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Assessing assimilation from an indigenous perspective

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Abstract:

Assimilation is a process of integrating one with another. It is either voluntary or forced. This paper attempts to view the assimilation of indigenous communities in its myriad aspects. Before colonial enterprise, there were cross-civilizational and cultural interactions. However, with the advent of colonial enterprise, colonization triggered a full-scale cultural clash that has resulted in indigenous communities reacting in multiple ways.

Keywords: Assimilation, indigenous, and Colonization.

What forced assimilation has to be addressed at the beginning of the discussion. Colonization, in its raw manifestation, was brutal in subjugating the colonized in more than one way. It was physical, mental, psychological, economic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and societal. The entire fabric of the colonial enterprise was to negate the existence of the indigenous communities. When such a nuanced encounter occurs, the fault lines of cultural clashes become prominent and trigger wider conflict. Some individuals among indigenous people opted to react to colonization in a manner that they succumbed to being assimilated into the culture, religion, and all ideological apparatus of the colonizers. There is no distinction in how indigenous people reacted to colonization, whether in settler or non-settler colonies.

The influences that forced assimilation need to be analyzed in detail. Assimilation is sometimes seen more as a strategy than as a capitulation into subjugation. However, prolonged assimilation might lead to permanent integration into the colonizers' culture and society, albeit without fully benefiting from the advantages of colonization. Fanon has famously stated, "Black skin, white masks." The role of the ideological state apparatus is brutal to ensure that the assimilated stay within the precincts of the assimilated society and



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culture. However, when the transformation of the mask into a permanent mark on the skin happens, it is assimilation of the first order and a point of no return.

Colonialism primarily aims to land grab in one form or another. However, assimilation would ensure that they act as compradores and continue their hold over the land. Negating the possession of the land is one way to ensure the erasure of the land claim. Thus, the term "*terra nullis*" came into being. If one were to assimilate into the system the Europeans imported onto indigenous lands, one would be assured that the land would remain with them. This act of assimilation is to have a hold over their land and, in the process, remain rooted to the land even while acting as an integrated individual in the imported systems of the colonizers.

Assimilating an identity is yet another level of colonization, where the indigenous individuals fail to see that they are assimilated. This negation of the individual self to the other self is complete when an individual willingly assimilates into the colonial culture. This is primarily intended to ensure the individual's survival against the oppression unleashed by the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. It is here that an individual compromise his indigenous identity for that of the colonized identity. The erasure of an identity is attempted in many ways, for instance, in the Canadian context through residential school systems, in the Australian context through the Stolen Generations, etc. In the text *The Indian School Days*, Johnston, in his introduction, quotes Reverend Mr. Wilson,

"Indians and whites should become 'one in language, one in pursuits, tastes, ambitions, and hopes ...we want them [the Indian residents] to become apprenticed out to white people and to become, in fact, Canadians.'" (7)

The emergence of a new identity is what the colonizers attempt, either voluntarily or forcibly. Assimilation is ensured out of fear or triggered by the survival instincts of the indigenous people.

Such an assimilationist attitude is furthered by literary production, school systems, and belief systems that internalize the idea of being inferior through the colonial enterprise. The indigenous people are forced to see themselves in the light of a European consciousness that they see themselves as victims of their own culture and belief systems. It is here that the advances of colonialism by focusing on the powerlessness of Indigenous peoples. This idea is further legitimized by the notion that tribal cultures are primitive and irrelevant, thus enhancing the hegemonic power of the colonizer's ideological control." (Bastien 151-2)



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However, any attempt to assert an indigenous identity is perceived as 'an undesirable goal,' and "... no effort must be left untried to prevent that poor, benighted Indian from pursuing such a goal." (Cardinal)

European intervention begins by removing an indigenous child from their homes and educating them in European ways and orientation. This establishes a positive outlook on European systems while simultaneously instilling a sense of inferiority in indigenous epistemology. Fundamentally, as Bastien opines, European education attempts at "secularisation and desacralization of the universe" (120) contradict the episteme of the indigenous communities. Dislodged from traditional systems and with nothing else to believe, assimilation becomes the only option for an individual who is churned in the ideological state apparatus of the colonizers. The schools were not only agencies for vocational training in trades beneficial to white society but also groomed children for religious vocations, as Johnston unambiguously recounts in his semi-autobiographical text, *The Indian School Days* (26). Textbooks, especially those of history, were only reinforcing stereotypes that were detrimental to the indigenous communities.

Assimilation was attempted through the residential school system, where the children were forced away from their homes and incarcerated in schools. The forced assimilation of young children was deemed beneficial from a European perspective. However, the children themselves were hapless victims and helpless in rebelling against such an atmosphere. This model of oppression is silent and devastating, as children would be reacting to the oppression, and as they have no other options for thinking for themselves, they are forced to follow the rules and internalize the oppression. Assimilating was the only option left for the children. Humiliation, decrying the indigenous system, stereotyping of the individual, forced observance of European practices and rituals, and enforced assimilation on young minds, so that nothing was left for them to rebel or think against. The very faculty of thinking was subdued because of the constant oppression of the individual. identity and lack of knowledge of the indigenous communities amongst the children.

This discontinuation of traditional systems in the minds of young children left them with no alternative but to assimilate into the European mould. They were kept continually occupied in one way or another so that they seldom had time to think or reflect on what they were being forced to do, and there was no space for the children to think. They were forced to follow and believe what was dished out to them in the residential schools. Bastien summarises the residential school as a space lacking familial and cultural relationships, creating a sterile, incomprehensible void for young children. "Survival meant conforming to the colonial rules of authority and becoming dependent on them." (42) The continued



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residential school system reframed generation after generation in the same mould, and assimilation was seen as the best way to survive. In the process, the loss of the indigenous identity is effectively withdrawn for generations together, and the loss that cannot be retraced or reinvented, for there will be far fewer people who remain indigenous and far more people who have assimilated.

It is the separation from family and the emotional and spiritual vacuum created by forced residential schools, and for the stolen generations, a void that was filled formally by the European systems of thought and practices that left no room for any alternatives. The psychological scar and internalized inferiority enable assimilation with ease without an escape route for the young individual. The psychological scar of separation in childhood is so intense that it turns traumatic and might as well create an intergenerational trauma, which is transferred to subsequent generations.

The compounding effect on assimilation is ensured by forcing indigenous children into foster homes where the European mould is reinforced, a stark contrast to their ways of living and those of the settlers. Here, there are two possibilities—either the child accepts a better lifestyle and assimilates, or assimilates due to societal pressure or rebels. Rebels are also taken care of by other institutions. With adherence to norms within settler homes being rewarded, the scope for assimilation is multipronged. Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* presents a poignant story of two approaches to the same situation.

Assimilation is asserted or reinforced through the church, which remains the only legal religious denomination in the settler colonies, as the settlers have scant regard for the indigenous tribal spiritual and tribal traditions. The traditions were snubbed as animist and considered less than human; any continuation of the indigenous tradition is looked down upon with contempt and disgust. This forced conversion by the destruction of a belief by another set of beliefs forces the indigenous communities to assimilate when they see no alternative. It is also an assertion of an identity as a convert longing for acceptance in the white man's fold. This assimilation may be tactical; however, when it passes on to the next generation, it becomes the norm. One can read that in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where Nwoye converts and walks away from traditional beliefs.

Religious conversion effectively assimilated the indigenous communities as it ensured compliance and obedience to the new order. The European belief in subordination to higher law and in falling in line with the law of the religious institution becomes paramount to acceptance into the fold. Thus, once an insider, one is subjugated and forced to obey, not to question or even to ruminate. Thus, a convert is more assimilated and docile than a non-converted, assimilated indigenous person. In Lorne Simon's *Stones and Switches*, Old Set-



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Bol converted to the Christian faith as he worked in the church; yet he “never honoured the priest with a confession.” (29). It is the institutionalization of a belief structure in conversion to the European belief structure. Assimilation is a ripple effect on society. It ensures loss of community and conviction in customs.

“The children of those whom Christianity has colonized have become afraid of their own kinship alliances because they did not learn about them by participating in ceremony ... and can be observed ... in acting out through spousal, child, and elder abuse in Indigenous communities.” (Bastien 124-5)

Assimilation ensures loss of language. This is detrimental as the culture and language are interconnected. When language is lost, the expressions, embedded ethos, and values will also be lost, along with geo-specific information. The loss of language will compound the loss of identity and hinder revival, thus paving the way for greater assimilation than for the retrieval of the language, land, and culture. Language was systematically erased through the imposition of European languages on indigenous communities; to that extent, the indigenous communities assumed that the lingua franca amongst them would be better in a European language. The nuances of language are also lost, and the finesse of expression and proverbs that lead to understanding worldviews will also be lost forever. Reclamation of language remains a distant dream.

Loss of land and economic control by Europeans creates a dependency syndrome among indigenous communities that not only internalizes inferiority but also fails to lift them out of dependency, effectively keeping them in the same position. This continued dependency through policies, local government, and ideological and repressive state apparatus ensures continued assimilation, either voluntarily or forced. Any attempt to recover from the cultural and social subjugation is thwarted from within.

The internal conflict ignited by colonization ensures that the people are assimilated and are forced to believe that it is best for them. This legitimization of assimilation is orchestrated to ensure the continued negation of an identity.

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