
‘The Story needs to be told’: Rewriting the Native History by Jeannette Armstrong in *Slash*

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Twentieth Century saw many changes in the global scenario which was over shadowed by European Colonization in the preceding centuries. Apart from the obvious economic and political progress, there also came a distinct awakening in the literary field – an awakening which was then consciously spread by the experts of this field within their community. They took upon themselves the task of leading their people out of the aftermath of colonialism and thus celebrated the fall of the same by carving out their hard earned space in the human history.

Canada and her native people were no exception as they also shared the same colonial story. European colonizers settled in Canada during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These settlers perpetrated aggression and oppression on the native populations with distinct cultures, identities, customs and civilizations. Because of superior war technologies, deceitful trade practices, organized armed forces and police, they defeated and conquered the first nations of Canada. Those nations which could not be conquered were lured to sign treaties in the name of the Queen of England. As almost all such treaties were written in the English language, which the natives did not know, the European settlers wrote them to their advantage. A very oppressive racist policy was practiced to annihilate the native populations. Education was used as a means to colonize the minds of the young to teach them the superiority of the European civilization and culture. They were labeled savages and uncivilized without a history of their own. As almost all the native cultures were oral, the colonizer denied the authenticity and historicity of these cultures. To assert the authenticity and historicity of their cultures, therefore, is the first job of the native writers.

Uncle Luther, a character in Louis Owen’s *The Sharpest Sight*, comments on the way history should be dealt with. He says, “a man’s got to know the stories of his people, and then, he’s got to make his own story, too... we got to be aware of the stories they’re making about us, and the way they change the stories we already know.” (91) Just as one can fight words with words, one can also fight history with history. Thus there was a need to re-write the already established history in its black and white form instead of using a variety of colours (ignoring the true picture). In any case, history is the present reading of the past.

According to E.H. Carr history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past. The past and the present can never be considered as separate from each other for as Homi Bhabha claims, “of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are.” (19)

History, then, is a responsibility of its writer. The whites have failed to serve this responsibility or rather have taken undue advantage of the same and have made the world the way they wanted it. The irony lies in the fact that they do not want to be held responsible for this after all. Lee Maracle narrates the incident of a first year student of Chinese origin in the heroine Marianne's class in her novel *Sundogs*. The instructor, who is a Ph.D. in Asian studies finishes every paragraph of his lecture with "correct me, Sue, if I am wrong" (153). Owing the words that he speaks while teaching an aspect of knowledge and collecting pay cheque for this, he does not want to be responsible for his knowledge. He however, does claim an authority on the subject but not responsibility. In the process of exercising authority, he does not care to examine the truth concerning what he teaches. At the same time, the student who is open to learning would definitely accept whatever the so called authority gives, even if it is a falsified image. What is necessary then is another source of knowledge which is equally authentic. And the native writer presents himself as that very source.

The idea is to enthuse the people by not only informing about their past but also to evoke that past. As Howard Adams observes in his essay 'Cultural Decolonization,' "One of the first tasks of cultural decolonization is to analyze and interpret our history and culture from an Aboriginal perspective. This is one of the important steps in our reawakening. It is the key to transforming the colonizer's society that continues to dominate us." (252) In this formative period, it becomes necessary for the native writers to write with and as part of the Aboriginal people, not for them and must transcend these distorted falsehoods that have stood for so long as legitimate history.

For this, some of the writers adopted the method of 're-writing history.' They made history as the center stage in their works. As discussed by Juneja in *Post Colonial Novel: Narratives of colonial consciousness*, there are three ways found in dealing with history in fiction. "(a) Against History mostly in realistic novels (b) Dis/mantling narrative in the novel using post modern techniques and (c) Re-writing a tradition in the novel which appropriate indigenous narratological traditions." (106) The process of rewriting history involves both the community and an individual, and how the two became one during the times of crisis. The native youth constantly in search of his roots, ultimately finds them in his tradition and is reminded of himself. The task of the native writer then becomes not to reconstruct the historical facts for the native reader, but to make him aware that his is not the society which is devoid of heroes. Interestingly, in the novel where the writer adopts the method of re-writing history, the entire community is at the focus, rather than one character being the hero or the heroine. Since it is tradition and history that they wish to propagate, these novels present a particular view where one finds a sense of community. There is an absence of an individual voice and the voice of the protagonist is that of the entire community. The writer who adopts the method of re-writing history attempts to reconstitute the past according to the psychic movements of the present. Thus, he/she is able to record the anxiety, agony, anguish and anger of his race. By using the colonizer's language, the colonized writer expresses pathos of his race and the trauma of his people.

In the preface to her narrative *I Am Woman*, Lee Maracle states :

There are a number of amazing women struggling to re-create and re-build the family systems of our past. There are also a number of men struggling to recreate and re-build the political institutions and governing systems of the past. We do so in a terrible vacuum, created by the absence of context, the lack of knowledge and the death of those who might have been able to teach us... We are saddled with the responsibility for altering these conditions and re-building our nations...

(X - XI)

Thomas Kelasket, the protagonist in *Slash* passes from one event to the other, more as an observer than as activist, a hanger-on rather than a leader. The central idea of this novel is the intersection of material forms of oppression (like racism and sexism) and internalized oppression due to colonialism. Noel Elizabeth Currie in “Jeannette Armstrong and the Colonial Legacy” observes that Tommy sees the divisions between those who find strength and pride in the traditional ways and those who feel that traditions are useless in the twentieth century, that ‘development’ will bring equality.

The members of Indian Friendship Centre provide an example of pride and power in being Indian. It is Mardi who gives Tommy the nickname ‘Slash’. Mardi’s political awareness forms that of Slash and her words start him on his search for all important third choice against assimilation and extermination. Mardi helps Slash in identifying his roots and accepting them. Finally Slash opts for catering to similar needs of his fellow natives and instead of going back to the reserves, he decides to join Red Power Centre – a group of “warriors fighting to keep a race of people alive”(75). We get a glimpse of the fact that all Indians were “awake now from their long sleep” (71), as Mardi put it and also from the letters Slash received from his sister Josie.

She said that a lot of young people had become interested in what was going on with Indians all over. She said that they had started a club and were having war dance lessons and were talking about putting on a War Dance Pow-Wow ... She said lots of people who were ashamed to be Indians before then were now proud (73).

Having passed that stage already, Slash now involves himself in helping others. His efforts begin when he reads in the newspaper about “ a protest somewhere in Nebraska” (87). The group was called American Indian Movement who were protesting against an Indian being killed due to police brutality. After this, starts the second stage of Slash’s learning period, only now he has become more perceptive and also less disillusioned. His experiences in the prison, his understanding of the surroundings of his reserve and his discussions with his father and other old people have prepared him for a more vivid vision, having temporarily been at peace with his own self.

Till now Slash was temporarily satisfied with a truce with own self, while his journeys with the AIM’s people make him more satisfied as he sees a similar awakening among other Indians all over. It boosts up his morale to meet people with similar ways of thinking. “I got a real good feeling. Like everybody there was on the same wavelength” (92). It also gave him and others like him the confidence that their beliefs were justified and that they were on the right path. The most important fact was that “somehow it was comforting to know. We were a long way from total extinction” (90).

In the course of Slash's journeys, the author narrates some of the important historical events concerning the natives that took place in the past. In the chapter "Mixing it up," many such events are remembered when Slash's group passes through different routes. For instance, when they are on the route called the "Trails of Tears", Slash informs that was the route taken in 1838 when Tribes in the southeastern U.S.A. were uprooted to give place to white settlers. They were forced to march under military custody from Georgia to Oklahoma. Literally thousands had died on that route, from cold, hunger and fatigue and "we stopped at one place where a monument had been erected in Minnesota where thirty-eight Sioux were hanged for trying to protect their people ... Abraham Lincoln had authorized that execution" (98). Just as he joined the AIM's group, giving us the first hand information of what happened at D.C., Slash keeps on joining different protest movements in Canada and in the process, the author gives both general and personal account of the same. With occasional discussions between Slash and his fellow activists, one can almost visualize the scenario of the time and one can also realize the logical reasons as to why the Indians participated in these movements, what their actual feelings and reactions were and also how these movements affected even the smallest reserves. When the group was on its way to D.C. in a discussion, a member called Elsie tells Slash,

I'm here to go to the length that's needed to state our case. I support the American Indian Movement for that reason. You are here to learn. I hope things come out like we want, but if it don't we can't quit ... Some guys here are not really sure why they are here except that they got a hope something will be done. Many of them are just plain fed up feeling like the underdog all the time. Others are very clear why we are here doing this. One thing is certain, we are all together in our dream of the future (98).

By this time, Slash has very clearly realized that attitude of the whites was of "putting them Indians back in their places" (115) or "to teach them damn Indians who is boss here" (115). As a result he says, "A lot of people got their heads busted in ... A lot of Indian women were raped and beaten and old people battered around. Many of them were not even connected with Wounded Knee, but they were Indians" (115).

While Slash is trying hard to get over the shock of loss of Mardi, (through different resorts such as alcohol, drugs, women, etc.) he is also aware that things had started boiling all over in Canada.

Once again, Slash decides to join the movement to caravan across Canada to educate Indian and Non-Indian alike about the grievances of Indian people. Armstrong's description of this caravan reflects the newly discovered awareness of self recognition among Indians and their final decision to fight for the same. Only that some people like Danny, Slash's brother who felt the same things he did but failed to take it rightly and resorted so much to drinking that it led him to death. Some like Mardi and George, kept on fighting till they had to be eliminated somehow i.e. killed in case of the former and imprisoned in case of the latter. While there were also much more sensitive people like Slash who, probably being more concerned about general human values even when they were deeply involved in these raids and movements, felt that there was something missing and that there was something higher to achieve or realized that what these protests apparently aimed at. What made such people tag along was the very fact that Indians

did, after all, stuck to each other and remained united and that they finally showed the readiness to stop taking injustice lying low.

A highly noteworthy feature of the novel is that whenever Slash is upset, frustrated or pained, whenever his mind and soul are in turmoil or whenever he roams about with the purpose of finding answers to both obvious and hidden questions, he finds solace in his tradition consciously or unconsciously. When he is wrongly sentenced to an imprisonment, the inhuman treatment given to the Indian prisoners leaves him utterly humiliated. However, simple memories of Indian songs usually sung by his family members slowly take him away from the thoughts of suicide and once again set him on the right path – a path which he never leaves after that. The first time he decided to go home (which was after a long gap) after the sentence, he was somewhat doubtful and ashamed to face his family. However, the readiness of his parent to accept him and their love once again give him the new courage to encounter the world. In fact, his brief but frequent stays on the reserve always further clarify and sharpen his perception regarding the native issues. It is during one of his early visits home, in one of the many discussions he had with his father, that he understands what actual internalized racism means and how it is proving murderous for the Indian tradition and culture. He tells his father,

I know that there was something more than passive discrimination in the schools and everywhere else for that matter. The only time there is less is if you dress up like Jimmy does and change your voice to a higher pitch and use different English with big words mixed in, and even then there is some. In itself ... that is more than passive discrimination. It is an insult to a whole race of people thousands of generations old. It is the kind of discrimination that does more damage than any cops kicking the shit out of a drunken Indian. It's the main reason why the Indian was drunk (86).

Interestingly, every time Slash is home, he decides his next route of the journey. Moreover, when he fails to find Mardi in South Dakota, the realization that she might be killed makes him almost insane with anger and pain. "Every time a meeting would come up ... I would go straight and the anger would build ... I felt like if I had a machine gun, I would have run out and started shooting at any white man passing" (123). Simply being with his Pops, Mom and Uncle Joe gradually make him overcome his miserable state of mind. As always he undergoes a catharsis in Uncle Joe's presence and once again a traditional Indian in the figure of Uncle Joe enlightens him on the most important question of his life, "Can you tell me, Tommy, what you really want of all this?" (132)

This time Uncle Joe's view convinces him more than ever that there is a lot more to understand. Mardi had offered one way to escape against the internalized oppression; i.e. to revolt against the material oppression. This was the necessary third choice apart from either assimilating or getting lost. Though Slash accepted this alternative for quite some time, he soon realizes the complexity involved and is therefore dissatisfied with merely material answers. Conforming to Maracle's views in *I am Woman*, Mardi is "raised in settler society, divorced from (her) past and alienated from (her) history," (Maracle, 51). Therefore, Mardi's understanding is a limited one. As Currie observes in "Jeannette Armstrong and Colonial Legacy", "she has had no examples of Indians who are neither assimilated nor lost. Violence, suffering, addictions, and deprivation are the

story of Indian woman's life, so much so that the simple fact that she has survived is a victory for Mardi" (Currie, 144).

Now she looks beyond herself and tries to win the same survival for her community with the help of similar means. Whatever she does comes out of the knowledge of her own personal power. Correspondingly, she assumes that each and every Indian has the personal and communal power to make a difference. So, political activism is the means for winning over internalized as well as material oppression. Her views do not include the traditions and values of the Indian culture as a necessity for a general awakening which is where Slash differs from her. For Slash, both consciously and unconsciously and for Armstrong, too, Indian culture and tradition are the ultimate answers. His roots pull him back to his original conscious Indian self and he is convinced more than ever that only his tradition which is far from extinction can keep an Indian ticking. Although such clear vision makes him at peace with the outside world, his battle with his own self, the unanswered questions, the 'missing something', still goes on. In a gathering in Alberta he meets a middle-aged Indian medicine man who profoundly changes the direction of his life and also offers a possibility beyond the options of assimilation or extermination. In his address to the audience, this medicine man says, that maintaining Indianness is what is to be done.

Everything pulls you away from it I don't mean you have to quit the whole society. I mean you don't have to take part in the things that destroy you. The kinds of jobs you work at ... The things you get involved in for Indian rights, too ... The next generation, and how we survive as Indians, depends on that (201).

All the unanswered questions of Slash are answered, "because I knew it wasn't a matter of belief. It was more, it was knowing for sure" (201). The firm faith in his Indianness returns and Slash acquires a new consciousness which is much more refined and wiser. This understanding is now so clear that even his love for his wife Maeg does not shake it and at one point, he stops involving himself in political activities (which are of primary concern for Maeg) and opts to remain at home with his son, the little chief as Pra-cwa named him. As he tells Maeg. "I can't go along with supporting anything that will compromise what I know to be the centre of all that I believe in" (244) For Slash, taking utmost care of whatever is left of the Indian ways and passing it on to the next generation, that to his little Chief and seeing to it that they understand the full meaning of it – becomes a primary concern. So he tells his son in Okanagan language.

You are an Indian of a special generation. Your world will be hard but you will grow up proud to be Indian. That will make you different than some of us. If I keep to the Indian path and protect your rights the way Pra-cwa explained, you will be the generation to help them white men change because you won't be filled with hate (250).

The key to the future lies in the past and the lessons it offers, as Currie observes,

Understanding his identity as an Indian person makes obvious for Slash what has been missing all along, an identifiable, long-range goal: 'We are slowly learning decolonization' (S,223). In effect, the healing process that the struggle began was the real victory, since "when a people have to fight, the pride returns and with it the inner

strength.” (S, 133) : they change their reality and their world by changing themselves (Currie, 147).

At this point, they are being able to define the world on their own terms and start acquiring their right to control their own destiny, making, in the process, the external forces reacts to them in a new and different way. By allowing her characters to get involved in the historical American Indian Movements, Armstrong not only presents a firsthand report of the movement, but also attempts to show how this movement affected and involved all big and small reserves in this grand awakening. The novel thus becomes an appeal for the Indian youth to realize and understand the legend of the native life in its true, black and white form. It is an appeal for the Indian youth to have a total faith in the tradition and wisdom of their ancestors.

The author with the help of these discussions between Slash and some of the other characters with whom he gets involved forms a counter discourse. The novel is full of scenes where Slash indulges into serious discussions of different issues. First, he has discussions with Uncle Joe and the new priest regarding institutionalized racism and religion. He also discusses internalized racism with Mardi and Jimmy, and also during AIMs with Elsie and other political movements with his wife Maeg. Although, according to Slash, “Many of meetings and sessions didn’t seem to have any real focus on what to do ... There were no solutions planned, just reactions to things” (120). The reader can very obviously see that the author is commenting on some very significant aspects involved in such movement. It also shows the writer’s general attempt to clarify certain issues concerning not just racism, but even the native communities’ reaction to the same. Most important of all, the two different approaches adopted by Slash and his wife, Maeg clearly show two very important reactions by the native communities. Slash, on the one hand has found his roots and is more concerned about the future generation who will need to keep their tradition alive rather than the ‘Constitutional Rights’ Maeg is fighting for. Through Slash, Armstrong, conveys the opinion that their responsibility of passing the native culture to the next generation is more serious than that of their parents who were unaware of the colonizers’ intentions. Moreover, his spiritual journey also taught him that personal and global harmony are very important in life. On the other hand, Maeg is always involved in protest movements concerning land claims, constitutional rights for native children, etc. She is worried that Slash’s way guaranteed years of bitter struggle “we have been beaten over the heads too much already” (243). Thus one can say that Armstrong offers two alternatives for her people, one of active resistance (chosen by Maeg) and the other of silent inactivity, aiming for ultimate global peace (chosen by Slash) both of which are extremely important for their prideful survival .

Slash, being always a follower and never a leader, (not till the end at least, when he promises to lead his son), conveys a feeling of community which is a conscious, sensitive one. Whether AIMs succeeds or fails, it is a minor issue. In fact, the entire description of the movement and Slash’s experiences during that period almost make one feel that Armstrong’s narrative is a furtherance of Slash’s statement that they were all “dead people, walking fast to catch up with something (Slash couldn’t) see” (57). The bigger and more glamorous the aim, the harder and more far-reaching is the disappointment, boredom and hopelessness which the final

disillusionment brings. Slash realizes this in time and manages towards a self realization that the change which is needed is more of an internalized nature. What is important is that like Slash, the Indian community once again retrieves its lost identity and reaffirms the faith, “we can just be us ... we were (not) less ... (but) just different”(86). It is through understanding and acceptance of the traditional ways healing can begin for the community and breaking the chains of the internalized oppression in the process.

As one can see, by adopting the method of re-writing history, Armstrong “incarnates a magnified vision of all ambiguities and impossibilities of the colonized.” (Memmi,108) In this whole process, the writer makes a very important contribution to the movement of the awakening of the community. The writer brings in the novel as a protagonist a common native (though a fictional one), who later on, participates in a some historical events and becomes an indispensable part of that particular movement, but having understood the objective of the movement and in return clearly, the movement becomes an indispensable part of his very being.

By doing this, the novelist serves two major purposes. Firstly she is able to convey how major events touch the lives of everyday people. As Mike Meyers remembers in the preface to Lee Maracle’s novel *Sundogs*, the events at Oka gave a great many Aboriginal people permission to express their frustrations about their oppression, and may be more importantly, look within themselves and become familiar with an almost forgotten sense of self. Similarly, Slash’s discussions with many people where they talk about their reasons to join the AIM display their disillusionment with their positions in the post colonial society.

Secondly, involvement of a common native in the mass movement allows the writer to convey that one does not have to be a legendary figure to influence or affect a fellow sufferer. One does not have to be John Kennedy who, upon being killed, caused “all them black people ... burning cities all over the United States” (Armstrong, 31). Instead, one can very well be a common person like Mardi, Maeg or Chuck in *Slash* who helped Thomas Kelasket to understand and react against the racial discrimination.

To conclude, one can say that with representation of Slash’s reconnection with his tradition, Armstrong successfully conveys her personal faith in the native tradition which propagate an all encompassing bondage between men and nature. Re-writing History thus become a highly effective tool for an awakening in the native community.

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