Constructing Critical Consciousness by Disputing History: Philip Noyce's Landmark Movie Rabbit Proof Fence

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Abstract : This article discusses how the movie Rabbit Proof Fence, directed by Philip Noyce, revises the history of Australia by dramatizing the historical incidents of the stolen children. The film exposes the racism that operated in the Australian government machinery from 1901 to 1970 in the policy of forceful removal of native children from their families and assimilating them to the white society causing considerable trauma to both the displaced children and the family members of the indigenous communities. The cinematic strategies employed by the director to offer a compelling discourse of the past are discussed. The broader contexts of the movie, the stolen children report of 1977 and the 'history wars' between right-wing and left-wing historians are also analysed. Drawing on the concepts of historical revisionism, this article attempts to understand the contribution the cinema makes to the process of building a nation on the lines of an inclusive democracy, accommodating the aspirations of all communities.

Keywords **-** Australia, revisionism, stolen generation, history wars, assimilation, racism

History is a dialogue with the past, not a monolithic understanding of it; our understanding of the past has to be subjected to constant revision and re-visions as the very essence of history is to clarify our perceptions not just about the past, but about the present too, to ascertain how the past works in the present. It has more to do with finding solutions to the pressing issues of the present than with simply answering questions about the past. Australia is a land where negotiating the past faithfully and being open-ended about its history of colonialism is integral to build the nation along the true principles of democracy upon which the nation-state purports to build itself. A nation has to constantly engage with the past critically and truthfully, which must inform its politics and direction. *Rabbit Proof Fence*, directed by Christopher Noyce, and released in 2002, engages with the troubled history of aboriginal dispossession, material, cultural and spiritual. The movie introduced the 'history wars', which enraged academia for many decades, into the popular imagination. This paper analyses the aspects of historical revisionism the movie engages with and the cinematic tools employed to 're-vision' the past.

Historical revisionism refers to reinterpreting widely held historical understandings of the past because new evidence and refined perceptions emerge out of historical debates and discussions. In a sense, all history is revisionist history because the very attempt to construct a narrative about the past offers new perceptions about the past. Revisionism is the very nature of the process of a true attempt to understand the past; history has to be refined and perceived with multiple viewpoints thereby providing room for different perceptions. Historical revisionism enables the subjugated voices, suppressed by the dominant discourse, to gain visibility and traction. Historian James M McPherson describes:

> …revision is the lifeblood of historical scholarship. History is a continuing dialogue, between the present and the past. Interpretations of the past are subject to change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning…The unending quest of historians for understanding the past…is what makes history vital and meaningful. (McPherson)

How to represent the colonial past has been a contentious issue in Australia and is an enduring debate, something which is still going on, debated in various platforms, in academic circles, in movies, TV shows, and other popular cultural expressions. The resistance to negative representations of Australia with regard to the colonial past and the treatment of Australia's indigenous people has been a strong cultural current in Australia and has got much political significance as it is a matter of great importance in defining the nation. How to characterise the colonial encounter is the issue; should it be characterized as a violent destruction of self and identity of the natives or a negligible conflict between the colonialists and the Indigenous people? Liberal and right-wing Australians take a strong stand against categorizing the conflict as having involved events like conquest, invasion, genocide, etc. These are some of the common themes that run through most representations of European colonial encounters in other parts of the world. A strong need to represent the encounter as mutually beneficial and marked by the white government's genuine intent to establish an inclusive nation has considerable traction among the public. But at the same time, there are several left-wing historians and intellectuals, both non-indigenous and indigenous, who argue that a truthful evaluation of past reveals that the colonial encounter has been violent and marked by injustice, dispossession, exploitation, and cultural genocide. They argue that even after Australia became a federation in 1901 many policies aimed at the welfare of the indigenous people caused considerable trauma to them. Several historians pointed out that the writing of Australian history is incomplete and not based on facts but on romantic ideas. An Australian anthropologist Professor W.E.H. Bill Stanner coined the term "Great Australian Silence" to signify the deficiency in Australian history of the voices of the First nation people. This movement in Australian historiography to view its past from the perspective of the marginalized has parallels with the subaltern historiography of South Asia and the Native American historiography in America. Postmodern tendency to dismantle grand narratives dismissed dominant Australian historiography as a mere fantasy of the white man who intends to assert Western cultural superiority. Interpretation of Australian history by focusing on its 'silences' became a major theme for movies post-2000. One such movie is *Rabbit Proof Fence* which captivated the attention of the audience world over with a powerful human story. The movie refreshed the history debate specifically with regard to the stolen generation. The movie was instrumental in renewing public attention to the government report on stolen generations titled "Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Children Report" released in 1977.

Rabbit Proof Fence revisits the controversy surrounding the discourse of stolen generations, a hot topic of debate that defines the politics and engagement of the indigenous people of Australia with the nation. The immediate context that sparked the movie is the 1997 government report mentioned above. The report investigated the government policy of removing native children from families during 1910-1971 and the enduring trauma such a policy caused to the separated children and their families even generations after. The report highlighted the structural violence perpetrated against the first nation's people after the colonial period. The injustice is systematically enabled and the report tried to scientifically verify the concerns of many indigenous groups whose pressure led the government to institute a commission for inquiry into the stolen generation's dilemma. The report documented specifically the impact of government policies from 1910 to 1970 during which period many aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their families. This government policy of assimilation is now viewed as the practice of racism based on the belief in Western racial and cultural superiority. The report generated renewed discussion about the institutionalized injustice meted out to the aboriginals. Institutionalized injustice is invisible because it comes under the category of structural violence. Winter and Leighton observe that structural violence is "is almost always invisible, embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience. Structural violence occurs whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic or cultural traditions. Because they are longstanding, structural inequalities seem ordinary—the way things are and have always been" (p. 99). The movie underlines structural violence inherent in the practice of western legal traditions. The film is a product of collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous subjects: it is based on the work of Daisy's daughter Doris Pilkington-Garimara's book *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* and the director of the movie Christopher Noyce is a white man. The nature of production speaks of a national context in which the issue of the stolen generation and all other institutionalized injustices inflicted upon the indigenous people are not just the trauma of the first nation peoples but part of the collective sensibility of the nation. Finding answers and solutions to atone for the wrongs of the past is essential for the nation to fulfill its democratic aspirations.

Rabbit Proof Fence tells the story of the miraculous escape from a containment zone in Moore River Native Settlement in the year 1931 by three young female indigenous half-caste children, Molly Craig, Daisy Craig and their cousin Gracie. They were held there because of the government policy of relocating children born on the relationship between white father and indigenous mother. The policy was not to give rise to an 'unwanted third race', relocating the half-caste from their indigenous families and assimilating them into Western society and culture was deemed to be the solution. Jigalong , the town nearby the native place of these children, lay along the rabbit proof fence which the Australian government built during that time to ward off rabbits from entering the farmlands. The children ended up in the settlement because the Chief Protector of Western Australian Aborigines issued an order for the capture and rehabilitation of these children. As a result they were forcibly removed from Jigalong and taken to the settlement. The three children ran away from the settlement and started off a journey to walk all the way back to their native place making use of the fence for navigation. Meanwhile, a skilled tracker Moodoo was assigned with the task of finding the children and taking them back, a task in which he eventually fails. On the journey they were helped by aboriginal women, men and white men who were working on the fence. Fighting all odds, the children, except Gracie, who was caught on the way, reached their destination and reunited with their family and evaded recapture by disappearing into the remote desert. This emotionally compelling human story of a great survival riveted the audience world over and sparked debates in Australia concerning how to represent Australian history. The cinema is considered as a significant moment in the history of Australian cinema as it inaugurated what came to be widely recognised as the entry of history into Australian cinema.

The movie is based on the recorded, real-life story of Molly Craig, her younger sister Daisy and their cousin Gracie who undertook a 1500-mile journey to escape containment in 1931. These girls were removed by force from their native place Jigalong and taken to Moore River native settlement north of Perth. The scene is depicted in the movie to effect strong emotional response from the audience: the police man, Riggs, chases the children while they, along with their mothers, run to escape into the bushes. He literally wrenches them from the hands of their mothers and throws into the police vehicle and drives away. The removal was the result of the Australian government's proclaimed policy of transforming and "breed out the color" of the children born out of the union between indigenous woman and white men, named as "half-castes". As the officer in charge of aborigines in Western Australia, A.O. Neville proclaims the aim is to "breed out the color" in order to wipe out the undesirable presence of a third race in the country. Their escape and follow the rabbit-proof fence to journey back home and the hardships they face forms the plot of the movie.

The children, the protagonists of the film, were forcibly removed from their family and community by the white authorities in order to assimilate the half-caste children into western culture by systematically erasing their native identities. The cinema chronicles the long journey of these children fighting all odds and challenges posed by nature and distance. The movie is grounded in the national history of Australia and adds to the controversial debate about the stolen generation, which we have discussed in the introductory stages of this article. The cinema specifically addresses the production of indigeneity in media and tends to displace various notions associated with Indigenous people and their history. The movie offers a corrective perception to the Australian people with regard to the history and condition of Indigenous people in present-day Australia as the trauma of the former's existence could be traced back to specific historical incidents in the past. The quest for home has metaphorical significance as well; the story can be viewed as the triumph of human will against inimical forces.

The relationship between western settlers and aborigines of Australia has always been an inconsistent one in which the former were always at the receiving end, subjected to exploitation, loss of culture, language and identity. The policies charted out by the colonizers ranged from segregation to forcible displacement and cultural erasure through the practice of cultural assimilation. The stolen generation, a tragic consequence of the ill-fated policies of the white government, haunts the first nation people even in the present times of state-sponsored welfare measures to address the issues of the natives. The stolen generation is deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination of Australian consciousness and has been a source of creative imagination, with numerous films and media productions thematize the issue in a wide variety of ways post 2000.

Environment is a key feature in Australian cinema. The nature depicted is rugged and intractable which the hero negotiates with great exertion, finally emerging victorious. This is categorized as gothic mode. There is another tradition of representation of the environment in Australian cinema that views the environment with less hostility and fear. The environment depicted is more feminine and emotional that aids and assists the person who tries to cope with it, providing succor and comfort. The environment

depicted in the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* critically problematises the representation of Australia in its dominant narrations. By focusing on three female indigenous protagonists and their struggle for survival in the outback environment, the narrative re-visions Australian landscape and its emotional import. The emotive impact of the landscape conveys the stolen generation experience more evocatively than what a plain historical narration can do. Alexa Weik von Mossner writes : "…while aiming for a realistic portrayal of the physical hardship of the outback, Noyce also uses that cinematic environment strategically to reinforce viewers' emotional attachment to its young Aboriginal heroines and, ultimately, to push a political argument that runs counter to the conservative national ideology that informs much of traditional Australian landscape cinema" (p. 248). Using environment Noyce re-visions dominant ideology of the nation that tries to cover up its past and the treatment the nation meted out to the natives.

The cinema takes its name from the fence that was erected in south coast of Western Australia, functioning as an obstruction to rabbit hordes. The fence turns out to be the life-line for the three young escapees as they use it as a physical line in the vast landscape that would take them home because they knew that the fence extends beyond their native place. Many Australians until they watched the film had no idea about the stolen children or the history of aboriginals in Australia. The movie struck them as a shock that elevated their sensibility to a sudden recognition of history, consequent alteration in their subjectivity and their idea about their place in the nation.

Reworking certain key elements from Australian cinema, the lost child and the tracker, and altering their popular signification, Noyce delivered a shock to non-indigenous viewers with regard to their perception of the land. The popular meaning of the lost child image in Australian imagination represents settler anxieties about being lost in and antagonistic and unfriendly environment, but in the movie, Molly desperately wants to go back to her land and she is not lost in the land; it's her confidence in the land to which she feels a sense of deep belonging that gives her the strength to undertake the arduous trip. An aboriginal child can never get lost in the outback. Collins and Davis writes in their subtle analysis of the movie: "This new approach to the Australian landscape is central to the film's radical inversion of the meaning of lost-child films, for it actively allows for and Aboriginal notion of 'country', i.e., belonging to particular areas of land, having customary obligations to that land and being physically and emotionally affected when you are taken from your 'country'"(p.45). *Rabbit Proof Fence* counteracts against the popular meaning of the lost child image by presenting a powerful image of native resistance and ultimate success.

The representation of A.O. Neville, though criticised by many for its caricature like depiction, thematizes the deep current of thought that runs through western ideology, that it is the burden of the white man to civilize the world. The mission undertaken with passion and true intent is based on the strong belief of Neville that he is doing something for the benefit of the aborigines. The caricatured depiction serves the purpose of Neville appearing as a representative of an ideology than an individual negotiating law and responsibility. The scene in which Neville gives a lecture to a white audience regarding the 'half-caste' problem contextualizes the whole cinema in the western ideological enterprise and its racist dimension. The subsequent demonstration of 'how to breed out the half-caste' reminds one of the arguments of eugenics which informed fascism world over. Neville lectures, "…every aborigine born in this state come under my control notice, if you will, the half-caste child, and there are ever-increasing numbers of them. Now, what is to happen to them? Are we to allow the creation of an unwanted third race? Should the coloureds be encouraged to go back to the black or should they be advanced to white status and be absorbed in the white population?" (Noyce, 11:59-12:26). A little while later he explains, displaying a photograph of three generations of people of aboriginal and white parentage, how intermarriage among white and indigenous people simply bred out the black color. These brief scenes depict how dehumanizing the western ideological enterprise was and how man-made laws reduced human beings to just names on paper and their destiny controlled by an officer's few remarks and signature on a paper. Objectification and dehumanization are the twin strategies employed by the ideological enterprise to wipe out aboriginal population.

The fence in the movie exemplifies the anthropocentric world-view that characterises western belief system. The rabbits were not native to the land. They were introduced by the Europeans and then they proliferated in a conducive environment, causing large-scale destruction of vegetation. The fence to keep out rabbits from farmlands is symbolic of the cultural invasion that proved detrimental to the land. For the Europeans Australia is *terra nullius* i.e. empty land that has to be tamed and occupied; the inhabitants there are dangerous and need to be vanquished if the empty land is to be inscribed with meaning and purpose. Grant Rodwell writes, "Colonial process of appropriation was largely based on myths of human and cultural emptiness" (p. 198). To acknowledge the culture of the land and aboriginals as the owners of the land would contradict the myths that enabled conquest and exploitation. The anthropocentric world-view that enables man with sufficient myths and beliefs to ruthlessly exploit the land and its people is in stark contrast with the inclusive world-view of the natives who live in harmony with nature. What operates in native world-view is a "cosmology of interrelatedness", where everything is interconnected and humans have not special right or status. This world-view is powerfully expressed in the movie and problematises the historical consciousness of the white American who perceive western culture and ideology as superior, in whose sensibility Eurocentric notions operate consciously and unconsciously. The movie thus targets the historical sensibility of the non-indigenous Australian whose very subjectivity is constructed by a lack of understanding of the nation's past.

The greatest significance of *Rabbit Proof Fence* is that it entered the fiercely fought 'history wars' that aims at defining the Australian nation. The film definitely revealed the ideological underpinnings of the colonial enterprise and the Australian federation and invited both negative and positive criticism. However, the artwork was instrumental in prompting the nation to review its past and make critical judgments. Noyce employs an approach of making the local story universal by bringing in an array of cinematic strategies and ensuring that viewers identify empathetically with the characters even though they are not aware of the historical background. The essential historical context is charted out in the initial titles of the movie, but even without noticing that the powerful human story is appealing to viewers belonging to diverse backgrounds. The cinematic effect is achieved mainly by evocatively representing land as reflecting the mentality of the characters, be it the aboriginals or the white settlers. The cinema owes its success to its universality; it is possible for the audience to relate themselves to the story irrespective of its local and historical specificity. The director explains in an interview that halfway through reading the screenplay, the characters ceased to be black or white, they were just children wanting to return to their mothers and he thought this was a film that had to be made. The hand-held camera shot in key moments enabled the viewer to immerse oneself in the body of Molly. As Molly walks to Neville for inspection the viewers hear the sound of the intensified breath of molly. The exaggerated breath is at once diegetic and non-diegetic, it overflows from the screen and occupy the inside of the viewer, and the viewing experience is that of an empathetic identification

with the emotions of Molly. This is the moment the viewer who is not aware of the historical experience of the stolen generation enters history; the all too common feeling of empathy that the viewer feels becomes the pathway through which history enters subliminally to the consciousness of a non-indigenous viewer. History enters the nation's political consciousness not as a sudden revelation of hitherto hidden knowledge of the past but through empathetic identification with an existential moment in the aboriginal experience of colonialism. As to an Australian non-indigenous viewer the moment of revelation alters his perception both of his identity and the relationship with the Australian land and culture.

A major criticism levelled against the movie hinges on the depiction of A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of the Aborigines of Western Australia. As Jane Lydon analyses: "In too easily feeling for, feeling as the child taken from her mother, the film fails to articulate a coherent critique of the assimilationist program in which all settler Australians are implicated; the figure of A.O.Neville is shown as a 'slightly misguided and idiosyncratic fool' rather than a symptom of an entire culture of indigenous devaluation'. Such appropriation has served as a powerful colonial strategy, subsuming Aboriginality into an inclusive nation state while leaving the status quo unchallenged." (146) The answer to the criticism is there in the phrase "subsuming Aboriginality into an inclusive nation-state". The film addresses the practical imperatives of inclusiveness that a democratic nation aims at and simply finds a solution to the lack of historical consciousness prevalent among the non-indigenous people with regard to the colonial past of the land. Using popular media and a visual language of Hollywood that the Australian society is familiar with the film kick starts a consciousness of corrective thinking in the society. Ethnographic studies prove that popular media initiatives that engage with powerful human stories have got the potential to alter perceptions and ensure progressive political participation tolerant and appreciative of differences and encourage self-criticism, a vital component that ensures the democratic functioning of a society.

To answer the criticism that the movie does not challenge the status quo an ethnographic analysis has to be done among the viewers of the film. Going by the reception of the movie and the way in which many viewers responded to the movie suggests the trend that the movie has definitely impacted the society into thinking about self and the nation differently. The production of the cinema itself was a self-discovery moment for the director who barely thought about the existence of the aborigines before he encountered the script of the movie in strange circumstances (Pendreigh). If the making of the movie was a revelatory moment for the director that altered his own perception of his identity and the nation, the impact it made on the audience is also self-explanatory. It is a "status quo" change in subjective perception that resulted in the very making of the movie. There are subversive elements in the movie that lends complexity to the narrative. There are ordinary white men in the movie who could have easily turned informers. They are testimony to the internal criticism inherent in and run counter to the ideology of dominance and cultural superiority; the proletarian white man who negotiates the outback is one with the land and its inhabitants. The activity of these men is in a sense deconstructive of the extreme insensitivity and coldness of western civilizational enterprise blind to the value of native life and culture formed through centuries of negotiation with nature and land. Isolated and alone, consigned to negotiate the land and its inhabitants, including both the human inhabitants and the animal ones, these white men's selves thump to the rhythm of the land to which the aboriginal life is an integral part. They do not participate in the colonial ideological mission, instead they reshape their identities by trying to feel the land and its inhabitants and tell a different tale that springs from the depths of human self. It is not just the white workers at the fence who behave with sympathy and compassion but also the white man in charge of distributing the ration to the aboriginals in Jigalong shows his oneness with the land and the people by conveying the news of the escape of the girls to their mother and relatives. These white men who refuse to participate or play their roles in the colonial narrative enterprise by behaving counter to its aims is indicative of the fact that principles of humanism too percolated to these lands during the time of colonialism and which in turn proved effective tools for the dominated to orchestrate resistance movements and dissent. Colonialism was not thus a one-way movement of complete domination and oppression; it was a discursive enterprise that entered into critical negotiations with indigenous structures of thought and epistemes in various micro-contexts where there was space for both subversive activity within the colonial enterprise and curating resistance among the dominated.

In conclusion the cinema presents aboriginal life very positively by contrasting it with the western culture which is shown as insensitive and anti-human, incapable of understanding the value and worth of indigenous cultures, which they purport to systematically destroy through the policies of assimilation and appropriation. The representatives of aboriginal life in the movie, Molly and her family, live in tune with nature while the western culture appears destructive and out of touch with the rhythm of natural life. It appears as cruel and a destructive imposition both for human life and nature, metaphorically signified by the rabbit-proof fence erected for preventing rabbits from crossing over to farm lands. The mammoth task achieved by the little girls, covering 1500 miles of hostile Australian outback, helped both by aboriginal woman and sympathetic proletarian white men, stands testimony to the survival skills of the aborigines. Their cultural identity is derived from the deep union they establish with their environment and the way they spiritually merge with the land and the beings in it. The cinematic strategies employed – the use of stunning visuals of Australian landscape, evocative background score, relying more on facial expressions than dialogues etc. – create an ambiance that makes viewing an empathetic identification with the experience of the girls. Historical awareness turns out to be experiencing the emotions of the past. It is said that artistic works can take us directly to experiential contact with how people in the past felt about their lives. Taking the viewers into such a deep communion with the past, shattering their sensibility with and emotional experience and making them think critically about the nation, is the achievement of the movie. This is precisely the reason why the cinema created controversy and reignited the debates about the complex issue of how to represent the history of the nation. The historical merits of the cinema hinge on its potential for immediate impact on the audience, especially white Australian audience, who lacks a proper sense of the past; the cinema becomes a medium through which historical sensibility is generated within the dominant community. The audience knowingly or unknowingly grapples with the idea of the past and thinks about events of the past that influence the present. A sense that understanding past is crucial for finding a solution to the problems of the present is spawned within the social mind by the powerful and compelling representations in the cinema. The techniques of verisimilitude that the cinema employed with realistic costumes and historical recreation of setting, makes us believe that what is shown on screen is something that really happened in the past. The seductive capacity of the film rests on the aspect that it is a composite media, a confluence of visuals, sound, dialogue and many other cinematic strategies. Well-executed cinema can give us a shock treatment, altering our perceptions and ideas about the past. The cinema's visceral qualities can impact our consciousness no other medium can, demonstrating to us how to make sense of the world. Cinema has a powerful 'reality effect' and can impact people's sensibility on a deeper level. Cinemas that convey ideological messages achieve more in correcting perceptions and structural inequalities.

Rabbit Proof Fence has achieved that by giving the audience a shock treatment by offering the non-indigenous audience profoundly unsettling visions about the past of the nation.

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