

REGENERATING ETHNICITY IN COLONIAL RULE IN JEANETTE ARMSTRONG'S SLASH.

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The research article delves into the profound struggle and enduring spirit of Native Canadians, highlighting their resolute commitment to reclaiming and revitalizing their ethnic identities in the face of colonial domination. By exploring the multifaceted dynamics of cultural preservation and adaptation, this study seeks to illuminate the indomitable will of indigenous peoples in Canada to safeguard their ancestral traditions against the currents of history.

Post-colonial literature revisits colonial history through the lens of the colonized, analyzing its economic, political, and cultural impacts on both colonized peoples and colonizing powers. It delves into decolonization, contests various forms of domination, and shapes political and cultural identities. Key themes include anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonization, with writers like Fanon, Memmi, Rushdie, Ondaatje, and Walcott rejecting colonial oppression. Their works raise awareness of racism and oppression among colonized peoples, marking the initial steps toward decolonization. Postcolonial writers challenge the imposition of language, culture, and attitudes by colonizers, striving to subvert colonial powers. Many reject the "postcolonial" label, as NayantaraSahgal does, arguing that it simplifies India's history, overlooking pre-colonial traditions and ongoing legacies.

The writing and reading of texts by African, Canadian and Caribbean authors are seen as a means of restoring dignity and self-respect to people who had suffered from hundreds of years of contemptuous dismissal, exploitation and enslavement by colonizers. Canadians, Africans and other colonized people are seen as mentally and physically capable only for menial labour or routine clerical positions. This approach has been used throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to justify the enslavement of millions of Africans and Canadians to work in the sugar and pesticide factories. Colonial settlers and governments continued to

maintain that the people they colonized are incapable of self-government or of putting their land and its resources to good use. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the African writer Fanon denotes that European's interests in retaining their hold on the lands and resources they have occupied, made it almost impossible for them to change their attitudes. Fanon is believed that settlers and colonial governments could be uprooted only by violence. He argued that such violence is a means of destroying the mental colonization and sense of racial inferiority. So, many of the postcolonial writers produced their works to destroy the mental image of the colonization from the psyche of colonized people.

The term ethnicity refers to a group of people sharing a common name, language, symbols, socio-political organization, religious beliefs, cultural heritage, sometimes territory, common ancestry and a group of identity. Ethnicity has its foundation in combined remembrances of past and present experiences, common inspirations, value systems, norms and expectations. Most of the indigenous people of Canada have lived and continue to lead their lives within the framework of an ethnic group. Ethnicity stands as a symbol of communal identity, solidarity, security, familiarity and cooperation. Ethnicities of colonized countries assume a triple history: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. In the pre-colonial period, ethnic groups were more rural, regional and homogeneous. During the colonial era, ethnicities have been crushed by the dominance of colonizer's culture and inhuman treatments of native ethnicities. And in the postcolonial period, native ethnicities started to breed again and they work to regain their former rights over their lands.

Problems such as nepotism, socio-political disorder, manipulation of ethnic identity for self gains, ethnic hatred and civil wars are attributed to ethnicity. Although ethnic hostilities are constant revealed in politically motivated murders, torture, unjustified imprisonment, disappearances and denial of human rights for the targeted ethnic groups are the aspects of colonial tyranny. Colonizers conquer, steal and exploit the natural and human resources of colonized people, the consequences are it leaves the colonized dispossessed, demoralized and marginalized. During the later part of colonial and postcolonial period native people desire to retain their power and independent state through their ethnicities.

In those periods, ethnicity acts as a pole, around which group members are mobilized and compete effectively for power, scarce economic resources and constitutional protections. Ethnicity, as used in this context, refers to a subjective perception of common origins, historical memories, ties and aspirations. Under the colonial pressures, members of the ethnic groups are urged to form an organized political action-group to maximizing their corporate political, economic and social interests. In different ways, ethnicity is often by elite groups in socio-economic and political competition. The factor of ethnicity plays a significant role in informal relationships. But at the same time ethnicity is a live political and economic issue. It is not just a mere cultural identity limited to friendship, marriage and rituals.

Canada has been inhabited for thousand years by distinctive groups of aboriginal people with distinct trade networks, spiritual beliefs and social hierarchies. Some of these civilizations

had long been faded by the time of the first European arrivals. In the late fifteenth century French and British expeditions explored and later settled along the Atlantic coast and in later period Canada become a colony of both French and British Empire. After many struggles and battles Canada regained its state of independence in the year 1982. Canada has thirty-four ethnic groups with at least 100,000 members for each and there are eleven major groups, which have over one million people. Canada is a country, which bestows much significance for its culture. Though they are numerous ethnicities and culture, Canadians are cultural oriented people.

During the twentieth century the literature of Canada takes a different form and the native writers start to throw a positive spirit on the aboriginal people through their writing. Rather than blaming the colonizers, they start to renew their culture, ethnicity and nationalism through their writings. There are many significant aboriginal writers in Canada like Joseph Boyden, Maria Campbell, Richard Van Camp, E.J.Pratt and Michel Ondaatje whose works are the tributes of Canadian culture. The aboriginal works records the place of native people in historical, anthropological and political contexts. They expose prejudices and misconceptions entrenched since colonial days regarding native societies and their moral spiritual and political values. The aboriginal works tries to preserve and promote their own cultural identity. Aboriginal literature is enriched with native social and political issues. They write about the issues of control of their own education, projects to preserve still extant languages, folklore, songs and rituals.

Jeannette Christine Armstrong is a Canadian author, educator, artist and activist. She was born in 1948 on the Penticton Indian reserve in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. She received a formal education at a one-room school there, as well as a traditional Okanagan education from her family and tribal elders. She expresses her creative visions through works of sculpture, art and music and also received numerous awards. Armstrong frequently appears as a speaker to discuss First Nations education and literature.

Armstrong is a skilled writer in all genres of literature like poetry, short story and novel. Her works are filled with the optimistic thoughts unlike many of the Canadian works. This optimism is the remarkable quality of her and through this she inspires and encourages the young generation with hope. She broke the formal structure of a novel and often includes poem and letters in novels. Her works deals with the issues of political, cultural and linguistic struggles of Native Americans in both Canada and the United States. In her novels and poetry, she experiments with language and form, working to make English reflect Okanagan language, concepts and relationships with a community that includes not only people but also the land and all that grows and lives on and in it. Her first novel *Slash* (1985) remains as an important milestone of Canadian literature and it is one of the first modern novels published by an indigenous Canadian author.

Armstrong's first novel *Slash* published in 1985, which presents the fictional biography of a native man, describing his personal development from childhood to fatherhood. *Slash* becomes a Canadian classic and remains as a milestone in her life. In the process, it depicts the discourses employed by the education system, Christianity and organisations such as AIM during

the 1960s and 1970s. The novel follows Tommy Kelasket, a Native American activist, whose journey from troubled youth to dedicated advocate is marked by personal tragedies and societal challenges. Influenced by his upbringing and guided by his uncle Joe, Tommy's commitment to his community deepens through his involvement in protests and demonstrations for Native American rights. His relationship with activist Marti underscores the tension between personal desires and communal responsibilities. Despite losses, including Marti's death and Maeg's sacrifice during a rally, Tommy remains resilient, symbolizing hope for future generations. The novel ends optimistically, focusing on Tommy's belief in his child's role in advancing Aboriginal society despite ongoing struggles.

Slash is a pertinent portrayal of native Red Indians life in a shifting world. The protagonist Tommy Kelasket is the representation of native Red Indian adolescent, who loses their cultural balance at the initial stage and later battle for their birthrights. *Slash* is a tale of Red Indians enduring spirit and their long-lasting quest. Though Armstrong presents the life and prides of Red Indian race on the whole, she highlighted the perseverance of the Okanagan tribes, to which Armstrong herself belonged.

Red Indians take immense pride in their ethnicity and heritage, refusing to be ashamed of who they are despite enduring discrimination and ridicule, especially in schools where White children often mock their clothing and lifestyle. Despite facing numerous humiliations, Red Indian children maintain their pride in their heritage, embracing their identity with dignity and resilience. "Be proud that you're Indian. Don't worry about your clothes or your looks or how you talk. We are the people who have every right to be here" (23).

Armstrong traces the initial stages of Indian's cultural transformation. She clearly exposes the chaotic state of Red Indians, when they caught between old customs and new systems. They no longer had faith in their Red Indian belief. Like many of the young Red Indians, the protagonist Tommy Kelasket is also to face this dilemma. Though he has strong belief in his tradition, sometimes he struck in the fancy of modern world. "I don't know who is right anymore. I get real mad when white people make fun of us, but at the same time I feel ashamed when I go to town with Dad and Ma and they get stared at. I know they ain't dumb and dirty" (45).

The Red Indians prioritize their rituals, hunting, and agriculture, revering nature and preserving their ancient medicinal practices. They resist modern White food and medicine systems, valuing their traditional ways. In pre-colonial times, they enjoyed good health, devoid of diseases. Their foremost duty is to pass down their medicinal knowledge to future generations, safeguarding their people from outside influences. "He said that the white people sometimes put things into foods that weren't good for people. He also said that a lot of stuff that's dirtying the air is no good for people. He said, "You got to quit eating them kinda foods" (39).

The Red Indian people are forcefully confined to reserves and treated like refugees in their own lands, resisting assimilation into White society. They face control, violence, and

genocide by Whites intent on eradicating their beliefs and way of life. Government support is limited to those who conform to White rules, perpetuating their marginalization and oppression. "The ones that are just brown White men. The ones that fit in. Soon there will be no more true red men, with their own beliefs and ways" (69).

The White government aims to exploit natural resources, leading to the displacement of Native people from their lands. Water rights controlled by White ranchers hinder Native agriculture, pushing them into poverty and despair in reserves. Forced to relocate to towns where they face rejection and limited job opportunities, many Native individuals suffer a fate similar to Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul in George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), succumbing to White dominance and oppression.

The Indigenous peoples held steadfast to their vision of unity, cherishing their communities and aspiring for a life of harmony. However, this dream often remained elusive due to the relentless oppression inflicted upon them by colonizers. Despite the hardships, Indigenous communities maintained a profound love for their own culture and rejected the notion of one race being superior to another. Yet, breaking free from the shackles of the past proved challenging for native peoples, as they endeavored to preserve their heritage amidst adversity. In an interview with Janice Williamson, Armstrong asserts that:

It's a whole process of uncovering layers of mythology about what society and people should be about forced onto me by other people's thinking and philosophy of discovering through those layers the Native principles that I've been given through my teachers, of looking at these principles truthfully and honestly in terms of how they equate with the negative myths. The process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I've uncovered the fact that I'm not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not less because I have brown skin, or a native philosophy. (115)

With unwavering faith, Indigenous communities placed their trust in God and His impartial grace that extends to all humanity. They firmly believed that God alone reigns supreme over all, rejecting the notion of any so-called "master race." Upholding a profound reverence for all races, they sought mutual respect from others, echoing their own principles of equality and dignity. "They demand respect for their own tribe and only give respect to those who respect them" (140).

Many young Indians are actively rediscovering their ancestral customs, seeking guidance from their elders on contemporary issues. They hold deep reverence for the wisdom of their elders, recognizing their role in guiding the younger generation. Through native gatherings, they diligently preserve and renew their old folklores, rituals, and medicinal practices, ensuring their transmission to future generations. Despite the widespread influence of White men's traditions

and language, Native Americans continue to cherish and uphold their own language, valuing it as an integral part of their identity and heritage. “At the session there were a lot of young people who were really trying to re-learn the old ways” (121).

Trade and religion served as pivotal tools for the penetration of colonizers into various regions, including Africa, India, and Canada. Colonizers imposed their own religious beliefs on colonized countries, with African novelist Chinua Achebe highlighting the particularly intense religious conversions in Africa. This trend was widespread across all colonized nations, including Canada. Colonizers utilized religion as a means of manipulating minds, aiming to erode native religions and cultures. As noted by Ryga, they often employed religion and alcohol as tools for altering consciousness, leading to the ruthless elimination or degradation of the history and traditions of indigenous peoples. “Often using religion and alcohol as mind-altering drugs, the preserved history and traditions of the original peoples were ruthlessly eliminated from memory or turned into objects of scorn and humiliation” (Ryga, S, 10).

In later stages, the Indigenous peoples harbor a sense of hope and express direct protest against the White government and its regulations. Rejecting assistance from the government, they opt for self-reliance and empowerment. An example of this defiance occurred when the Okanagan people occupied a district office of the White government to assert their authority and demonstrate their grievances. They stoke the passion of the younger generation, seeking to assert their Indigenous identity visibly. Embracing distinctive attire like blue jeans, red headbands, and traditional garments adorned with beads and roots, they symbolize their Indian heritage proudly. Methodically planning and organizing their actions, they advocate for the preservation of native rights. Rejecting assimilation, Indigenous peoples refuse to emulate Whites and no longer feel ashamed of their identity. They strive for everything to reflect their Indigenous heritage, longing for the return to their ancestral lands.

Native peoples seek to address their traumatic circumstances through the preservation of ancestral methods. Many Indigenous individuals largely eschew political involvement and gatherings, preferring to focus on revitalizing their society through traditional customs and culture. Young Indigenous people place great value on learning hereditary knowledge from elders, considering ancient ways and tales invaluable. As expressed by one advocate, true empowerment necessitates a comprehensive rebuilding encompassing mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

In a colonized country, every individual, from the unborn to the elderly, feels the impact of colonization. Whether one supports or opposes the Whites, colonization affects them profoundly. Individuals like Tom, who strive for an autonomous life embracing their Red Indian identity, face considerable adversity under White rule in pursuit of their aspirations. Conversely, youths like Jimmy, seeking acceptance in White society, encounter rejection due to the biases of the dominant race. Despite efforts by Indigenous people to assimilate and conform to White

norms, they find themselves perpetually excluded. Ultimately, colonization inflicts suffering upon all individuals in various ways.

Through the novel *Slash*, Atwood stands as a spokesperson of the indigenous people. The present research paper brings out the ethnical unity of natives, patriotism, love for indigenous, craving for tradition, cultural dilemma, effects of globalization on indigenous people, hostile circumstances of Canada for its own people, colonial subjugations, struggle against colonial domination and also racial injustice and mortifications of indigenous people in the colonial era. Genocide is the vehement weapon of colonizers, which is used to demolish the ancient ethnicities and races. The well known Canadian playwright George Ryga present a short note about the novel *Slash* in its foreword. He clearly presents the brutalities of colonization and also analysis its effects on colonized people. "SLASH is a gently written novel, dealing with a brutal theme. It is a story of colonialism in Canada and the rest of this continent. Colonialism over the aboriginal peoples, with its own quality of cultural and physical deprivation and a legacy of racial genocide." (Ryga, S, 9).

Armstrong's optimistic portrayal of Native Red Indians sets her apart from the prevailing pessimism in Canadian literature. Despite facing humiliations and cultural challenges, characters like Tommy and Penny maintain hope and resilience, striving to revive their traditions. Their selflessness and respect for others contrast with the indifference of the dominant society. Armstrong highlights the longing for ancestral lands and the importance of preserving cultural heritage. She acknowledges the struggle against feelings of inferiority among colonized peoples, offering pride in ethnicity as a remedy. Through character like Jimmy Armstrong addresses the challenges and remedies for cultural preservation. Ultimately, her work serves as a beacon of hope, urging the younger generation to embrace and safeguard their traditions against decay.

Armstrong's literary contributions serve as a rallying cry for Indigenous empowerment and cultural revitalization. Through her works, she inspires the younger generation to embrace their heritage and reclaim their rightful place in society. Armstrong's enduring legacy lies not only in her literary achievements but also in her unwavering commitment to advocating for Indigenous rights and representation in Canadian literature and beyond.

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