

CHAPTER - III

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As discussed in the foregoing chapter, I propose to analyse the protest in Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* through the character of Tommy Kelasket (Slash) who becomes the mouthpiece of the writer to express the ideas about the Okanagan culture, beliefs and the injustice being done to the native people by the White Americans.

Slash is an important novel that traces out a young Native Canadian man's struggle with colonialism, racism, and a self-identity that doesn't fit easily into "assimilated". The novel's four long chapters begin with "The Awakening", in which 14-year-old Slash first comes to realize that being Indian in Canada means adopting an "assimilated" identity. In the second and third chapters, "Trying It On" and "Mixing It Up", the protagonist recounts his various experiences as a drug dealer, convict, activist, vagrant and prodigal son. Slash tries on various roles and identities, shifting restlessly from place to place, focusing on his own inability to come to terms with what it means to be an Native person in North America. The final chapter, "We Are a People", draws the loose threads of Slash's life together as he struggles to make sense of his identity as an Okanagan community member and activist in many Native

struggles, as well as his new roles of father, husband, and widower. In so doing, Armstrong elucidates self recognition, and treaty rights.

While discussing the theme of protest in *Slash* it is important to take into consideration the opinion of George Ryga who says *Slash* is “a story of colonialism in Canada and the rest of the continent. Colonialism over the aboriginal peoples, with its own special quality of cultural and physical deprivation and a legacy of racial genocide. It is the story of one personality attempting to find a way out of this living death by way of prison, spiritual confirmation and active political struggle.” (1985 : 9)

To discuss various aspects of protest being observed in *Slash* it is necessary to take a brief account of the four chapters of *Slash*, so that it would help us to understand the condition of Okanagan people through the character of Thomas Kelasket who is the protagonist of the novel.

The opening chapter of the novel, ‘The Awakening’, depicts the character of Tommy Kelasket’s refusal to submit to discriminations and exploitations carried out in school with him and make an effort to draw the readers’ attention to the socially harassed community by the white ones.

The second chapter, 'Trying It On', reveals the rapid industrialization that gave rise to the migration of the masses from one place to another. The novelist present the dehumanizing behaviour given to the native people and brutality of the white towards them. Here the aspect of resent is developed in the character of Tommy Kelasket who tries to protest against the customs which are imposed upon him.

The third chapter, 'Mixing It Up', reveals the real picture of protest in which Tommy Kelasket gets involved in various activities that shows his resentment against unjust economic and social situations that safeguards not only one's natural rights but also to confirm social change.

The fourth chapter, 'We Are A People' deals with the crisis of Tommy Kelasket who gets confused either to assimilate or stay out of the sight, but finally comes out with the hope for himself and his native people.

There are different kinds of discriminations observed in the society on the basis of race which leads Tommy Kelasket to protest. Protest forms the base of the maltreatment given to Thomas Kelasket in the western school. Tommy is being sent to the western school for grade six as it was not available in Okanagan valley. Various experiences make clear the base created for protest. Joe used to rob their bacon skin and eat it

as he was always hungry. Joe was punished by beatings and was also given extra month of barn duty. Even the students in the school were punished for speaking Indian. Thomas was clever from the beginning regarding this matter. When he was small he had read something about Indians going to vote for the government to elect their chief. That was for the first time Thomas was made aware about the policy of the white people to sell the Indians out of their reserve and make them like white people. It is where Tommy confronts an unjust inhuman situation. It is rightly pointed out by Julia Emberley that "*Slash* is a picture of colonization for the native people." (1993 : 129) Even Tommy Kelasket was teased for his language, which created the feeling of resent in him. As Betsy Worland says, "Slash's first separation from language is in the white schooling system" (1990 : 67-73) Slash becomes the link between the English and the Okanagan.

Jeannette Armstrong suggests the Okanagan languages, which are endangered toward extinction, are a priority to everyday use. Those languages represent the diversity of response to the natural world, as indigenous languages and contained significant messages related to sustainable survival within the natural world. When Thomas enters with this background in that school; he is moved towards alcohol in

search of his own identity, even though buying drinks were prohibited for Indians. He leads himself towards self-destruction which teaches him to rebel leaving no option for himself and his native people. Protest transcends the primary impulse to refuse, this refusing attitude develops in Slash through the advice of the father given to him, that 'the law don't mean much on the paper. It's what's in your head that's the real law. If you learn good things and think good, no paper laws are needed for you. That's what we believe. (Jeannette Armstrong 1985 : 21) Tommy was maltreated in the school even then he was proud of being Indian and confident about who he was. This maltreatment is expressed by many incidents, e.g. when the school principal said to Tommy that he was very lucky to be with the white people. There were different classrooms and different teachers for the blacks. Here Slash is protesting because he tries to get rid of the unjust prevailing acts. There is one incident when one boy Humphrey insulted Indians by saying, "You frigging Injuns are nothing but thieves, full of lice, everybody knows that!" (24), but Monty opposed him, he was kicked out by the principal but Humphrey was not even detained. Even the principal insulted them by saying that,

You Indians are lucky to be here. We'll get along just fine as long as you don't steal from the other kids. I want you all to wait here while the nurse comes to check your heads and ask you some questions. Then I will assign you to classes. (23)

Tommy, even has to take permission to play with the white ones. When he returned home he was learning some things about his own land that some people in British Columbia were leasing their land and pressurizing them to live like white people. Under this pressure of greed Tommy felt under the confusion in his own tradition and that of the white people. A lot of new houses were being built to take away the land from the Indians which was reserved for them in British Columbia. All this difference we notice was due to their brown skin. These all incidents in his life results into an intense human consciousness which leads to protest.

In an interview with Janice Williamson entitled 'What I Intended Was to Connect and It Happened', Armstrong said that it was difficult task to make it clear in the whites that even though she was of brown skin but she was not dirty. (1992 : 112-129) There is a need of her peoples philosophy where social chaos taking place and people are becoming selfish for their own needs. The novel and its protagonist clears the

concept that Natives should be treated as free individuals and their rights should not be restricted, which created confusion in the mind of Tommy Kelasket. Even the priest suggested him to join the youth club because youth club meetings were the discussions on certain points regarding the current affairs. This discussion made himself identified with the downtrodden and the oppressed. When Thomas is in the confusion he is inspired by Uncle Pra-cwa and his own Dad. They used to tell him that Indians need not change and they should always get their rights. Even the priest suggested him to get involved into such activities because those activities were regarding the current affairs which increased the feeling of protest in Slash. This consciousness and the restlessness about social inequality are the starting points of the protest in Tommy Kelasket.

When John Kennedy was killed and the situation became critical, Tommy thought that one morning he would wake up and he imagined that all the white people would have vanished so nobody would have to do anything and that year he turned fourteen. Tommy remembered the speech by American President regarding great society in which he wanted whites to reject the dark races that is why they wanted Indians to be like them or be out of sight. Here the government goes against the

rights of native people. So there is no other option for Tommy Kelasket rather than to protest.

Due to his Indian friends getting mixed up with the white culture even Tommy was adopting the practices of the white people, which leaves him with a bitter feeling inside. Protest expresses overt reaction to events as Tommy, who is eventually called Slash, begins to experiment with alcohol and his father tells him the perils of this behaviour. But this falls on deaf ears, as Slash starts using drugs in order to escape from the problems he faces over the pressure to assimilate verses retaining his tradition. He begins to eschew tradition in favour of becoming more “Modern” which eventually leads him getting involved in the drug trade in Vancouver, where he earns the name Slash from his involvement in a Knife fight.

When Slash falls away from his spirituality and into the world of drugs and alcohol, he becomes ‘scared of the sweat’ the traditional Native Purifier that uncle Joe wants him to take. When Slash walks into a bar where he is to make a drop off, he enters a world of Native assimilation that is cheap and facile. The following lines describe his hiding of himself into drugs and alcohol due to the confusion in his mind about the traditions of his native people and of the white ones.

Music pumped heavy and thick, vibrating off the walls and sweating bodies. The usual girls with thick mascara, tight jeans and cheap, flashy blouses, their black hair curled and bleached in front, danced on the slippery floor. The talk was loud like the growl of a wounded bear; the laughter reached a pitch that sounded more like (57)

Here Armstrong uses narrative technique to show the seedy world of the Indians in the white territory of the city. The fact that the talk was like “the growl of a wounded bear” indicates that Armstrong feels this world as harmful to the Indian tradition. This passage also holds the suspense that climaxes in Slash’s fight in the bar, a fight that serves as another turning point in his life. It is this catalyst that leads to his introduction to Mardi, who becomes his first real love and movement, which proved as the basis for the protest.

Mardi encourages Slash to tell her of his youth spent on his farm and about the Indian ways taught to him by his uncle Joe. Slash soon falls in love with her; to him she “smelled like sage and cedar and her skin was even brown and smooth like those hills in the Okanagan” (62), his home. Slash is eventually put in jail for his part in the bar fight, and he quickly

loses his will to live because he cannot release his shame and helpless rage he feels by being locked up. He decides suicide is his only way to return "home to the mountains" of the Okanagan (67). He is being pushed into great sort of depression and in this situation he remembers all the songs taught by his uncle Joe. He sings one such song, and this serves to release him from his tormented mental state. Slash finds peace from the land vicariously, and his release from prison sees him recognize once again the importance the land has to his sense of well being.

After his release from Prison, Slash gets involved with the political action group that Mardi is a member of, here he learns the lesson that he was sent to Prison to learn, as he finally began to understand why he had deserved to be punished for working in the dope business. This realization that he was helping to understand his own people and self by participating in activities that are harmful to him sends Slash home to his family and back to living on, and with the land. Upon his return, he hugs his father, and longs "to tell him . . . how much I hurt and how bad it had been in prison. Everything I felt seemed to seep into his hands and I knew I didn't need to say anything. He already knew." (79) Slash has come full circle in his realization of what is important to him.

This is underscored when he learns his parents have adopted a different approach to raising his younger brother and sister, that of being more lenient.

Slash wants to tell his parents that their raising of him did not result in his bad behaviour; rather it “had something to do with going to a white school where everybody was different and that was what made one confused and dissatisfied.” (80) Slash’s return and his consequent change is pronounced when he meets Jimmy. Jimmy, as the assimilationist, espouses the white maxim of progress and literally buying into the dominant society, in contrast to Slash and his renewed focus on his tradition. Slash has a renewed sense of the place of the traditional in his life and this is distinct when he encounters Jimmy. So Tommy tries to bring social change in the society which is accelerated by various protest movements like Native Suffrage Movement.

Slash leaves on a journey, this time on one of political activism in the fight for native rights. He tours many reserves where he meets many likeminded people. At one point, Slash remarks to himself that ‘many traditional people he encounters had very little education and, because of that, they were strong in their ways.’ (91) Education in the white society, and assimilation that is expected as a result of this is associated

with a lack of tradition, as Slash himself realized upon his first return home. Through his protesting in the United States, Slash sees things that really told just how cheap the life of an Indian is to a white man whose status is threatened, which ultimately in his being able to see 'things with a different eye than before.' (119) But Slash's anger over this still prevents him from embracing the tradition.

"Mixing It Up" sees Slash getting involved in many more militant protest actions in both Canada and the United States. The chapter opens with his involvement in the 'Trial of Tears' protest, a symbolic action that was intended to shed light on the forced exodus of Native people to make way for white settlers in the southeastern United States. Slash remarks that he hadn't even heard of it, but then 'I guess that was the point of this whole trip : to educate'. This aptly describes Armstrong's point for writing the book itself. Armstrong says that the development of the novel emerged out of a desire for developing materials for the schooling system, specifically the Okanagan Curriculum project, that would present the Native version of the stories surrounding the historical period the novel is set in, to give not just the historical documentation of that time, but beyond that, the feeling of what happened just prior to the American Indian

movement, and what happened during the militancy period. (Lutz, 1991 : 13-32)

Armstrong says she developed the concept of filling the gap in the contemporary history of native thought over the past twenty-five years. (Williamson, 1992 : 111-129) And so the novel's detailing of events takes on a textbook significance, as Armstrong shows how Slash, like many natives of his time, were mixing Native thought with political activism in order to settle outstanding land claims issues. Land is important for the Natives as it is their definition as a people. Armstrong says that, in Okanagan at least, there are no pronouns for 'he' or 'she' that people are spoken of in relation to their connection or relationship to something, be this to another person or to the land they get their living from.

But this mixing is tainted, as Slash mixes militancy with a manly courage that misrepresents the real aim of the Native suffrage movement. Armstrong says that there were a lot of things wrong with including the male ego and a displaced philosophy regarding what role the Native women played in it. Thus her use of a male protagonist serves to show that there is a necessary recovering of the feminine or soft power that Slash discovers on his journeys. Armstrong points out that, through his metamorphosis into a personality, this character reconciled

himself to his feminine qualities . . . the capacity for compassion, love, sensitivity and understanding that's required that is more than just feminine, it is the reconciliation of both male and female and the wholeness and healthiness of who we are as human beings. (1992 : 111-129)

When Slash gets burnt out from the stress of it all, he decides to return home for the winter dance. This happens in November, and as he comes near his home in the hills of the Okanagan, Slash reminisce about the powder dusting of soft snow at home that makes everything look like its shining and feathery like the down on a goose's chest. (129) There Slash's home is associated with nature and a goose, both symbols of his spirituality. The goose represents the animal world, nurtured by nature, which is in turn the sustenance of Slash's people. Slash's return to his home and his family is therapeutic for him; to him the brown earth hills of the Okanagan are like a woman's skin' brown and rich, needing nothing more to be beautiful. (130) Here the land is likened to a woman that needs not the dressing up of the white people's world as in the city. With the comparison to the natural woman, the land becomes the symbol of life and fertility, and the source of the future of Tommy's people.

This returning of the home marks the end of another journey for Slash – the third where he learns to mix the old ways with the new.

Armstrong wants to depict here the feminine side of her character Tommy Kelasket, even though he is male he contains some feminine qualities of women like understanding, sensitivity and compassion which helps him to understand the situation of his people and try to solve it through his protest to preserve their rights and positions in the society where his people are maltreated by the white ones and suppressed, of their rights.

Central to the land claims issue is the actions or position his people should take in the constitutional talks going on in the early 1980's. He is starting to learn that balance is key to survival in life, but he still has much anger inside him. He talks to his uncle Joe about what he has learned from his journeys, saying, "I did learn a lot of things while I was gone, but I'm falling to pieces. It's like I'm made inside all the time." (130) Slash must reconcile his anger to his feminine side. Here Armstrong has given the base of Tommy's religious ideology because through the novel we come to know that Tommy is aware of his religion which is a key to his survival, but he still must seek out answers.

Slash, renewing himself with the reasons, once again falls prey to the depravity of alcohol and drugs, and does not return home until his sister comes to inform him that his older brother Danny has died as a result of alcoholism. He returns to face the people he most wanted not to, because of their grief. (163) Slash returns to offer comfort for his parents, showing that he puts the needs of others before himself. Again there is a description of the land that affirms Slash's sense of renewal upon his return home. The description about the nature in the Okanagan valley even develops the sense of protest in Tommy Kelasket. Because he is truly fond of his land and the nature on the Okanagan valley Trust as he is sobering himself up :

The trees sprouted little green leaves and flowers of all kinds bloomed between the sage and the cactus. The hills were covered in a soft green that turned rich grey. Soft blue and powdery massive covered the distinct hills as the light would fade into deep velvet when the nights came. (167)

Getting involved with the Okanagan political struggle, Slash finds that one of the most exciting things that happened was the learning by the young people from the old people. But something is missing, and Slash remarks that he "had to somehow find what it was that was missing."

In "We Are A people", Slash recovers the facts that changing his way of living would bring him new ways of leading his life. When Slash leaves his home again in his fourth phase of life, he returns to the self-destructive habits that killed his brother, and many other native people; drinking and drugs or a kind of escapism from an oppressive reality. This time Slash breaks the cycle of self-destruction. As he says, the end of that road stands out clear. (197) Slash has a kind of dream, a vision where he realizes how his physical deterioration is also a cultural one and he enters a detox camp run by the natives that shows him the value he lost in his old ways and where he learns an answer to the settlers' demand that they either assimilate or "Stay out of sight". Here Armstrong presents Tommy as he protests not only for himself but for the masses who lack courage to express themselves and to protest for their rights. As Joe, the director of the camp says, 'There is another way. It's always been there : this way is a return to the traditions that they know, a return to the metaphors and religion of themselves, a return to a way that has everything to do with Native people actively determining their own futures.' (Currie, 1990 : 138-52)

From this Slash learns how important and how precious his existence was. It was necessary. (203) With a new found purpose and reaffirmation in life, Slash returns home again.

Upon this final return, Slash finds his father in the hospital suffering from a heart attack when they meet, it is the reversal of the previous meeting, because now it was Slash who took all the hurt from his father into his own body. Slash's time spent in the detox camp has allowed him to learn again the lessons his father taught him when he was a child that he must be proud to be an Indian, and to find his own way to live in the world where he does not have to choose between assimilating or death : it is another way to live as an Indian person. Slash begins to understand that most Indian people have knowledge of different ways and values and that's what comes into conflict with some of the values that are taught to them in schools and by society as a whole. Slash has finally rationalized his place in the world and can contribute to it in a positive and meaningful way.

His final return home sees Slash recognize that 'one of the effects of colonization is the way people see themselves in relation to those who are doing the colonizing.' (221) Slash tells Jimmy who has had no success in assimilating, that they must recognize their own condition in the colonization process

in order to break its hold over them. As Marilyn Dumont says, "the misrepresentation of me (as a native person) makes me doubt my experience, devalue my reality and tempts me to collude in an image which in the end disempowers me," (Williamson, 1992 : 53) it is necessary to confront this in order to overcome it. Slash now realizes that he must empower himself through a recognition of the validity of his tradition as a Native person and it is this recognition that enables him to contribute in a positive way to the benefit of his people. Slash's new found awareness and openness of amalgamating the old with the new introduces him to Maeg, who is also "very traditional in her world view" but that her approach to everything was from an everyday practical point. (227)

Slash eventually falls in love with and marries Maeg. They go to the Okanagan to build a home and start their life together, while there they see a grouse and a deer and Slash and Maeg join them to have lunch and to bask in the sun. They are part of the landscape, natural inhabitants like the wild animals. It is here where Maeg tells Slash of their impending parenthood, causing them to feel a happiness that is synchronous with 'the rhythm that flowed around them in shimmering waves.' (231) When they return to Flint Rock in the spring with their Son, they live as if in a dream; they are

one with 'the hills, the beautiful dream.' (247) They are one with the natural world that surrounds them. This above description of Okanagan valley has a great respect in the mind of Tommy Kelasket and to protect it and their rights from white ones, he tries to protest.

Their happiness is short lived, as Maeg gets killed in a car accident, a symbol of the divisive politics surrounding the constitutional debate that will only harm the Native people. The epilogue of the story shows Slash back at Flint Rock, witnessing the setting sun "Across the Okanagan Valley." (253) The "mars – red" reflects the war that Slash is fighting, the deep purple reflects the bruises he and his people have suffered, and "the crimson" symbolizes the blood that has run red from the veins of his people who have died in this struggle that is far from over. The sun, giver of life, is setting with the weight of this fight, only to rise again on a new day that will herald the dawn of destiny. It is a destiny that Armstrong shows to be in harmony with a Native concept of spirituality in harmony with the land.

The prologue and the epilogue wrap the story in a circle, as the beginning of the book is also the ending. The introduction to the story of *Slash* in the prologue is in fact spoken from where he is at the end of the book, in the

Epilogue, affirming the healing circle of his narrative. As Margery Fees says, “A faith that process and struggle are more important than conclusive settlements or final answers pervades the novel” (1990 : 174) that undertaking the healing journey is a continual process, a process of struggle underscored by the concentric cyclic journey made by slash. In this way Armstrong embodies the Native way of healing and living in continual flux with a changing world.

While describing the native people and their land we come to know that when Europeans subjugated the indigenous population of North America, the Native people were forced to adopt the culture of their oppressors to survive in it. Something is there what we notice in Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* where Tommy Kelasket tries to protest against the white who seized the rights and the land of his people. The Native populations were displaced so that the Europeans could have access to their land. To Natives land is the source of all life. But to the settler society, land is a commodity. In robbing the Native population of their land, they robbed them also of their identity, culture and history. The struggle for native sovereignty in Canada has therefore centered on the issue of land rights. Like all Native people, *Slash's* spirituality is tied to the land, and this is presented in the novel as integral to the re survival of his

spiritual and cultural identity. Throughout the novel, Slash relates his experiences in metaphors associated with land and nature. To him, nature is an important aspect of his sense of being. Armstrong uses metaphors of nature to draw attention to important aspects of Slash's journey to acceptance of his spirituality, a spirituality that is tied tightly to the land.

As Slash tells us his own story through his various experiences which makes clear that Armstrong has written *Slash* in the first person perspective. Slash explains all the incidents in his life which lead him towards protest. As Armstrong says, when a person reads, they could experience the process as if they were going through it. (Williamson, 1992 : 111-129) In this way, *Slash* acts as a healing medium for all native people that have shared the colonization experience. It also is a study in the problems of asserting a Native perspective within the discourse of the dominant society.

While commenting on the vivid issues related with the native people of Canada Edward Said says, in her novel *Slash*,

Jeannette Armstrong seems less preoccupied with writing a great work of literature with which to rouse her people's spirits and more concerned with creating a fictionalization of the last twenty-five years of her people's struggle against colonialism in Canada.(1994-4)

She subtly weaves references to well-known Canadian and American historical events. Through these events we notice Tommy Kelasket, who disagrees with the unjust prevailing acts and carries out his protest for the upbringing of his native people and protecting their lands from being displaced. Armstrong aims to tell history from the perspective of those who have been here to be excluded from it, the Okanagan of British Columbia, because she realizes that this is essential for any group seeking not only recognition of their existence but also respect as a collective one.

Said mentions the drain theory in which wealth was drained off of India by the Great Britain. The same is also true when the Native land is used for English logging operations, mining and power plants. Exploitation of resources was not only a means used by the English to get richer, but also another method of flaunting their power by creating new and ever changing environmental laws and regulations which the Natives were forced to follow.

In *Slash*, the reader observes that nationalism is composed of other elements among which are anger and pride. Slash while protesting for the rights of his people wants to shout "Do something!! Don't die begging and crawling !!! Die on your feet. Now is the time." (120) Pride, however, also

plays an important role in his resistance and eventually becomes a more positive source of strength in his protest.

Armstrong illustrates the important phenomenon in *Slash* when the Okanagan find themselves forced to obey English laws. They cannot hunt or fish when the government in Ottawa declares that it is off-season, nor can they do so in the off-reserve land which had been stolen from them. Decisions were made and wealth was distributed by the Department of Indian Affairs Offices which were principally under English control. The only Natives allowed to participate in that political process were those who were judged to be more loyal to the English than to their own people. Their only form of self-government, the Tribal Councils, were deliberately filled with fully-colonized puppets loyal to the colonizers. When they accepted innocently to obey the rules of the system, it became corrupt and changed itself to leave them continually in the wrong. When they protested peacefully in the same manner as other groups of the time, they were surrounded and attacked by the police. When they accepted the judgement of the ruling system, it was biased against them, as is seen almost immediately when *Slash* is sent to jail but his attacker escapes prosecution. In each case, the colonizer uses the law to gain or to keep control over the colonized group.

Said states that opposition and resistance to colonialism is articulated first and foremost by culture, before they are through politics, economics, and military history. (5) In *Slash*, the elders, such as Uncle Joe, pra-cwa, and Slash's parents, oppose the changes to the village from the very beginning and preach the continued practice of their culture as a means of self-defence from cultural corruption. They continue to do so consistently throughout the novel, even when the youths are more involved in political actions as a means of defence of their rights and their culture. Eventually, even Slash recognizes that culture is the ground on which he must defend himself, so he begins to learn from the medicine men and to teach his nephew and son his people's traditional ways.

While commenting on *Slash* and on colonialism, Currie suggests that, "the centre of the novel is internalized oppression due to colonialism." (1990 : 138-52) Slash faces the effects of such colonialism and so he makes an attempt to protest against the injustice done to his people and try to save their rights in the real sense to keep alive their indigenous culture, beliefs and their native land.

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