

From Fissured Consciousness to Awakening Consciousness: A Reading of Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows*



Literature

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ABSTRACT

The history of mankind from the creation has witnessed that one section is always in the lowest rungs of the society, subjected to exploitation and hardship. The unfortunate aborigines in Canada come under this category. In spite of all the callous measures taken to deny these people space, the benevolent nature does not allow abolition of a race or a culture and a rudiment, has always subsisted to revive, to regenerate, and to take efforts to attain the parental ethnic disposition. The marginalized people, from a state of marginality are moving towards centrality. Jeannette Armstrong, a native Canadian writer through her novels has brought out the key issues in the political, cultural and linguistic struggles of Native Canadians. This paper reveals a process that leads to the formation of a wholesome community where they rediscover their own selves.

Marginalized literature suggests critical approaches to deconstruct the widespread perceptive of domineering upper class dogmas. With the emergence of subaltern studies, the subject matter of history has been transformed to focus on ordinary humanity. Inequity due to racism, casteism and sexism which persevere for generations has resulted in fractured realization and split personality. Spivak states, "The lives of these unhonoured, unsung, unwept people also have the fascination of a great story never yet told, because, after all it is the story of the majority of the human race, speaking not in one but a variety of voices - the voice of the voiceless" (272).

Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan Indian, through her writings discusses the veracity of Okanagan society. She believes that, as a writer, her duty is to up lift the veil which distort the dream of the current state of the global village. Her novel *Whispering in Shadows* is a journey of unearthing the intimate accents that guide the world and human souls. The novel tells the story of Penny Petrone, an Okanagan tribe, involving her journey through life as an artist, environmental activist, mother and casualty of cancer. Through her journey she discovers the multifaceted traditions that eventually go back to the humankind and mother earth.

Penny's paintings renovate imagery from her tradition. Her deep concerns towards ecosystem are seen in her paintings. She feels that art dictates her. As an artist, Penny's paintings reflect the mores. The curator who accesses the paintings asks her whether she would be able to sell her paintings. Penny contradicts that she is not concerned about money. Her only aim is to create some consciousness among the marginalized section. The curator wants to buy her pictures at a very low price. He tells her that art is something only the wealthy can afford and in this business secondary importance should be given to social consciousness. Penny feels offended by the words of the curator. She gets angry and smashes all her paintings.

Reprisal of the aboriginal people is a progression to awakening consciousness. Penny goes to Los Angeles to attend a conference at UCCA. The customs and Immigration man ask her, "Are you Indian? ... How much Indian blood do you have? .. I need to know how much blood you have?" (194). Penny grits her teeth and replies "I'm full of blood. Just cut me and see me." (194). After a series of meetings in Ottawa, the activists decide to go to New York, and to the UN, to seek the support of other countries. The Native Canadians assert that they do not need anybody's establishment and what they have is already their own. They hold rights to their land and to nationhood. They just need to have it documented. The Whites try to make them hand it over by telling them that they have no alternative.

Survival, as a pursuit, depends on the aptitude to put together politics with mysticism. The Whites have the strongest position in Canada because of their, "land claims, to help stop what's going on here" (108). They extend their companies in the colonized land. The resources are controlled by governments who

license out their extraction. In the protest camp, one of the police men keeping some papers in his hands announces that they are breaking the law by creating interference. He also threatens that if they do not disperse immediately they will be arrested. But the elder of the Native men replies calmly, "I am home. This is my home. It always has been and it always will be, regardless of what you do it. I'm here for the duration. Get used to it" (115-16).

The colonizers try to detach the Natives from their land. They fail to realize their, "Reconnection to Earth" (87). David, Penny, Emilio and other activists go to San Cristobel to attend a meeting. They are informed to lock their room and, to carry passports, money and camera wherever they go. They are asked not to drink or wash their mouth with that water. Hearing all the conditions, Penny recalls the reserves where she grew up, "the water we carried in buckets to use was lake run-off. I grew up drinking the water that geese and ducks swam in, and cows and horses watered at, not to mention the beavers and other stuffs" (164). People in the city get affected by various diseases while the Natives do not.

Globalization has created havoc among the marginalized community. When Julie and Penny discuss about, free enterprise the later tells Julie human mind always search for treasure. She elucidates the word enterprise to Julie, "ENTER and PRIZE. The prize is money or power, which equate to each other. No matter how cute the rules work. There is always a boss in command" (77). Penny brings out the draw backs of free enterprise. Competitions make the manufacturers to produce more than the required quantity. The manufacturers sell their stuffs and leave the place. Due to competition, merchandise has to be made cheaper and hence they produce stuffs in lower quality. The whole idea of Free enterprise is that anybody can become rich. Everybody believes in that dream. They work all their lives towards it, without realizing the problems it would create. The colonizers pollute the environment and plunder the resources. Everyone realizes that free enterprise is a mere fantasy. Suppression does not degrade the pride of the Native Canadian women in their work. The textile co-op is a Mayan women's organization. They are weavers and make wool and cotton. They stitch the garments and other products on manual. The work consumes more time to spin and dye. The products fashioned by the weavers are of the highest quality.

The Natives are proud of their rich heritage and culture. They have renewed their traditions and are grateful to God for bestowing them a new day. Susapeen, the great grandmother of Penny tells her that the world is new, "Today we are here, but the shadows follow us in the bright of day. Take care to wrap the light around you. To let it keep you warm. To greet it and give thanks each new day . . . we will chase the dreams of the others away into the last shadows of night creeping down in the valley" (18-19).

The coffee growers in Canada suffer a lot due to paucity and oth-

er hard ships forced on them by the settlers. They are forced to sell the manufactured goods at a cheap rate. When the Natives try to sell in Mexico City or Vera Cruz the Whites hijack their trucks. So, they outline a proposal for the benefit of the indigenous people in Canada and USA. Emilio summarizes a proposal which would provide some profits to members of their organization. The members of the group are inspired by the proposal and decide to take serious consideration.

Belief in the primitive God comforts the Natives. Ocasingo, is one of the towns the Whites took during their uprising. Helicopter raids drop bomb on these places. The rebels extended their assault to many villages during their fight. They use flame throwers to burn the crops and drop fire bombs on huts which they suspect of the hide out of the rebels. To the people living in Ocasingo, Mexican army men are terrorists. The villagers have no other choice. They pray to mother earth for her blessings.

Penny is strongly rooted in self and community. Her political activities are mixed with spirituality. Survival, thus, acts as a process of restorative for her. When Penny takes physical treatment for cancer, Shanna comforts her. The latter, asks her mother to think positive because the world is getting lot better with more and more new medicines. She strongly affirms her mother that very soon there would not be any more sickness. Penny tells

her, "I'm really sick right now from the drugs they are using to help get body to fight the cancer" (259). She tells Tannis that her body is trying to find a way to transform, to cope with things confronting it. She develops a hope within herself. If the human community is not able to maintain balance, eventually all living thing would mutate to a new balance. Penny writes her last letter to Gard, her friend. Being seriously ill, she is admitted in the hospital. She does not fear the arriving shadow. She tells Gard that one should leap into the void and allow the wind to carry in its own direction. Then only new things could come.

The fissured people assert, "we have not faded into the earth like snow before the summer sun of 'progress' nor have we stagnated in some sort of retrograde time capsule. We have survived and will continue to survive because of, and inspite of, the changes" (Damn 16). The only way for the Native Canadians to regain control is by changing themselves. Empowerment through learning and monetary development could put an end to disparity. The indigenous people in Canada are in a long way being totally in control of their lives. They make a sincere attempt to rediscover their own selves. They undertake a journey within their own selves and through their psychic voyage obtain self assertion

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