

Preserving Native Culture in Native Schools: A study of Luther Standing Bear's "First Day at Carlisle" and Luci Tapahonso's "Snakeman"

Virender Pal

Associate Professor, Institute of Integrated & Honors Studies, Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra

ABSTRACT

In the colonized countries, multi-pronged strategies were adopted by the colonizers to deracinate the Natives. One of the strategies that was common in the United States of America, Canada and Australia was the taking of Native children away from their families and keeping them in boarding schools run by the churches. The policy has been stopped, but its impact is still visible in the Native society. Alcoholism, domestic violence, fractured families, high rates of suicide and high rates of incarceration have been associated with children who were taken away from their parents. The Native writers have written extensively about the impact of this policy. The current paper is a study of two stories about Residential schools.

Key Words: Native, residential schools, stolen generations, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism as an enterprise was strikingly similar across the world. The same strategies were adopted by the invaders across the world. The resistance of the Native societies was broken by the superior firepower of the invaders and then the process of creating the division among the Native started. After the successful invasion, the first thing the invaders did was to make the natives believe that they were inferior to the invaders. Colonial institutions like Western educational institutions and Christianity came into play and Native children were taken to these institutions (Devi, Natives' 2). The educational institutions were used to smother the Native cultures and languages. The impact of these institutions is still visible on the society. According to M. Wilson et al., the residential school had a "devastating impact on Aboriginal families and way of life, the effects of which continue to reverberate even today. This includes a high level of mental health problems experienced by indigenous Australians and the absence of parenting models resulting in unacceptably high levels of child abuse and neglect, which many people attribute to this period" ("The Harmful Use of Alcohol").

In Australia, the Native children who were taken away from their families are called "the stolen generations", in the United States of America the policy was called Native School and Residential schools. The names of the policies may be different but their impacts on the Native population were similar. Effects of Native schools on the Native Americans in the United States include, "Increased physical, sexual and emotional violence in Native communities; underemployment and unemployment; increased suicide rates; increased substance abuse; loss of language, religious/ cultural traditions; increased depression and post-traumatic stress disorder; and increased child abuse" (Smith, Andrea 92).

Studies have been conducted in Australia, the United States of America and Canada on the impact of the policy of taking away children. In Australia, the study is known as *Bringing Them Home*. Noted Australian critic Penny Van Toorn says that the report "sits like a stone on consciousness of many Australians" (24). Similarly, K. Tsianina Loawaima writes about these schools:

They were schools that took schooling to extremes, and in the blast furnace of colonialism welded the worst aspects of schooling-rigidity, homogenization abuse of power, mindless bureaucracy, demanding labour and rote "learning" with racism, oppression and dispossession to eliminate the Native. (IX)

Native writers, many of whom, have been part of these residential schools have written extensively about it. A whole new sub-genre of “residential school literature” has come into being (Eigenbrod 278). Most of the writers agree that the policy of taking away children was “cultural genocide” (Wright 35). The policy was adopted so that Natives could be written out of existence one of the problems in the settler colonies was about the ownership of land. The colonizers were acutely aware of the fact that at the same stage in the future, they may face legal troubles from the Natives regarding the ownership of land. That is why they were very much interested in obliterating Nativty from the indigenous people. In obliterating indigeneity, Residential schools were the most important policy followed by the colonized. The Native writers have exposed the hidden motives behind the establishment of Residential schools in their writing. This paper is a study of “First Days at Carlisle” by Luther Standing Bear and “The Snakeman” by Luci Tapahonso.

It is important to note that these colonial schools were alien institutions for the Natives. In most of these settler countries, such formal education institutes did not exist. So, these institutions became important organizations to deculture the Native and elongate the colonial rule. Kuokannen while analyzing the role of these schools writes:

Educational institutions in particular have played a central role in colonizing indigenous people. Colonial school system despite its geographical location, has also been a very effective tool in implementing these racist theories and indoctrinating them in children Indigenous and non-indigenous alike worldwide (Kuokkanen 697-98)

The story “First Day at Carlisle” by Luther Standing Bear is one of the early accounts of the Residential schools. In the story, it seems that Luther Standing Bear talks of the policy in an approving tone, but he also expresses the agenda of these colonial institutes. The story seems more believable as Luther Standing Bear writes about the experience as a child and seems to have developed affection for the people who ran the institute. The story is a balanced account of his stay as he enjoyed some of the luxuries which were not available to the children who joined the Residential schools at later stages. While talking approvingly of the institutions, Standing Bear takes the gloss off the policy.

At the beginning of the story, Standing Bear tells the readers that the school is located in Carlisle Barracks. At the same time, he tells the difference between expectations and reality. The first shock for the children is to find the empty rooms:

When our interpreter told us to go to a certain building, which he pointed out to us, we ran very fast, expecting to find nice little beds like those of the white people had. We were so tired and worn out from the long trip that we wanted a good long sleep. (113)

The children were expecting to find beds to sleep on. They thought that the white man would provide the same luxuries to them also as enjoyed by him. While bringing them to school, the children must have been lured by the white man by telling wonderful stories. In one of her stories “The Big Red Apples” Zitkala Sawrites how she was lured by the white man:

Judewin had told me the great tree where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat. I had never seen apple trees. I had never tasted more than a dozen red apples in my life; and when I heard of orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them. The missionaries smiled into my eyes and patted my head. I wondered how Mother could say such hard words against them. (27)

When Zitkala Sa joined the Residential school, she came in for a shock. All the promises that were made to her proved to be hollow. Instead, her long hair was cut short which was not acceptable among the tribe. In her tribe, the shearing of her hair was allowed only during the period of mourning.

In the story, Luther Standing Bear is also shocked when they are “all herded into two rooms on the upper floor” (113). The word ‘herded’ makes clear that the children had to live in unhygienic conditions and they did not have enough space. This makes clear that the children were betrayed on the very first day. Moreover, they were not provided with enough food. On the first morning, they were given “bread and water” which disappointed them (113). The children were not offered nutritious food in the institutions. In *My Name is Seepetza*, Shirley Sterling writes about the strategies adopted by the children living in the Residential schools to save themselves from malnutrition:

We don’t get margarine at every meal so some of the girls stick some to the bottom of the table. Then at the next meal, they scrape it off and spread it on the bread. Other times girls hide bread or raw carrots in their bloomer legs under the elastic. They take it out and eat it late at night when the lights are out. That’s when we get really hungry. We heard that the boys tie a jackknife to a string they lower it through a small window into the cellar. They spear potatoes and carrots that way and eat them. (26)

The Native children were 'herded' into the Residential school for many reasons. The first reason was to dilute or obliterate indigeneity among the Natives. The whites also needed house help and farmhelp, so the boys and the girls were trained to fill those positions.

The children were not offered the comforts white people enjoyed at their houses. In the beginning, the children slept on the cold floor. After a few days, they were given bags and were told to fill the bags with hay. Though they were able to sleep comfortably as the hay-filled in the bags kept them warm, these were still far from the comforts enjoyed by the whites.

Later works about the Residential school are full of the details of atrocities committed on the children including sexual abuse, severe beatings, fatal medical experiments etc. The Truth Commission of Genocide in Canada has confirmed the horrible truth about the Residential schools. Ironically, most of these schools were run by the Churches. The people of God are expected to be benevolent, but they turned out to be devils. Smith writes about the horrible crimes committed by these Residential schools:

The list of offences committed by church officials includes murder by beating, poisoning, hanging, starvation, strangulation and medical experimentation. Torture was used to punish children for speaking, Aboriginal languages. Children were involuntarily sterilized. In addition; the report found that church, clergy, police and business and government officials were involved in maintaining paedophile rings that used children from the residential schools. (Smith, 91)

Luther Standing Bear does not give a hint about any, such atrocity being committed on the children. However, he does write about the process of deracination starting with admission to the school. It is interesting to note that Luther was a child at that time and he did not understand the process of deracination. His narration shows that he did not even know about the repercussions of such actions of the whites. The first thing that was done by the school officials was to change the names of the children. The traditional names of the children were changed to Christian names.

The action was devastating for the children because in Native communities, names were very important and any name could not be given to anyone. The name for the natives had deep cultural meanings. For instance, Louise Erdrich in her novel *The Birchbark' Houses* says that only "seven or eight people possessed the right to give names" (39). These seven or eight individuals were people with heightened spiritual sense and named the children after recognizing their specialities. Gerald Vizenor also stresses the same thing: "Individuals were given special names, at birth...in the traditional past, a person in the tribe was selected to present a sacred name to a child" (13).

In the white institutions, the children were asked to select their names by pointing towards a name written on the board. Luther Standing Bear points out: "I took the pointer and acted as if I were about to touch an enemy" (117). The word 'enemy' used by Luther Standing Bear clarifies many things. By using the word, he makes clear that these English names were enemies to his people and children themselves. These names were alien to them and their communities and had no utility to them. On the other hand, the traditional names pointed towards their tribal affinity and connected them to the land. The names often pointed towards the animals, flora and fauna of the particular area of their residence. However, the white names did not point out any such connection and alienated them from their people and their land.

The second important cultural shock Luther had to suffer was the cutting off of his hair. He tells: "We were all called together by the interpreter and told that we were to have our hair cut off" (119). For the boys cutting off the hair was a graver problem when compared to having a Christian name. Their response shows that they were not ready to get a haircut:

We listened to what he had to say, but we did not reply. This was something that would require some thought, so that evening the big boys held a council, and I recall very distinctly that Nakpa Kesela, or Robert American Horse, made a 'serious speech. Said he, "If I am to learn the ways of the white man, I can do it as well with my hair on" To this we all exclaimed "Hau" meaning that we agreed with him. (119-20)

The response of Luther Standing Bear does not tell about the gravity of the situation regarding cutting hair. In fact, after watching the short hair of the boys, Luther Standing Bear also wants to get his hair cut. The response to the haircut is best captured by Zitkala Sa who writes in "The Cutting off My Long Hair":

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blade of scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother. I had suffered extreme indignities. People had started at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish, I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort

me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my mother used to do; for now, I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

The importance of keeping long hair among the natives is accentuated by the writer towards the end of the story. While describing the appearance of his father he writes: "Father was so well dressed. He wore a gray suit, nice shoes, and a derby hat. But he wore long hair" (129). Luther Standing Bear's father is dressed like a white man but he has not shorn his hair. This shows the importance of long hair in the Native American culture.

Long hair is the external symbol of the Native American culture, the whites soon started attacking the other cultural things like language. Luther Standing Bear writes: "We were not allowed to converse in the Indian tongue, and we know so little English that we had a hard time to get along" (125). This censuring of the language created a problem for the children especially at later stages when some of them got united with their families. The families could not speak their Native tongue. This lack of communication resulted in unspeakable anguish among the Native people Luther Standing Bear articulated this problem in his story. His native tongue was prohibited in the school and his father did not know English. He faced the dilemma of what to do: "But our rules were that we were not to speak the English language under any consideration. And here was my father, and he could not talk English!" (128).

Luther Standing Bear was lucky as Captain Pratt allowed him to speak in Sioux tongue to his father, but this permission was an exception. In the later stages, children were beaten severely for speaking in their Native tongue. For the whites, it was very important to make the children forget their native tongue because only then they could be conditioned. It is well established that language is the carrier of culture, if language is lost then all the knowledge and cultural codes associated with the language are also lost. In the case of the Native Americans, language is associated with the land as Jeannette Armstrong points out: "As I understood from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within... (qtd. In Lawrence, 127)

Along with the Native languages, Native religions were another casualty. Once the children lost their language, they also lost their religious practices. In the schools, the children were forced to follow Christian beliefs. In the story, Luther Standing Bear inform the readers:

All the boys and girls were given permission to choose the religious denomination which appealed to them best, so they were at liberty to go where they pleased to Sunday school. Most of us selected the Episcopal Church. I was baptized in that church under the name of Luther. (124)

This transformation from Native religion to Christianity affected the Natives badly as it changed their worldview and thrust an alien worldview of them. According to the white writers, the change in worldview has made "apples" the Natives who are "red on the outside, and white on the inside" (Allen 10). The Native believed that the world is "cyclic" (Power 308) where all the living beings and non-living beings are connected. However, the Native stories show their disenchantment with Christianity and are returning to the Native religious and Native writers playing a major role in the process. In the story "Christianity Comes to the Sioux", one of the characters Harley tells: "I was just saying to Wakan Tanka that I haven't forgotten him. I didn't go the way of the steamer and the great piano. I listen for His voice and the music He makes in the water and through the wind" (310). Wakan Tanka is the name of the God among the Sioux. The character says that he did not go the way of the steamer means that he did not become a Christian as the missionaries arrived in Sioux country on the steamer and converted many Sioux to Christianity. However, Harley did not convert to Christianity and still retains Native beliefs are more coherent when compared to Christianity. The revival of Native ceremonies like Sweat lodges are taking place across the Americas. The damage done by institutions like Residential schools is being documented and people are being motivated to know about the ancestral beliefs.

Certain writers show that the children who were kept in Residential schools also tried to save their traditional beliefs and culture. They were also successful in doing so even under the watchful eyes of the Church officials in the Residential schools. Luci Tapahonso documents the struggle of Native children to preserve their culture in the story "The Snakeman."

The story showcases the close ties Native children had with their family members. In the case of the Native family included the whole tribe. In the Native societies, nobody was allowed to remain an orphan. If something happened to the parents of a child then the whole tribe stepped in and performed a communitarian bond allowing the Natives to survive through the difficult times.

One of the major differences between the white and Native worldviews is that of the concept of time. Whites believed that time is linear, but for the Natives, time is circular like a tortilla. The Natives believe that many worlds exist together, and

the ancestors keep visiting the world to help their children. There are so many instances in Native literature where ancestors visit the contemporary times to save the children. The importance of ancestors is accentuated even by the writers like Chinua Achebe and in Native American literature (Devi, Silko's Narrative 6). In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, he accentuates the importance of ancestors through the following passage:

Near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of Kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children.

The above description by Achebe makes clear the ancestors are respected and revered by the people. In the story "The Snakeman" Luci Tapahonso tells the readers that the bond between the mother and the children is not snapped even after death. Mothers continue to help and love their children after their death. The story "The Snakeman" opens with the following description:

The child slid down silently and caught herself at the end of the fire escape. She eased herself down until she felt the cold, hard sidewall through her slippers then she let go. (72)

The opening scene of the story shows that a young girl goes out of the building through the fire escape. The scene is very important as it sets the tone of the story. In the subsequent lines, the writer informs the readers that the little girl comes back after some time. However, the reason behind this hidden visit is not clear.

The writer also accentuates the bond between these Native children through this story. The Native children were kept in the Residential schools to train them in White Etiquette. One of the important attributes was individualism. The Christian missionaries believed that the communitarian lifestyle was deviant, so they wanted the Natives to become individuals who just thought about themselves. However, Luci Tapahonso's story makes clear that the school authorities failed to kill that communitarian spirit among the children. In the opening scene of the story, the reader comes to know that the Native children act like a team and protect the girl who goes out and patiently wait for her to come back: "The girls went back to their beds and the ones that were closest to the fire escape window opened the window and held it up until she was in. (73) These girls lived in a building which they believed was "haunted" (73). In the school, the children believed that the place was haunted because it was near the graveyard.

The little girls are afraid at night because they feel lonely in their beds at night. In this situation, the elder girl protects them and to assuage their fear sleeps with them in their beds. This kind of behaviour could lead to severe punishment for them, but their culture and tribal upbringing make them protect the younger children:

The bigger girls slept with the little ones, and they prayed that God wouldn't let the man in the attic or the snakeman come to them and that the world wouldn't end until after that mom came to visit. (75)

The Snakeman in the Dine tradition refers to a supernatural being who compelled on abducted women to follow him to his land. The title of the story indicates that the children were aware of the story of the Snakeman. If the traditional Snakeman is there to haunt them in the Residential school, then their traditional sisters are also there to save them. Luci Tapahonso herself attended a Residential school at Fort Wingate. Her story is a curious mixture of her experience at the Residential school and the spiritual traditions of her people. The story makes clear that the people who tried to obliterate their cultural practices through Western education failed miserably. The children in the Residential schools kept their culture alive and formed indestructible bonds. They survived malnutrition, beating, torture and oppression through these indestructible bonds.

Towards the end of the story, Luci Tapahonso tells the readers that the girl who went through the fire exit went to meet her mother who had died long back. She tells the other girls:

She calls me and waits at the edge of the cemetery by those small, fat trees. She is really pretty. When she died, they put a blue outfit on her. A Navajo skirt that's really long and a shiny, soft, light blue blouse. She waves at me like this: 'Come here, Shi yashil, my little baby.' she always calls me that. She's soft and smells so good: (74-75)

The incident shows that the Native parents had an indestructible bond with their children. The girl's mother had died, but she still visited to help her daughter and protect her. Her motherly feelings and love for her daughter have not diluted even after her death. Her mother knows that her daughter lives in a Residential school where she might be conditioned to become white in her worldview. The girl tells the other girls, "When it's cold or snowing, she lets me inside the blanket with her.

We talk about when I was a baby, and what I'll do when I get big. She always worries if I'm being good or not" (75). In the above lines, it seems that at night he mother meets her daughter to nullify the effect of the daytime teachings of the whites. That is why she keeps to talking about what she will do when she grows up. The mother certainly does not want her to become an "apple". That is why she remains rooted in her culture. Her cultural meeting with her daughter is so to save her from the ruinous influence of white Residential Institutions.

The two stories showcase the real reasons behind the establishment of Native institutes. The real reasons for the establishment of these institutions were to deracinate the Native children and to train them in the skills which could make them useful to the white households. In both the stories, readers came across the strategies adopted by the whites to de-culture the children. The writers also infirm about the counter strategies adopted by the Native children to save their culture. The Native culture is still surviving and thriving because of the robust cultural practices of the Natives.

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