

The Destruction of Aboriginal Selfhood: A Sociological Approach to Marie Clements's *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*

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Abstract:-

This research article attempts to exhibit the sociological impact of forced migration on Native Americans from Indian reserves to Urban Centres. Marie Clements's sensible play *Tombs of Vanishing Indian* clearly depicts the havoc created due to forced relocation in the lives of three Native American sisters. This paper highlights the loss of Aboriginal identity in the context of the historical injustice like Forced Sterilization of Native Women, Aboriginal Displacement and Assimilationist Policies with special reference to Clements's *Tombs of Vanishing Indians*. This research paper examines the historical background of the play and the societal repercussion on the each of the significant character in the play. It also sheds light on the Native Americans who are treated as second class citizens as they undergo social marginalization by the settlers of the land. Therefore, this paper urges its readers to also have a sense of social thinking to witness a joyful society with equal care and respect to fellow human beings irrespective of their social and cultural difference.

Keywords : Forced Relocation, Sterilization, Assimilationist Policies, social marginalization, societal repercussion

“Every act of creation is first an act of Destruction”

(Picasso)

America is indeed a superpower nation. It has the world's largest economy and has the most powerful military. It also has a large influence on international affairs and is a leader in science and technology. The United States is also a major player in global politics and its soft power is hard to ignore. America's superpower status is further cemented by its ability to influence the international economy and its ability to shape global trends. Instead of being governed by one dominating culture, the United States has many ethnic cultures representing its population's diversity. Despite of its glory, the country has a dark past of eliminating the native people of the land. This great country is built on the graves of countless Native Indians, who are the original inhabitants of the land.

The original inhabitants of America have become the Indigenous peoples of North America with around 2.6% of the population. The United States was built and developed by European immigrants who displaced Native Americans by committing several dreadful atrocities against them, including massacres, forced removals, and the assimilation of Native American children into boarding schools and they were forbidden to speak their

native languages. This displacement and mistreatment of Native Americans has had a lasting impact on their population and their culture. This has resulted in the erasure of traditional cultures, languages, landscapes, and spiritual practises, as well as a lack of traditional knowledge, the disruption of social and familial connections, physical and financial pain, and psychological and emotional harm. The loss of aboriginal selfhood has been further compounded by ongoing racism and discrimination. Even today, Native Americans suffer from some of the highest rates of poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse in the country.

The destruction of Aboriginal selfhood is the result of generations of colonization, oppression, and marginalization of Aboriginal people. This has taken many forms, ranging from physical violence to cultural assimilation policies that aimed to strip Aboriginal communities of their unique identity and sense of belonging. Clements's *Tombs of Vanishing Indian* brings forth the horrific violence unleashed on Native women in the name of forced sterilization. This is cleverly done to reduce the population of Native American as well as weaken the familial bond in the Native communities. Later on the government orders the few left out Natives to live their life in reserves which has no spirit and joy of the indigenous community due to broken families, culture and tradition.

The effects of this destruction are still felt today in terms of poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment, as well as high rates of incarceration and suicide. Aboriginal people are also more likely to experience discrimination and racism, which further impacts their self-esteem, sense of identity, and overall wellbeing. Communities that were once thriving have been decimated, with many of the people who were forcibly removed facing extreme levels of social and economic marginalization. The legacy of this destruction has been passed down through generations, with Indigenous people still facing systemic discrimination and barriers to accessing essential services. This has had a significant impact on their well-being, as well as their ability to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of America. This situation can be related to the significant characters of the selected play for study.

In order to address this issue, governments and communities must continue to work together to create policies that ensure the rights and dignity of Aboriginal people, while also promoting healing and reconciliation. These policies should focus on education and engagement with Aboriginal communities, to ensure that all voices are heard, respected, and included in decision-making processes. Additionally, governments must work to provide adequate resources, including mental health and health care services, to ensure that Aboriginal people have access to the same quality of services as other Canadians. Finally, governments must continue to invest in programs that promote and support Aboriginal culture, language, and traditions, as well as encourage economic development within the community.

Since the European invasion of the continent, the loss of Aboriginal self-identity and subjugation have been ongoing problems in America and Canada. Aboriginal people have had their human rights violated, their lands taken, and their culture and language silenced. Aboriginal people are now oppressed and have lost their sense of identity as a result. Both direct and indirect forms of oppression have occurred, ranging from the government's physical and psychological maltreatment of Aboriginal people to the environmental damage brought on by

mining and other industries. These policies' negative repercussions have been disastrous, resulting in health inequities, poverty, trauma across generations, and intergenerational trauma. Aboriginal people are still fighting for justice today, and for the recognition of their rights to self-determination.

Jon Waterhouse, an environmental steward from National Geographic claims "As a global community, we have lost our way; we forgot what it means to have a relationship with the land" (Raygorodetsky). Generations of colonization and displacement account to the legacy of displacement of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands due to European colonization. Beginning in the 16th century, European colonisation of the Americas had a terrible impact on Indigenous communities, including the forced relocation of hundreds of thousands more people and the genocide of millions. The long-lasting repercussions of this forced relocation on Indigenous people have resulted in intergenerational trauma that has been passed down for millennia. Many Indigenous communities have been able to restore a portion of their ancestral lands, but many others continue to experience marginalisation and relocation.

The legendary story of Juana Maria, known throughout history as the Lone Woman, is a good and apt example of forced displacement. The whole population of San Nicolas Island was transported to Santa Barbara Mission in 1835. Juana unknowingly missed her baby boy on the island and risked her life by immediately jumping into the sea to reach her island. Unfortunately, her son was not found on the island. She spent 19 years alone on the island before being rescued and brought to the mainland in Los Angeles, where her own people had moved miles away; her language was not even understood by Urban Native Americans. Her food, culture, and traditions were left back on the Island. Within six weeks of staying in the city, Juana died. This true story shows the dreadful effects of forceful dislocation.

Marginalization of Indigenous people refers to the exclusion of Indigenous people from mainstream society and resources. Marginalization takes many forms, including economic, social, political, and cultural. Examples include lack of access to education, health care, housing, employment opportunities, and clean water. These forms of marginalization are rooted in colonialism, racism, and the legacy of the Indian residential school system. Indigenous people in Canada are twice as likely to experience poverty and have the lowest life expectancy of any other group. Marginalization has had a devastating effect on the health and well-being of Indigenous communities, making them more vulnerable to violence, addiction, and suicide. The effects of marginalization are felt most severely by Indigenous women and children. Marginalization is a deep-rooted and systemic issue that requires urgent action for meaningful reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous women playwrights are writing stories that reflect their experiences and realities. These stories are cemented on the themes of displacement, displacement of people, loss of cultural identity, and the struggle to reclaim their cultural heritage. Indigenous women playwrights are also exploring the intricacies of current issues such as violence against women, racism, and the impact of colonization. These stories often explore the complexities of identity and culture, the effects of colonization on their communities, and the intergenerational trauma of Indigenous people. Playwrights such as Tara Beagan, Yvette Nolan, Jani Lauzon, and Marie

Clements are just a few of the talented Indigenous women playwrights in Canada. Their work is helping to open up conversations about Indigenous history and identity, and to bring attention to the systemic injustices Indigenous people face today.

Marie Clements is a Métis playwright, artist and filmmaker from Vancouver, British Columbia. Her work has been widely praised for its innovative and creative approach to storytelling. She is well-known for her plays that explore First Nations culture and themes, as well as for her poetic language and evocative imagery. Clements' plays are often praised for their strong characters, complex story lines, and thought-provoking themes.

Critics of Clements' work often point to the unique way in which she blends various theatrical forms, such as traditional First Nations storytelling, contemporary drama, and musical theatre. Her plays often use a combination of music, dance, spoken word, and other elements to create a unique theatrical experience. In addition, her plays often feature strong female characters, as well as characters from various ethnic backgrounds, creating an inclusive and diverse theatrical experience.

Overall, critics have praised Marie Clements' work for its boldness, its thought-provoking themes, and its creative approach to storytelling. Her plays are often praised for their ability to weave together stories from different cultures and time periods, creating a unique theatrical experience that can speak to a wide range of audiences.

Marie Clements's plays *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is a story of three Native American sisters and their mother who relocated from Oklahoma to Los Angeles as part of the federal government's assimilationist termination and relocation programmes of the 1950s. Clements dramatizes the emotional, psychological, and social effects in the lives of three Native American sisters in his incredibly moving play. Thousands of Native women were forcibly sterilised in the 1970s as per government order acts as a backdrop of this emotional play. The horrors of residential school is also depicted in a very subtle manner which were created to strip Indigenous children of their culture and language and assimilate them into white culture.

This play is about reclamation of history, culture and family. It tells the tales of three grown-up native sisters separated in early childhood; eventually the sisters reunite to discover their traumatic past. The action of the play is set in US and refers American laws and attitudes especially those dealing with relocating native populations from reservations to urban areas and forcible sterilization programs. The play also touches on the Canadian policies, including native boarding schools and foster parenting.

The whites always used their power and authority to disrupt peace in the native community. The opening lines of Clements' *Tombs of Vanishing Indian* give a heart throbbing picture of an Indian mother killed in front of her three daughters. Jessie, the eldest sister becomes a doctor and has all the comfort in her life except the never ending pain of her horrible childhood days. Miranda, the second daughter later becomes an actor and auditions frequently to play the role of Indian in Hollywood films. Janey, the last daughter lives in utter poverty has been pulled into a police station and questioned by a detective because of false assumptions of killing her child.

Jessie as the eldest sister is still regretting her past inability to take care of her sisters after the death of her mother. Due to her white collar job, Jessie isn't feeling happy about her native ancestry. She is the real example of assimilated native person. She tries to overcome her past history being an orphan Indian and it is too hard for her to do or hear anything related to Indian. As her husband, Daniel says, "I just don't get it. You never want to talk about your past but you have no problem cutting people in half when they bring up anything to do with Indianness" (Clements, 33). Jessie becomes a social responsible person altogether when she finds out that her husband has been sterilizing Indian women to erase that particular ethnic race. The reply given by Daniel to justify his act can be taken as the voice of hegemonic Whiteman, "What we are offering here is birth control so that the population will not be infected by people who cannot control their urges..."(Clements,71).

Jessie is struggling to find her identity and purpose in life. She is trying to reconnect with her culture and her family, and is searching for her own voice and belonging. She has strong feelings of guilt and responsibility for not being able to take care of her sisters after their mother's death and for not being there for them during their difficult times. She is also worried about how her sisters are doing, especially since she was not there for them during the difficult times.

Jessie is trying to find her place in the world and is struggling to find a way to reconcile her professional identity with her native ancestry and identity. She is trying to find a way to honour her ancestors and her culture while also pursuing her career. She is trying to find a way to balance her professional and personal lives. She is trying to find a way to have a meaningful life without feeling guilty for not fulfilling her family's expectations.

Jessie's journey to self-acceptance and finding her own place within her culture and family is an inspiring one. She is learning to embrace her identity and to find a way to reconcile her professional and personal lives. She is learning to be proud of her culture and her heritage, while also pursuing her career.

Miranda talks about how she was tormented physically and mentally in an Indian Residential school. And she details her traumatic experiences of being in different foster homes, "I've been in twenty-six foster homes"(Clements,53). This bold character has a tragic past without a family of her own. She is the best example of a shattered child from a completely broken family. The pain of her experiences is evident in her words: "I don't belong to anyone, I don't think I ever will"(Clements, 55). She is a victim of the Indian Residential School System and has been forced to endure a life of loneliness and abuse. Her story is a powerful reminder of the devastating effects of the system on Indigenous children. Miranda's story highlights the need for more support and understanding for Indigenous children who have been traumatized by the residential school system. By sharing her story, she brings hope to other Indigenous youth who are struggling to find their place in the world. Her story serves to remind us that we must continue to stand up for those who have been emotionally, physically and mentally hurt by this system.

Miranda says, "There wasn't much family. The church that dressed itself like a school also dressed itself like a jail...Indian boarding school"(Clements,40). The church which is the symbol of care and love plays exactly the opposite of its role. It was like a jail for the Native Americans who were forced to attend the Indian boarding

school. This shows the government's oppressive attitude towards Native Americans and how they were treated unfairly. It also reveals the lack of support and family structure for the Native American children, which was an unfortunate reality of their situation.

Miranda talks about how she was tormented physically and mentally by the whites in the society. Miranda recounts how she was treated like an outcast in her own home. She was not allowed to play with the white children, and she was constantly reminded of her place in the white world. Even when she tried to stand up for herself, she was met with mockery and physical violence from Bob Stills, her director boss. He would beat her and call her names, and she was powerless to stop him. This physical and mental torment that Miranda endured is a prime example of systemic racism and its effects. It is a testament to the power of white privilege and the way it can be used to oppress people of colour. By enforcing his authority over Miranda, Bob Stills was able to maintain his dominance and keep her in her place. His actions speak to the larger problem of racial injustice, and how it can be used to keep people of colour down.

Detective Fullen finally finds out that Janey was sterilized under the forced sterilization act in the 1970s. Janey's emotional trauma leads her to hallucinate to a larger extent and that makes the readers empathize with her. As the play's lines reveal it:

DETECTIVE FULLEN

There was no baby, was there?...No baby because there was no way you could have conceived.

She doesn't respond.

You knew you were sterilized, didn't you? You knew but you let us believe you killed him, why?

She stares off into space not looking at him.

JANEY

I did conceive of him. I did. I wanted a baby...I wanted a baby...I always wanted a baby/

DETECTIVE FULLEN

/You didn't have a baby because it was physically impossible/ (Clements,44)

As Janey became aware of the truth that she was forcibly sterilized, it shines a light on the injustice and cruelty of the eugenics movement and its lasting impact on those who were its victims. It is a stark reminder of the immense suffering and pain inflicted on the individuals targeted by these laws. Janey's emotional trauma helps to evoke a sense of empathy and compassion in the readers, a reminder that no one should have to experience such a traumatic event. The story of Janey's struggles and her perseverance in the face of such a tragedy is a testament to the strength and courage of those who were victims of this dark period of history. Janey was able to continue on with her life, despite the trauma of the act, and her story serves as an example of the power of resilience.

Clements's play is a fascinating and poetic examination of the ruthlessly bureaucratic procedures that have attempted to facilitate the elimination of Native Americans throughout history. Despite the fact that *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* concentrates on specific policies and locales, it eloquently addresses bigger themes of Aboriginal displacement. Indeed, there are echoes of Canadian policy aimed at dissolving First Nations families and culture: the potlatch ban, residential schools, and the restriction on Native language, all of which have left us with deeply detrimental consequences.

Tombs of Vanishing Indian shows the power of social marginalization and racism. The play portrays how the native Indians were deprived of their rights and were forced to assimilate into the dominant culture of the United States. The play reveals how the government and white people failed to recognize the rights of the native Indians and exploited them for their own gain. The play also shows how the native Indians were forced to leave their ancestral land and culture and adapt to the white culture in order to survive. The play is a powerful reminder of the need to respect diversity and to recognize the rights of minority groups.

Thus, Clements's *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* stands as a perfect literary work for presenting the oppressed group and their suffering in a realistic way. Typical to any other Clements's play, this play also brings hope and confidence to face the future as one witness the powerful reunion of the three sisters who is very strong emotionally to face their upcoming challenges. It is also a fact that Natives grow closer and stronger only in the company of their fellow Natives and that is the sole reason for the emphasis on community in any Native clan all over the world.

The indigenous peoples understand that they have to recover their cultural identity, or to live it if they have already recovered it. They also understand that this is not a favor or a concession, but simply their natural right to be recognized as belonging to a culture that is distinct from the Western culture, a culture in which they have to live their own faith. (Garcia)

The play centers on how the three Native American sisters reclaim their culture, identity, and family through the healing process. The sisters must confront the traumas of the past and work to heal from the impact of forced assimilation and the pain of being separated from their family. The play also examines the role of matriarchy in the Native American culture, as the older sister becomes a motherly figure to the two younger sisters. The play is both powerful and emotional, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and family in a thoughtful and nuanced way. It is a powerful exploration of the consequences of colonisation on Indigenous people, and the resilience of family and culture.

This play recognizes the unique history and experiences of Aboriginal people, and their right to define their own identities. This play is related to Indigenous autonomy and self-determination, and it is very much essential to the decolonization process. Aboriginal selfhood is not an individual pursuit, but one that strives to create a collective sense of pride, belonging, and self-worth. The importance of Aboriginal selfhood is that it provides a platform for Aboriginal people to reclaim their identities, challenge stereotypes, and build a stronger sense of solidarity and community. These sisters in the play were characterised aptly by the words of Patricia O'Shane,

an aboriginal activist and retired Australian Aboriginal teacher: "Obstacles are there to get around, climb over or scramble through." (O'Shane).

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