OPPRESSION OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN: ISSUES OF RACE AND GENDER

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Abstract

The Native American society or American Indian Society is a racially and culturally distinct community. It has its own culture, identity and social characteristics. The Native American people faced the problems of discrimination, oppression and inequality. The women of the community suffered of being women on one side and Native American on the other. These women did not have a powerful tool to present their issues as white women had feminism. They tried to set the mainstream feminism in their Native American framework and presented issues of racism, sexism, gender, oppression and segregation in Euro-American rule of United States of America. Their feminist approach has tried to reveal exploitation and oppression of the native tribes by the Whites and their government. They have also presented their oppression caused by their men within the community itself. They were also attacked culturally by thrusting the Western Culture upon them by Euro-Americans. The women writers of this community found a way out to their voice by means of literature.

Key Words: Native American, oppression, segregation, discrimination, inequality, exploitation, racism, sexism, gender, tribe.

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Introduction

ppression and segregation is the history of African American and Native Americans – American Indian Women. They were treated in an inhuman way, on the ground of race and gender, not only by the so called white society, but by their male counterparts also. The White Women present their issues with the help of literature that is termed as feminism. The feminists did not consider the issues of Coloured Women while presenting their issues. The Coloured Women-American Indian and African American-started presenting their own issues with the help of their own literature. They started their movements termed as Native activism or American Indian feminism and Womanism. They communicated their issues such as racism, gender, oppression and segregation through their creations.

Native American Women's Activism

Native American Women-American Indian Women-revolted against racial and gender oppression. Their political concerns have much in common with African American Women or black women. They tried to find a helpful and supportive approach to put feminism in a framework of their activism. They considered themselves the feminists, but they differed from European American feminists. They dealt with the female marginalisation and inequality in United States of America. They were oppressed and maltreated by the colonial power of the United States. The colonial power caused the destructive changes in their tribal gender roles also. Their gender roles were affected by the process of Christianisation and Westernisation. In this relation, Allen Paula has rightly mentioned, ".... the devaluation of women that has accompanied Christianization and Westernization." (Allen Paula 1986:202) European American influence was one of the elements those led to the growth in violence against Native American Women. They were oppressed as Colonised American Indians on one side and the women on the other.

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They desired for decolonisation and national liberation. A large number of American Indian Women were actively involved in the movement. They played their roles in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement. But their roles were ignored and their movement was dominated by their men only. The leaders of American Indian movement considered "..... women to cook and clean for them, they preferred that women stay in the background." (Mihesuah Devon 2003:119) These women could not have a good rapport with their men and also have uneasy relationships with the white feminist movement. They tried their best in fighting for racial liberation so that the effects of colonialism on their tribal men may not affect their movement. For this purpose they adopted the mainstream feminist approach set in their framework. This approach helped them up to certain extent. Allen Paula has rightly noted, "A feminist approach reveals not only the exploitation and oppression of the tribes by whites and white government but also areas of oppression within the tribes and sources and nature of that oppression." (Allen Paula, 1986: 223) The feminism helped these women writers to present the source, nature and effects of racial segregation and effects of being women. The coloured Americans, Men and Women, encountered economic and social problems in colonised America. They faced war, diseases and maltreatments, lowest wages, joblessness or unemployment. The women were suffering of domination and oppression based on race, gender and social structure of inequality. This structure has limited the opportunities and forced the women in poverty. Their lives were constrained. They were not allowed to participate in social institutions. The labour opportunities were influenced by race and gender discrimination. These opportunities were affected by American Natives' being male or female; black, American natives and others. The labour arrangements were basic determinants of social inequality. These people were discriminated in education, employment, social institutions and in politics. All these issues forced the Native Americans to live in a bad plight.

The Native American women, along with formal limits of social structure, were subjected to cultural attacks also. The institutions and organisations of these people were systematically attacked by the whites. The social organisations were the only means to maintain and flourish the culture of the Native Americans. The White rulers tried to suppress and destroy these institutions. They legally prohibited the use of drums and religious gatherings of the coloured and black communities. This was the social system in which a dominant group would control and manage a subordinate group of people in relation to their culture. The cultural patterns of these

oppressed groups were denied and the values and practices of the dominant groups were elevated. To get rid of these obstacles the Native American Women shaped their lives and the lives of their families with the help of dignity and determination. They opposed this system by revolting and rebelling against it. They tried to change the social structure and accommodation. They got involved in slave rebellions, American Indian wars and workers' revolts in the fields and mines. They also resisted the dominant group in relation to primary labourers in families. The Native American women created new institutions and helped their children to have own cultural identity. These mothers promoted a cultural heritage as a tool that would help them and their children to face racism, poverty and discrimination effectively. But, it is the case that only resistance will not lead to a desirable change in the society and in the plight of people affected, it needs determination. Some of the women laid their weapons down in front of triple burden of race, class and gender. Some of the women get escaped of these burdens by means of crime, drugs and antisocial alternatives of lifestyle. Finding no alternative than running away, few women became the parts of street culture that led them to the life of crime, drug addiction, prostitution and imprisonment or captivity. Due to these reasons the dominant society could control them and suppress their revolts.

Discourse of Oppression of Native American Women

The oppression of Native American Women has found its outlet in the literature by the women and men writers. Due to the effect of colonialism the sound of Native American Women has been suppressed at the local level. Their experiences and issues did not appear until the 1970s. The pioneers like Zitkala-Sa(1876-1938), Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971), Mourning Dove (1884-1936), Luci Tapahonso (1953), Leslie Marmon Silko (1948), Lousie Erdrich (1954), etc. paved a way for the future movements. They focused on a number of obscured issues and aspects of Native American Society. Certain issues are presented in the literature by writers like Gloria Naylor, Denise Segura, Karen Hossfeld, Ruth Zambrana, Linda Grant, Elizabeth Higginbotham and other writers. This discourse in the literature gave a way to the emergence of the political and social activism among Native American Women. With the help of literature these women found their voice that is considered to be a benefit of feminist theory. In this relation Rebecca Tillett has expressed, the "recovery and privileges of previously silenced female voices appeared to be a key benefit of feminist theory." (Rebecca Tillet 2007: 68) A number of Native American

female authors have depicted their experiences in their creations. For example, Lousie Erdrich offers a vast perspective on the Native American realities of these women's lives. Her writings

deal with racial and feminist movements, historical phases of colonialism, anti-colonialism and post-colonialism. Her contribution to the literature of Native Americans has paved a way for the emerging writers and the development of literature itself. Tillet has pointed that Lousie Erdrich has tried to eradicate the notions that have made these women homogeneous, In the same way literary figures, such as Allen Paula (1939-2008), Janet Hale (1946), Leslie Silko (1948), Diane Glancy (1941) Wendy Rose (1948), Joy Harjo (1951), nila northSun (1951) and Winona LaDuke (1959) have tried to present the issues of Native American Women through their literature.

Summary

The Native American society was economically and socially subordinated. It remained socially and culturally distinct in American Society. It was a systematically discriminated and socially marginalized racial group. They have their distinctive culture and their own identity within a large mainstream American Society. The larger society imposed their gender roles and relationships upon Native communities that led to sexual violence. If a woman marries to a white man, the membership in their own community to that woman would be denied. On the other hand, if a man gets married to a white woman she would become member of their tribe easily. This was nothing but an example of sexual violence in the community. Due to this reason Native American women have not been empowered within the community. These women were oppressed by the male of their own community as well as by the enslavement. They were suffering of unemployment, inequality and poverty. Native American Women did not have a hopeful tool to present their issues like the white women's feminism. They tried to set mainstream feminism in their own framework and present their issues of oppression, sexism, racism and gender. This framework of Native American activism led to creation of Native American women's literature and social activism among them. The women writers like Allen Paula, Diane Glancy, Janet Hale, Joy Harjo, nila northSun, Lousie Erdrich and Winona LaDuke contributed a great deal to the discourse of oppression of Native American women. They tried to pursue the goals of decolonisation and national liberation. They undertook the task of presenting experiences of Native American Women with the help of their literature. They also tried to depict the aspects of their native culture. They contributed their biographies, culture preservation

and social institutions to the American literary field and American society. They gave a way to their matrix of domination created by race, class and gender. In this relation Patricia Collins has stated about the presentation of Coloured Women, "Experience on three levels namely the level of personal biography, the group level of the cultural context created by race, class and gender and the systematic level of social institutions." (Patricia Collins, 1986:364-65) The Native American Women used literature as a useful device to illustrate the relationship of social structure to human desires and their acts. Within the realm of race, class and gender oppression, women created lives for themselves, their children and families as well as for their community. In this creation they found the support of dignity and determination to revolt against the system.

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