Journal of Higher Education & Research Society
A Refereed International
ISSN- 2349 0209 VOL- 6/ ISSUE- 1 APRIL 2018

NATIVE STORIES – THE WEAPON AND THE REMEDY: ILLUSTRATING THE POWER OF STORIES THROUGH DEBORAH MIRANDA'S *THE BAD INDIANS.*

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Abstract

Violence against women is one of the most ubiquitous abuses of human rights. According to US Department of Justice, Native American and Alaska native women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than any women in the US in general. Ironically, these data never translate into heard stories. Deborah Miranda in Bad Indians cites survival stories of gendered and sexual violence, the ones that usually remain in the dark. These native stories not only contradict the master narrative of American progress, but exemplify a retelling of lived experiences of strength and survivance. Deborah Miranda through her portrayal of Vicenta's story establishes a microcosm of Native American women. This paper seeks to answer questions like what does such narrative do and what purpose do these stories about rape and violence against women serve in the contemporary discourse? In this sense, the paper also tries to establish Miranda's idea that story is the most powerful force in the world.

Keywords: *Native American women, Gendered and Sexual violence, Deborah Miranda, Master Narrative, Stories*

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- **Anjitha Gopi**

> *"Vicenta Gutiererez, sister of the 'The Blonde Gutiererez', when [she was] a girl went to confession one evening during Lent, and Father Real wanted her, to grab her over there in the church. And next day there was no trace of the padre there, and he was never seen again. He probably fled on horseback in the night. Some said he fled to Spain. He was a Spaniard. He grabbed the girl and screwed her. The girl went running to her house, saying the padre had grabbed her." (Miranda, 22)*

This is Vicenta, one of many survivors of gendered and sexual violence rampant during the 1770s in the coasts of what is now California. The history of California covers conventional stories of Spanish missionalization, Gold Rush and the resultant migration of settlers to California, but never does it pay attention to the genocide of Californian Indians. In this context, stories of gendered and sexual violence remain in the dark. The pages of history turns oblivious to their stories, rather they are invisibilized. Deborah A Miranda's *Bad Indians*, *A Tribal Memoir* elicits the decimation and extermination of California Indians amidst the wake of colonialism, one that contradicts the master narrative of American Progress. Vicenta's story is not only a voice amidst radio silence of survival, but also a voice that managed to break free the chains of Colonialism. This paper focuses on how Vicenta's story acts as a weapon, a voice to fight against the invasive nature of Settler Colonialism and also a cure to native women's traumatic history of gendered and sexual violence.

Vicenta's brave rendition marks its beginning much earlier than April 1935 when Isabel Meadows, a Native woman told J. P Harrington, an ethnologist the story of a young Indian woman raped at Carmel Mission by a local priest almost a century ago (Miranda, 93). This makes us question why does Miranda pick Vicenta's story to portray the plight of Californian Indian women during missionization. Why Isabel Meadows does snuck this story into Harrington's field notes, amidst relevant bits of Coyote language and culture. What significance did a story of rape hold in an era where rape was not even considered

as a crime "Vicenta's rape is located in a deep, complex, ugly confluence of human history" (Miranda, 99). To understand this, a look into the history of gendered violence towards native women is inevitable. Rape and violence against Indian woman was a convention since Columbus's expedition in 1493. Native women were given away as "incentives" or "rewards" to his subordinates by Columbus. In *Conquest of America,* Todorov narrates the plight of one such woman who was given away as a reward to Michele de Cuneo by Columbus. Cuneo's narrative of his encounter with native woman is humorous but violates the woman's body and belief systems. He writes:

> Having taken her into my cabin, her being naked according to their custom, I developed a desire to take pleasure. I tried to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her fingernails in such a manner that I wished that I had never begun...Finally we came to an agreement in such a manner that I can tell you she seemed to have been brought up in a school of harlots (Todorov, 48-49)

This story questions the blank spaces in Californian Indian history. It reinforces the idea that whatever we know, are the perspectives of Europeans. We only know about this woman because Cuneo wrote a letter to his friend describing his pleasures. But the woman and her perceptions remain unconcerned: her whereabouts, sufferings, her state of mind is unrecognized. The stories of gendered and sexual violence continued during Spanish missionalization of California from 1769 to 1833 and saw a climb in the number and stories of violence against woman. Certainly, when a tourist visits a mission, he is not told about the victimization of native but a glorification of Spanish and the *monjerias,* translated as the "unmarried women's quarter" is given incessantly. James Sandos however, has a different story about *monjerias,* a place of confinement, where "priest in the missions had unmarried Indian women above the age of seven locked together at night in a room to preserve their chastity" (206). He also drives out the irony of *monjerias* that "kept the Native American men away from women, but it did not keep the Spanish soldiers away" (79).

The colonialization of female bodies took a boorish turn when Padres interfered in making reproductive decisions for Indian women. Desperate for labourers, who were otherwise dying off as a result of colonial violence, padres insisted on endless cycles of procreation, which badly affected the woman's body and minds. Her basic rights were taken away, what little sovereignty was left in personal choices were also thrashed to meet the increasing needs of colonizers. Miscarriages, still births became natural and

another approach to monopolize native Indians was born. Colonial powers continued to dominate Native lives through Mexican authorities who replaced the Spanish priest after the missions collapsed. Indian woman continued to work as house help and to no one one's surprise, these stories are nowhere to be found and remains hidden in the pangs of time , which marks the extends of victimization. Lack of documentation of native resistance colonized the minds of future generation who experienced self hatred. Nothing changed even after Americans took over California in 1864. Instead it worsened with Gold Rush, when the U.S Government legalized killing of Indians who were mere hurdles in their way of progress.

It is to this backdrop of devastation and decimation that Vicenta Gutierrez was born. Thus, Vicenta's story is a "microcosm" of rape in the larger Californian Indian history. Rape or sexual gendered violence, hence is another form of colonialization, where Native bodies like Native lands are exploited. As Andrea Smith elicits this point in *Conquest: "*The project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that native bodies are inherently violable – and by extension, that Native lands are also inherently violable" (12).

The history of sufferings and forced silence leads us to the following questions again as to why do Isabel Meadows decide to narrate the story of this young woman, Vicenta to Harrington, a salvage ethnographer who was in search of Coyote stories and language? What was so appealing about this tale that was an accepted norm of the times they lived? The answer is Vicenta's courage to speak up against a crime, which in those times and within those circumstances was not a crime at all in the first place. The rape of a Native woman was not an atrocity or violence in the eyes of law during Missionization. Vicenta's story puts an end to silence. It tells us that silence is not the remedy.

Her story gives us multitudes of layers to dissect. Not only does this story of rape speaks volume to us in terms of tearing of woman against her wishes, but also throws light on stripping of a culture as a whole. The retelling of Vicenta's story by Isabel Meadows is the beginning of defiance to the unending years of forced silences. This story, on one hand is a weapon to combat settler colonialism, to expose the hidden part of justified stories written down in history. On the other, it acts as a remedy to cure the wounds of thousands of woman and encourages them to speak up against the violence committed not only against their culture, but also on their bodies primarily. Vicenta's life

is a continuum of life stories of woman who have been given away or traded for the pleasure of "civilized" men. As the statistics suggests, one in every three native woman is sexually abused. "More than 2.5 times more likely to be raped than in any other ethnic group" (Amnesty, 2). This reasons out why Deborah A Miranda, a survivor of rape herself chose to include Isabel's retelling of Vicenta's story. This abides to the practice of storytelling as it educates, informs and heals.

Vicenta's story shrieks louder amidst forced stillness of a century, as a story of conquest, in compliance with the meaning of her name "to conquer". It helps the woman to understand and value their bodies, by extension their culture. The story of Vicenta is not just a retelling of lived experience, but ventures the idea that "bodies are sacred and voices are power" (Miranda, 107).Miranda's efforts to agglomerate Vicenta's courage into her narrative is also indicative of the strength of stories as a form of native resistance to the conquest of colonization, as stories are powerful. In this fast moving era of globalisation, indigenous knowledge and ways of living are often reprimanded when weighed with science. Indigenous narratives instead of being relegated to the margins, must be included in the mainstream to make this global village a place, where everyone finds their niche.

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