Research Paper English

James Bartleman's As Long As the Rivers Flow : A Critique on Racial and Cultural Marginalization of Native Canadians

PARVATHY.U

RESEARCH SCHOLAR DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH SREE SANKARACHARYA UNIVERSITY OF SANSKRIT KALADY, ERNAKULAM, KERALA

ABSTRACT

Racism can be simply defined or understood as the ill-treatment of certain groups of people on the basis of their race. Racism originates from the ideologically constructed belief in society that certain racial groups are superior and others inferior. This baseless belief has been utilized by many groups to dominate, control and exploit the so called inferior racial groups throughout the history. The Native Indians in Canada is one such group of people who face racial, cultural and political marginalization in society. The colonial powers have exploited and marginalized Native Indians in Canada on the basis of their race and ethnicity. The present paper titled "James Bartleman's As Long As the Rivers Flow : A Critique on Racial and Cultural Marginalization of Native Canadians" " tries to show how far Bartleman is successful in portraying the exploitation faced by Native Canadians at the hands of dominant white people who boasts about civilizing and assimilating natives into the mainstream society.

KEYWORDS Native Canadians, Racism, Residential Schools, Alcoholism, James Bartleman

Racism can be simply defined or understood as the ill-treatment of certain groups of people on the basis of their race. Racism originates from the ideologically constructed belief in society that certain racial groups are superior and others inferior. This baseless belief has been utilized by many groups to dominate, control and exploit the so called inferior racial groups throughout the history. The Native Indians in Canada is one such group of people who face racial, cultural and political marginalization in society. The Europeans, who invaded their lands, employed various discursive agencies to propagate their racial superiority and inferiority of the Native Indians. .European colonizers imposed their rules and regulations to control and restrict Native Canadians. Certain acts passed by white government made natives culturally and politically subservient to their rule. Through Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 and Indian Act of 1876 government tried to assimilate natives into their culture i.e.; to make the natives more like Europeans and to make natives accept their rule. Attempts were made to isolate natives from their land and cultural traditions. As a result the social and political institutions of natives were systematically destroyed by the colonizers. Their covert political aim was to make the natives despise their racial and cultural heritage and to adapt them to European ways and accept colonial rule as a benign civilizing act.

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. 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 children also had to suffer physical, mental and sexual abuse form the school authorities, the trauma of which haunted them forever The present paper titled **"James Bartleman's *As Long As the Rivers Flow* : A Critique on Racial and Cultural Marginalization of Native Canadians"** " tries to show how far Bartleman is successful in portraying the exploitation faced by Native Canadians at the hands of dominant white people who boasts about civilizing and assimilating natives into the mainstream society. The paper focuses mainly on the problems faced by native children in the residential schools- how they were forcibly taken away from their parents in the pretext of civilizing them and the physical, mental and sexual tortures and its trauma that haunted them forever.

As Long As The Rivers Flow (2011) is the first novel by James Bartleman, which is dedicated to the memory of these lost youth, and to their parents and grandparents, many of whom were victims of Canada's notorious residential school system. The novel deals with the plight of children in the Residential schools in Canada which were opened to civilize and assimilate the children into mainstream society. The novel explores the consequences of Canada's residential school system through several generations. Through the novel Bartleman tries to inspire the natives in Canada to forget the past filled with oppression, racial prejudice and agony and start a new beginning for the sake of coming generations.

The novel deals with the life of Martha Whiteduck who was born in Cat Lake reserve and her miserable life in Residential school. The novel portrays how the experiences in residential school negatively affected her life and how at a later stage in life she succeeds in escaping from this trauma. Martha at the age of six is taken to residential school which was six hundred miles away from Cat Lake reserve. She had to witness and suffer innumerable cruelties of the nuns and priests in the school. The native children including Martha were compelled to accept western ways of life and Christianity at the school. They were cruelly punished when they spoke in their native languages. When Martha tries to help her cousin Little Joe who found it difficult to adjust with the new and strange environment of the school, from the beatings of Sister Angelica she is cruelly punished by the nuns.

With the help of another nun, Sister Angelica dragged Martha roughly from the room and down to the basement. There they tied her hands together and attached them with a rope to the overhead hot water pipes. The two of them pulled off her dress and flogged her with electrical cords until her bowels loosened and she fouled her pants. They then untied her , pushed her into the coal cellar and locked the door.

"You dirty savage, never, ever, interfere with our work again. Let's hope this teaches you a lesson" (p.52).

The school authorities boasted about civilizing the native children but did not provide adequate security for the children in the school. Many children including Martha were sexually

abused by a priest named Father Lionel Antoine in the school. He was attracted by prepubescent girls and tried to abuse them. The church authorities transferred him from the church because of the complaints from parents and instead sent him to the residential school. This shows the negligence from the part of church authorities. They were only thinking about the safety of white children and cared less about the poor native children in schools. Father becomes safer in the school as no one believed the complaints of children abused by priest.

The day came, almost inevitably, when he could no longer control himself and he molested a little girl. At first he was afraid because she fled his office in hysterics and told the nuns that he had hurt her. But no one believed her and he realized that he was free to do anything he wanted without fear of sanction. The Indian girls were under his control, and the nuns, even if they were to take the word of a child over his, would never think of calling the police, or reporting him to his superiors. He was after all a priest and they had been trained to obey priests without question. (p.44)

At the age of sixteen Martha is send back to the reserve. Martha as a result of years of staying in school is now not fluent in their native languages and other skills like hunting and skinning which are essential to make a living for the natives which make Martha ashamed of herself. Martha becomes an alien even for her mother which causes adjustment problems between them.

When Martha tried to help to run the household, her mother was not impressed.

"What sort of person have you become, anyway! You come home spoiled by that school, expecting to be fed the food of the whiteman. But people like me can't live without country food. You can't shoot a gun, set a net, light a fire, chop wood, clean fish, cook bannock or smoke geese- let alone make moosehide moccasins and gloves. Why, when I was a girl, I could do these things before I was ten!" (p.59)

Martha begins to find consolation in alcohol and in the company of other youth in the reserve who were taken to residential school. All were experiencing the same state of Martha and were unable to come out of the trauma which residential school life gave them. Martha starts a relation with Russel, another school mate and becomes pregnant. Martha starts to live with him and delivers a baby boy who is named as Spider. The boy is taken away from her by the Children's Aid Society because of the alcoholic and irresponsible nature of Martha and Russell. This changes Martha a lot. She decides to start a new life and to take back her child from Society. She strives hard to learn her language and becomes efficient in hunting and skinning of animals which takes her close to her mother. Later she delivers another child whom she names Raven. Martha leaves Raven with her mother and leaves to Toronto to get a job and to take care her family.

The novel discuss the problems created in the lives of natives as a result of excessive drinking which is their way to escape from the harsh reality of their pathetic existence. Spider is adopted by a white couple and is renamed as Edward. Spider a result of the excessive drinking of Martha during pregnancy is affected with fetal alcoholic syndrome which makes him slow in studies and violent.

After he started school, his teachers reported that his "work habits left much to be desired" and that he had "difficulty paying attention in the classroom", which was their way of saying that he was disruptive and lagging behind his peers. His parents' suspicion that he had a deep-seated learning problem was confirmed when they took him for thorough physical, developmental and psychological testing. The diagnosis was fetal alcohol syndrome, acquired when Martha drank during pregnancy and alcohol penetrated the wall of the placenta to poison and damage her son's brain. (p.112-113)

The adopted parents are soon fed up with Edward and they leaves him when he begins to torture them. Spider and many others like him were named as Punks and they lived like beggars, addicted to drugs and alcohol in the streets of Toronto.

Martha reaches Toronto and through her hard work and with the help of Nora completes her high school diploma and obtains a well-paid job at the Native Friendship Centre. She begins to enjoy her life and at the same time provide for her family. After years Martha accidentally meets Spider , recognizes him and take him with her. Martha faces many instances where she is mocked and insulted because of her race during her stay in Toronto. When Martha and Spider tries to get a room in motel during a long journey at night the manager refuse only because of the reason that they are Indians. Martha remembers that incident in the novel.

Martha watched him quietly until he looked up.

"Look, lady, gimme a break. I got nothing personal against you but I've got a living to make. I never to rent rooms to Indians. They are nothing but trouble- drinking and fighting and disturbing the other guests. So why don't you do me a favour and let me watch television in peace. And while you're at it," he said, raising his voice, "go somewhere where you'll be welcome. There are at least a dozen reserves around here. Try your luck at one of them. You'll be with your own kind.

Martha protested. "But we have our rights. The Charter says you have to treat us fairly. I could take you to court.

"Then sue me. Canada's a free country."

It was a kick in the stomach and a return to the racism Martha had experienced at the residential school and seen on her way south. (p.169-170)

When her mother Mary Whiteduck dies Martha decides to return to Cat Lake reserve and settle there. At reserve Raven finds it difficult to adjust with Martha. Raven believes that Martha does not love her and because of that she left Raven with her grandmother. Martha starts to live with her children but soon she begins to be haunted by the old memories of her sexual abuse and once again turns to alcohol. Martha also starts blaming herself for the fetal alcoholic syndrome which destroyed the life of Spider. She begins to behave indifferently to Raven who feels that no one loves or understand her and there is no meaning in her existence. Many other children in the reserve were facing the same situation in their homes. Most of their parents were studied in residential schools and were still haunted by their past. They tried to find consolation in alcohol and treated their children in the same way they were treated in the residential school. Feeling unwanted these children decides to end their lives and formed suicide pacts.

In many families, the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had spend their childhoods and much of their teenage years in residential schools where no one ever hugged them, unless it was to molest them. No one ever hugged them, unless it was to molest them. No one ever said "I love you," unless it was a prelude to sexual assault. Dysfunction has cascaded down through the generations with survivors neglecting their children as they had been neglected. Or worse, they sexually abused them as they had been abused. (p.84)

Raven also joins such a pact, but when she faces the sorrow of the parents over the death of their children-her friends she decides to break the pact. She is haunted by the memories of her friends and she approaches Joshua, the Chief of reserve for help. She accuses her mother for her present situation. Joshua aware of the trauma faced by Martha tells Raven that the memories of sexual abuse faced by Martha and others in the reserve are the main reason behind their indifference towards children and excessive drinking. They together decide to help Martha and many others like her in the reserve.

Joshua decides to conduct a Healing Circle and to invite Father Antoine to participate in this healing session. He writes a letter to the Archbishop, informing the problems faced by many people in the reserve and requesting to send Father Antoine to participate in the Healing Circle. Father Antoine is send to the reserve. During the Circle, the survivors of residential school speak about their trauma and how this trauma made them to neglect the needs of their children which resulted in their suicides. Only then Father Antoine realizes the harm he has done to the small children in the school and starts to repent his activities. They also decide to forget the past and move on in their life for the sake of their children. At the end of circle, all the survivors including Martha hugs the Father and says that they have forgiven him whether he admits or not admit his sins and decides to start a fresh life.

"It's easy to say sorry when you don't mean it. And we're the ones carrying the burden anyway, not them. The only way to get it off our back's is to forgive those who harmed as. whether they accept their blame or not . That does'nt mean we should forgive and forget, but we need to forgive to be able to start healing ourselves and get on with our lives" Martha then dragged an astonished Father Antoine to his feet and hugged him, saying," I forgive you." She turned to the Bishop and hugged him as well" (p.237).

The novel ends with an epilogue. The epilogue shows how Martha now feels relieved of the burden of her bleak past and hate towards Father Antoine and is on the verge of beginning a new journey towards a happy and prosperous future: " The pardon she has extended to Father Antoine had banished the monster of hate within her, freeing her to deal with her depression and alcoholism and make a new start with her children" (p.241).Martha's decision of forgiving the priest for his wrong doings and to have a new beginning can be interpreted as the common decision taken by the present native society to forget their past and to work for a good future for them and their children.

Father Antoine has but lost his peace of mind and is repentant about his cruelties to the poor children in the school. He decides to spend the rest of life making amends to his victims: " For he had never felt pity for the little girls and he had deceived himself when he assumed they had loved him, mistaking their compliance with his demands for genuine affection. He now had to find a way to make amends to his victims before he died. . . " (p.243). The repent of Father Antoine can be interpreted as the realization and repentance of the European white society for oppressing and mistreating the aboriginals in Canada on the basis of racial and cultural differences.

Thus James Bartleman has successfully presented the mental agony and frustration faced by natives over the loss of their land, culture and self-identity as a result of the European colonization and the assimilationist policy of the Canadian government in the novel. Through the novel Bartleman also directs them to gain strength from their past, to strive for their rights and a better future for the sake of coming generations and shares his dream about a future where no one is marginalized or oppressed on the basis of their culture or race in the society.

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