Research Paper English

Cultural Resistance Through Children's Literature: a Study on the Children's Works by Select Native American Writers

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ABSTRACT

Culture is acquired by an individual even from his childhood. The values and beliefs acquired by a child forms the important factor which determines his/her future thoughts and beliefs. In most of the societies cultural values and beliefs are passed onto the next generation through the medium of stories. Children can only develop through their experience of the social and physical world and stories forms an important part of that world. In this sense, children's literature can play an important role in making children realize the values, beliefs and rituals of their social groups and its significance. The present paper entitled "Cultural Resistance Through Children's Literature: A Study on the Children's Works by Select Native American Writers" tries to out how far the select Native American writers successfully use the medium of children's literature to propagate and inculcate the rich cultural heritage of Native Americans to the younger generation and to resist the cultural marginalization faced by their community under the dominant white culture.

Culture forms an important part of every society and its members. Raymond Williams in Culture and Society (1981) defines culture as a "whole way of life" of distinct people or other social group. Culture thus includes values, beliefs, attitudes, religion, concepts about universe, material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture is responsible for the production and circulation of social meaning among the members of a society or group. Williams perceives culture as "the signifying system through which necessarily … a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Hesmondhalgh, p.16).

The indigenous people of America can be considered as the most vulnerable preys of colonization. The colonial powers have exploited and marginalized Native Americans on the basis of their culture and race. The Europeans, who invaded their lands, employed various discursive agencies to propagate wrong information and stereotypes about the natives and their culture. Their covert political aim was to make the natives feel inferior about their own culture, to adapt European ways and accept the colonial rule as a benign civilizing act. The colonizers were to a great extend successful in alienating Native Americans from their rich cultural heritage and to assimilate them to the dominant western culture. To ensure native assimilation into dominant European culture the colonizers targeted mainly the native children. Native American children were forcibly taken away by the white authorities and admitted in Indian Boarding Schools run by Christian missionaries. In numerous ways the children were forced to abandon their Native American identities and adopt European-American culture in these schools. They were taught Christianity and denied the right to practice their native religions. These children were inculcated inferior notions about their own indigenous culture and lifestyle. Boarding Schools were meant to separate these young children from the elders in their community who usually transmitted the native cultural values to their young generation. They were compelled to use English language and neglect their native languages. The young generation who were only trained in English found it difficult to comprehend what the elders tried to convey them. This was meant to restrict the indigenous cultural transmittance which was primarily taking place orally. The main objective of westerners was to create a generation of indigenous people with western culture and outlook who will remain subservient to Europeans forever.

The native writers now try to reclaim their culture, rehabilitate its place and deconstruct the misconceptions created by the Europeans. Having aware of the power of literature to influence people, they have chosen literature as a weapon to fight against the cultural and political marginalization which the Native Americans face in their own homeland. These writers try to generate a young generation who are aware of their rich cultural heritage and who are capable of creating a bright future for their community.

Culture is acquired by an individual even from his childhood. The values and beliefs acquired by a child forms the important factor which determines his/her future thoughts and beliefs. In most of the societies cultural values and beliefs are passed onto the next generation through the medium of stories. "The stories, we tell our children, the narratives we give them to make sense of cultural experience, constitute a kind of mapping, maps of meaning that enable our children to make sense of the world. They contribute to children's sense of identity, an identity that is simultaneously personal and social" (Marriot, p.9). Children can only develop through their experience of the social and physical world and stories forms an important part of that world. This emphasizes that stories can play an important role in the process of acculturation. In this sense, children's literature can play an important role in making children realize the values, beliefs and rituals of their social groups and its significance. The present paper entitled "Cultural Resistance Through Children's Literature: A Study on the Children's Works by Select Native American Writers" tries to out how far the select Native American writers successfully use the medium of children's literature to propagate and inculcate the rich cultural heritage of Native Americans to the younger generation and to resist the cultural marginalization faced by their community under the dominant white culture.

Joseph Bruchac is a contemporary Native American writer and story teller with a particular focus on northeastern Native American and Anglo-American lives and folklore. Bruchac's contribution to the field of native children's' literature is praiseworthy. He has published about 100 works for younger children and young adults which tries to inculcate in them the rich cultural heritage and values and beliefs of native communities. His works for children includes anthologies of traditional stories, short stories, picture books and fiction and non-fiction. Bruchac has a great interest in stories and story- telling

which remembers us the oral tradition prevailed among native communities. Most of his stories try to teach the children the native beliefs and concepts about universe. "The Origin of Death" is a story which deals with the origin of the concept of death and the inevitability of death in human beings. In the past stories helped the elders to transmit their cultural values, beliefs, concepts about universe to the next generation. With the arrival of colonizers the native languages were dead and along with it the traditional stories. Thus the next generation of Native Americans trained only in English language was grown without hearing these stories and realizing their rich cultural heritage. Bruchac has collected and published anthologies of traditional stories in simple English. His important traditional story collections include Flying With the Eagle, Racing the Great Bear: Stories From Native North America (1997) which includes 16 rich, thought-provoking Native American tales. Native American Animal Stories (1992), Native Plant Stories (1995), Keepers of the Earth (1988), Keepers of the Night, Keepers of the Life (1997) are his other important collections of traditional stories. Picture books form another important group among his children's works. Bruchac's picture books mainly deals with stories related to Native American myths and helps the children to understand the beliefs and values of their community in a simple and interesting way. His important picture books include The Great Ball Game: A Muskogee Story (1994), Buffalo Song (2007) and The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story (1998). Buffalo Song. deals around a calf which is left alone as the whole herd is killed by white hunters and Walking Coyote, the protagonist who tries to save the vanishing buffalo herds in US during 1870's and 1880's.

Joseph Bruchac has also written non-fiction works for children, which deals with the history of native Indians, negative impacts of colonization, racial discrimination and cultural marginalization faced by Native Americans. Bruchac's Trail of Tears (1999) deals with the forced removal of Native Americans from their homelands following the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and their march towards the new land allotted for them by government. Native Americans suffered exposure, disease and starvation on the route to their destinations and many of them were dead during this journey. This book written in simple English also includes graphics and is used as a social science reader for native children in schools. He has also written novels for children and young adults which deals with the life of Native American societies; how colonization physically and mentally affected the children and the cultural and racial marginalization and discrimination they face in their everyday lives. Eagle Song (1999) deals with the life of a nine year old Danny Bigtree whose family has moved to a new city from the Mohawak reservation. The novel deals around the problems which Danny faces in the new environment; homesickness and teasing from his white classmates and how he finds solution to these problems. Bruchac's fictional works are also based on Native American legends, tales, and myths. Bruchac's other important fictional works includes Heart of a Chief (2001), Hidden Roots (2004) and The Way (2013).

N. Scott Momaday is one of the most celebrated Native American writers, acclaimed for his novel House Made of Dawn which won Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969. Momaday has also contributed to children's literature through various genres like short story, plays and novels.

"Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas Story" by Momaday is one of his important story for children. The story is inspired his own childhood Christmas experiences. The story revolves around Tolo, a mute boy who follows an old man who seems to be his grandfather during a Christmas season. He has also written plays for children. His plays mostly dealt with the problems faced by native children in the past due to Residential school system and about their rich cultural heritage. The Indolent Boys recounts the 1891 tragedy of runaways from the Kiowa Boarding School who froze to death while trying to return to their families. The play explores the consequences, for Indian students and their white teachers, of the federal program to "kill the Indian and save the Man. The Moon in Two Windows, a screenplay set in the early 1900s, centers on the children of defeated Indian tribes, who are forced into assimilation at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where the U.S. government established the first off-reservation boarding school. Children of the Sun is a short children's play that explains the native beliefs and myths about sun.

Lousie Eldrich, widely acclaimed for her contribution in the second wave of Native American Renaissance is another contemporary indigenous writer who writes for the children. She is known for her juvenile fiction novels. Her works for children consists Grandmother's Pigeon, The Range Eternal, Chickadee and two novels under the Birchbark series – The Birchbark House and The Game of Silence. The novels under Birchback series has received rave reviews. Her works also introduces children to the various problems Native Americans faced in the past like epidemics, forced removals and the present racism and discrimination they face in mainstream society. The Birchback House, the first novel in the series published in 1999 revolves around a small Ojibwa girl Omakaya. Omakaya is the sole survivor of a smallpox epidemic on an island and is later adopted by an Ojibwe couple. When she reaches the age of seven, another epidemic endangers her new family and her village again. The novel shows how she realizes that she is a gifted girl with healing power and saves her community. The novel also includes decorative pencil drawings, a map of the Ojibwa community and a glossary of Ojibwa language translations. The second novel in the series The Game of Silence was published in 2005. The novel deals around the arrival of a new group of refugees to Omakaya's village who have been forcibly driven off their land by the federal government. The title "The Game of Silence" refers to the games which elders use to keep the children in the village quiet while the elders are having serious discussions about their future negotiations with the government. The novel ends with the government intimation to Omakaya's village people to leave their home for new land out west. The novel provides information on the various traditional games of Native American communities and the issues of land rights.

Sherman Alexie is another contemporary Native American writer whose writings are mainly drawn out of his experiences as a Native American growing up on an Indian Reservation. His first juvenile novel The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian published in 20007 is semi- autobiographical and has also won the 2007 U.S National Book Award for Young People's Literature. The novel focuses on a fourteen-year-old Indian named Arnold Spirit, born with hydrocephalus, and is teased and bullied by both his own people and the whites for his deformity. Rowdy, a tough kid who saves him form others harassment is the only friend he has. The encouragement given by a reservation high school teacher makes him to join an all-white public high school in the off-reservation town. This decision hurts Rowdy and strains their friendship. Arnold slowly makes white friends and starts to adjust with the new life unlike in the reservation. Later he joins basketball team and plays two games against his former school Wellpinit, and specifically Rowdy. During their first game, Wellpinit wins after Rowdy elbows Arnold in the head and knocks him unconscious. In their second meeting, Reardan wins and Arnold gets to block Rowdy. Arnold believed he wanted to win, but after seeing the Wellpinit players' faces after their defeat, he cries and feels ashamed of himself. The novel ends with the reconciliation of Arnold and Rowdy and their decision to correspond no matter where their future takes them. The novel also deals with the problems of alcoholism, poverty, racism faced by the Native Americans.

By analyzing their works one can understand that these Native American writers have provided a clear picture of Native American history, exploitations and discriminations which they continuously face from the period of colonization through their works. They have successfully tried to inculcate the rich heritage and cultural values of Native American society to the younger children in an interesting way and to make the young generation accept their native culture, to make them to feel proud about their Native American descent.

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