

Experiences of Native Children in White Institutions: A Study of Vickie L. Sears' Story "Grace"

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades of twentieth century a whole new sub-genre of literature has sprung up in the 'settler colonies.' This new sub-genre articulates the experiences of Native children in white institutions particularly in Residential schools and orphanages. The children who grew up in these institutions are still wrestling with psychosomatic problems and other health related issues. However, there are some who have gained sanity and these few have written about their horrifying experiences in these institutions. This paper is a study of Vickie L. sears story "Grace."

Key words: Violence, White, Native, Grace, orphanage.

INTRODUCTION

Native literature written by people across the world represents the reality of the Native people. At the same time it represents the impact of colonial policies on the Natives. The Native societies were quite different from the White society. The invaders portrayed these differences as the hallmark of the inferiority of the Natives. The Natives at that time were gagged, they did not know how they were portrayed by the Whites. The truth was obscured by the language of the invaders. That is why the immediate response from the Natives was not registered. However, Native literature is answering them back. The Native writings bring out the other side of the story.

The Natives society was closely knit and all the people of the tribes acted like an extended family. The children in this society was everybody's responsibility and the relations were valued by the Natives. Vine Deloria Junior points out that Christianity has fared badly among the Native because it ignores the family and community life: "Christianity among Indians has fared rather badly during recent years. When placed next to traditional religions, it has very little to say about responsibilities to family community; most Christians deals with the Church as if it were the deity" (38). Leslie Marmon Silko also points out the same things about Christianity:

Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus would save only the Individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother loved and cared for them as her Children, as her family. (Ceremony 62-63)

The tribal society indemnified all the people and did not allow anybody to remain alone or orphan. All the people were taken care of. However, the White policies have altered the community life of the Natives. Vickie L. Sears points out the changes that have taken place in the Native society in her short story "Grace."

The story opens with the description of two children who tell that they are "orphans" (168). This shows that the word that did not exist in the vocabulary of the Natives has become a reality. Earlier, if something happened to the parents of any child, then child became responsibility of everybody in the tribe. In her book *Yellow woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, Silko elaborates the ties between her people: "Children called their mother's sisters 'mother' as well, and a child became attached to a number of parents figures" (68). Similarly Jerry Watchman writes about the relations in the Navajo society: "In Navajo Kinship, the distinction of brothers and cousin does not exist" (70).

The problems does not end with the children getting orphaned, rather the readers are bewildered when they tell the readers: “Our parents got a divorce and we don’t know where they are, so we need to keep our thinking straight” (168). This line tells that the Natives have become pseudo-whites in their behavior. Native literature is full of instances where the Whites forsook their children. When the Whites arrived the Americas they entered into sexual relationships with the Native women. However, the children born out of these unions were forsaken by the Whites. The forsaking of these Children by the divorced parents show that the Natives have become White atleast in behavior.

Many of the important Native writers are of mixed blood descent. The pain of being left alone is visible in the writings of these writes. Thomas King mentioned in an interview is Jennifer Andrews:

My father took off when I was about five years old and I’ve always held it against him. In my novels I keep writing about fathers who either desert their families or who are assholes. (166)

In his novel *Medicine River*, he has written about such a father. He deserts his children and wife. Thomas King establishes the character of the father through a letter. The letter reads:

Dear Rose,
I’ll bet you never thought you’d hear from me again. I’ve thought about calling or writing, but you know how it is. How are you and the boys? Bet they’re getting big. Bet you’re probably mad at me, and I don’t blame. I’m going to be a Calgary for a Rodeo. Thought I might drop in and see you... (1)

The Native literature is full of such examples. However, Vickie L. Sears tells the readers that these vices have entered the Native society.

The children in the story have been rendered orphan because their parents have divorced. Divorce is a vice that has seeped into the Native society from the Whites. Marriage among the Natives was considered ‘mysterious and holy’ (Eastman 10) and the “nuptial blessing was given by the High Priest of God, the most reverent and holy Nature” (Eastman 10).

The marriage was holy union so the divorce was out of question. However, the divorce of the parents of the parents of children shows that the Native people have also adopted the vices of White man.

One of the important things about the Native American literature is that is not only tells about the impact of colonial policies, but also about the vices that are rampant in the Native society. Vickie L. Sears also writes about the important problem of alcoholism among the Natives. Vickie L. Sears story is suggestive of the problem of drinking among the Natives. The children in the story identify the Indian people by the habit of drinking. In the story, Sears writes: “They were more brown than us, but I wondered if they were Indian. They didn’t drink though, so may be not” (170). Babita Devi et al. writes about the problem of alcoholism among the Natives (Natives’ Nativity 3).

The children realize that the couple they are talking about are brown in color, but then they realize that they do not drink so they cannot be Indians. The appearance here does not matter. In the story it becomes clear that drinking is a bigger identifier than the appearance. Drinking is in fact, a problem, however, it must be understood that alcohol was introduced among the Natives by unscrupulous Whites. The Native writers have written about the impact of alcohol in the beginning of the contact. In her novel *The Game of Silence*, Louise Erdrich writes:

Nokomis made the quick fist-to-mouth sign for drinking ishkodewaaboo, the water that burned. Albert had developed a love for the stuff that disarranged men’s minds. Deydey rarely took any of it, for he said that burning water was a false spirit. (139)

This shows how alcohol was introduced among the Natives. Some of the Natives understood the true nature of the alcohol and abstained from it. However, many of them succumbed to the temptation of alcohol.

In fact, alcohol has devastated the Native communities across the world. In the beginning alcohol was drunk by the Natives out of curiosity. In the contemporary times alcohol is drunk to find solace. The Natives drink alcohol to forget their pain for sometime. Alexis Wright, the noted Australian Aboriginal writer, writes about the problem of consumption of alcohol among the Australian Aborigines:

In those times it must have been a revelation to the Aboriginal people who succumbed to alcohol, to know that the grog could make you forget about everything that reminded you who you were. (36)

In the contemporary times, Native societies have been devastated by loss of identity and land. That is why they take refuge in alcohol. According to the studies “many people begin drinking to enhance positive emotions and reduce negative ones, and alcohol does reliably lower anxiety and depression and improve his self-esteem at least temporarily” (Taylor 136).

It must be noted that the theme about White impact on Natives is only a peripheral theme in the story. The story is more about the how the White withered when they were given absolute power.

The story is more about the psychology of the children and how it gets affected by the behavior the people who are appointed as their guardians. In the story Vickie L. Sears tells how the Whites crushed the psyche of the Native Children. The Whites who were supposed to nurture the children opposite. The children who were kept under the guardianship of Whites were tormented by them psychologically:

I thought they was going to take us to a tavern because that's where the orphanage lady took me real late one night, to show me where all the Indian women was and what kind of people they are, always being drunk and laying up with men. (169)

The orphanages were advertised by the Whites as place where the Native Children were taken care of. The Native children were kept in these orphanages and mission run Residential schools to train them in civilization etiquette. However, the people who have lived in these orphanages and mission Residential schools have painted an altogether different picture of these institutions. The people who ran these institutions assaulted the children psychologically. In the story, Vickie L. Sear writes that the people who ran the orphanages did not try to make the lives of the children better, rather they convinced them about the bleak future of Native people. In the story the orphanage lady tells the narrator: “That woman said that is all us Indian girls like to do and I will be just like that too” (169). Here the orphanage lady has already decided about the future of the girl. It is interesting to note that girl is only nine years old. So the readers could understand the impact of such an assault on the psyches of such Children.

The impact of this assault on the psyche of the children is clearly visible in the story. The nine year old girl finds it difficult to trust any such person. In the story Vickie L. Sears writes: “I started thinking maybe these people are okay, but a part inside of me told me I best not get myself fooled” (169). In these lines, the narrator Jodi tells about her feelings about the old Indian couple who are ready to adopt them. The old Indian couple Paul and Grace adopt these children, but the children are unable to trust these people. Whenever Paul and Grace try to come near the children, their experiences in the orphanage come between. Vickie. L. Sears writes about the feelings of the narrator when Paul takes her brother Billie Jim to bathroom:

They left and I worried about Paul messing with Billie Jim. My stomach felt all like throw up when they come back. I asked Billie Jim, in our secret way, if something happened and he whispered no. (171)

It is clear that the children could not trust the grown up because they were treated badly by the orphanage people. The children were not even safe in the bathroom. The scene suggests that the children had very bad experiences in the orphanage. The impact of such behavior is clearly visible on the children. They are not able to cultivate normal relations with anybody. When Grace tries to cultivate a normal loving relationship with the children, the narrator dissuades her:

Then the woman reached down to take my hand, but I didn't want her to get me, so I told her I had to take care of my brother and took Billie Jim's hand. (172)

Vickie L. Sears has used the genre of short story to convey her message. The short story conveys the message through limited words. That is why the writer only suggests what had happened with the children in the orphanage.

The narrator asks a question from Paul and Grace: “Do you use a stick or strap for spanking.” This question tells a lot about the treatment of children by the orphanage people. This question makes clear that the children were beaten in the orphanage. The beating of children was not allowed in the Native society, but the Whites were brutal in their treatment. Vickie L. Sears further reinforces: “I never cared much about where I went, as long as the people didn't beat on us with sticks and big belts” (171).

Another important thing that emerges in the story is that of sexual exploitation of young children by the people who ran the orphanage. These sexual experiences of the Children make them suspicious of all the grownups. The narrator fails to trust Grace:

She put my brother in her lap where he went to sleep, with his chubby fingers in her hand, but I stood guard just in case things got weird. (172)

This makes clear that the narrator is suspicious of Grace doing bad things with her brother. This again reinforces the idea that even small children were not safe in the hands of unscrupulous Whites. The theme keeps on coming again and again. The narrator suspects that sooner or later Grace and Paul will try to sexually exploit them. In fact, narrator is bewildered when she finds that Grace is least interested in sexually exploiting her:

She showed me it and then closed the door. That's funny because she didn't stay. (172)

It is clear that the girl is astonished because Grace does not stay back. However, the suspicion keeps coming back in her mind. When Grace offers to help the narrator with the nightgown, suspicion comes back:

Then I knew she was going to do bad things like the orphanage woman and I wanted to grab Billie Jim and run, but I didn't know where I was. I started to back down to where she said to sleep and she said, "It's all right if you don't want any help. Have a good sleep." (173)

The suspicion in mind of narrator is too deep rooted to be alleviated very soon. She keeps on waiting bad things to happen. Eventually Grace is able to win the confidence of the narrator:

I let her hold my hand sometimes too because it seemed like the bumps in her hand felt better. Least she always smiled when I let her. She didn't squeeze my hand or put it in her tee-tee. She didn't never put her fingers in mine or play with Billie Jim's pee-pee. Neither did Paul. Brother and me both liked that. (183)

The story suggests that the people who ran the orphanages not only exploited the children sexually, but also invented new ways to torment the children and damage their psyche. Narrator tells the readers:

I remembered the wild kitten I made friends with out in the tall grass back at the orphanage. I thought about how one of the orphanage matrons killed the kitten and hung it around my neck and told everybody I killed it. All day I had to wear the kitty, but I didn't cry. (178)

The kitten was killed by the matron because the narrator Jodie made friends with her. It clearly suggests that the children were not allowed to make friends even with the animals. If the animals were made friends then they were killed. This shows that the children were in the hands of callous people.

The children were not only beaten and tormented by the people who ran the orphanages, but also censored the cultural items associated with the Natives. The people who ran the orphanages were indulged in obliterating the Native culture. In the story, the readers are told how the religious beliefs of the Natives are debased by the Whites. The orphanage lady told the narrator: "pole was a pretend God and that was wrong because God was up in the heaven and Indian people was bad who made the pole" (169). The pole is an important religious symbol, but the orphanage people teach them that the pole is bad and the Indian religion is devilish.

On the other hand, the old Indian couple not only takes care of the narrator and her brother, but also initiates them in the Native culture. In contrast to the orphanage lady, Grace tells the children: "the totem pole was to make a song about the dead people and animals and that it was a good and beautiful thing" (169).

The couple act like parents for the children and gives them a life style that should be given to every child. The old couple take them to "picnics or pow-wows or rodeos" (174). Grace tries to teach them about all the things which are the part of Native life. She shows them "different plants and birds" (176). Like all the Native people Grace has amazing knowledge about the birds and plants. She teaches them how to make baskets.

Hair among the Natives are one of the most important cultural symbols. The Native people do not cut or crop their hair. ZitkalaSa wrote about the importance of Growing hair in her famous American Indian stories and old Indian Legends:

Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemies. Among our people short hair was worn by mourners and shingled hair by cowards. (22)

The children in the story are also aware of their customs of the Natives that is why they become horrified when they realize that Paul and Grace will cut their hair. Instead of cutting their hair, Paul and Grace teach them how to tie their hair in braid.

Paul and Grace try to initiate them in their culture, but their happy days are very short. Paul dies and the children are sent back to the orphanage again.

Through the story Vickie L. Sears make clear that Native children should not be kept under the guidance of the Whites. The best place for such children is their tribal community. The children should be initiated in their culture. Keeping such helpless children in orphanage makes them vulnerable to sexual predators. Vickie L. Sears story makes clear that this kind of treatment with young children stunt their psychological growth and they may develop psychosomatic problems for life.

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