International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation, Vol.24, Issue 10, 2020
ISSN: 1475-7192

Assertion Of Indigenous Culture: A Postcolonial Study Of Geraldine Brooks' Caleb's Crossing

[1]*D.V. Litty Davis, [2]Dr. Xaviour Chandra Bose

Abstract
The writers in the postcolonial era not only focus on the European colonization but also on the ethnic identities, racial divisions and linguistics. Geraldine Brooks is conscious of the tribulations of the insecurity and insularity faced by minority communities. In the novel *Caleb's Crossing*, culture conscious is foremost and Geraldine has brought microcosm community exuberantly to life with immense vitality and vivacity. This paper clearly exemplifies the natives who have lost their tradition, day long sites, rituals, language, religion and lands since the arrival of the Whites. Brooks projects Caleb, the native becomes the victim who is denied the rights to survive in his community. The White settlers come to the island and owned the lands of Wampanoag as their own. Once they settled, they commence to corrupt the natives, exploiting their entire community. The Whites could few souls who are abandoned, hated and thrown out from their community. The identity of few natives is unanswerable. Being a journalist and writer, Geraldine has given voice to the minority. Readers can perceive how Geraldine dismantles the looping traps made by the colonisers.

Keywords: natives, survival, identity, violation

Indigenous people are the traditional inhabitants of a geographical terrain. Centuries of uninterrupted way of life by these native communities have created a system of knowledge and a distinct culture of their own. "Culture", as Ngugi wo Thiong'o, the celebrated African writer and postcolonial critic writes in his Homecoming: "is the sum of their [indigenous people's] art, their science and all their social institutions, including their system of belief and rituals" (4). As Stuart Hall says, culture is "the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society" (Baker 439). But the colonial mission of the Western world has inflicted grave harm to these native communities and their cultures across the globe.

This article attempts to study Geraldine Brooks' novel Caleb's Crossing in the light of the above assertions and analyses the effort taken by the writer to centralise the neglected history of the marginalised Wampanoag indigenous cultural identities that have gradually lost their tradition, religion, language, culture and land to the systematic onslaught since the arrival of the settlers. The paper also seeks to discern the postcolonial notion of western world that the natives are uncivilised savages who are to be conquered and civilised.

Caleb's Crossing by Geraldine Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize winning Australian novelist is a historical fiction based on an overlooked true episode in American history. This novel recreates a fictionalized version of the remarkable, but neglected true seventeenth century story of Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk, the first Native American to attend and graduate from Harvard College. Caleb belongs to the native Wopanaak (Wampanoag) tribe of Noepe,

an area now known as Martha's Vineyard, which is a small island off the coast of Massachusetts. He was the first Native American to attend and graduate from Harvard College in 1665 after facing numerous socio-cultural and educational barriers.

Caleb's Crossing presents a brilliant girl Bethia Mayfield, the young daughter of a pastor Mayfield living in the isolated Puritan settlement of Great Harbour on Martha's Vineyard. She is a dynamic personality who balances her strict religious restrictions with a passionate love of nature and a growing curiosity about the native culture of the Wampanoag tribe that populates the island. When Bethia secretly strikes up a friendship with a young person from the Wampanoag tribe named Caleb, she begins a journey that will shape her life. Intelligent,

independent, and kind, Bethia is the narrator and the heart of the novel Caleb's Crossing. Bertha's relationship with the male protagonist Cheeshahteaumauk, later renamed as Caleb sow the seeds of Christianity in his mind and in the hearts of a few more native Wampanoag inhabitants. Caleb was named after one of followers the Biblical character Moses a great leader who led his people to freedom.

[1]*Research scholar, Department of English, Lekshmipuram College of Arts and Science, Neyoor, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Tirunelveli
[2]Head & Professor, Department of English, Lekshmipuram Arts and Science College, Neyoor

The narrative of Caleb's Crossing follows Bethia and Caleb from Grand Harbour to Cambridge and beyond, charting not only their crossing of the stretch of ocean between the island and the mainland but of an antagonistic and often unbridgeable dichotomy that existed between the Native American and the white settler, between a pagan and a Christian, and between a male and a female. Brooks has built a world of emotion, struggle, and natural beauty in which the balance between the traditions of the past and the potential of the future are captured in the lives of two young friends.

As the narrative progresses, we could find Bethia and her father, Mayfield acquires the Wampanaontoaonk language in order to seize the attention of the natives towards Christianity. Bethia begins to converse with Caleb in his own language. She remembers what her father once said: “They loved any person who could utter his mind in their tongue” (30). Bethia also imparts the language of English to Caleb. She commences to teach him letters: “‘A’ I said, tracing the shape in the wet sand. It has two sounds. Remember them thusly:

‘Adam ate the apple’” (55). She even narrates the Garden of Eden and the fall of Adam and Eve to Caleb. She adds the explanation about the forbidden fruit. Caleb rebukes saying, “Our God of the Southwest, Kiehtan, made the beans and corn, but he rejoiced for us to have them” (56). Caleb's comment confuses Bethia and she seeks the help of her father and requests him to accompany her in her ministries. Later she wins the soul of Caleb and through him almost his entire community. Mayfield makes the once despised fellow Iacoomis as his comrade to spread gospel. The settlers represented by Mayfield and his daughter, Bethia are aware of the influence of language in the cultural domain and hence acquire the knowledge of the local language.

Similarly, Mayfield considers Caleb as the right person to propagate the gospel in his community. Bethia says, "He sees him, more than any other here, as a great hope to lead his people " (9). He is assured of his education at Harvard University. Mayfield brings Caleb to his house and offer him education only with the sole purpose to spread the gospel. Wampanoags worship nature as their God. They worship in natural environments and praise their God Keesakand. They also believe that their names are given by "Cheepi, the devil-God" (44). They dance and make merriment. They hit their hands towards the sky. Mayfield says,"... they invited trance states, in which they traveled through the spirit world, communing there with the devil through imps that came to them in animal form. From these Satanic familiars, they drew power to raise the mists and the winds, to foresee the future and to heal or sicken people as the whim led them" (45). When Caleb and Iacoomis turned towards the settlers they were entirely displaced from their lands. They lose their home town, religion, language, culture and tradition. These incidents prove how the Whites took language as their weapon to entice and convert the indigenous people.

The native culture never advocated the concept of the private property. Land has been always a common resource for them. But, the Whites, when arrived on the island, made negotiations with few of the natives and grabbed their lands by paying pittance. The natives who once owned their lands find their farms now in the hands of the Whites. Bethia the narrator quotes her father: “Every hut and house we have built here is on land willingly sold to us through negotiations that I conducted honourably” (11).

Although both Bethia and Caleb had a strong desire to learn, they encounter numerous obstacles to further their educational causes. Brooks creates Bethia’s character around a typical woman’s experience during the 1600s, encompassing a domestic and servile life with a recommended marriage and numerous constraints on her opportunities for education. All these obstacles occur to her simply because of her gender. Bethia is denied access to books, and a formal education. Yet, she even while cleaning and cooking or taking care of her baby sister, Bethia listens intently to the lessons her father teaches her brother and Caleb, committing much of it to memory. Bethia is forced to steal knowledge by listening through doors, glancing at the boy students’ notes, hiding her brother’s books in her basket. She is thus a self-learner even when she is refused formal education because of her gender. But, when her father sells her as an indentured labourer to an elderly tutor in Cambridge to pay for Makepeace’s education at Harvard, readers live the reality of Bethia’s confinement and dashed hopes. She is even refused the freedom to choose whom to marry, even while Caleb says hoe women in their tribe has the freedom to choose in marriage and end marriage. Brooks, through the character of Bethia, brings to life the voice of a woman trapped by religious and social constraints in the seventeenth century America. Just as education pushes Caleb from a familiar culture into an alien and at times a blatantly racist one, it prevents Bethia from moving forward. The prospect of home duties offers her no comfort.

There are several incidences in the novel that further demonstrate the rigidity and cruelty of the colonial religious leaders toward women and native people. Even the Indian College is part of a larger plan to assimilate youth leaders from the Wampanoag and also to gain funding from European investors to help pay for construction of Harvard College. During the year that Caleb is studying (he is an excellent student), Bethia’s brother realizes he is not Harvard material and he and his sister come to blows. Bethia curses her brother and is then whipped and made to wear a note pinned to her dresses stating how she has sinned and the recompense she seeks. She is humiliated but we see her strength in getting through it all. It is truly a dark time for women as it was for native people as well.

Similarly, Caleb, because of his perceived inferior status, is not expected to attain the educational level required to succeed at Harvard. Unlike Bethia, however, as a result of the special conditions of the Harvard Indian College, Caleb is given the chance for a collegiate education and succeeded beyond all expectations. Among other accomplishments, he learned to read and write in English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Caleb's experiences at Harvard College and those of another Native American student, Joel Iacoomis, are vividly depicted in the latter half of the novel.

Wampanoag clan has certain culture and traditions followed for centuries. Their traditions are totally uprooted by the colonial impact. For instance, their dress code and knowledge of the native medicine are wholly corrupted by the Western influence. In Wampanoag, they have pawaaws, the medicine men. If anyone falls sick, they give "white hellebore" (7) to the sick and engage in "daylong rites and pagan dancing" (37). They have a belief that these will cure the sick. On the contrary, the Whites heal the Wampanoags with prayers. When some Wampanoags came with an infected person to seek recovery from Mayfield, he says, "God in his wisdom has not done so much for these as he has for our nation. Satan has had full charge of them. It is a blessing that God now brings us here" (62). This vividly shows the trapping mindset of the Whites.

Geraldine Brooks recreates the language and style of the time in order to immerse the readers into the seventeenth century atmosphere of Caleb's story. Usage of archaic word such as tegs, decoctions, shapeling, sumptuary, breechclout, gallnut and sneakery add to the authenticity of the characters' voices. As the Afterword of the novel suggests, Brooks has researched the geographic area, food, medicine, education, writings, and diseases of the time to accurately portray the life and loss surrounding the early years of the first American college. To quote an example, the flavour of seventeenth century Harvard is described in the passage below:

The scholars and their tutors lived in their own world, walled off from ordinary folk by their black cloaks, their Latin speech and their high thoughts. Samuel had told me that there was much talk, in the early days of the settlement, against the expense of building a college such as this one. It would have been easier, and cheaper, in that straightened time, to have the scholars boarded among the townsfolk, meeting together for classes, as the universities of Europe generally fashioned it. But the English who visioned this place had graduated from the colleges and Cambridge in England, and they aspired to what they had themselves known: a gated sanctuary where the boys and their tutors lived together, a lofty remove from the town, with its miserable distractions and ungirt life. Scholars were not to leave the college yard, except by express permission of their tutors. In that way, it was supposed, they would eat, sleep, and breathe their studies, encountering nothing that was not to the purpose of
learning. (236–237)

Thus, this novel offers a glimpse into the early historical factors that shaped modern America about land and nature, women and children. Geraldine Brooks mirrors the systematic manner by which the indigenous social, cultural, religious, educational fabric of the Wampanoag tribe and their emotional attachment to their land has been systematically decimated by the colonial institution. The novel may have a happy ending but the pulse of their struggle creates an eternal ripple on the pond of a republic in the making.

References:

1. Atlas, Amelia. "Geraldine Brooks's new novel stars Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk, Harvard's first Native American graduate." *Pride of the Indian College*. Harvard Magazine. (May-June, 2011): n.pag. Web. January 2018.
2. Brooks, Geraldine. *Caleb's Crossing*. New York: Viking, 2011. Print.
3. Chris Baker. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications. 2006. Print.
4. Nehls, Kim. "Celeb's Crossing." *Journal of College and Character* 13:2. (May, 2012): n.pag. Web. 31, January 2018.
5. Wa Thiong'o Ngugi. *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann, 1965. Print.