

Unlearning at White Settlers' School; Erasure of Identity and Shepherding the Indian into Christian fold: A Study of Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepetza*

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Abstract

The policies adapted by the whites in different colonies were different. In imperialist setups the natives were subjugated, but in 'settler' colonies elaborate strategies were devised to break the native societies. One of the policies was to take the native children away from the families. These children were kept in state and church run institutes to nurture them in white culture. In the recent years a lot many narratives written by these 'stolen' children have been published in Canada, the United States of America and Australia. These narratives are the vehicles for articulation of pain and trauma these children had to undergo. The current paper is a study of Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepetza*. The story in the novel is narrated by a twelve years old girl. The young girl's authentic narration shows how Christianity was used as a tool to oppress and torment the young children by the missionaries. The young narrator not only narrates the trials and tribulations faced by the children in such residential schools, but also shows how the transmission of culture to the next generation was interrupted.

Keywords: Residential schools, Indians, Christianity, priests, sisters.

I was supposed to attend a Halloween party. I decided to dress as a nun because nuns were the scariest things I ever saw. (Cited in Smith, 2007)

Introduction:

Colonialism operated around the world in radically different ways, but the outcome of the process was same all around the world. Edward Said while differentiating between colonialism and imperialism wrote:

As I shall be using the term "imperialism" means the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory, "colonialism" which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory. (Said, 1993, p. 9)

Since both colonialism and imperialism were different so the policies adopted by settlers/ colonisers were also totally different. While in the imperialist setups the rulers were satisfied with subjugating the natives, in settler colonies a more elaborate process was adopted with a lot more strategies to break the native societies and usurp their land.

Australia, for instance, was declared “terra nullius” (Short, 2003, p.492) (a land owned by none) and the Americas were declared to be “an almost untouched, even Edenic land, untrammelled by man” (Mann, 2005, p.5) by the whites to usurp the land. The use of missionaries to break the native societies was another strategy adopted by the whites.

Unlearning at White Settlers’ schools:

Another policy that had wide ranging impact on the native populations was the introduction of educational institutions. These educational institutions introduced in the colonies did not conform to the traditional patterns of learning followed in a particular colony or imperial territory. They were specially started by the colonisers to break the native societies and to de-culture the native children. Kuokkanen while analysing the role of these educational institutions writes:

Educational institutions in particular have played a central role in colonizing indigenous peoples. Colonial school system despite its geographical location, has also been very effective tool in implementing these racist theories and indoctrinating them in children (Indigenous and non-indigenous alike) worldwide. (Kuokkanen, 2003, p. 697-98)

The colonisers propagated that these educational institutions were meant for ‘civilizing’ the natives, but the reality has been brought out by the survivors of such institutions. The current paper is a study of Shirley Sterling’s *My Name is Seepeetza*. The novella is based on her own experiences in a native school.

Orphaned for Improvement?

One of the strategies adopted by the whites was to take the native children away from their parents. The policy was adopted in the United States, Canada and Australia. The disastrous and diabolical policy resulted in severe psychological problems for the affected people. The children who were taken away from their parents were kept in institutions run by Churches and the governments of the respective countries. The policy practised in the name of assimilation did not only affect the people who were taken away, but affected the people of the next generations also.

My Name is Seepeetza is a part of “residential school literature” (Eigenbrod, 2012, p. 278) an important sub-genre within Native Canadian literature. The book is based on Shirley Sterling’s own experience as a student of a residential school. The book uses the limited experience of a twelve year old girl Seepeetza alias Martha Stone. The narrative is different from the other residential school narratives in the sense that any direct comment about the impact of these institutions on Indian society is missing from the narrator because a twelve year old girl cannot comprehend the policies of the administrators of the Residential Schools.

The residential schools were established for “transforming” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 197) and “civilizing” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 199) the Indians, but the process of civilizing was very brutal where the people governing the schools had absolute power over the students. The brutality faced by the students has been articulated in many “memoirs, poetry, fiction and plays that recreate the school experience through the literary imagination and that, like many other different by themed texts written by indigenous authors” (Eigenbrod, 2012, p. 278).

Recalling such experiences is traumatic. Many of the students of Residential schools have refrained from writing such narratives because of the pain they will have to undergo. One such incidence is visible in Rita Joe's poem "Hated Structure":

I had no wish to enter
Or to walk the halls
I had no wish to feel the floors
Where I felt fear.
A beating heart of episodes
I care not to recall (Joe, 1988, p. 75)

The residential schools ran by breaking Indian families and turning children into orphans by depriving them of their natural parents. The irony was that the whites claimed that this was a favour they were doing for the Indians' improvement.

The Schools' Secret

It was an open secret, certainly. The charade of civility and barbarity in the name of civilization were secrets that were well-known to the generations of Indian students who had been through the institution.

Fear is one word that is stressed in the poem by Rita Joe. Same is the case with Shirley Sterling's novel *My Name is Seepetza*. The inscription on the cover page of the novel reads:

Last year Father Sloane took some pictures of us when we were in our dancing costumes at the Irish Concert. It was funny because. I was smiling in those pictures. I looked happy. How can I look happy when I am scared all the time?

The book is written in the form of a journal by a twelve year old while staying in Kalamak residential school. The residents of the school were not allowed to communicate with anybody outside the school because the students could reveal the brutalities faced by them in the school.

It is interesting to note that the schools were not afraid of the leakage of the secrets to the parents of the native students because most of the parents had themselves studied in the Indian schools and knew about the ordeals their children will have to face in such schools. Rather the school authorities were afraid of the written documents coming out of the schools as they could cause a huge embarrassment to the authorities of these "civilizing" institutions. Seepetza also knows that her journal could land her in trouble:

I'll get in trouble if I get caught. Sister Theo checks our letters home. We're not allowed to say anything about the school. I might get the strap or worse. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.12)

Seepetza is a second generation student of the school. Earlier, her mother also studied in the same school and she was also aware of the brutal assimilation tactics used by the school:

My mum only went to grade three. She went to Kalamak too. The nuns strapped her all the time for speaking Indian, because she couldn't speak English. She said just when the welts on her hands and arms healed, she got it again. That's why she didn't want us to learn Indian. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.89)

The mother knew very well about what will happen to her daughter, even then she is helpless because of “law” (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.13) that forced the Indian to send their children to the brutal residential schools.

Priesthood and Paedophilia: An Ignoble Connection of a noble profession

The story in the book is told through the eyes of a twelve year old girl who is unaware of the policies of the white colonial institutions. So the story might pose some problems to a new reader.

The readers can understand the problems of these children only if they have some knowledge about the residential schools and the treatment meted out to the residents in such institutions. Seepeetza describes one such incident of the school where “some boys ran away from the school because one of the priests was doing something bad to them” (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.13). Now “something bad” was beyond comprehension even for Seepeetza. She does not know what “bad” was being done to the boys.

The reader may feel helpless because the perpetrator of “something bad” was a priest, a paragon of virtue in the western civilization. Any direct comment from Shirley Sterling is also missing, but a little research might reveal that the boys were sexually exploited by the priest. The native literature of Australia, Canada and America is full of such incidences where the children were sexually abused by the priests (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 141, 142; Kuokkanen, 2003, p. 702; Wright, 1997, p. 32). The priests in these narratives appear as devils who perpetrated extreme brutalities on the children who were placed in their custody.

The devilry was not restricted only to the priests but the teachers also succumbed to the temptations when they were given absolute powers, for instance, investigation by Federal Bureau of Investigation has established that John Boone a teacher at the BIA - run Hopi school “had sexually abused as many as 142 boys from 1979 until his arrest in 1987. The Principal failed to investigate a single abuse allegation (Smith, 2007). The teacher was later convicted and sentenced to a life term for his crime. Similarly, The Truth Commission of Genocide in Canada issued a report that claims the involvement of mainline churches and government in the murder of 50,000 native children through the Canadian residential school system:

The list of offenses committed by church official 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 pedophile rings that used children from residential schools. (Smith, 2004, p.91)

It is interesting to note that residential school system in Canada operated through a partnership between the state and various churches. Churches were in charge of running the schools (Kuokkanen, 2003, p. 701).

Christ versus the Colonizer: the Devil may quote scriptures

No institution did a greater disservice to Christianity than the residential schools under scanner underlining how the very guardian may damage the cause.

The operators of the schools were supposed to bring up children according to the core principles of Christianity. Christianity relied on the spirit of "love which casteth out all fear" (Howitt, 1838, p.3) and the plainest injunction of Christ was "to love our neighbor as ourselves" (Howitt, 1838, p. 6). But in the residential schools it was totally opposite. The priests did not cast "out all fear," rather they induced fear among the children:

Sister superior carries the strap in her sleeve all the time. It looks like a short thick leather belt with a shiny tip. When someone is bad sister superior makes them put their hands out, palms up. Then she hits their hands with the strap usually about ten times (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.18).

In fact, Christian beliefs were used to torment the children. The religious beliefs of the natives were totally strange to the whites for whom the best model for the religion was Christianity. The Indian religion had "no word of God not even his prophets, no Ten Commandments, no creed, no doctrinal councils, no heresies" (Gould, 1985, p. 7). Sam Gill a specialist in Native American studies wrote about the problems he faced while studying the religion of the natives:

(I)n terms of my training as a student of religion, I had no text, no canon upon which to base an interpretation of highly complex events. There is no written history, no dogma: no written philosophy, no holy book. (Gill, 1987, p. 6)

Unwholesome Holiness:

The Indian beliefs defied the canons of Christianity and fell short of Whites' definition of religion. The imposition was absolute but the first generation Indians remained unconvinced, though the rearing in the residential schools took toll of the second generation.

Since the native religions did not qualify as a religion according to the terminology of whites, so the native children had to be trained and nurtured in Christianity. The Europeans believed that "as Christians they and they alone had the truth" and "after the ravages of European borne diseases, the religion of the Europeans was the single most dangerous force the Indians across the entire hemisphere would ever face"(Page, 2004, p. 19). Christian doctrine was used to instill fear among the children:

Then she told us about devils. She said they were waiting with chains under our beds to drag us into the fires of hell if we got up and left our beds during the night. When she turned the lights off I was scared to move, even to breathe. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.19)

The children like Seepetza are tormented by the thoughts of devils and they carry the fear in their hearts forever. It seems that Seepetza becomes a Christian in true spirit and preaches her father about Jesus and tells him that "he died on the cross for you, for all of us" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.117) and thinks about her "Dad's chances of making it to heaven" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.119). But the older generation of the Indians is not impressed with the Christianity and the priests:

The people followed singing hymns and praying and crying. We sat outside in the truck. My dad won't go inside a church. When he sees the priest he spits. He doesn't like priests. He says priests are not as holy as they like us to think. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.122)

Seepeetza's dad is not the only one to hate the priests, her uncle also hates priests since "the time one tried to do something wicked to him" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.117). The same feelings were conveyed by Copway, an Ojibwe convert and circuit preacher while criticizing the injustices waged on his people in the name of Christianity. He insisted that Indians can be governed according to tenets of Christianity but with "less coercion than the laws of civilized nations, at present, imposed upon their subjects.... A vast amount of evidence can be adduced to prove that the force has tended to brutalize rather than ennoble the Indian race" (cited in McNally, 2000, p.839). Again in this case limited experience and the tender age of Seepeetza do not allow her to see the 'heart of the matter' and understand the reality of the priests and the sisters.

The little girl narrator is unable to understand the implications of the stories and incidents narrated by herself. But the readers can easily spot that the behavior of the nuns and priests was not exemplary. Their conduct does not testify their status in the society.

The nuns and priests who "were supposed to offer better care of the Native children than their own parents" (kuokannen, 2003, p.702) starved the children:

After mass we put our smocks over our uniforms and line up for breakfast in the hall outside the dining room. We can talk then because sister goes for breakfast in the sisters' dining room. They get bacon or ham, eggs, toast and juice. We get gooey mush with powder milk and brown sugar. We say grace before and after every meal. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.24)

The difference between the breakfast of the sisters and children shows that the children were poorly fed and the times when they had enough to eat in the school were very rare. The children had to adapt different strategies to survive on the meager diet of the school:

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 their bread. Other times girls hide bread or raw carrots in their bloomer legs under the elastic. They tape 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 jack knife to a string the lower it through a small window into the cellar. They spear potatoes and carrots that way and eat them. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.26)

Survival in these schools was clearly a difficult task and the children had to put all their skills to use to survive among these heartless nuns and priests.

Naïve Natives' Introduction to Hypocrisy

In fact, the narrative poses a problem for the readers because they are unable to understand certain incidences that are described in the book. She writes at a place in the book that the "Sisters are not allowed to go anywhere by themselves" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.67). The question is obvious because the sisters are sworn to an abstemious life style so they are not allowed to go alone. But the narration of an incidence complicates the matter. Seepeetza describes an incidence where she accompanied Sister Superior to the town:

I liked going with her because we talked about things. She asked me what I'm learning in math and other subjects, mostly school stuff. She drove somewhere in town, to a back yard and parked. I stayed in the car when she went in to visit. She

never talked about it when we drove back to school. I never asked her. (Sterling, 1992/2015, 67)

The narrative makes clear that the sister superior had gone in the search of forbidden pleasure. The sisters are leading a life style about which they are not themselves convinced.

They teach the students that which they do not follow themselves:

Sister told us about sin in catechism class. She said we sin when we lie or cheat or steal or skip mass on Sunday, eat meat on Sunday, kill or curse or argue or call names or even think bad thoughts. She said everybody sins every day, at least seven times. If we die without confessing small sins, then we will go to purgatory. If we die in a state of mortal sin we go to hell. You can pray people out of purgatory but never out of hell. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.86-87)

The nuns indulge in doing all the things they forbid the children from doing. In fact, the nuns and the regime of the school represent brutality and heartlessness. They profess no love for the native children kept under their custody, rather the children are treated brutally by them. The children in school starve and are pushed towards death and suicide:

Last Saturday one of the boys hanged himself in the tek, where the boys do working. His name was Leo. He was in grade four, so I didn't know him. They say he was playing Zorro with some friends. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.97)

In the above lines the readers may get a feeling that the death might be an accident. But further in the book, the writer makes it clear that it was not an accident. She writes about Charlie, a boy who is supposed to have died in an accident. She writes "Charlie wouldn't have done in on purpose. He wouldn't have given up" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.116). "Given up" is probably the most pregnant phrase in the book. It makes clear so many things and is an epiphanic phrase for the readers. The phrase makes clear that the life in the school was an ordeal for the children and so many gave up in these adverse circumstances.

What's in a Name?-De-culturing the Natives

The main aim of the schools was to "kill the Indian in order to save the man" (Smith, 2004, p. 90). It was an important colonial project to break Indian society and erase the cultural identity of the native people. A small incidence makes it clear:

After that sister Maura asked me what my name was. I said, my name is Seepetza. Then she got really mad like. I did something terrible. She said never to say the word again. She told me if I had a sister to go and ask what my name was. I went to the intermediate see and found Dorothy lying on a bench reading comics. I asked her what my name was. She said it was Martha Stone. I said it over and over. Then I run back and told sister Maura (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.18-19).

The names that were given to the Indian kids were important because their names connected them with their land and the world. The connection between them is clear:

We all have Indian names but we're not allowed to use them at school. Jimmy is kyp-kin, Coyote Head because he sings a lot. Dorothy is Qwileen meaning Birch Tree because she worries about the trees. Missy is Kekkix meaning Mouse Hands and Benny is Hop-o-lox-kin. We don't use our Indians names much. My parents

know we should get in trouble at school if we used them there (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.78).

It is clear that these endeavors were done to mute “the indigenous voices, the blinding of Indigenous worldviews and the repression of Indigenous resistance” (Wilson, 2004, p. 361). The Indian people have termed it as a “cultural genocide” (Horn, 2003, p. 66).

It, in fact, was a part of cultural genocide because an attempt was made to annihilate a whole culture, a world view that was needed for maintaining a balance in the ecosystem. The brutal colonial machine did not realize that by annihilating the Indian culture they were annihilating a wonderful body of knowledge and wisdom that was collected by the native people over the centuries.

It was arrogance of the white people that led them to believe that only their world view and only their culture was correct, every other custom was deviant. This restricted point of view led to the loss of precious knowledge that could have been beneficial to the mankind. The Yanomami tribals of Brazil, for example, use five hundred species for food, medicine and building hunting and fishing material (Goodman and Grig, 2007, p. 16). If the Yanomami culture becomes extinct their knowledge of these medicinal plants will also become extinct.

Another assault on native identity was the negative stereotyping of the Indians. Even after almost five centuries of colonization the stereotypes of the natives have not debilitated. In the modern popular culture the image of “uncivilized savage” has been replaced by “the drunken Indian” (Franklin, 2013, p. 311). Seepeetza also mentions that the stereotypes of Indians have nothing to do with reality: “The Indians in the movies are not like anyone I know. Real Indians are just people like anyone else except they love the mountains” (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.90).

In fact, the stereotypes perpetrated by the whites have done even more damage to the identity of the natives. These stereotypes have made them sinister looking in the eyes of the large masses who did not have any direct contact with the Indians. In other words, the people have started believing the negative images perpetrated by the dominant popular culture. Jo Ann Morris, a native American scholar describes the impact of such images on the natives:

Up until the present day, the American public has been fed, and has accepted as fact inaccurate information about Native Americans. The damage that can be done by attributing stereotyped characteristics to another, or to oneself, is immeasurable. When looked at through image-colored glasses, an individual is never seen as an individual, he is not seen for what he is but for what he “ought to be.” (Cited in Johnson & Eck, 1995/96, p. 73)

These stereotypes not only degrade the natives in the eyes of the whites, but they also “erode self- image among Indians, hamper their achievements and trivialize sacred and religious customs” (Johnson & Eck, 1995/96, p. 72).

Seepeetza is unaware of the impact of these stereotypes on the psyche of the whites and on her own people. She is a child who does not go into the implications of these stereotypes, but she in her innocence does shatter these stereotypes and bring out the truth about her people. For example her comment on her anger is illuminating:

It’s the Irish in me that gets so mad, just like Dad. His grandfather was Irish. I know it’s not the Indian in me that’s mean because Yay-yah is kind and gentle, like Nun. She has no white in her. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.98)

Most of the nuns in the school are Irish and they are often harsh with the children (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.63). So Seepeetza associates anger in her and her father with Irish blood (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.98). The whites are violent while the Indians are gentle (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.98). The gentleness of Indians is evident even in their language which "sounds soft and gentle, like the wind in pines" (Sterling, 1992/2015, p. 89).

Assault of the Androcentric outlook

The Indian life was different when compared to the whites. The natives lived their lives in the community in extended families while the whites were bred in "rugged individualism" (Francis 78). The idea of Indian family did not end with relatives and human beings only, rather it extended to the plants, animals, rivers and other natural things. This holistic approach of the Indian preserved the fragile eco-systems. While the materialistic white man led many species to extinction, the Indians endeavoured to preserve all living and non-living things. The attitude of Indians towards animals is brought forward by Seepeetza. Her cousin Mickey who used to shot the birds with his sling shot is warned by her father:

Dad caught him once and told him never to kill animals unless you need to eat.
Dad said never to make animals suffer. (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.114)

The Indians are kind and considerate to the animals. The depiction shatters the stereotype of a violent savage and makes clear that the people who are told stories about "generosity, caring and community" and "about the land and relatedness of all creation" (Francis, 2003, p. 78, 79) cannot harm their fellow human beings. Seepeetza's father is the embodiment of the beliefs that all the creatures are related to one another.

The Indians do not believe that man is the master of all the creatures rather man is a part of the scheme and all the creatures are equally important. This attitude is manifested in Seepeetza's dad:

My dad brought the fawn home about a week ago because he found the mother dead up in the hills where he was checking for cattle. Somebody shot her. Dad says never shoot deer in summer because that's when the females have their babies.
(Sterling, 1992/2015, p.114)

Thus *My Name is Seepeetza* is a book that not only brings out the atrocities faced by the children in the native schools, but also showcases the relevance of the beliefs of Indian people. The masterstroke in the book is the choice of narrator as a young girl. A child as a narrator allows Shirley Sterling to accommodate many themes at a time and the child like narrative lends authenticity to it.

Most of the times Seepeetza is unaware of the implications of the policies she narrates. As a narrator she does not have any biases or prejudices towards anybody. She misses her home, but this does not stop her from appreciating the sisters and father when they are good (Sterling, 1992/2015, p.33, 42, 93). But the voice of child narrator complicates the problems of the readers as they have to do a bit of research to understand the truth behind the policies of the residential schools. In fact the narrative of this little girl "allow[s] a clear glimpse of how fragile the rhetoric of improvement, philanthropy and justice so often used by those interested in the "Indian problem" in the late nineteenth century could be" (Ellinghaus, 2016, p. 564).

Invoking the old debate: 'nature' versus 'culture'

The Whites replaced the Indian way of life with an artificial institution of their own. They replaced the community upbringing with schools of their own. They introduced a new concept of religion.

On one level the conflict between the Native and the White seems to evoke the 'nature' and 'culture' debate, but a more intense probe reveals that 'culture' demonstrated in White attitudes, behavior, lifestyle and institutions was a pretence rather than something substantive.

On the other hand, the Indian way of life was so different that all the definitions of Whites conflicted with it. The Whites took resort in stereotyping the natives and their solution was to damage the social fabric of Indians altogether and to artificially impose their own religion, values and lifestyle over the natives.

In an attempt to impose their culture they took recourse to a diabolical institution with reprehensible strategies. Its operators revealed a savagery that shames the very tenets of Christianity.

Conclusion

Through residential schools, the whites systematically attacked the Indian life but even worse were the assaults on children under the pretext of correction. The Indian living in oneness and bonhomie with nature, their naïve approach to life and their sense of wonderment at the charade of the whites conveyed in the novel make the reader wonder whether the narrow concepts of morality and ethics actually breed hypocrisy and drive sin. Moreover, the novel makes clear that the outlook of the Indians towards life and nature was not faulty as portrayed by the whites; rather it was futuristic and wise. The whites while planning the destruction of the Indian life style ignored the environmental aspect of the Indian culture. The destruction of such a world view, erasure of such a culture can only complicate the lives of modern man who is already fighting against the problems like Global warming, extinction of species and deforestation.

Thus the diabolical institutions not only fractured the psyche of the Indian children and thrust lifelong psychological problems on them, but also disrupted the flow of centuries old culture. These institutes stopped the transmission of culture and a gap occurred and so much of the traditional wisdom that could have been of great importance to the mankind was lost.

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