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Colonial Institutions and their Impact on Indigenous Societies: A Study of Select Native Writings

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Abstract

Native people across the world are still struggling to unload the bag and baggage of the colonial worldview that was thrust on them. The Natives conditioned by the colonial worldview are still struggling to decolonize themselves. The Indigenous writers know that decolonization cannot be achieved completely without establishing the distinct worldview that existed in pre-colonial times. The Natives were conditioned by the colonisers through colonial institutions like Native schools and Christianity. That is why the Indigenous writers are critical of the colonial institutions. This paper is a study of the impact of colonial institutions on Native populations and how the Native writers are trying to decondition their people.

Keywords: Native, Christianity, worldview, colonizer, drought, rain

Introduction

In his book *India that is Bharat* while commenting on the process of colonisation, J. Sai Deepak writes:

In a nutshell, coloniality refers to a meta phenomenon that affects the mental constitution of the colonised society and reorients its entire worldview to bring it in line with the coloniser's by distorting, stereotyping, eliminating or acculturating the indigenous worldview. (41)

While sitting in front of the television and watching a commercial advertisement for Fair and Lovely one realized that we still suffer from the complex that only fair is beautiful. This exposes the disastrous impact of European culture on India. The universalization of European culture made it the touchstone against which all other cultures had to judge their self-worth.

The European culture has meticulously established itself as the modern culture and any other culture which could not match itself according to the parameters of European culture was declared to be backward. Due to this setting of European culture as the only modern culture, other cultures are struggling to establish themselves and, in most cases, they fail to resuscitate themselves. When we have a look at India, for instance, any cultural rehabilitation movement, any adherence to the past cultural practices is branded as backward and antediluvian by Indians themselves. We have already seen this happening in the case of the Sabarimala temple case. There are so many other practices which sometimes have solid scientific basis and are opposed in the name of modernity.

The concept of modernity is colonial residue through which colonialism maintains its grip over the colonised countries. Through the concept of modernity, the accident controls the production of knowledge and most importantly keeps indignity out of the colonised country. The dictionary defines 'modern' as the present or recent times, but in the colonised countries it means following or imitating Western culture.

This is where the greatest success of colonialism lies. The greatest achievement of the colonial power was not in the suppression of the protest or obliteration of history, but rather in the fact that colonisers were able to project themselves as ideal in front of the colonised. The people who were colonised by the European powers started striving to become white at least in their behavior and thought process. In Native American literature such people are called "apples" – that is Native people who are "red on the outside, white on the inside" (Allen, Introduction 10).

Indigenous literature is written by those people who are Indigenous in their worldview. Most of the Indigenous writers are of the view that for being Indigenous the possession of that particular worldview is the most important thing. It is important because, over the centuries, intermarriages have taken place between the Indigenous people and other groups. This has led to a change in the physical appearance of the people. So, a person who might appear like a white man might turn out to be an Indigenous person in his worldview and vice versa is also true. This question is important because the criteria devised by the government is blood quantum (Garrouette 15) and a person who claims himself/herself must have "one quarter blood degree" (Garrouette 15). If the criteria

of blood quantum is followed the Indigenous people might cease to exist within the next fifty or hundred years because of intermarriages. The Indigenous literature claims that only Indigenous people should be allowed to decide about the aboriginality of their people. Indigenous literature is a movement against absorption by the mainstream dominant societies. Ronald Niezen points out: "Some of the strongest claims of difference are made by the marginalized and deracinated by those who would otherwise be absorbed, eliminated and forgotten by dominant societies" (6).

The biggest difference that can be observed between Euro-American literature and Indigenous literature is that of science and scientific point of view. The Euro-American literature perpetrates and claims to be the sole proprietor of scientific knowledge. For them what is scientific and rational is true and acceptable. This automatically reduces Indigenous traditions and values to superstitions.

In Euro-American writings science has a panacea for everything and every natural process can be represented in mathematical equations. In other words, the natural cycles seem to be independent of humans. In Euro-American scientific books droughts are for instance, dependent on El-Nino and La-Nina the undercurrents of water in the Pacific Ocean. The normalcy of rain depends on the movement of these two currents. This means human beings do not have any impact on floods and droughts.

The indigenous perspective is different. In Indigenous literature, the world is "a sacred hoop" (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 56). The life in this hoop operates in a cycle and every single life form is dependent on one another. In this sacred hoop, man does not have a privileged position, rather he is a part of it and is affected by the things that affect others. The Natural cycles are also affected by the actions of the human beings. Human beings are the only creatures, which disrupt the natural cycles because they resist what is happening to them. On the other hand, animals and other organism so they do not disrupt natural cycles.

In the important novel *Ceremony*, the noted Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko Weaves a narrative around how drought can occur due to human action. She writes about how the disrupted water cycle can be restored by rectifying human behaviour. In the novel, Tayo curses rain:

He started repeating "Goddamn, godamn!," it flooded out of the last warm core in his chest and echoed inside his head. He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud to find the corporal and get him up before the Japanese saw them. (11)

The impact of this prayer is evident and the rain eludes his homeplace for six years Tayo could see the consequences of his praying are evident on all the living beings: "Tayo could see the consequences of his praying, the gray mule grew gaunt and the goat and kid had to wander farther and farther each day to find weeds or dry shrubs to eat" (13).

To the people conditioned by Western culture and scientific theories, this seems implausible. The Westernised natives also reject such things as superstitions. That is why the Indigenous writers are remarkably courageous people. They know that they can be rejected as people who are abetting superstitions, but they still do their job. The greatest resistance comes to those who are Indigenous in appearance, but Whites in worldview. The educational system propagated and devised by the White colonisers is the biggest factory for churning out such 'apples.' In the novel *Ceremony*, Silko points out the role of educational institutions. In the novel, Rocky, who

happens to be a full-blooded Native is conditioned by White institutes. Silko writes:

After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque. Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old Grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition and he opened his textbooks to show her. (47)

Rocky's case shows how the Whites were able to attract the Natives to become like them. In the novel *Ceremony*, Rocky's mother thinks that nurturing White worldview and lifestyle is the guarantee to success: "She could do what White people wanted in an Indian and she believed this way was his only chance" (48). Babita Devi *et al.* have written extensively about the problem in their papers (Natives' Naivety 2, Codifying the Oral Traditions 5, Silko's Narrative Negotiation 4).

However, the novelist further confirms that Native knowledge is not a superstition, rather it is important in ensuring the survival of the human race in fragile eliminates and geographies. In the novel, Tayo initiates a ceremony to restore balance in the water cycle. This ceremony restores the balance in the water cycle and it starts showing. Susan Beaver writes: Ceremony, a necessary act to obtain or regain balance with the earth, replenishes her love for humankind. The purpose of the ceremony is to integrate to unite one with all humankind as well as the realm of ancestors, to blend one with all of creation. (7)

It is interesting to note that the Native Americans are not the only people to believe that human intervention leads to droughts on Mother Earth.

Easterine Kire, a member of the Naga Tribe from the Northeastern part of India also projects the point of view of her people Naga people believe that drought occurs due to the actions of people. In her novel *Son of the Thundercloud*, she writes about the prophecy about the end of the drought:

The prophecy said that the heavens would open and pour out rain when the Son of the Thundercloud was born. (58)

In the novel, she makes clear that droughts are "man-made" (64). The protagonist of the novel Pele is told by the supernatural sister:

There will always be that danger so long as mankind lives on earth. When people are overtaken by greed, they are going to bring a lot of trouble into their own lives and the lives of others. Pray that this change stays. If we lose this latter rain the world could be wiped out by a second drought. (65)

Ceremony and *Son of the Thundercloud* could be rejected as fictional books which are not grounded in reality. They might be rejected as figments of the imagination of the respective authors, but there are instances from contemporary societies who believe that droughts are an outcome of human misdeeds. Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor quotes a Masaai man in her article published in *National Geographical Magazine*. She asked the Masaai man "What about drought?" To her query, he replied: Just once, five years ago. But that was the consequence of our misdeeds. We had raised fences. We fixed that error. (95)

This statement by a Masaai man shows that Euro-American scientific claims are an anomaly in the world. The beliefs of Indigenous communities are similar all over the world. The Indigenous community across the world believe in a holistic approach towards the earth and believes that there exists a relation between the earth and people that should be revered and respected. Earth should not be considered a source of economic riches, but a nourisher and sustainer of human life and animal life.

Indigenous literature is critical of the Western institutions which were at the forefront of conditioning the Natives. One

of the most important institutions is Christianity. Christianity was used by the colonisers as a political tool. It was used to break the Native society and to elongate the rule of the colonisers. Christianity was used to alter the character of the Natives. In the short story "The Soft-Hearted Sioux", Zitkala Sa shows how Christianity was used by the colonisers to alter the character of the Natives. The people of the Sioux tribe used to hunt buffaloes for their food, but the youngsters who were educated in boarding schools were taught about Christ and trained not to hunt. The narrator of the story tells the readers that in the Boarding school he was trained to be a Christian:

Yet I did not grow up the warrior huntsman, and husband I was to have been. At the mission school, I learned it was wrong to kill. Nine winters I hunted for the soft heart of Christ and prayed for the soft heart of Christ and prayed for the huntsmen who chased the buffalo on the plains. (47)

The above statement shows that the strategy of the colonisers was a success. The person like the narrator has been rendered ineffective by their training in Christianity. They cannot resist the brutal force of the colonisers because they cannot fight.

This transformation of the narrator into a non-violent youth shows that Christianity was indeed a political tool. The Europeans were Christians from the very beginning, yet they were able to massacre natives like vermin. The history of colonisation is punctuated by brutal massacres on all the continents. It is indeed interesting that the teachings of Christianity were different for the Natives and the Europeans. It allowed the Europeans to indulge in violence but turned the natives into meek creatures who could not resist. The transformation of Natives into meek creatures meant the elongated rule of the colonisers.

Christianity is one important institution that continues to play an important role in the lives of the colonised even after achieving freedom. In settler colonies, it remains a pervasive force that continues to dominate their lives. It is the single most important institution responsible for altering the worldview of the Natives. In her novel *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko delineates the difference between the two. In the novel, Tayo's mother goes wayward and the response of Christians and the Natives is different to her behavior. For instance, Auntie Tayo's mother is worried about what people will say:

I've spent all my life defending this family, but nobody ever stops to think what the people will say or that Father Kenneth will call me aside after mass to speak with me. (81)

This behaviour is odd for the Natives. The Natives live in a communication society where tribes act as an extended family. The closely-knit tribal society makes sure that nobody remains alone/orphans in the family. However, Christianity has altered this aspect of her personality. Her 'communitarian' self has died under the pressure of the White man's religion. She differentiates between her biological son Rocky and her sister's son Tayo:

She had always watched him more closely than Rocky, because Rocky had been her own son and it had been her duty to raise him. Those who measured life by counting the crosses would not count her sacrifices for Rocky the way they counted her sacrifice for her dead sister's half-breed child. (27)

It must be made clear that this behaviour of Auntie is not induced by some personal shortcoming of her character, rather it is a result of her brainwashing by Christianity. One of the biggest hindrances to the propagation of Christianity among the Natives was their tribal character. Christianity

propagated individualism among the people. Silko accentuates this aspect of Christianity:

Christianity separated the people from themselves, it tried to Crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her Children, as her family. (63)

The difference between Christianity and Native beliefs is obvious when one looks at the response of Christian priest and tribal elders to the waywardness of Tayo's mother:

The catholic priest shook his finger at the drunkenness and lust, but the people something deeper: they were losing her, they were losing part of themselves. (63)

This makes clear that Christianity disrupted the tribal communitarian lifestyle nurtured by the Native way of life.

Moreover, Christianity is depicted as a "totalitarian religion" (Bonetti 77) by the Natives. The master Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe calls it a lunatic religion because it did not allow any other God. In tribal societies, every tribe has a different deity and a different God. However, Christianity sought to obliterate all the other Gods and deities. This again had a tremendous transformational effect on the people. The people who were tolerant of other Gods became intolerant and started abusing the Gods of their ancestors. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe writes:

An abominable religion has settled among you. A man now can leave his father and his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of this father and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. (122)

Widely acknowledged as Chinua Achebe's heir, Chigozie Obioma in his novel *The Fishermen* writes about how Christianity continues to influence the lives in contemporary Nigeria. Ibo people who were once very tolerant of the religious beliefs of others have become intolerant. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe writes that Ibos did not fight for their Gods. Religion was a private matter among the Ibos. Achebe points out that even if a man kills the "sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him the God" (117). Obioma's Nigeria is Christianised and intolerant towards such things. In the matter of faith, there is nothing personal. In the novel, When Ikenna declares "I no longer believe in God" (136). To his mother replies: "Ikenna, look here: One thing Eme and I cannot take, and will never accept, is an atheist of a child. Never!" (136).

When one reads the novel, one realises that Christianity has changed the character of the Ibos. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe introduces the readers to a society that is laborious and hardworking. In this society, anybody could climb the ladders of success with the dint of his/her hard work. Moreover, the society had indigenous medicinal knowledge of herbs which were used for different ailments. However, Obioma's Nigeria is different. In contemporary Nigeria, Obioma shows the over-reliance of people on supernatural intervention for everything.

In the novel, *The Fisherman*, Obioma highlights how Christianity has altered the society of Nigeria, particularly the people of his tribe. In the novel, God is supposed to do all kinds of things from saving the ball from getting lost to stopping the children from peeing on the bed to getting a visa of Canada stamped on the passport. In the novel, Obioma shows how the son of the priest prays for the ball:

Because he couldn't contribute, he prayed for each ball asking God to help us keep this one for much longer by preventing it from crossing the clearing. (19)

Obioma shows that as an institution Christianity has altered the life of Nigerians who now believe that everything is in the hands of God.

This has made the lives of people static. Overreliance on the will of God (161) does not allow people to indulge in any activity that can help them make their lives better. Obioma is critical of such institutions. He feels that Africa has been made hollow by the colonial institutions:

Colonialism across most of Africa was so especially among the former British protectorates that in its aftermath Africa was essentially hollowed out. The civilization of the peoples, their various cultures and traditions, their religious political philosophies and institutions were eroded or even destroyed. (Obioma, Africa has been failed)

Obioma makes clear that if Africa has to claim its rightful place in the world then it has to go back to its Indigenous institutions that were nurtured over the aeons. The institutions allowed mankind to survive in Africa from the very beginning. Obioma fulfils the role of novelist envisioned by Ngugi wa Thiongo who wrote that the role of a 'novelist is to teach, to re-educate his society out of their acceptance of social inferiority' (51).

Obioma makes clear that over-reliance on the beliefs of Christianity is jeopardizing the existence of human beings on the planet. It is not only affecting the human beings but also the natural resources like water bodies. In the novel, Obioma cites the example of a river:

Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja Osha, mermaids and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This changed when colonialists came from Europe and introduced in the Bible, which then prised Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians see it as an evil place. A Cradle besmeared. (25)

The river has been reduced to a foul-smelling drain due to neglect. The Native literature is full of such instances where the sacred symbols associated with the ancestors were rejected and repudiated due to the influence of Christianity.

Thus, Native literature is an attempt to decondition the people of the colonial influence. The Native writers plead a case for dismantling the colonial institutions and replacing them with Indigenous institutions. The European institutions and values are not universal as portrayed by the colonial narratives. The Native writers make clear that Indigenous institutions are best suited for the conditions and should be resuscitated and re-established.

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