



## Ethnic Strife and Schizoid Tendencies: A Reading of Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*

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### ABSTRACT

*The most distressing experience of individuals in a society torn by different conflicts is the feeling of estrangement or isolation. In an ambiance of ethical and cultural decay, many find themselves cut off from their roots, separated and lost. Having been truncated from a foot hold, due to communal pulls one fumbles in a state of utter boondocks unable to secure a grip on the forces of life. Society which has to be consistent becomes unfamiliar, bizarre, dangerous and discordant due to the tendency to bulldoze the individual into a faceless non-entity. It is this discriminating sense that causes loneliness and alienation. Alienation originates due to conflicts. Jeannette Armstrong, a native Canadian writer through her novels has brought out the discrimination and deprivations of the Native Canadian community. This paper focuses on the various powers and ideological divisions in society that keep the aborigines of Canada out of the mainstream and cause alienation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Native Canadians, aborigines, alienation, conflict

Jeannette Armstrong (b.1948), an Okanagan Indian, grew up on the Pentiction Indian Reserve in British Columbia, is the first Native woman novelist from Canada. As a campaigner for Aboriginal rights, Armstrong serves as an international observer to the continental coordinating commission of Indigenous people and organizations. Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Slash* (1985) traces the growth of a single main protagonist as he struggles with social and psychological pressures to maintain a positive sense of identity and community in a rapidly changing world. Thomas Kelasket, the central character in Armstrong's *Slash* is torn between various conflicts that make him feel alienated. He finds himself inside a mare. He struggles hard to get liberation and emancipation. Thus he is in a state of psychological paralysis. The present paper, traces the various powers and ideological divisions in society that keep the aborigines of Canada out of the mainstream and cause alienation.

Every society has access to natural assets such as land, water, minerals, flora and fauna. They have cultural sanctions for formatting the rights and duties associated with that property. Among the marooned societies, land is considered as main property and beneficial in different ways. Numerous tribal groups lost their prime resource of earnings, as the settlers in Canada usurped their lands, resorted to force, and pushed the original inhabitants to the far-flung reserves. The landless people encounter untold sufferings. Deprivation of land leads to political, economic, social and ideological conflicts.

In Armstrong's novel *Slash*, Thomas Kelasket's sense of being is secured by his relationship to the land he lives on. He enjoys working in the land of his family's ranch much more than studying in school. But the Native bond with their land is blatantly ignored by the White settlers. The novel describes the nineteenth century itinerary that the deracinated Native tribes in the United States took when the White settlers forced them out of their ancestral land. The incident draws attention to the crucial role land occupies, in the culture of the Natives and the fear of dislocation. Relating the severe hardships his ancestors have faced, Thomas Kelasket assumes, "I thought it must have been terrifying and horrible to be put in a place where you didn't even know what plants to eat and what medicine to use with the weather making everybody so sick all the time and lots dying" (96).

When Natives in Canada plan a people's caravan from Vancouver to Ottawa, to make the government recognize the land claim matter by peacefully protesting against, poor housing, education, high suicide, death rates and low economic opportunities, the Canadian government reacts very shabbily. The press coverage it arranged distorted Indians and discredited the caravan, so that the power of their real intentions would be neutralized. On their way to parliament hill in Ottawa, some scoundrels are employed to join them. They started to shout and put up banners with comic jargon. They made the whole thing to look like communist spawned. In the final analysis, the purpose of the caravan is mislaid and the Natives lost the support they have gained from the people across Canada.

Cultural conflict creates vast problems among the older and younger generations of the Native Canadians. Refusing either to incorporate or to get lost, some Natives try to assert their Native identity and declare, "We'd rather be 'Red' than dead" (54). Only a small number of them thrive in living and thinking 'Red', while the majority dress and talk like Indian, but think 'White'. Similar to the Whites, the young Native men and women tend to disregard and ignore the words of their elders. Thomas Kelasket says that the Native boys never ask the Native girls to dance with them at 'sock-hops' only because the White guys didn't. To Maracle, "The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level" (20). By failing to accept the humanity of their elders, women, and their own worth, Natives could not be truly 'Red'. Thomas Kelasket's older cousin Joe says that in residential schools Native children are beaten up for talking Indian and that these schools make people mean from being forlorn, famished and cold.

In its zeal to root out the tradition, the White majority undertakes methodical brainwashing of the aborigines through educational institutions set up specifically for this purpose. In *Slash*, Thomas Kelasket is in search of his own identity. His family clings to traditional Okanagan life, one that includes pow-wows and hunting. Although some of his friends tease him, Thomas Kelasket clandestinely admits that he likes talking the Okanagan language and attending the pow-wows. Thomas Kelasket goes to a White school that tries to assimilate him into White ethnicity. The school in which he learns is a place famous for its horrid practice of racism and hatred. His encounter with intolerance does not end with school. After attending a racist school, he is forced to enter a racist society. He endeavors to overcome his suffering through alcohol, drugs and political activity but these outlets do not assuage his pain and despondency. It brings a sense of estrangement and lack of purpose in him.

The present-day Native Canadian mores, unlike the old one, is chaotic, mystified and torn with several contradictions. In *Slash* the series of journeys that Thomas Kelasket embarks upon, plots his growth as a person, awareness of himself and his place in the world. He leaves the place of cultural sanctity to attend school off of the reservation, which alienates him from his cultural practices. He experiences a dichotomy in feelings between his cultural worth and the pull of the entrepreneurial consumerism of the colonizer society. He feels, "ashamed at school because we didn't have TV and a new car" (26). It is at the White school that he learns shame in association with what he does not possess. Thus, Thomas Kelasket is awakened to the entrepreneurial consumer ethics, in contrast to the Indian ways, which has good feelings tied to it. Thomas Kelasket's friend Jimmy, who does not live "up-the hill" (26) like the former, believes that those that do live there are "stupid and old-fashioned" (26). Jimmy dislikes his Native heritage as he has faced ostracism at school for it. So does Thomas Kelasket, but his father has advised him to be proud of Indian. The raging conflict within the mind between pride and love for his Okanagan culture and the shame that they are condescension by the White kids in town, finds expression in

Pra-cwa's words, "ever since those young people went to school away from home, they are changed. They don't like our ways. May be it's because they only know English. They are ashamed of everything Indian. . . they got no pride" (25).

Mardi, the girl friend of Thomas Kelasket, points out the magnitude of the problem faced by the Natives, when she tells him that the Whites give them only two choices, "Assimilate or get lost" (70). Those who try to elude oppression by appropriating White ways, paradoxically end up feeling extremely oppressed. The psychological damage is so extensive that some of the marginalized do not want to reveal their identity. Jimmy for instance, rejects his Native heritage and desperately tries to end as one of "brown white man," (69) their society wants them to be.

Indigenous people, have co-operative and self-sustaining lifestyles on their lands. They could survive well in this atmosphere of hostility and detachment. The colonizers are a destructive force to them. Armstrong relates, "Without being whole in our community, on our land, with the protection it has as a reservation, I could not survive" (Beeler 143). The novelist is aware of the intensity of despair and despondency of those who are not whole in a community or still on their own land. She understands the profundity of the annulled and fears as the Indigenous peoples' attachment to the land have begun to give way or surrender.

Any form of oppression or colonialism, is a binary ideology of "Us versus Them" (Said 23) in which 'Us' stands for oppressors or colonizers

and 'Them' for colonized. This frame of mind is present in the novels of Armstrong. Said states, "opposition and resistance to colonialism are enunciated first by culture" (23). In *Slash*, the elders such as Uncle Joe and Thomas Kelasket's parents combat the changes in the village from the beginning itself. They warn the youngsters by adage, worshipping the modernity would destroy them. The Okanagans are forced to obey English laws for hunting and fishing. Resolutions are made by the Department of Indian Affairs offices which are chiefly under English control. Indulgences are given to those Natives who are judged to be more loyal to the English than to their own people.

Poverty or ecological factors are strong determinants of conflict. The dominance of the upper class creates conflicts among the marginalized section. The aborigines quietly slip into a state of corporeal and mental degradation due to exploitation, injustice and favoritism committed by the oppressors. They flounder in a state of estrangement or despair. Undeserved humbleness in the hands of the economic and politically powerful people in extreme cases has resulted up in a fissured or schizophrenic tendency within the marginalized community. They have a deeper sense of acuity of life. They are conscious about the society they live and endure. The individuals basic desire to live equally is lost in coarseness due to the over powering pressure of external factors. Yet, there are positive signs of resistance. The war of nerves continues.

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