CHAPTER III

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Slash provides the readers with an honest representation of the harsh realities of the Native Canadians. Attempting to write a piece of literature with which to rouse her people’s spirits, Jeannette Armstrong concentrates on creating a fictionalisation of the last thirty years of her people’s struggle against colonialism in Canada. She tells this history from the perspective of those people who have deliberately been excluded from it, particularly her own people, the Okanagan people of British Columbia. The novel deconstructs and critiques the premise of a single history. It is a narrative that shows “an-other” version of the rise of the American Indian Movement and the Canadian Native involvement in the movement during the ’50s and the ’60s, a version that may not have got coverage from mainstream press because it contravened the status quo. Jeannette Armstrong recreates a picture of the specific time-span, a specific historical juncture which would serve as a background for the American Indian Movement and what happened during those days of militancy. Slash records the spirit of the people who were involved in the movement, their joys and sufferings, their fears and courage, their hopes and expectations, for the better understanding by the present generation.

George Ryga writes in the foreword to Slash “Slash is a gently written novel, dealing with a brutal theme. It is a story of colonialism in Canada and the rest of this continent. Colonialism over the aboriginal peoples, with its own special quality of cultural and physical deprivation and a legacy of racial genocide. It is a story of one personality attempting to find a way out of this living deathly way of prison, spiritual confirmation and active political struggle.”

Political activism among Canada’s native peoples since the latter part of the 19th century has largely reflected their attempts to organise political associations beyond the Band level in order to pursue their common interests. In 1969, the proposal of the federal government to abolish both the Indian Act and the Department of Indian affairs (now Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) to transfer administrative responsibility to provincial governments sparked a dramatic increase in the scope and intensity of political organisation and activism among Canada’s native peoples. In addition to native people’s
involvement in provincial, national and international representative organisations, a variety of other, often short-lived, special-interest groups have appeared such as the Canadian Youth Movement (1970s), the Calgary Urban Indian Treaty Alliance (early 1970s), the Canadian Native Communications Society and the National Association of Canada (1970s). The National Alliance for Red Power (1960s and early 1970s) and the American Indian Movement are the ones that advocated more radical programme of action than those adopted by officially recognised provincial and territorial organisations.

Jeannette Armstrong narrates the history of this conflict and especially the Native politics in British Columbia. Slash, the protagonist, represents the “growing cultural awareness and political sensitivity” of the Indian reserves. He undertakes a series of journeys which mark the growth and development of his identity. He encounters racist attacks, hostility and oppression at the hands of the white settlers and their system. He is compelled to re-examine and re-evaluate his identity. In the process he learns to feel proud of his people and his culture.

The novel has four separate sections titled The Awakening, Trying It On, Mixing It Up and We Are A People, apart from a Prologue and an Epilogue. Armstrong tells Hartmut Lutz (1993) in an interview that Native people kept on asking her “Is this accidental that there are four parts, and its like the Four Directions, and there are prologue and the epilogue and the direction above us and below us?" And I said, “No, it wasn’t actually!” Armstrong confirmed that she was not thinking about the technicalities while constructing the novel, she prepared herself in the “Indian way” for this novel. Armstrong uses Slash as a vehicle of ideological message. She portrays the protagonist Tom’s character with a purpose to demonstrate that it is only through the revolutionary imperative to act that social restructuring can be achieved and the conflict of identity be resolved. Tom’s life is structured into phases that correspond with the development of his revolutionary consciousness. Each phase helps Tom to grow an awareness.

Armstrong believes that her writings help to reveal the truths about herself and her people. She says:

“The process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I’ve uncovered the fact that I’m not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not less because I have brown skin, or a Native philosophy. In fact,
I've found that my philosophy, of harmony, cooperation, and healing has a lot more relevance today in terms of humanity and the whole world....”

Armstrong took some active steps to boost the morale of the Okanagan people with her involvement with the En’owkin Centre, a cultural and academic enterprise run by the Okanagan people for their own benefit. One of the major projects of the centre was to develop and distribute a history of the Okanagan people because the general feeling was that they alone can best narrate their history. This work was undertaken by an innovative project called “The Okanagan Curriculum Project” in 1979. Jeannette Armstrong joined this project as a researcher in the early 80s. She says “The only correct version has to be from our people! Nobody else can give the correct version, but our people. And we are going to stick to that.” She was determined to fight all kinds of non-Native manipulation and intrusions to ensure this authenticity. This was the purpose that inspired Armstrong to write the novel Slash. The novel claims to be an honest and vivid appraisal of that chosen point in history. The protagonist addresses the readers in the first person in the prologue as he says:

“.....I must examine how I changed and what caused the changes. I must understand it and understanding it, I may understand what changes our people went through during those times and what we are coming up against.

It is crucial because I am an Indian person. As Indian people, we each stand at a pivot point at this time in history. We each have the burden of individually deciding for our descendents how their world shall be affected and what shall be their heritage.”

This declaration explains the purpose of Armstrong to a great extent. “The Awakening” traces the beginning of Tom’s journey in life as he tries to construct his identity while fighting against blatant racial discrimination. As a child he has to face a painful dichotomy between the traditional values instilled in him by his Okanagan identity and the mindless pull of the capitalist consumerism of the society to which his school and most of his mates belong. He is torn between a pride in his heritage and the disdainful reactions that he faces among his peers. As he gets ready to join a new school along with some other children from the reserve, his father tells them –

“It’s going to be hard, because you’re different. They will probably treat you mean and make fun of how you talk and how you dress and how you
look. Now I want you kids to go to that school and don’t listen to them. Be proud that you are Indian. Don’t worry about your clothes or your looks or how you talk. We are the people who have every right to be here. We ain’t sneaking in from somewhere and pushing our ways in."

The first exposure to a white school draws the Indian students’ attention to the widespread opulence among the white kids and the point that Native children are different, is driven home by the principal in a harsh manner - “You Indians are lucky to be here. We’ll go 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.”

Very early in their lives the native children like Tom learn that the natives are bound to face discrimination not only at the hands of the government but also the educational system run by the church authorities.

The church and the Christian missionaries are held to be responsible for showing a deep-rooted disregard and disrespect for the native religion. Ironically even those natives who have embraced Christianity, are still discriminated against. The children have to face the worst experience when they attend schools run by the missionaries. Cousin Joe warns them of the mental trauma a native is destined to suffer in the school, as he says “...... it makes people mean inside from being lonely, hungry and cold.”

Armstrong tells in an interview “The suicide rates and problems our people are having are a result of being told you’re stupid, ignorant, a drunk, you’ll never amount to anything – just because you’re Indian. To me that’s the biggest lie of all that needs to be dispelled.” Drinking was blamed for a lot of people not wanting to work but hardly one thought about the fact that a lot of people living on the welfare hardly had anything to work on. They stayed home because they had nothing better to do. They were not ranching and farming, they mostly picked apples. The young people did not want to work on their lands anymore as they did not know how to raise cattle and crops. Being away at residential schools for a considerably long time stopped them from embracing the traditional Native way of life.

Tom’s father says to Pra-cwa “First it was the schooling, then it was the welfare and Bank housing, then it was the beer parlours and land-leasing and now it’s development. Pretty soon, Indians don’t have to do nothing but get money and spend it drinking.” George Ryga in his foreword to Slash makes an
attempt to deconstruct the term “drunken Indian”. He examines how merciless was capitalism in North America in its quest to secure resources. The Natives’ lands were taken away by force and they became homeless in their homelands. “Often using religion and alcohol as mind-alerting drugs, the preserved history and traditions of the original peoples were ruthlessly eliminated from memory or turned into objects of scorn and humiliation.”

Tom feels that listening to the elders who spoke about their own culture and their way of life has an enriching effect on his mind. On the contrary, the new American President’s speech, where he talked about setting up a “Great Society” sounded to be fake. “He talked about progress without strife and change without hatred.”, that makes Tom confused. He wonders whether people really mean what they say. “I thought about all the history books and stuff at school and in the movies. How it was all like that, a fake, while really the white people wished we all either be just like them or stay out of sight.”

In Joe’s words, “it makes people mean inside from being lonely, hungry and cold.”

The authors of The Colour of Democracy (1994) observe how the evidence of racism in educational institutions is demonstrated by the failure of boards and schools to develop an inclusive and equitable relationship with racial minority parents and communities. It is reflected in the failure of teacher training programmes to provide students with the necessary knowledge in understanding the skill to effectively manage a multiracial classroom. This analysis reflects, how for the minority students, the school can be a non-supportive and even a threatening place.

An analysis of curriculum provides some insights into the ways in which schools marginalise minority students by either excluding or minimising their experiences, history and contributions to Canada as a nation. Visible minority students are exposed to discriminatory educational practices which, like a multitude of timeless voices, tells them loudly or softly that they are intellectually, emotionally, physically and morally inferior.

Jeannette Armstrong talks about such marginalisation of her own people in an interview with Hartmut Lutz (1993). She says that it is with this view of saving the Indians from more humiliation that the En’owkin Centre was established. The objectives of the centre is to “record and perpetuate and promote ‘Native’ in the cultural sense, in education, and in our lives and our communities.”

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In her novel, Armstrong has developed this thought that marginalisation, at any stage of one’s life, leaves a significant impact on the individual’s identity and self-esteem. The novel describes various such situations that take place in the school that the protagonist attends.

Native children are meted out with the most disrespectful treatment even by the teachers here. They are taken to be dumb and so they are never provided with adequate academic facilities. Slash observes “Sometimes, I think the teachers really got mad at me because I always knew all the answers. Sometimes I knew it was because they didn’t like an Indian to do better than some of their favourite white kids.” Infact the learning difficulties of minority students are often pedagogically induced. Their learning is influenced by how the teaching is done (Cummins, 1988). This phenomenon is summed up by Kehoe thus, “It is a fact rarely accepted that there is less wrong with the learner than with the process and institutions by which the learner is taught.” A complex relationship exists between educators’ expectations and their conformity to these expectations in terms of their students’ academic performance. A teacher who holds stereotypical opinion about a particular racial group is likely to translate these biases into differential classroom treatment. The teachers often are found to make subjective evaluation of the capabilities of the students which is sometimes unrelated to the academic potential. In Armstrong’s novel, the protagonist falls prey to the dynamics of social difference. At the end of the day, matters look to be getting worse and worse, with huge number of Indian students quitting school or becoming alcoholic. As time passes, it becomes evident that conflict does not always come from outside, it also comes from within, from one’s circle of friends and relatives. Tom’s own world looks to be crumbling down, failing to answer his queries.

In “Trying It On” Slash tries on some of the dominant practices of the colonisers. He is almost convinced at times that the Indian tradition should be forsaken in favour of a more progressive ideology put forward by the growing force of capitalism. The younger members in the reserve are constantly being lured into following the culture of the dominant discourse. They are fed with concepts that they have a lot of ‘catching up to do’ and “We must take our equal place in society. We no longer need to sit back and be forgotten, second class people stuck on reservations, living in the dark ages.” As in any colonial
context, *Slash* also examines how economic plunder, the production of knowledge and strategies of representation depended heavily upon one another. Because specific ways of seeing racial, cultural and social differences are essential to the setting up of colonial institutions of control.

Fanon (1963) reserves the accepted paradigm by which Europe gave the colonies their modernity. He argues that not only were “the well-being and the progress of Europe – built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races” but “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.”

In *Slash* the young Okanagans seem to worship the modernity which has been brought into their tiny village by the whites, such as electricity, television, cars, fancy cloths, alcohol, drugs etc. Tom comes across a similar situation on returning home from prison. He is surprised to see how differently the younger siblings Jenny and Wayne are being raised by his parents.

“They were treated different than I was, Pops and Mom seemed to baby them more. They were allowed to do almost anything and got out of work a lot too.”

The mother explains that they are apprehensive about bringing up the children in an Indian way because the traditional way of bringing up does not seem to yield any positive result. This argument brings to light the confusion that reigned supreme among the Native people about the changes that were occurring around them like the threat of assimilation.

By the end of the novel, almost everyone comes to accept that these symbols of ‘modernity’, have brought more harm than good. The elders in the village therefore, preach continued practice of their culture as a means of self defence against cultural corruption even when the youths are more involved in political action as a means of survival.

The colonisers, however, continue to exert on the Indians their rules and regulations. It help them furthering their power over the Indians. The Okanagans also find themselves forced to obey English laws. They can not hunt or fish when the government of Ottawa declares that it is off-season, nor can they do so in the off-reserve land which has been stolen from them. Decisions are made and wealth are distributed by the office of the Department of Indian Affairs which are principally under British control. The only natives allowed to participate in that political process are those who are judged to be more loyal to
the English than to their own people. Their only form of self-government, the Tribal Council are deliberately filled with fully colonised puppets loyal to the colonisers. Menno Boldt and J. Anthony Long (1996) probe into the philosophical, social and political ideas that underlie the objections raised by the Indian leaders to the charter of Rights and Freedoms introduced by the Canadian government on April, 17, 1982. The Indian community in Canada raises questions about the adequacy of western-liberal doctrine in dealing with their conception of rights.

"Imposition of the Charter's provisions on Indians is being justified by the Canadian government on grounds of enhancing their quality of life. The same justification was given for forcing Christianity on Indians; for enacting the racist provisions of the Indian Act; for imposing an elective system and a hierarchical structure of government; and, for legislating a policy of assimilation. Implied in all of this is a deeply embedded ethnocentric assumption that Indian culture is inferior."28

The Indians do not view their struggle for their special status as a racist movement, because being Indian is a cultural and political identity for an Indian, which is not a racial one.

Old Pra-cwa sadly observes the rift created between the older and the younger generations on the reserves as he says, "We all know we will never again be as one. They lost their language, their ways and are no longer interested in farm or ranch work. They have nothing to depend on except a hope that things will be better if they do things the white way."29 Tom sadly observes "I agreed with the young man but I also agreed with Pra-cwa."30 He wonders whether things could be better if they looked and acted rich, and tried to change their reserve to be like town.

His friend Jimmy starts showing his desperate urge for assimilation into the White world. "You know I never did get a new bike, so I went and stole one. I hate being an Indian, I hate Indian ways."31 The entire community seemed to be passing through a daze of confusion. The ladies show the worst manifestation. "I thought about the older ladies getting all dressed up in lady suits and white high heels and gloves and getting taxi to town to have tea with white ladies, and how at home their kids got cloths from the Salvation Army and macaroni to eat."32
Gloria Anzaldúa looks at this internal conflict in *From Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and observes how the ambivalence from the clash of voices result in mental and emotional perplexity and also how it gives birth to a dual or multiple personality plagued by psychic restlessness. The opposite pulls thus become strong at times leading to utter confusion. Tom also begins to show signs of losing faith. He experiments with alcohol without paying attention to his father’s warning against it. Soon he graduates to drugs and gets involved in a brawl connected with drug-trafficking. He is stabbed on the shoulder by the miscreants. The pain is so unbearable that rest of his self seem to have started working on its own. “I remember the knife glittering in my hand and slashing at what seemed like forty people frozen into different poses.” He is sent to prison. This incident focuses on the dilemma of the indecisive individual whose inability to act positively gives rise to the problematic outsider.

While in prison he meets Mardi, from the Friendship Centre, “who smelled fresh like sage and ceder and her skin was even brown and smooth like those hills in the Okanagan.” She wonders at Tom’s physical strength that enabled him to slash the nuts off anybody who dared attack him. She calls him Slash. Jeannette Armstrong uses three names for the protagonist to suggest the multiple senses of his self. Thomas/Tom – his Anglo-Celtic Christian birthname indicates both his relationship to his family, and the assimilative force of the dominant Canadian culture. The name Slash, on the other hand, given by Mardi, represents the angry, cynical, warrior self. Julia Emberly comments in her essay on “Aboriginal Women’s Writing and the Cultural Politics of Representation”: “The very title Slash connects the mark that divides aboriginal / colonial culture, a mark that embodies the spiritual / emotional / intellectual, as well as the physical scars of assimilation.”

Thomas/Tom Kelasket thus becomes Slash, who symbolises the growing spirit of resistance and political sensitivity of the young Native Canadians. He encounters attacks of racism, hostility and oppression at the hands of the white settlers and their system. He makes an attempt to construct his identity through resistance.

Jeannette Armstrong seeks to foreground in the novel the doubly marginalised aboriginal voices which have been driven to the periphery through complex historical and cultural processes. Like the marginalised people
elsewhere, the Canadian Aborigines also can survive only through a programme of action based on their cultural distinctness. The formulation of an aesthetic resistance entails the problem of contesting the cultural hegemony, both external and internal. Constrained to operate within the framework of Canadian cultural parameters the native writers seek to right the wrong done on their forefathers by throwing overboard the aesthetic assumptions that goes into the making of a canonical text. It serves the political purpose of dismantling the colonialist structure and giving a voice to the disarticulated minorities.

Resistance in Native literature is a socio-political phenomenon spawned by the resurgence of an identity crisis among the Canadian aborigines. Like minority literature, resistance writing draws attention to itself and to literature in general as a political and politicised activity. Central to the struggle is an attempt to reconstruct the history of the relations of power between the groups in struggle by giving access to history, to those who have been denied an active role in history and its making. Native writers like Lee Maracle, Thomas King and Jeannette Armstrong fictionalise the problematics of opposing the official culture. Their writings become counter-hegemonic discourse as it attempts to reinforce the process of cultural self-determination. In Slash, the protagonist makes an attempt to achieve self-determination through a strong bonding with land and home.

Identification with nature acts as part of a support structure for Slash. These are bonds that rescue him from despair. In prison when Slash is on the verge of committing suicide, his desperate longing for home and its peace have been symbolically presented by visions of the natural world of the Okanagan. He decides to go back to the mountains which are part of the landscape of his home. He can almost celebrate in imagination the Winter Dance feast, a ceremony of sharing and togetherness.

“I heard deer hoofs rattles shaking louder and louder and there seemed to be a soft sound in my ears almost as though lots of people danced around me with their feet stamping, their eyes closed and their bodies sweating. The song vibrated through every fibre of my body like a light touch of wings, and the hard ball inside my chest seemed to melt and spread like warm mist across my chest and moved outward throughout my body. I felt tears, warm and real, wet my cheeks and I heard someone singing uncle Joe’s song. All at once I heard my cellmate ask
softly, “you okay, Tom? and I realise it was me singing.”

The depth of his feelings for Mardi, the activist, is so strong that he identifies her with his deep love for the nature of the Okanagan. In Slash’s words – *To me the brown earth hills of the Okanagan are like a woman’s skin: brown and rich, needing nothing more to be beautiful.* But this bond of the Natives with “home” as place, has been unfortunately ignored by the white settlers. When they came, they simply forced the natives out of their ancestral land. Slash says “I thought it must have been terrifying and horrible to be put in a place where you didn’t even know what plants to eat and what medicine to use with the weather making everybody so sick all the time and lots dying.” The faith in native traditions is further ingrained into Slash around his time.

Slash gets involved in political activism. The importance of land to the very identity of the native people and their tradition is repeatedly stressed upon in the novel. “It is hard to show just how much our pride, our culture and our lives all have their roots in the land. It’s not easy to explain that to protect and attempt to regain control over it is really the way to protect our own lives as Indian people.” The reserves in which the aborigines of North America were “fenced in” were not created by them but by their oppressors. Land as territory for sale is a European concept, not a Native one. Ironically the definition of Indianness is articulated in colonial documents like the Indian Act, not by the people themselves. Aboriginal people identify themselves truly through their culture-specific environment, and they also see connections among themselves as indigenous peoples who are different from the immigrants. They believe that they are fundamentally different from any one else in their land, fundamentally different from the white Canadians. The basis of the difference is land, their passion for it and their understanding of their relationship with it. They belong to the land; the land does not belong to them. They feel that the land recognises them and they know the land also. Mardi sums it up well when she tells Slash that the whites give them only two choices – “Assimilate or get lost.” In the same breath she declares that they can make a third choice and that is what the ‘Red Patrol Movement’ is all about.

When Slash’s brother gets alienated from the tribal identity, he can not be saved from self-destruction. Slash is aware that like his brother, he too would slip into oblivion if he does not find answers to questions that arise from deep within him. He soon realises that an involvement is the first step towards
combating institutionalised racism. He wants to take Mardi home but she is strongly involved with the Beothuck Patrol in Vancouver, a symbol of the Native Alliance for Red Power. Slash now works with the Band council. He joins an agitational programme and sets out for Kamloops, up north. He meets activists coming from different parts such as people from the Union of Chiefs, representatives from the non-status groups, the leaders of the Saskatchewan Metis Association and some delegates from the United States.

Slash’s journey to the United States makes him aware of the universal sufferings of the Indians. There is absolutely no border that is recognised by the Indians of the two countries because their objectives are one and same. The issue that becomes a major concern is that the government has been exercising control and manipulation through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.). As a result access is given to corporation with the approval of the puppet Tribal Councils. Slash's anger at the inequalities of the new social order motivates him into becoming an anti-establishment rebel. He wishes the Canadian Natives were as active as the Indians in America. He continues with his travelling between the two countries. On one such occasion he meets Mardi after a long time. He wants her to come back so that they could work for their people together. But Mardi is already involved in serious activism of American Indian Movement (A.I.M.). She leaves him saying “We'll be together, Tommy, sometime when the blossoms come out and everything turns good for our people, but for now we'll do what we each have to.” She symbolises the dream which had the power to unite thousands of young Native Canadians at that point of history to look for a better tomorrow.

The chapter “Mixing Up” describes how Slash gets more deeply involved in a series of militant protest events in Canada and the United States. This section almost resembles a chronicling of history as Armstrong strives on with her portrayal of the time. She tells Janice Williamson “I sat down and tried to cover everything that happened in Indian country during that time in the States and Canada. I looked as it in terms of what influenced the thinking of the people and how it affected Indian lifestyle, communities and individuals.” Corruption is rampant everywhere and it mainly stems from the B.I.A. control over the councils through the use of monies allocated by it. The reserves witness people dying left and right, most of them are alcohol related deaths and suicides. Slash’s anger towards his people grows stronger as he wants to shout
"DO SOMETHING!! Don't die begging and crawling!! Die on your feet."

The popular leaders are willing to compromise their idealism for the privileges of power that neo-colonial politics offers. The state mechanism of Canada is indirectly involved in a neo-colonial economic and cultural policy. Bitter disappointment, anger and blame replace, what could have been a true strategic formula of resistance. Slash gives a vivid account of his frustrating experiences in the public meetings.

- Many of the meetings and sessions didn’t seem to have any real focus on what to do or how to begin to do it. Instead these sessions were a lot of what could be called “bitching” sessions, where everybody would denounce white governments, the D.I.A. and other things like prejudice in general. There were no solutions planned, just reactions to things.*

The Indian Affairs Minister, however announces that some of the Aboriginal claims have been recognised and the provinces are urged to join in “fair settlement”. Slash feels that the government is bound to take these steps because the Indians have already started voicing their protest. As a whole it looks as if something good is going to happen as everybody is getting mad with rage and anger. The Band meetings are held where issues like Indians getting caught hunting off the reserve are mostly taken up. People vow to get violent if claims over cut-off lands are not acknowledged. Cut off lands are those pieces of land cut off from reserves without the permission of the Indian people. It was different from the general land claims. General land claims is the claim to the whole territory which the tribe originally owned. Most reserves in the British Columbia were not set up under the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which meant that the reserves were not actually legal. Moreover the government did not seek the permission of the Indians to cut the reserves. The elders in the meetings get up and say in Okanagan “There never was a good agreement on any of our lands. They lied to us. They never kept their promise. They make laws and they break them.”*^ 

David Ahenkew in his essay “Aboriginal Title and Aboriginal Rights: The Impossible and Unnecessary Task of Identification and Definition” narrates the situation in which the Indians lost their land and culture to the white aggression. Before the European settlement of North America, it was unknown among the First Nations of one nation to deprive another nation by force of its right to self-determination and to sufficient lands and resources to maintain the lives of its
people. In Europe, however, conquest and domination were frequent occurrences. Entire peoples were displaced and forced to submit to governments by others. But the case of the Canadian Indians was a different one.

"Because First Nation concepts are generally not recognised in Canadian law, the federal government has taken the position that self-government and aboriginal title are not existing, but must be identified and defined. This places the First Nations in the situation of having to discuss these concepts not only from their own viewpoints but from the Western European perspective which separates rights from title and little from self-determination."*

The whole scenario in Canada looks to be frustrating and the Native young men are becoming restless.

"To us, looking around, we could see the resources the governments were selling to corporations and the land they were taxing people for. It meant the government was taking too much and not giving anything back to the people who the land was taken from. It meant we had no homes, no jobs and often no food, and there was nothing else to do but get drunk or join the movements."*

Slash is dejected and joins a militant group and marches towards Ottawa to make a demonstration in the Parliament. But they are faced with the riot police that leave many of the delegates injured. Although many pictures have been clicked of the incidents that really took place on that day, yet none of them appeared in the news papers. It shows how helpless the Indians are in their own habitats. Control of the media has always been a powerful ideological weapon. It operates in the form of construction and suppression of truth. The instance that has been drawn in the novel is a classic example of the hypocrisy of the State. All these incidents drive Slash more and more into depression. He starts boozing and drinking cheap, rotten stuff. At this point of time he comes to know about the death of his younger brother, Danny.

"No tears comes, just a hard quiet seemed to settle over my brain like a black fog. I could not speak. I could not think about it. I wanted to turn around and run away. Back to Ottawa, anywhere, anywhere back in time, back to when I could see Danny as a young man, so handsome and strong and quiet and gentle with the horses."*
Danny breaks the circles and finishes himself. He has been frustrated and alienated from his tribal identity and that is why he could not be saved from self-destruction.

Slash is aware that like his brother Danny, “he too could easily slip into oblivion”, but his faith in the Native way of life comes to his rescue that finally helps him to develop a strong sense of identity. Danny’s death ironically restores Slash to life. Slash witnesses a number of people dying alcohol related death in the reserves and after a long time tears come rolling down the cheeks as he says “The hard things inside me melted and I finally cried the tears of my brother whose death was the death of many.”

Hartmut Lutz (1993) makes an observation that in a number of contemporary Native novels some characters are portrayed to have separation from their “tribal identity” that leads to alienation. “And a lot of people then just don’t make it back anymore.” In Slash Danny symbolises the symptom of “falling apart” who could not be restored to the community.

Slash’s own world seems to be crumbling down as everything looks very depressing. He stays home that spring and like always it has a healing effect on his troubled mind. He somehow starts feeling that settling land claims might really happen someday, but it should be considered as the secondary achievement. The real achievement would be to raise his people up off their knees and teach them to do things on their own terms. Only then they could break out from the welfare cycle. His activism continued with projects such as march towards Vancouver for the occupation of the regional D.I.A. office. But they fail to achieve anything satisfactory. Everywhere if there is a gathering of people, the drums are brought out, protest songs and friendship songs are sung. Almost all the people grow long hair, wear chokers, beads and blue jeans. But Slash is still looking for some answers to his question “What was the whole thing about? What was being Indian about?” There are slogans painted in red about the Indian Power. Only the in-circle people know about the specific plans that are laid for the militant actions. Slash does not belong to the in-circle group. It mainly consists of radical Chiefs and ex-Chiefs and some people who have been involved with the Red Power Movement and the AIM supporters in Canada. Slash is somehow not trusted by some people despite his being a strong supporter of AIM activities in the States. Slash’s tragedy of not being understood by people around him has been referred to by Armstrong in her
interview with Hartmut Lutz (1993). She claims that this trait of Slash's character has been portrayed on the image of a real-life character. Armstrong was busy interviewing and talking to as many people who were involved in the movement, as possible. She met many people during that time. But one person, she was really indebted to was

"...closest to the character of Slash, in terms of the way that person operated. He was always in the background, he was always thinking about things, and he was always trying to be on top of the things in terms of what would happen. And he was always misunderstood, and was always put down by some of the people who were involved."^16

Finally in the chapter ‘We are A People’ the author describes how Slash goes back to drinking and drugs as a way to escape from an oppressive reality of life. The movement ends in a chaos and there is a huge problem of shortage of fund. Some Bands sign an agreement with the provincial government. According to the agreement they are not to hold any further demonstration while negotiations over the cut-off lands are being held. All actions come to a standstill which makes the younger people very depressed as they to not know what has exactly happened. Slash realises that it is good for him to move. He attends a religious conference where he meets the medicine men talking to the youth continuously about returning to the medicine ways^57 of their people. They are urged to continue their struggle in finding their true identity. One very old an speaks on the Native spirituality that soothes the troubled mind of Slash. "We are the ones who are lost, in alcohol and drugs and in cities in the rat-race. We will soon be as extinct as the buffalo if we don’t get back to them things."^58 However the fact that the police is looking for getting as many AIM people as possible angers him. Non-violence just does not seem to work any more in Canada. The constant killing of the Canadian Native activists and the formal promise of Trudeau^98 to look into the matter are shocking. Slash sinks further and further into alcohol and drugs. He is drunk all the time, is into detoxification centres, eats in the Salvation Army and is jailed many a times.

During one of such cyclic moods of self destruction, Slash experiences a dream-vision that tells him that his physical and spiritual deterioration is actually an echo of a cultural deterioration of the Native society.

He joins a detoxification camp and comes in contact with a medicine man who instils new hope in his mind. He discovers a new meaning to live for. The
medicine man is a Plains Indian whose presence and words have a strong influence on Slash's mind. Finally Slash feels he was strong enough to face the world. For the first time he feels "I was important as one person but more important as part of everything else."60

Slash returns home after two long years of wandering. He is surprised to find old Pra-cwa still talking in Okanagan and saying things that are very similar to the ones the medicine men from different tribes are talking about. He is content and enjoys true happiness after a long time. He now knows that to understand one's culture one had to use it, just as to preserve one's language, one had to speak it. "It's using them things that's important. In using it, you understand it. That's what our culture is. You protect it by using it."61 One's love for one's culture would grow from a strong involvement. Slash has been projected in the novel as "a part of other things in terms of the community."62 It is with the support of the community that Slash rebuilds his fractured sense of identity. There is not much focus on the individual aspect of the character in the Western individualistic sense. Armstrong says about the character of Slash, "I couldn't isolate the character and keep the character in isolation from the development of the events in the community, and the whole of the people."63 The protagonist has been portrayed here as a sum-total of the collective spirit of the world around him. In Armstrong's words:

"So, when you see Slash in terms of his family you can see what his character development was. The same way with his friends, when he was out on the trail. The character development of the people around him, the pieces of character that come in and out, are all part of his character development, or his being, or whatever, and the relationship of his thinking to those things."64

The collective quest for identity of the Indians has been symbolised in the novel in Slash's spiritual journey in life from loss of faith to affirmation of his self.

Together with wife Maeg and son, Slash merges beautifully into the surrounding natural world further strengthening the bond between land, nature and the life of an Indian. Maeg's death in an accident points to the part providence plays in human life. The novel ends with a note of hope for the native people for Maeg leaves behind their little son Marlon who is called the 'Little Chief' of the future by his father in the hope that he would guide more
and more people to the third alternative – that of cultural affirmation. Ryga puts it thus –

"Her hero and her heroine, at the end of the book, do not rest easily with activities which appear to meet the needs of the day. There will be more deaths and mutilations of the spirit, as well as betrayals. For it has been a time of arousal to action - a time of preparing."\(^{65}\)

Armstrong presents Slash’s journey as a spiritual quest, as a whole, as a circle. She says, "I wanted to take him from and bring him back to health again and go through the whole process."\(^{66}\) In the prologue Slash tells of the circular journey which has brought him "back to when as an almost man, things seemed so simple."\(^{67}\) He sees his past as a spiritual quest that of coming to terms with his Indianness, of re-claiming his tribal identity and re-affirming his role within his community. Like his creator, Slash has been brought up in a traditional atmosphere, where his people refuse to give in to assimilationist policy of the government. Yet when confronted by the dominant culture’s attitude towards his own race, he is confused and loses his spiritual strength. This gradual loss of spiritual health from a position of wholeness constitute the beginning of a circular healing process. The circle is scared and has tremendous power in the Native worldview. The Native believes that everything in nature is circular and cyclical, the seasons, the movement of the earth, the winds etc. The "circle represents the journey of human existence. It connects us to our past and to our future. Within the periphery of the circle lies the key to all Native philosophy, values and traditions. All things living depend upon its equilibrium."\(^{68}\) The circle connotes stagnation in the Euro-American tradition, but it symbolises spiritual rebirth in the Native worldview. In Slash’s case also, his circular journey comes to an end when he regains his spiritual power and finds his place within the community, realising his necessity to it.
Notes and References


6. En’owkin Centre was established to develop a curriculum for school children that carried the history and the content in a correct way. The En’owkin Centre was called “The Okanagan Curriculum Project” that had a lot of involvement of the Native people.


15. Ibid, p. 36.

16. Ibid, p. 36.

17. Ibid, p. 17.


23. Ibid, p. 43.


27. The use of term ‘Indian’ does not intend to imply that Canada’s indigenous tribes constitute a single people in any socio-cultural-political sense. There continues to exist diversity in cultural heritage, political institutions and so on. At the same time there exist today, and have always existed, cultural traits and values which traditionally have been shared by most Indian tribes. These include: reaching decisions by consensus, spiritual unity, institutionalised co-operation and sharing, respect for personal autonomy and a preference for impersonal controls.


30. Ibid, p. 43.

31. Ibid, p. 44.

32. Ibid, p. 47.

33. Ibid, p. 58.

34. Ibid, p. 62.


37. Ibid, p. 130.

38. Ibid, p. 96.
Red Power Movement was spurred by a sense of urgency to create a plan for self-determination of the Native Americans. The Movement focussed on the glories of the Indian warriors of the past. Gradually the movement became more militant while focussing its demand on the restoration of lands that have been taken away illegally. Also during this time, the American Indian Movement formed in Minnesota. America had Nixon as the elected president at that time.
First Nations cultures have diverse religious beliefs. There was never one spiritual system. But all these cultures have traditionally defined medicine ways headed by the Medicine man or the Shaman. Since the first encounter of the European colonisers and the Indians, the Aboriginal bodily resistance to the life-sciences' episteme of the colonisers has nourished as reflexive anguish which has formed the basis of colonisers' racism toward the Natives. Along with its monopoly of violence, however, the colonial regime also established a monopoly on truth, and negated the value of Indian traditional knowledge. The colonial rule since then, has left a deep scar on the Aboriginal body, and the rediscovery of traditional medicine now seems to be not only a way of healing this historical wound but also a means of political empowerment of Indian communities. The medicine man stands for tribal wisdom, no matter which tribe he came from. The term "medicine man" is generally reserved for someone possessing knowledge and healing abilities. Indian medicine is not for sale, not for profit - it is a gift to be shared. Men are usually the ones who are chosen to be "medicine men" since women are already fulfilling their role as life givers and healers. Men because of not having the same relationship with the Earth must strive to fulfill their role and connection with "the creation as servants of the people, as medicine men."


Pierre Elliot Trudeau came to power in the late 1960s on a platform of no special status for Quebec. He applied the logic of his position to the only other holders of special status, the Indians. It was Trudeau’s policy for French-Canada which led to his government’s terminationist white paper on Indian policy in 1969. This policy announced Canada’s intention to dissolve Indian nations and encourage the assimilation of Indian people into Canadian mainstream society. Trudeau faced strong dissatisfaction from the aboriginal people. Trudeau believed that the special status that the Aboriginal peoples received, set them apart from the rest of the nation. He wanted to repeal the Indian Act, eliminate the Department of Indian Affairs and do away with reserves. The near-universal opposition
of the First Nations people resulted in the government shelving the paper in 1971.


61. Ibid, p. 211.


63. Ibid, p. 16.

64. Ibid, p. 16.


