ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis has become an important tool in deciphering the colonial oppression and how it has affected the psyche of the natives. In Australia, we find that the problems like alcoholism, substance abuse, child abuse, fractured families, schizophrenia, dementia and suicides are endemic among the Aboriginal populations. Almost all the researchers blame the policies of white Australian government for the plight of the Aborigines. The current paper studies Alexis Wright’s Novel Plains of Promise to show that policy of stolen generations followed by the white Australian government played havoc with the psychic life of the children.

KEYWORDS:  Ivy, Aborigines, colonialism, exploitation, mental, physical, oppression.

INTRODUCTION

In the last three or four centuries colonialism had been the greatest exploiter of human beings and most brutal abuser of human rights. Most of the indigenous people suffered in the hands of imperialists be it the indigenous tribes of Nigeria, the natives of Canada, the Tibetans, the Maoris of New Zealand and the locals of Malaysia and South Africa. Some of the colonies were lucky in the sense that after centuries of rapacious exploitation of natural resources and brutal oppression, they were able to exorcise the demon of imperialism and lay claim on what was legally theirs. But there were certain colonies which were made their homes by the imperial masters: New Zealand, Canada and Australia to name a few. Among these three “settled” countries Australia is said to be lingering behind as far as providing rights to the Aboriginal Population is concerned. Due to the unfavourable power relations; the language, culture and life style of the Aboriginal people are often shown in negative light.

Native Australian literature is a sort of a response to these negative representations of Aborigines by the largely white writers. The native writers use the language of the dominant culture to make themselves heard. However, the Aboriginal literature is not merely a protest
literature which it is normally labeled by the white critics. Literature according to Dr. Johnson can not be without any purpose. The Aboriginal writers clearly spell their motive to write different genres of literature. Alexis Wright, the award winning Black Australian writer has told about the motivation behind her writings: “In the Australian literature we have remained almost invisible or often at the mercy of being misrepresented by others. And I include in this the bulk of academic writings and books about Aboriginal people where most of our people would not have a clue about what was written about them.” 1 All the Native writers have taken up their pens to write because “histories have been smudged, distorted and hidden or written” 2 for them and they want to correct the histories and they would write about the plight of their society. She further observes: “I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities. Let it not be mistaken suffering is widespread in our communities.” 3

What Alexis Wright has said about “suffering” is authenticated by the reports that have been published in different journals. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data for 1998-1999 reveals that Indigenous men and women are hospitalised for “mental and behavioural disorders at 2.0 and 1.5 times the rate, respectively of their non-Indigenous peers, with the Indigenous: non-Indigenous rate and ratios for men and women for mental disorders due to psychoactive substances being 4.1 and 3.5, and for psychotic disorders 1.8 and 2.0.” 4 Apart from this, the Indigenous suicide rate for 1999-2001 was 56% higher for the state as a whole and across Australia young aboriginals have high rates of incarceration. Only 2% of the Western Australian population are the aborigines but “this group is at considerably higher risk for suicide and deliberate self harm.” 5 The life expectancy of an Indigenous male is about 18 years less than average European male, while the life expectancy of female is about 20 years less than the average European female.

The most important aspect of Aboriginal suffering is its psychological aspect. Schizophrenia, Dementia, depression and suicidal tendencies are all aspects of the same problem. The current paper focuses on these aspects of the problem and tries to find out the root of the problem in the colonial institutions of Australia. Plains of Promise is a novel that covers all the four phases of Australian government’s policy towards Native population: “Subjugation (approximately at the end of 19th century), segregation and protection (up until the early 1950s), assimilation (1950s to early 1970s) and finally overtures towards some kind of limited self determination.”6 All the four phases are shown in the novel through the three generations of a family of single mothers. The stories of Ivy ‘s mother, Ivy and Ivy’s daughter Mary are identical in the sense that all of them become single mothers but at the same time the novel also shows how changes are taking place in Australian Government’s policy. Ivy’s mother is exploited by a white man on a cattle station while Ivy is exploited by her “protector” in the camp where she is brought for protection. The aboriginal women were exploited both mentally and physically; it is actually not the colonization of mind, but also the colonization of body. Their children are snatched by the authorities, but the government policy changes by the time Mary, Ivy’s daughter, grows up; she enters a sexual relationship and becomes a mother out of her own sweet will and is able to retain her daughter, an act, which was not possible in the times of her mother and grandmother.
The story of the novel is centred round these three women, Ivy’s mother commits suicide about which only hints are dropped by the novelist: “God’s people take her child away and leave her there crying out like an animal for days afterwards.” (PP 9). The effect of her separation from Ivy is that she commits suicide “as a sure way of leaving St. Dominic’s without permission.” (PP 22) But psychic disintegration of Ivy is shown to the readers through every phase. Though novel tells us only about Ivy’s conditions but it is clear that Ivy’s case can be generalised to all as we find it hard to find even a single mentally healthy Aboriginal character in the novel. St. Dominic’s mission is a place infected with suicides, alcoholic Aboriginal men; and delirious and schizophrenic indigenous women.

Shelley E. Taylor describes three stages of psychic disintegration in her book Health Psychology: “In the first phase, alarm, the organism becomes mobilized to meet the threat. In the second stage, resistance, the organism makes efforts to cope with the threat, as through confrontation. The third stage exhaustion occurs if the organism fails to overcome the threat and depletes its physiological resources in the process of trying.”

We can see that all these stages are evident in Ivy’s case. First phase occurs when Ivy is sexually exploited by the head of the mission Errol Jipp when she is not even a teenager. She is chosen as a sexual companion by Jipp because of two reasons- first she is “fair” and second because she is helpless as “she had no family” and hence without any protection. Ivy knows that her “fair” colour is a source of misery and tortures so she starts longing for the “dark skin” (PP 20) of the chapel girls and thinks of them as the members of “killer women tribes in the jungles of Amazon” (PP 21). The comparison of Chapel girls with the “killer tribes of Amazon” shows the mental processes of Ivy as she wants to be like them because then she will become a warrior herself and will be able to defend herself from her tormentor Jipp. This marks the first stage where Ivy wants to meet the threat by yearning to become black like chapel girls and then saving herself by becoming an Amazon warrior. Second stage of “resistance” is evident in her marriage with Elliot where she tries to confront the life as it is, and in the third stage Ivy exhausts herself and becomes a neurotic when her daughter is taken away.

Alexis Wright rightly expresses that after encounter with Jipp Ivy becomes a problematic child. Readers are told that Ivy as a child was “never able to read like the others. Her best efforts consisted of stumbling over the words and muttering.” (PP 51) In addition to this she shows other symptoms of being a schizophrenic child where she is seen “speaking to the sky” (PP 53) and sees herself dying in the dreams. But important question is if Ivy is a problematic child from her birth. The writer gives us a glimpse into the mental processes of Ivy in order to tell about the gradual decline of Ivy mental state. One of the important problems of Ivy in the Mission is her isolation because of her sexual exploitation by the boss of the mission. Everybody makes fun of her because they think that Ivy is happily indulging in the relationship with Jipp. She is stigmatised by the society because such relationship is devalued, feared and objectionable; and this stigma involves “a pattern of discrediting, discounting, degradation and discrimination directed at her. This stigma is “a form of social oppression and operates to disqualify and marginalize stigmatized individuals from full social acceptance and participation.”

Stigmatization is almost universal and is practised in almost every culture and is a “powerful determinant and exclusion.” Her sexual exploitation has a two way impact on her: it isolates her from her worldly companions; and it fills herself with remorse because of sexual act performed by Jipp in the church: “She knew the sight of her nakedness sprawled out indecently
in God’s place would never be forgiven.” (PP 32). Her thought process shows the immense success of colonial institutions where natives had to face a multi-pronged attack. Ivy is a victim of brutal system where she is physically exploited and at the same time her religious conditioning disintegrates her mentally for the crime she has never committed. While Errol Jipp, who impregnates her at the age of fourteen is immune to any such feeling.

Another reason that can be easily noticed by the readers is the process of deculturation that was started by the white government in Australia. Culture is very important for the well being of any person. Corin has defined culture as:

Above all a system of meanings and symbols. This system shapes every area of life, defines a world view that gives meaning to personal and collective experience, and frames the way people locates themselves within the world, perceive the world, and believe in it. Every aspect of reality is seen embedded within the webs of meaning that define a certain world view and that cannot be studied or understood apart from this collective frame.

The most important fountain spring of aboriginal culture is their intimate connection with land. The deculturation happened mainly because the people were uprooted from their traditional lands. The Aboriginals “strongly believed that their relationship with the land was a defining aspect of who they are, and acted as the central element of their culture.”

One of the problems faced by Ivy in the Mission is that she is always treated as an alien outsider who is not acceptable to the local Aborigines. Even Ivy in her heart is sad about her being away from her home: “The plane flew across the landscape that Ivy had seen in her mind’s eye from the window with flowing curtains. Her home.” (PP 160). Once her bond with her homeland is severed she becomes a culturally isolated person who is not allowed to learn the language and customs of her people.

Ivy’s case clearly shows that the real culprit is imperialism and its many institutions which were especially engineered to condition people according to the convenience of the colonial masters. The hegemony in the St. Dominic’s mission is multifold: religious, racial, social and psychological; and each hegemonic structure is tailor made to strangle the psyche of the Aborigines. Absolute power without any checks corrupts Jipp and he becomes a symbol of brutal force of imperialism who abuses the rights and becomes an exploiter-in-chief, who can pick up any girl at will and can force her into a sexual relationship. He impregnates Ivy at the age of fourteen and then gets her married to Elliot to hide his crime. But this enforced marriage turns Elliot into an alcoholic and Ivy becomes almost half mad. She stops responding to any person and goes into a cocoon: “Jipp did go down to Pugno’s camp once… he tried to talk to Ivy, but received no response. Her face remained blank. She looked straight through him. He gave up, realizing he was talking to a brick wall.” (PP 154). But the final blow comes for Ivy when her child is taken away from her. Ivy becomes completely mad and the story of her mother is
repeated. But Ivy’s complete madness saves her from committing suicide like her mother. This perhaps makes her case worse as Ivy remains a neurotic throughout her life while her mother was able to free herself from life long torture by committing suicide.

The novel clearly shows that the Australian government’s policy of assimilating children particularly those of mixed Aboriginal and white descent, into white Australian culture proved to be a disaster for those children and their family. The policy interfered with the most loving relationships like that of a mother and a child as in the case of Ivy and her mother, and Ivy and her daughter. The result was devastating in both the cases: Ivy’s mother commits suicide to escape from the painful life while Ivy becomes a neurotic on being segregated from her daughter. The novel talks about the “catastrophic effects on the lives of the children and their families… The same themes: of loss of identity, family, and community; of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; of lack of self esteem and a sense of purpose; of drug and alcohol dependency and suicidal thoughts.”

The novel through Mary’s story tells us how the Aboriginals are still trying to emancipate themselves from physically and psychologically emasculating impacts of imperialism. The colonial institutions not only enervated their culture, but also put their existence under threat. Alexis Wright has taken an emollient stance in the novel where she wants to give a chance to the current generation of the white Australians who are making sincere efforts to empathize with the plight of the Aboriginals. Apology by the Australian Prime Minister is an important stride in this direction. There are many encumbrances, but they are largely abstract mental blocks emerging out of historical events and mistakes that have shaped the relations between the two communities. Looking at the current scenario, improvement in the relations seems ineluctable. Kevin Rudd’s apology has promulgated a belief among the Aborigines that here is a man who really wants to change the course of race relations in Australia forever. The nation has expiated its guilt for the atrocities. The confession is important because it means that they have admitted that they were wrong and once the realization is there, it ensures that this will not happen in future and hence it indemnifies future.

Wright’s novel is not incongruous with the current scenario in Australia. The novel is not only a fictional story but it is a historical archive because it tells what happened throughout Australia without revealing the real names. Telling real names is not at all important because there are lot many girls whose stories are similar to Ivy’s story. Alexis Wright herself felt the same pain, as Anita Heiss points out: “In writing Plains of Promise, for example, Wright says she tried to create a set of characters that are very real to her, and although a lot of the story comes from her own experience, the characters are not from her real life. Wright says fiction is the one way of saying that need to be said to the reader, without exposing people from her traditional area to the kind of scrutiny that a conventional history book would have risked.” The novel faithfully describes the phases of Australian history. Wright not only talks about the exploitation of the natives done by the Australian government, but it also talks about the recent reconciliatory steps that have been taken by the government. The novel makes it clear that whatever happened with Ivy’s generation and her mother’s generation is not happening with Mary’s generation. The change has taken place in the outlook of the government. Instead of “deculturation”, now the process of acculturation has started between the whites and the natives. The white population and
the government are very sensitive towards the feelings of the aborigines which means that future of Australia as a multicultural society is bright.

REFERENCES

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
7. Shelley E Taylor, Health Psychology. 4th ed. (Singapore: Mcgraw Hill,1999.)
8., Alexis Wright, Plains of Promise. (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press,1997), P 20. All the subsequent references are from the same edition of the text.
11. F. David Marks & Michael Murray et al, 63.