Nature in their bush life, they had to endure challenges of “incarceration and alienation” in their station life under their Protector. As Doris Pilkington portrays, these Mardu women “went to work on stations, some as stock workers like the men, and others in the homesteads. There they would carry out domestic chores, cooking and cleaning or caring for the children of the station owners” (18). They shared their maternal care and affection with other children also. The breastfeeding mothers were always ready to feed and nurse any baby which needed their support. As averred by Kate Soper, “... nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human

production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won, and if necessary forced to submit to intercourse” (141), the indigenous women prove to be the “Naturalized Woman” by being “a powerful maternal force” and the “generative source.”

The indigenous mothers were forcibly alienated from their children by the Government. These women were brimming with valiance and determination, though they were torn to pieces by the cruel factors of life. They would risk even their life to fulfill their duties. Doris’ mother Molly Craig was known for her “fierce independence and determination” (18). She absconded from the Moore River settlement for the second time in order to fulfill her obligation to the son of her deceased kinship sister. Though it was a desperate and a risky plan to escape from the careful vigilance of the protection board, Molly ventured into it. For her, the “baby’s safety was paramount” (60). Despite her best efforts to keep her daughter Anna safe with her from the hands of the Protection Board, the baby was taken away from her. Without her children “she became a melancholy figure who moved around in a dream-like manner” (67). She had to endure the “indescribable pain of a mother in torment and grieving for her lost children” (67). It was the most distressful time for a mother “whose pain in her breasts was made worse by the pain in her heart” (67). Though she wished to end her life, she had a hope to see them again and she never gave up that hope. When the assimilation policy substituted the protection policy, she renewed her hopes to get her daughters back. Her hopes and dreams were shattered by the Government which was reluctant to relieve her quarter caste and half-caste children.

The Stolen Generation people were destined to grow on their own without the guidance of their elders. They were uprooted from their cultural connections and forced to nurture an alien culture and habits. But the connections with their Aboriginal root were so strong that, though “the toddlers were not speaking their language and the memories of the families left behind were fading, they still remembered the smell and taste of bush foods” (80). This cultural alienation had devastating effects on their personal as well as their social life. When the little girl Doris was bold enough to dive across the fence to enquire about her grandmother Bambaru in her native language to the native women, “she was roughly lifted over the fence and smacked on her bare legs. It was Nurse Hannah who caused this pain — to punish a child who dared to ‘talk to natives’ and in ‘native language’” (81). She was severely warned not to use “blackfella language” (82) again. The children were not able to adapt to the meals in the communal dining room and they terribly

missed their bush food. Young Doris once saw a lit fire that instantly evoked her memories of the past — the love and warmth of her mother, father and Bambaru. When she went near it eagerly, in search of these special people, as usual she was smacked rudely by Nurse Hannah.

Standing inside the boundary fence sad and alone Doris understood, this was a lesson and she could pretend no longer. She decided that she had enough of smacks and being humiliated in front of the other incarcerated children, and so from that day forth she would become a child with no past. All her memories would be suppressed. This was a mutual experience for all incarcerated Aboriginal children and adults, who have no culture, no language, no history, no people. Like the blazing fire that had burned so cheerfully, the memories flicker and then die, extinguished forever. (87)

The Department was cautious about extricating the ties between the children and the native people. It gave instructions to the staff not to allow the children to see or move with any native people. In the case of Doris, “pain was the decision maker and the forceful persuader. Combined with daily reinforcement to forget the past, it proved effective indeed” (88) .

The Aboriginal children, according to the government, had to be taken care of by the Christian missionaries. Because, they have “the native’s spiritual, moral and material welfare at heart” and it was believed that “they can guide the natives to independence” (135). The treatment in the mission made the girls from settlement feel that “they were the little heathens who needed evangelising” (137). They were taught self-control and discipline. The preaching in the mission implied that “they were ‘ungodly’ and ‘unrighteous’ . They were bombarded with negative reference because of their spiritual status, or rather their non-Christian one. This attitude fed their low self-esteem, so while they were in this vulnerable position, the conditioning and the Christian indoctrination began in earnest” (140). As the young boys and girls were segregated, the settlement girls “could not fulfill their cultural obligations to their brothers” (142), and all their “correspondence was monitored and censored” (142). In the words of Narogin (1990), “The policy of assimilation attempted to submerge a dark minority, the remnants of the victims of a brutal colonization, in Anglo-Celtic life and culture without questioning the right to do so” (13).

When Doris’ friendly exchange of smile with a twelve-year old boy was mistaken and misinterpreted by the Matron, she decided not to work as domestic

help anywhere but to study and work as a wards maid in a hospital. Though, “sixteen was the legal age that all girls could become domestic servants to any so-called Christian family who was willing to employ them” (148), Doris took an important decision not to “work for any farmer’s wife” (146). She studied hard and had the training from the old Aboriginals to memorise quickly. Though Doris was successful and contented in her training course, “she was beginning to be mortified to find just how naïve she was, that she was an unsophisticated eighteen-year-old woman who knew nothing about the facts of life” (152). Her dreams of marrying Danny were shattered by his mother who was not ready to accept an Aboriginal girl as her daughter-in-law. Though Doris, “who had been taking orders from white women all her life” (156) decided not to give up her love, his mother intrigued to get her way finally. Doris married a Nyoongah man, a soldier who returned from service, called Gerard Pilkington.

The half-caste children had to suffer severe psychological and emotional set back and identity crisis, as a result of the regimented institutionalisation. They had to confront with the identity crisis right from their childhood. As children, they were indoctrinated in the institution that they were Whites and thus were superior to the Aboriginal people. They were conditioned to treat their own Aboriginal people with contempt. But, outside the institution, they were treated as “others”, inferior to the Whites. Thus, the Stolen Generation had to bear the brunt of their fair skin which was too white to mingle with their Aboriginal people and not too white to amalgamate with the White people. They had to wage a life-long battle to attain emancipation. They vacillated between black and white values. When she met her father and mother after more than twenty years, Doris had mixed feelings. Her mother wailed and other relatives came and joined her as they saw Doris. Later, Doris understood that that was the traditional custom to cry in order to express their feelings. Doris was afraid of her husband’s reaction, on seeing her parents: “The conditions her parents lived in were a disappointment. It was basic and plain, and she hated to think of what her husband’s reactions would be if he saw what his children were being exposed to. He and his family would have a fit” (182). Her husband and mother-in-law were already prejudiced against her people as they did not come under the Native Act. They acted “superior to the black — skinned people of the north — west and the eastern goldfields of the state” (183).

Doris expresses her confusion when “only negative aspects” of Aboriginal culture were propagated to them. This created a fear among the children. The missionaries did not understand that this sort of negative propaganda would have a traumatic effect on the children, when they grow into adults, as revealed in the case

of Doris Pilkington. When Doris' father died, the traditional funeral that Doris took part for the first time in her life confused her greatly. She saw her family members "rubbing their heads and upper bodies with a salve of red ochre and animal fat" (196). Having tutored in her youth that the aboriginals were "evil devil worshippers" (196) and "heathen fornicators" (196), Doris was, in fact, frightened to see their custom. Afterwards, she "learned this was an age—old ceremony that had been practised for thousands of years and was still an important part of her people's culture. Amazed, she found after the funeral that she was able to talk about her father without breaking down" (196).

The indoctrination of "white" culture and the inherent "black" values in the subconscious mind victimise the Stolen Generation people. This develops an inferiority complex among them which prevents them from socialisation and incapacitates them to take firm decisions in their life. During her mission life, Doris started to revive her communication with her parents. Once, when she received a letter with the photos of her family members, "she had mixed feelings.... She was ashamed to discover that her father was a Mardu or full blooded black man" (144). Afraid of the stings of criticisms and mockery from the other girls and the missionaries "of her full-blood relations sowing suspicion and fear of the traditional Mardu culture practices and belief systems" (144), she used to hide the photos. When Doris received "two dust — covered, tobacco- stained ten shilling notes", from her father, she was ordered by the Matron to "put that foul-smelling, filthy money" (144) in a jar. This prejudice against the Aboriginal people burdened Doris with the inferiority complex.

Besides being oppressed by the colonial rules, the Aboriginal women were mortified in the familial domain also, the main reasons of which being their caste difference and institutionalisation. Doris Pilkington's family life was not blessed with peace. The absence of parental guidance and elders' advice did create a vacuum in her life. Though she became the mother of two children, Doris was longing for some woman to accompany and advise her. She says: "It was frustrating without an older sister or another female relative to advise her" (161). The arrival of her in-laws to stay with them added to the woes of Doris. Her mother-in-law's "presence seemed to bring out the negative side of her husband's personality. The criticism, the sarcasm and humiliation heaped on Doris were made worse by her husband's change of attitude. Doris felt abandoned and neglected" (163). Her mother-in-law, "made it quite clear that Doris was an unsuitable wife for her son for the simple reason that her family did not come under the Native Act and Doris did. Doris felt alienated and uncomfortable. Her husband's family were categorized as being

‘Octoroons’, one eighth Aboriginal” (164).

During her third confinement, Doris acutely felt the need for someone to guide and advise her: “No one understood that she had not been trained in raising babies” (p.165). Her inability to have better living conditions, lack of elderly guidance, mental trauma due to “the constant criticism, the sarcasm and intimidation” (166) of her husband would have caused nervous breakdown to Doris but for the loving and affectionate company of her children and her faith in the Lord. She was denied freedom even to listen to her favourite music on radio. As Gerry didn’t like her listening to the radio, she “decided to revert to more cunning and deceitful methods so that she could enjoy her music in secret and at the same time preserve her sanity”, as “it was her elixir of life” (169). She regrets: “This was reality, a rural life of hardship, toil and tears. How can any woman be enthusiastic about this?” (170). When Doris left her son with her father and mother on their request to have the grandson for some time, she was scolded by her husband for leaving their son with the “black, tribal people” (187).

When Doris joined as a Nursing Aide in the Community and Child Health Services, she was totally engrossed in her tiring work and “began ignoring Gerry’s negative attitude and hurtful comments towards her” (195). Under the influence of alcohol, Gerry started abusing her physically, emotionally and verbally. This abuse “gathered momentum as the barbed words and accusations increased” (197). Doris could not understand, “how a mild-mannered, modest man could change into a loud, obnoxious individual when under the influence of alcohol” (197-198). Doris was able to perceive that it was because of his inferiority complex. It was the innate male-ego which wanted to exert its power over his sub-ordinate, his wife. Thus, the subordination of Doris testifies to the fact that secondary treatment was given to Aboriginal women by their men. One of the reasons for this is the impact of colonialism. As rightly presented by Diane Bell:

Within the historical context of Aboriginal society, the maintenance of male-female relations entailed a continuing dialogue which allowed women to participate actively in the construction of the cultural evaluations of their role in their society. But today, as members of a colonial frontier society, Aboriginal women no longer participate as equals in this process. Women’s solidarity and autonomy are being eroded and devalued. They are constrained and defined by the male-dominated frontier society as a necessarily dependent sex. The inter-relation between the sexes are thus no longer shaped predominantly by the set of male-female relations of Aboriginal society; the new forces of the wider

colonial society affect them too. The activities of men and women within this new order are differently evaluated and different opportunities for participation are available to men and women. (103)

Thus institutionalisation, or to put it more precisely, their deviation from their indigenous way of life, had an adverse effect not only on the Aboriginal children's life, but also on the marriage life and the male-female relationship in the Aboriginal community. In other words, colonialism served as an antibiosis to the social and cultural environment in which the indigenous people lived.

Doris Pilkington was able to get rid of her disorientation due to institutionalisation by going back to her roots. The past was revisited and relived by her. When she went to meet her parents, Doris had to get accustomed to the climate and the "impoverished living conditions. Doris came to realize that she must humble herself and settle down to learn something about her traditional history and culture. That required patience" (184). Thus, she prepared herself to be more resilient. The conditioning and the indoctrination among the Stolen Generation was very strong. She reveals:

It took me ten years to actually sit down and start my journey of healing, which was necessary for me to reconnect to my land and to reclaim my language and culture. It took ten years, because the conditioning was so strong that I had to metaphorically go through it all again, undo all that conditioning and come back. (206)

She was able to break the negative conditioning thrust on her and forge an identity for herself. Though it was a Herculean task to detonate the thick concrete wall of indoctrination ingrained in her 'self', Doris was able to recollect and realise her misconceptions about her past. At first, Doris misunderstood that she had been handed over to the government by her mother. Later on, she was told by her mother that she had been taken from her and as an Aboriginal mother, she had no rights to claim her children: "If the Government wanted your children, you had no right to prevent their removal. You just sat down to cry and mourn for your lost children. There was nothing else to do" (205). She recalls how she was not allowed to speak "black fella language" and says:

Mardu people who spoke my traditional language were called 'primitives 'and uncivilized'. That was the beginning of the conditioning, the negative stereotyping against my own family. When the caste system was introduced,

they graded us like cattle. We were octoroons, with one eighth Aboriginal blood, or quarter cast or half — caste. Light skinned children were conditioned to look down on their own people. The caste system caused a lot of trauma, right through to when they were adults, because they were discriminating against their own relations, their own brothers and sisters. (205)

Doris Pilkington explicates the *raison d'être* of writing her story and her mother's story: "Not all of us are asking for compensation in terms of money, but what we need are support and recognition, and acceptance of our shared histories. We need to teach the children, break down the negative stereotypes so we can get on with enjoying our rights as other people do in this country" (207). Doris subtly informs about the loss of heritage that the Stolen Generation had been forced to have by means of altered history through the example of her sister Anna. Doris says: "She was given an altered vision of her history and I think she prefers that" (207).

Doris became broken-hearted when she learnt about Gerry's affairs with another lady. But she never lost her hope: "She was determined to suffer in silence and prayed to the Lord for strength and guidance and deliverance from this impossible situation" (175). Though the ups and downs in her life caused mental agony to her, she "refused to accept defeat. She was a fighter and that fighting spirit had manifested itself at her premature birth. But most of all, she had hope; the very substance of life itself and where there is hope, there will always be life and love" (176). When the children saw the silent suffering of their mother, they suggested Doris to leave their father. Encouraged by them, she took that drastic step in her life — to separate from her husband. She beautifully narrates:

As the sun was setting over the blue-green sea she sat watching one of the beautiful sunsets she had ever seen. With the swift twilight came her decision, it was time to make a drastic change in her life. ...Like her mother, Molly Kelly, she had the determination and the strength to confront any new challenge and, when spring returns, you can be sure that Doris Pilkington will once again be walking amongst beautiful wildflowers somewhere in this wonderful country of ours, celebrating the resurrection of life itself. (199)

As an indigenous woman with intrinsic association with nature, she takes her life's decisions influenced and inspired by nature. Thus, Doris was able to recognize herself as a "self-existent entity" as perceived by Patrick D Murphy in his "Ecofeminist Dialogics." He says: "Only by recognizing the existence of the

‘other’ as a self-existent entity can we begin to comprehend a gender heterarchical continuum in which difference exists without binary opposition and hierarchical valorization” (194) and continues to insist that “It is not just recognition of a male ... It would also mean female recognition of a woman not only as the other but also as a self.” (195)

Doris spreads the message of hope to the victims of the Stolen Generation, especially the women, who bore the brunt of the institutionalisation, through her metaphorical observation of life.

The journey of healing and the healing process is similar to the wintamarra tree, my birthplace. When I was born here there was one tree, now, because over the years it died, four others have replaced it. This is in fact the story of life — you lose one part of your life and you get others coming through, stronger. This is a message I give to the members of the Stolen Generation, particularly the women. We all now need to develop our spirituality, this is making us stronger, and we are going to be the leaders of the movement to heal our people. (208)

The Wintamarra tree plays a seminal role in her life. As the representative of Stolen generation women who have inseparable bonding with nature, who was born and brought in the lap of nature, Pilkington could not write her narrative without talking about the integral part played by nature in her life. There are two chapters titled on wintamarra tree as ‘Tree of Life’ — when she talks about her birth and ‘The Healing Tree’ — when she talks about her rebirth. Nature becomes the part and parcel of her life as a companion, as a mentor, and above all, as a healer. She identifies her true self in nature and through nature:

The Wintamarra tree of my birthplace is a permanent reminder of the beginning of my life, and of the wonderful lady who gave birth to me here on the ground in the traditional way, so my connections to the land are very strong. The cycle will go on, like the family, the old people go and the younger ones come up. Although the tree at my birthplace is dead, the original tree, its roots are still there down in the earth, and four new trees have grown up. It’s always been there, waiting for me to come and reconnect to my birthplace.” (208)

As succinctly put by Hooti and Ashrafian, “The environmental texture which we live in plays crucially important and inevitable roles in our physical and emotional

patterns that determine our thoughts of who we are” (79), the ‘Wintamarra tree’ becomes the symbol of hope, resurrection and revival of life for Doris Pilkington.

Conclusion

The life writing of Doris Pilkington reveals her successful attempts to overcome her feeling of deprivation. It reveals the equanimity achieved by her through self-introspection and revelation for which Nature acts as a stimulus. She is empowered to achieve healing through her powerful connect with nature which proves to be her mentor and healer. As affirmed rightly, “The change in direction from a situation of domination and hierarchy to a different world order wherein collaboration and collective action is recognized as essential is one of the major tenets of ecofeministic ideology” (Usha 170), Pilkington’s life writing, that speaks about her revival of Aboriginal roots, strengthens its relevance to this ideology closely. Her portrayal of indigenous life before and after colonialisation attests to the inherent symbiosis of women and nature and the mutual give and take the indigenous women practice — the “reciprocation,” their intrinsic qualities such as judicious sharing of resources, maternal care, amazing endurance, resilience, fierce braving against odds, and their resurrection validate their wonderful resonance with nature.

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