

Cultural Erasures and the Emergence of Monoculture: A Discourse Study of British Civilising Mission

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Abstract

In the history of human invasions, European colonisation has had a huge impact globally. It colonised almost the whole part of the world. It used various strategies to colonise the nations and exploited those nations for multiple purposes. All the colonised nations were not kept under the same category and were classified as settler colonies, exploitation colonies and plantation colonies according to their utilisation. Moreover, the Europeans followed different strategies to keep those countries under control. The present paper aims to read the strategies used by the Europeans especially the British to colonise and control the Settler colonies by emphasising the concept of 'civilisation' used by the British to erase the cultural roots of the indigenous community. It also traces the attempts of the indigenous community in restoring their uniqueness in the present era through the re-writings of the history and communal activities. To do so the paper analyses select short stories from the settler colonies based on the themes of 'residential schools' and 'stolen generation'.

Keywords:

Colonisation; civilisation; stolen generation; residential school; cultural erasure

Of all the invasions attempted by humans, the most dangerous and highly impactful one was the European colonisation which happened since the 15th century. Historians prefer to call it imperialism rather than colonisation due to the extensive damage and prolonged duration. Among the Europeans, though colonisation was initiated by the Portuguese, the British emerged as the imperialist as they colonised most of the world and ruled for many centuries. They followed different strategies to colonies the countries and used those nations for different purposes. Based on the utilisation the colonies are categorised as settler colonies, exploitation colonies and plantation colonies. The British wanted to expand their territories for several reasons such as religious independence, economic growth and trading. The lands in which they settled permanently by removing the natives to the margin are called settler colonies (America, Australia, Canada, &etc.). The countries that they used for economic improvement with the manipulative usage of natural resources and humans are termed exploitation colonies (India, Africa, Middle Eastern countries &etc.). Plantation colonies were used as plantation land to cultivate the necessary by-products to meet their needs and to market the surplus quantity to the other colonies (the Caribbean Islands, Mauritius, Fiji &etc.). The British came in the disguise of business and slowly settled by grabbing power over the natives in all three sets of colonies. This paper looks at their exploitations of natives, their land and culture in the settler colony.

During the 16th century, the British landed in America mainly for religious freedom and economic growth. In Britain King James I followed Roman Catholicism which denied religious freedom to the Puritans in their country. Consequently, the Puritans decided to move to the new world to escape religious prosecution in 1620. They landed in a place in America which they named Plymouth in memory of the place they left in Britain. The natives were less in number in Plymouth and they helped the British with plantation. Initially, they all worked together and slowly as many British people started to migrate to America, they exploited the natives. As a result, the British expanded their occupancy in thirteen colonies and marginalised the Native Americans.

Due to epidemic diseases from Europe, war and violence reduced the population of the native people in America. The same strategy was followed in other settler colonies too.

The decline of Native American populations was rapid and severe, probably the greatest demographic disaster ever. Old World diseases were the primary killers. In many regions, particularly the tropical lowlands, populations fell by 90 percent or more in the first century after the contact (Denevan).

The Native Americans are denoted with terms such as Red Indians, First Americans and Indigenous Americans. The white migrants in America revolted against Britain for independence. With no choice, Britain declared independence to America in 1783. Though it declared independence to America, it was a great loss to Britain. To compensate it Britain turned its eye towards Australia. In 1788, Britain set foot in Australia mainly to transport its overcrowded prisoners and to expand its territories. A similar method which was used in America was followed in Australia to reduce the population of the natives of Australia, who are addressed as Aborigines. In the next three decades, 40-60 % of the Aborigines died due to the spread of epidemics and war. In 1763, after the Seven Years' War, based on the Treaty of Paris, Britain started to have control over Canada. The natives of Canada are addressed as Indigenous people, Native Canadians and First Nations.

The migrant White people in the settled colonies dominated the natives of those lands and carried out inhuman activities to suppress and silence those marginalised groups. The utmost inhuman activity exercised by the British was to separate the children from their parents in the disguise of civilisation. The present paper read the short stories "Lullaby" by Leslie Marmon Silko, "A Long Story" by Beth Brant and "The Letter" by Sally Morgan to present the pain and trauma experienced by the natives of the settler colonies due to the imposition of the residential school system, which separated the native children from their parents, language, culture and their identity. The hypothesis of the paper is to

- Read the select short stories by the native writers of these regions to present the discourses behind the concept 'Whiteman's Burden',

- Reveal the pain and trauma undergone by the natives of those regions for several centuries and
- Highlight the importance of cultural preservation in the contemporary world.

The British without having an understanding of other cultures and their values, considered theirs as superior. By maintaining their superiority complex they considered all the colonised people from different colonies as same and used the same terminologies to address them. Their exploitive nature caused them to consider/project those colonised' cultural and traditional practices as primitive. A purpose behind this homogenisation was to create a truth that all the colonised people had the same level of barbaric nature and they needed to be civilised. According to the British, civilisation was, "the triumph and development of reason, not only in the constitutional, political and administrative domains, but in the moral, religious and intellectual spheres" (Conklin 14).

Despite talking about civilisation, the British indulged in cruel barbaric activities to colonise the innocent natives of the colonies. They killed most of the natives and silenced the others by inhuman activities. Regarding such a kind of mass killing of the natives in Australia, Edward Wilson recorded his experience which could be applied to all the colonies.

In less than twenty years we have nearly swept them off the face of the earth. We have shot them down like dogs. In the guise of friendship we have issued corrosive sublimates in their damper and consigned whole tribes to the agonies of an excruciating death. We have made them drunkards, and infected them with diseases which have rotted the bones of their adults, and made such few children as are born amongst them a sorrow and a torture from the very instant of their birth. We have made them outcasts on their own land, and are rapidly consigning them to entire annihilation (quoted in Harris 209).

Out of the cruelties exercised by the British, the ultimatum was separating the younger generations of the natives of the settler colonies with the disguise of civilising them. The intentions behind such acts were to uproot the cultural and traditional values and practices of the natives, to spread the coloniser's religion, language and medicine and

through these the coloniser's culture. When compared with the British, the Natives lived contently and the natives' lifestyle was better than theirs. It is proven by the comments of James Cook, a British explorer, in his logbook on the aborigines' in Australia,

From what I have said of the natives of New Holland they may appear to be the most wretched people on earth, but in reality, they are far happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous, but with the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in tranquillity. The Earth and the Sea of their own accord furnish them with all things necessary in life... (Quoted in <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/pacific.htm>)

Nevertheless, they claimed their selfish act as 'Whiteman's burden' and to civilise the colonised, they indulged in uncivilised acts. Residential schools were started by the British in America, Canada and Australia to educate the native children and to civilise them which was a known broader perspective (whereas the hidden agenda was to erase their culture and identity).

In America, the residential schools known as 'American Indian Boarding Schools or American Indian Residential Schools' were established between the 17th and the 20th centuries. In Canada, the first British missionary school for the natives was started in 1830 and such schools continued to exist till the 20th century. Those schools were called as 'Residential Schools'. Like these two nations in Australia too, the children were forcefully separated from their families and sent to missionary schools. The children who were abducted by the whites from 1910 to 1970 are termed as the stolen generation. In these settler colonies, the agenda for starting such schools was to 'civilise' the natives like the whites and erase their cultural distinctiveness and such schools were run by the Christian missionaries.

It was felt that the Indian race and culture were inferior and that the 'superior race,' out of a sense of duty and generosity, must first civilize... and then assimilate them...these objectives remained the same and were modified only by the emphasis placed on them by different administrations (Grant 61).

They emphasised that they wanted the Natives to assimilate with the Whites. However, “the whole move to assimilation and total equality was carefully prevented by government policies” (ibid. 57). They wanted the Natives to be a useful servant to their needs. Moreover, they wanted the natives to lose their distinctive culture and their uniqueness (which is very primitive according to the British) and to become Christian, a civilised one. Almost all the schools were governed by churches or missionaries which became easy to convert forcefully into Christianity. Hence their mission was to “save the man; kill the Indian” (Adams). Their civilised way of educating the Native children included the British methods of ‘civilised’ punishments. The schools functioned by following military strictness in disciplining the children. “Children were frequently beaten severely with whips, rods and fists, chained and shackled, bound hand and foot and locked in closets, basements, and bathrooms, and had their heads shaved or hair closely cropped” (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples).

The British did not want to educate the adults as they considered it was waste of time and imposed it on the children of the natives. The British forced the Native children to study in schools which were far from their homes; hence they could not run back and separated them from their families at a young age until they were young adults. The schools taught manual work to the Native boys and domestic work to the Native Girls which proves assimilation was not the real motive of these schools, but to cut their cultural roots, “the primary role of education for Native girls was to inculcate patriarchal norms and desires into previously non-patriarchal Native communities so that women would lose their traditional places of leadership in Native communities” (Smith 5). In the residential schools, the native children faced tortures and physical abuses every day. They were deprived of contact with their families, forbidden to use their mother tongues and in a way their cultural roots and memories were erased by the colonisers.

The pain of that generation is brought to the notice of the world through the writings of the native children. They believed that their voices only eradicated these inhumane practices and some of them passed their traumatic experiences to the next generations which are recorded in personal narratives or literary forms. Armand Garnet mentions the aim of such writings by the Natives thus,

As an expression of voice, or, more correctly, a community of voices, Native writers are attempting to find expression in a society that does not share their values and concerns. The form of these voices, like the content itself, varies according to the individual author, but as a community, theirs is a collective voice that addresses the relationship between colonizer and colonized, the impact of colonialism, and, moreover, functions on a practical level by striving to bring about positive change. (110)

The select stories focus on the trauma and pain undergone by the parents when their children were forcefully separated from them in the residential schools. The short story "A Long Story" is written by Beth Brant, an indigenous writer from Canada. Her works focus on colonialism, racism and the experiences of the Natives. This story presents the trauma of two mothers who lost their children forcefully in two different periods; 1890 and 1978. One incident was a result of colonisation and the other was due to the Western cultural imposition in the name of law. Both incidents are interlinked, differentiated by the mention of the year each time and narrated by the mothers; Annie (named by the White) and Mary. Leslie Marmon Silko is an American writer with a White and Mexican ancestry. Her works focus on the dissonance between the Native and the White cultures, the discrimination faced by the Natives and the importance of cultural differences. Her story "Lullaby" focuses on the pain of a mother, Ayah, who lost her children due to the British education policy on the Natives, her psychological trauma and the pain of separation. "The Letter" is written by Sally Morgan, an Australian Aboriginal writer. Her works too focus on the pain of the stolen generation, loss of identity and racial discrimination. This short story talks about the pain of a mother who lost her daughter due to the imposition of the White Law. The narrator carries her sister's letter, a childhood photo of her niece Elaine and some documents to hand over to Elaine after her sister's death. Through a letter she confesses her trauma to her daughter which the daughter reads after her mother's death. Though these three stories are set in different timelines and locations, the trauma experienced by the protagonists of the stories are the same and importantly the situation they underwent is also the same.

In the name of 'White men's burden' the colonisers in the settler colonies have done a historical blunder. With selfishness to utilise human resources for their welfare and to have control over the natives, the British used uncivilised means in the name of civilising the natives. The native parents were issued a form which was collected later from the parents claiming that as parents' consent form to send their children to the residential schools. The parents were ignorant of the English language and they did not know the information mentioned in the consent form. They were cheated by the British rulers and the children were forcefully separated from them.

Nationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities ... In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten. In that time not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal ... Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children. (HREOC 31)

In "A Long Story" the 1890 part story depicts the anguish nature of a mother who knew that she lost her children and she would not have her children back. Even if they returned, they would be different and she would never see 'her' children again. The children were separated from her two days back. The mother describes the incident of losing her child thus, "We are frightened by this sudden child-stealing. We signed papers, the agent said. This gave them rights to take our babies. It is good for them. It will make them civilized, the agent said. I do not know *civilized*" (145-6). In "Lullaby" Danny and Ella, the children of the protagonist Ayah were separated from her by getting a signature on a consent form. She remembers that incident thus,

They were wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a black ball-point pen, trying to make her understand their English words. She was frightened by the way they looked at the children, like the lizard watches the fly...Ayah could see they wanted her to sign the papers... She only wanted them to go, and to take their eyes away from her children. She took the pen from the man without looking at his face and she signed the papers in three different places he pointed to (45).

In “The Letter” the mother (whose name is not mentioned in the story) was forced to send her child to a foster home. She narrates that incident in the letter that in a settlement when she was seventeen a White man cheated her sexually. When Elaine was born she was fair like her father but he did not want to accept them as family. Hence they were living in the settlement until her third year. Unfortunately, Elaine was separated from her mother by the Aborigines Protection Board stating that it was the best for her future. The mother mentioned this incident in her letter thus, “He said that black mothers like me weren't allowed to keep babies like you. He didn't want you brought up as one of our people. I didn't want to let you go but I didn't have any choice. That was the law”.

In residential schools, the children's names were changed, given a uniform to wear and their traditional long hair was cut. They were forced to speak in English. Christian names given to the children distanced the children from the family. Naming a person or place is an act of possessing. The British followed it as a strategy to conquer humans and lands and claim it as theirs. The residential schools followed this technique to transform the native children. In “A Long Story” the mother mentions that Annie is not her name. “That is not my name! There is no Martha! There is no Daniel! This is witch work” (147). Once the children were separated from their parents they were ‘new’ to the parents when they met later. In most cases, the children would never return and even when they returned, the parents could feel their children as theirs but have a sense of strangeness. In “A Long Story” the mother receives a letter from her children and she mentions it thus,

This letter is from two strangers with the names Martha and Daniel. They say they are learning civilized ways. Daniel works in the fields, growing food for the schools. Martha cooks and is being taught to sew aprons... I am afraid of Martha and Daniel, these strangers who know my name (147).

In “Lullaby” the children feel strange to look at their parents.

The last time they came was in early July, and Ella stared at her the way the men in the bar were now staring. Ayah did not try to pick her up; she smiled at her

instead and spoke cheerfully to Danny. When he tried to answer her, he could not seem to remember and he spoke English words with the Navajo (49).

In "The Letter" Elaine thought of herself as a white and when the truth was revealed to her by her aunt earlier, she could not believe that and denied it as a mistake.

The mothers in the stories faced agony constantly and lived with their memories. The pain of losing their children and knowing that life would not be the same after that incident left them shattered. The pain of the mothers could be understood from their narration of it. In "A Long Story" the mother speaks thus,

I am a crazy woman. I look to the fire that consumes my hair and see their faces. My daughter. My son. They still cry for me, though the sound grows fainter. The wind picks up their kneeling and brings it to me. The sound has bored into my brain. I begin howling. At night I dare not sleep. I fear the dreams... A crazy woman. That is what they call me (149).

Ayah in "Lullaby" suffers thus,

She carried the pain in her belly and it was fed by everything she saw; the blue sky of their last day together and the dust and pebbles they played with; the swing in the elm tree and broomstick horse choked life from her. The pain filled her stomach and there was no room for food or for her lungs to fill with air (47).

The mother in "The Letter" writes in her letter to her daughter about her pain thus,

For a long time I tried to forget you, but how could I forget my own daughter? Sometimes I'd take out your baby photo and look at it and kiss your little face. I prayed that someday you'd know that you had a mother who loved you.

Conclusions

The impositions of Christianity, English medicine and English language upon the natives are also mentioned in the stories. Under the guise of the civilising missions, the British looted the wealth and the labour of the natives. After World War Two several historical blunders were tried to be corrected and the inhuman treatment of the so-called civilised countries came to an end. The present generation of the Native people of these places understood the importance of their culture. The strength of the native culture enabled them to work as groups again which led to the formation of community-based activities to revitalise their life, culture and tradition. Presently many of the

Natives are re-writing their history from their point of view to enable the world to understand their side of arguments. Such stories help the Natives to have confidence in their culture and tradition through the experience of self-recognition and self-validation. Moreover, it enables the readers to exhibit respect for other cultural practices and enable them to understand human values.

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