



REVIVAL OF ABORIGINALS IN CANADIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

As a group of people, aboriginals in Canada share a history of genocide, a collective trauma, a history of dispossession of land, disenfranchisement, poverty and ill health, just to mention a few attributes. Moreover, among aboriginal communities in Canada, ultimately becomes subsumed in collective values. The basis of these values is invested in land, but not land as individual property right but as a right from the Creator. For aboriginal people, a worldview is at the core of community identity. Although each community has its own variant, there are common elements that make up the worldview and serve to define a community's identity in time and place. Because all things are viewed as interconnected, relationships among people also are critically important; the notion of religion and spirituality have a communal rather than an individual basis. Based on this thought structure/ edifice, the present paper will explore the status and acceptance of the aboriginals in the main stream Canadian society. It is, therefore, important for the intent of the present research, to first provide a discussion on the history of the relationship between Indigenous people and the Canadian state, and to proceed with a discussion on the history of Canadian immigration and their theological beliefs.

Keywords: *aboriginal, immigrant, theological beliefs, Indigenous.*

INTRODUCTION

Canada's aboriginal people comprise many different ethnic groups, although they have been characterized within the generalized terms 'Indian,' 'native,' 'aboriginal' and more recently 'First Nations'. However, unlike other minorities, aboriginal people have been racialized by social institutions, government policies, and within the public sphere itself. This has affected access to their own cultures, inhibited their opportunities, and limited their rights as citizens.

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The statement of Emberly holds true, in this context, when he says, “The structural elements that have impinged on the lives of Canadian aboriginal people, have greatly contributed to their marginalization in relation to the larger society” (Emberly 35).

The multicultural society of Canada has shown the trend of inclusion and social justice. People from different nationality, socio cultural background, and ethnicity have received theoretically, equal welcome to this land. At the level of government many major steps have been taken to maintain a level of symphony among different voices of Canadian land but, in true sense of the term, the issue of multiculturalism is still a mirage. To quote M.G.Vassanji, on the questions, or the issue of multiculturalism he states:

I ask myself, what is multiculturalism? Isn't it simply a waiting post, a holding area for immigrants, a quarantine to hold the virus and keep the peace while succeeding generations have time to emerge, fully integrated, assimilated? What a joy to behold a young Canadian of Asian or African background, speaking an accepted Canadian dialect; and what a pain in the backside, the contentious parents who claim their version of English is as good, if not better, and curry is simply great. Who is multicultural except the immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East; those whose language is not English, whose culture is not western and Christian? (Vassanji 7)

In such a state of affairs, it becomes more important to present a deep analysis into the subject in context. Irrespective of the ideals, theories and constitutional provisions the plight of the aboriginals is still the matter of discussion and questioning. Literature is always the mode of, engaging reality. The exploring eye of a creative writer reaches in those unseen corners and policies that the non-literary writing and the machine and machinery finds difficult to observe.

Critics make an honest attempt to highlight that there are several groups in Canada which are focusing on their own specific issues; like, land claims for indigenous people, racial outlining against Muslims and others, compensation for the tax victims etc. The critics suggest that, focusing on these specific issues is important; it will help in building partnership with various groups and communities across the globe for the revival of Aboriginals in Canada.

Wallis, Sunseri, and Galabuzi suggest that indigenous and racialized communities must recognize the classic, divide and conquer strategy that those in power use to divide them. Basically which, racialized and indigenous communities do not address. As well as, editors also suggest that these communities should ensure that whether or not there are steps being taken between indigenous and racialized communities with concerns to building coalitions,



and if not, what forces are acting out to keep these groups from doing so and what will be the appropriate approach for building these relationships.

Aboriginals comprise huge diversity of people, groups and interests located within varying socio-political, economic and demographic situations. In other words, aboriginals do not make up a single-minded huge entity, speaking with one voice. They spring from many nations and traditions. From the perspective of law, administration and governance Canada recognizes specific groups such as Indians, Inuit and Metis. However, within these broad categories there are many sub-groups like Red River Metis, Western Metis; Inuvialuit, Nunavut; Cree, Ojibwa, and so on. Aboriginals have comprehensively argued that aboriginality has been vitalized so that, the implementation of the government's policy of aboriginals would/should be made easier and which in the end, results in the carelessness of acknowledging these differences among such a wide group of people.

The missing consistent worldview by aboriginals complicates the determination of a single description of "aboriginality". The present chapter begins with discussing the concept of "aboriginal identity," its meaning and different ways of conceptualizing it and then move to look to the concept of 'ethnic identity' and 'aboriginality'.

On the subjugation of the aboriginals in Canada, the statement of Broad is worthy enough to mention Broad writes, "The process of colonization is part of Canadian history and its associated ideology is still linked to aboriginality" (Broad 35). Consequently, the study of aboriginals is not possible to understand without acknowledging the historical and on-going impact of colonialism. The colonization process extended over several generations. The first effect of colonization was the destructive impact on the social and cultural structures of aboriginal groups; social, religious, kinship, and economic institutions were ignored, rejected and replaced by Euro-Canadian institutions. Furthermore, colonization involves the interrelated processes of external political control and aboriginal economic dependence. "Canada is among the wealthiest nations and it is often a noted irony that aboriginal people are among its poorest citizens. In fact, aboriginal people argue that the wealth of Canada is built substantially on resources taken from aboriginal people whose poverty is a recent creation." (Frideres 54) This trend can be easily associated with the paradoxical statement 'Whiteman's burden' given by Rudyard Kipling in the context of colonization.

As a result of colonization and historical trauma, with which aboriginals are faced with the ever-present problem of assuming an identity and hoping that they will be endorsed by others. Historically, aboriginals in Canada never called themselves by a single label nor understood themselves as a national collectively. However, "Aboriginals are forced, at times, to alter their personal identity to correspond with the image projected by the reaction of others." (Adelson 28) Therefore, they come to see themselves as others see them. Canadians

have often stated on the individualistic nature of aboriginal culture and the fundamental respect and freedom which they allowed one another in their daily life. However, it has been argued by scholars that, if aboriginals in Canada behave in a manner that reflects these values, they will be de-valued by the members of the dominant society. As such, the lack of congruency between the individuals' behavioral identity and the dominant society's definition will adversely impact on the individuals' identity.

Now, the present paper will shed focus on the 'concept of ethnic identity' in aboriginals, seen as historically promising rather than naturally given. It has been discussed earlier too that, identities are seen as multiple, unstable and interlocking; there is nothing universal or natural about identity. Identity is presented as the subject positions, which are made available and mobilized in specific historical context. Churchill stated that for aboriginals, "the various aspects of identity have been sites for the construction and reconstruction of subordination, conflict activism and political struggles" (Churchill 62). Since, identities are not independent or constant; their salience varies with situational and political factors. Therefore, aboriginals in Canada have multiple standing in the family, home community and state, which means they have multiple identities. The interplay of multiple identities is important and must be fully understood to appreciate aboriginality. Hence, when aboriginals in Canada struggle for access to resources, they present their identity differently than they would in a non-competitive situation because they have learned to use different identities in different situations.

Both aboriginal and non-aboriginal groups have willingly adopted the recognizable fiction that, "aboriginal identities are essential and fixed: defined as 'traditional', unchanged forms that replicate some 'authentic' past" (Cornell 72). Aboriginals in Canada accept this fiction in order to empower themselves with a non-aboriginal society, whereas non-aboriginal groups accept it as part of a continuing historical stance of detachment. This standpoint allows aboriginals in Canada to opt for an identity that attempts to revive what is thought to be, "historically accurate or authentic cultural forms." (Crosby 14) Though, later on some people would like to take this path but it is impossible to follow because all aboriginals live within a contemporary, non-aboriginal dominated society that is different from the worlds inhabited by their ancestors.

Aboriginals in Canada manipulated between the two worlds and they situationally decide when to be 'traditional' and when to be 'non-traditional'. This position views identity as 'fluid', constantly being debated by aboriginal people in Canada. In this context Kublu states, "Aboriginals may reject the layer of the 'authentic native' and choose to live and give voice to an aboriginality consonant with life in the contemporary social milieu." (Kublu 60)



Crombie, points out that, aboriginals in Canada have to use ‘double voiced rhetoric’ in talking to non-aboriginal society so that they use a language that ‘power understands.’ She states further, “The movement back and forth constitutes identity creation and it reveals the lack of existence of a static, reified aboriginality” (Crombie 70). Therefore, in the end, it is through this movement between two different lines of rhetoric that contemporary aboriginality is created and sustained. Symbolically, identity creation amongst the aboriginals in Canada is viewed as the process involving the interrelationship between insiders and outsiders.

As far as western ways of knowledge is concerned, reason or rationality is the cornerstone of science to the exclusion of other human characteristics that may be metaphysical, such as spirit and faith. There is an acceptance that the universe is unified, interconnected and interrelated. Nevertheless, aboriginality is inclusive of all reality, both physical and metaphysical. In this context Atleo states, “Aboriginal knowledge is that reason or human cognition may not be the sole source of knowledge and that faith and spirit may also play a significant role to human reason” (Atleo 45).

However, non-aboriginal people who have adopted the Western ways of knowledge, assumes that knowledge can only be acquired through human reason. Any other experiences are secondary and not part of what is considered ‘evidence’. Though, aboriginal worldview is such that it is regarded as a network of relationships. Aboriginals respect presence; that is, knowledge of and respect for unseen powers. This worldview provides people with a distinctive set of values, a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to time and place; in the end, a distinct identity. Graveline further points out that, “aboriginals have a distinctive vision of reality (epistemology) that not only interprets and orders the places and events in the experience of a people but gives direction and identity” (Graveline 52).

It is clear that aboriginality is complex but ultimately it refers to linguistic or cultural collectivizes, and not personal identity. The primary source of identity for many aboriginal people is their community or nation. Now, if you ask an Indigenous person in Canada where they are from, most will tell you their indigenous nation first (e.g., Mohawk, Haida, Métis, and Inuvialuit). While traditional identity is understood as an emergent category of identification, there are cases where individuals/groups are overloaded by ‘border identity.’ This is where identity lies between predefined social categories. Their existence is somewhere between aboriginal and white. These individuals have a unique status as the grounding of their identity is based in both aboriginal and the dominant culture. In these cases, individuals perceive their position as one of both oppression and advantage. As such, these individuals found they are able to ‘cross boundaries’ between aboriginal and white because they possess border identities.

However, these individuals always find that, “they are initially associated with their aboriginal culture, especially with reference to their physical features, language and clothing like clues that they have.” (Haig-Brown 58) As such, their identity is subject to the definition of others, at least initially, as they enter into new interactional settings. Nevertheless, it also points out that aboriginal people can alter their external identity. However, it is too simple to say that individuals’ appearance alone determines their identity. The effect of social networks in which the individual is situated is also an important consideration to understand the choice of identity. In the end, it will be the type of contact that an individual has with others in each of the dual cultures and/or the way in which an individual socially experiences aboriginality that will mediate the relationship between one’s social status and one’s aboriginality.

The present day complexities of aboriginal society derive from the conflicting forces of the dominant society wants integration between the cultural and community forces of aboriginality. As a result, aboriginal communities in Canada have become complex and multidimensional. Defensive mechanisms have been devised over the millennium to counteract the assimilative forces that have imposed upon aboriginal culture. Aboriginals in Canada hold their own identities within their communities and cultures, meaning there are many different aboriginal identities. Each aboriginal community has a very specific creation story, institution relations, cultural epistemologies and community relations. Each is unique in its combination of cultural belief, political relations, and land and community relations, and in each case, it create the identities of the local members. As such, there are many different aboriginal identities, ‘sub-regional’ and not based on language families or major cultural groupings. They are often specific to a place that has historical roots with the land and a group history. At the same time, “cultural and linguistic identities continue to play a major part of aboriginal community.” (Atleo 45)

Therefore, an aboriginal person in Canada who has community connections will most often identify his cultural/linguistic affiliation, such as Cree or Blackfoot. Though, “aboriginal people also have developed numerous extensions of their community identities within the nation-state” (Banner 19). They have created their own identities that will allow them to deal with and manage relations outside their communities. As mentioned earlier, they have become adept in developing “sub-identities” to deal with government officials, media and other external agencies (37). Aboriginals suggest that their identity is an alternative to the citizenship rights that other Canadians have and they belong to an aboriginal group that has preceded citizenship in the modern nation-state.

Aboriginals in Canada argue that they are a people who can stand outside this state citizen relationship and may place their loyalties and interests elsewhere. Hence, it is not surprising that conflicts emerge between the two groups when one group sees itself as a ‘people’ and the other sees them as an ‘interest group’. Aboriginals thus confirm that, they are a people in



their own right and thus the legitimacy of the state over them is called into question. Since, aboriginals in Canada have always had a cultural identity but in the past it was largely taken for granted as it was anchored to groups and roles though, it was not a matter of choice. When people live in an aboriginal community, work with other aboriginal people and socialize with other aboriginal people, there is little need to be concerned with cultural identity except during conflict with other ethnic groups or government. However, the new generation of aboriginal people in Canada has grown up without assigned roles or groups that anchor aboriginality so that their identity can no longer be taken for granted. People can of course give up their identity, for empowerment or assimilation, but if they continue to feel it, they must make it more explicit than it was in the past and must even look for ways of expressing it.

Therefore, most people who do not live in an aboriginal community (a spatial) look for easy and recurrent way of expressing themselves; for activities that do not conflict with other aspects of their life. As a result, they refrain themselves from exhibiting ethnic 'traditional' behaviour that requires time-consuming commitment, either to a culture that must be practiced constantly or to organizations that demand active membership. In addition, because, aboriginal people are more concern for their identity rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing themselves which suit them best. Any mode of expressing their cultural identity is valid as long as it enhances the feeling of being ethnic and any cultural pattern or organization that nourishes, "that feeling is therefore relevant, providing that enough people make the same choice when identity expression is a group enterprise." (Simard 20)

In other words, as the function of aboriginal culture and groups reduces and individual identity becomes the primary way of being aboriginal, identity becomes the primary way of expressing aboriginality. Symbolic aboriginality in native people can be expressed in an innumerable ways but it is a characteristic of a nostalgic loyalty to the traditional culture. It is a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated into everyday behavior. Aboriginal people in Canada, sincerely desire to 'return' to these imagined pasts but they soon realize that they cannot go back. Many of aboriginals in today's era have come to the conclusion that neither the practice of traditional aboriginal culture nor participation in aboriginal organizations is essential to feel aboriginal.

Moreover, at the public level, it is not unusual to see the various aboriginal sub-groups express or give the impression of solidarity and social cohesiveness. They understand that, "unity is a strategic factor in developing and sustaining aboriginality" (Cairns 62). Aboriginals in Canada shared cultural and political identities as; they make it possible to be heard and to gain wider attention for their agenda as well as a means of making a difference on vital issues such as self-determination, land and resources. Thus the various aboriginal



sub-groups uses terms such as 'we as first nations' on occasion to illustrate the common historical experiences all aboriginal groups have shared as well as acknowledging their resistance to external labeling. As Retzlaff points out, representing themselves as 'First Nations' by the various sub-groups asserts autonomy and reinforces and promotes the notion that aboriginal people are not only distinct as nations or a people but also share the effects of colonialism.

Over the year's aboriginals in Canada have been forced "inward" upon themselves as families and communities. In turn, considerable cultural resources have been developed among these communities to survive and develop elements of an autonomy and opposition in order to survive in such a society. This strategy developed by aboriginal in Canada is an attempt to preserve and extend a definite territory, to combat violent assaults and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system they encounter on a daily basis. Recently, this strategy has been replaced by a 'war of positions' in which aboriginal people are using political strategies to achieve their goals.

Since it has been mentioned earlier too that, the multicultural society of Canada has shown the trend of inclusion and social justice, people from different nationality socio cultural background and ethnicity received equal welcome on paper to this land. But nevertheless, as multiculturalism became an accepted policy and practiced by Canadians from all walks of life, aboriginal people in Canada found more opportunities to engage in cultural activities and their sense of identity grew. At the same time, non-aboriginal Canadians have become more supportive toward aboriginal culture.

Being an aboriginal is surrounded but the shifting of flexible ethnic boundaries which may originate from forces outside the group in question as well as from within the group. When there exist social and political definitions that emphasize a particular boundary or affiliation like aboriginal, and members of such an identified group perceive economic and or political advantages to be derived from emphasizing that particular boundary, then there exists a strong likelihood of mobilization on the basis of that designated identity.

The main theme of aboriginal revival in Canada is the rediscovery and reassertion of the importance and value of cultural pluralism as well as a coincidental rejection of Anglo-Saxon conformity and the melting pot. Today, aboriginals in Canada are engaged in revitalization or revival of their culture supported by Canadians. An increasing number of indigenous people are developing adaptive strategies, constructing internal processes in their communities while responding to the challenges and opportunities of external forces. Aboriginal people suggest that while some aspects of traditional aboriginal culture are disappearing like songs and stories and others are changing as ceremonies, the fundamental nature of their culture (e.g.,

world-view) remains strong. They conceive of their primary identity as aboriginal and see their biculturalism in positive terms.

Since, the newly visible aboriginals may not participate in 'ethnic groups and cultures' than before, but their new visibility makes it appear as if aboriginality has been revived. Aboriginal culture in Canada is an inherited memory or an exotic tradition that can be enjoyed in a museum or at an ethnic festival. However, this new generation of aboriginal people in Canada is less interested in their aboriginal cultures and organizations; both sacred and secular, and is instead more concerned with maintaining their aboriginality with the feeling of being aboriginal. They are interested in finding ways of feeling and expressing that identity in suitable ways. Identity is the socio-psychological elements that attend role behavior. As well as, economic organization and developments play an important role in aboriginal identification, group formation, conflict and collective action, as well as the political alignment of much ethnic activism.

Aboriginal people in Canada wishes to be identified by other label, particularly on the basis of name, but the behavioural expectations that once identified by others have declined sharply so that individuals have some choice about when and how to play aboriginal roles. Aboriginality, then, is a function of the degree to which one's ethnic affiliation provides necessary and important resources. They believe that, aboriginality has become more visible because many of the symbols used by today's aboriginal people are also visible to the rest of Canada, not only middle-class people, who use them but also the media is more skillful at communicating the symbols than the traditional aboriginal culture and organizations of Canada.

The traditional and contemporary spiritual and philosophical beliefs of the Aboriginal people living in Canada are illustrated in the present chapter. With "over 650 First Nations communities in Canada" (Young 21), cultural elements varies depending on the particular nation's connections and relationships to the land and to each other. For example, the spirit world is a significant yet unclear component of this philosophy. Aboriginal people understood notion of time as circular and fuses the past, present and the future into one principle; i.e. the spirit world. The idea of the spirit world reflects, sharp perspectives on death and dying which are particular to the Aboriginal people' holistic worldview. As time is believed to be circular, life post-death is in constant relationship with the living world and those who inhabit it. Mc Nab shows this relationship is as follows:

The process of death and dying then significantly transcends and transforms the extremely thin barriers between the natural and the spirit worlds. Significantly, Aboriginal people still retain their beliefs in the spirit world and that is how the connections are made through circles of time dissipating the



conventional European notion of past, present and future being separate entities (Mc Nab 95).

On the issue of the aboriginal theology different stream of thought are found. According to Jordan Paper, native theologies in Canada are “highly individualized, but all exist within general cultural parameters” (Jordan 57). Furthermore, within this range of cultural possibilities, there can be as many interpretations as there are individuals. Jordan Paper gives the example of how symbolism can vary from nation to nation. “All traditions have an understanding of the ‘Four Directions’, but the colors and other symbolic associations with these directions can vary considerably” (57). An almost universal notion, the concept of the Four Directions is rooted in indigenous holism; The aboriginal people use a circle to describe the associative relationships between the four key elements of this worldview, “The intellectual, the spiritual, the emotional, and the physical” (Archibald 11). This philosophy emphasizes the relationships that humans have with all living entities; nature, other humans, spirits and mythological figures. A celebrated scholar in Cree research methods Shawn Wilson believes that, “Indigenous ontology and epistemology are based upon the relationships that form a mutual reality, while Indigenous axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to those relationships” (Wilson 80). The formation of reciprocal relationships is a principal element in Indigenous worldviews. These relationships are created with any living entity, as well as with spirits and nature.

However, within contemporary Canadian aboriginal societies, the practices of oral traditions have a significantly moderated role. This is primarily due to religious suppression and urbanization. In his book *Native North American Religious Traditions*, Jordan Paper, an authority on the native cultures, provides a brief historical description that examines aboriginal traditions pre and post European contact. The immediate consequences of the arrival of the Europeans were death from smallpox, measles, influenza, and other epidemic diseases. Later consequences of this contact were forced conversions to Christianity, the loss of traditions, and the formation of reservations and residential school systems. In Canada, the reserves were put under the strict and direct control of various Christian churches. Within these communities, laws were passed forbidding aboriginal people, “on pain of incarceration, to practice their religions” (Jordan 74). Jordan Paper further explains that missionaries would routinely call in forces such as the police or the army to terminate the practice of aboriginal traditions. Jordan Paper believes that the establishment of reserves and residential schools played a decisive role in the near-elimination of aboriginal languages, culture and traditional customs from society. For decades, aboriginal people across Canada and the United States stopped practicing traditional activities due to the control exerted by religious and governmental officials. The legal prohibition against practicing or even speaking positively of, aboriginal religions was “dropped from Canadian law in 1951, although not specifically repealed” (Jordan 55). Despite religious suppression and prohibition, aboriginal traditions in

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Canada have “not only survived, but are undergoing a cultural renaissance that has been burgeoning over the last three decades” (55). Evidence of this cultural rebirth can be found in the contemporary forms of drama being written by the aboriginals.

The early work of aboriginal activists in Canada dealt with ‘decolonized sensibilities,’ seeking answers and solutions related to their feelings of self-doubt and alienation from Canadian society, their disconnection from Canadian history and their traditional culture. Aboriginal people in Canada have been denied from participating in the intellectual and aesthetic production of culture. They concentrated much of their daily efforts on survival and it is only recently that they have the luxury of participating in the national cultural sphere. Furthermore, aboriginal people in Canada found that entering the cultural production sphere was organized, as per the dominant society’s worldview, which meant that aboriginal people were not part of it. Hence, aboriginal authors, artists, academics, and performers etc. all were systematically excluded. Only some of aboriginal authors, artists, academics, and performers such as Alex Janvier, Jeannette Armstrong, Daphne Odjig, Tom Jackson, Jamie Robertson, Sandra Laronde, Drew Haden Taylor, and Tomson Highway etc. were allowed on the main stage of cultural production and recognized for their efforts. These activists are now role models for young and old aboriginals in Canada and in-still pride in aboriginality for all.

The aim of aboriginal playwrights in Canada is to interrupt the current patterns of violent transfer and to insert cultural and embodied knowledge into the circle so that the new knowledge may be perpetuated in the place of violence. The suffering of individuals, communities, and post-colonial cultures is circular. But, as native drama illustrates, the circle of suffering can be interrupted, and pain can be countered by artistic processes that foster healing. So we can say that, the drama can be an advocate for victims; a fierce adversary of those who engage in violent acts; and an affective medium that counters violence, reinforces first nations’ identity, and breaks the circle of suffering.

However, when this understanding is countered by the first nations’ perspective on the circle as a symbol of reconceptualization, regeneration, and rebirth, the desire to counter violence against the aboriginal people in Canada it takes on new dimensions.

As concluding remark we can say that historically, claiming to be ‘aboriginal’ signified a political awakening. Today, taking on a positive aboriginality, still, has political connotations but it is an increasingly appealing identity category for young aboriginal people. However, aboriginality, today, is not ‘identity politics’, which refers to the emergence of political and cultural expressions from formerly silenced and displaced groups that now reassert and reclaim suppressed identities through the construction of counter hegemonic narratives and social practices.



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