

# COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND MARGINALISATION IN JAMES BARTLEMAN'S *A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE*

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## ABSTRACT

*Orientalism is affiliated with the representation of Self or Occident and the Other or Orient in which the Self is privileged and has the upper hand to exercise power, to define, reconstruct the passive, silent and weak Other. According to Edward Said, "Other" is the false image of the Orient fabricated by Western thinkers in contrast with the civilized West. He is of the belief that colonialism persists in the colonized nations in the form of racism, chaos, and violence even after decolonization. James Bartleman, Canadian author, and a member of the Chippewas of Mnjikaning First Nation through his works of non-fiction and trilogy of social justice novels, provides the readers an awareness of indigenous history and thus helps in the decolonization of the mind of natives. Through the characters in this novel the writer draws attention to the voicelessness of Indigenous people and persisting colonial mindset among people of Canada. The paper focuses on the postcolonial understanding of the novel "A Matter of Conscience" in the light of Said's Orientalism. The post-colonial concept of "Self" and "Other" has been used to contrast the settlers and indigenous community in the novel.*

**KEYWORD:** *Orientalism, Postcolonialism, indigenous, marginalization.*

James Bartleman was born in 1939 in Orillia, Ontario. He is a former Canadian diplomat, author and a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation. He served as the 27<sup>th</sup> Lieutenant Governor of Ontario from 2002 to 2007. Despite having a rough childhood because of mixed heritage and suffered from poverty and racial discrimination, he reached the highest levels of public service and had a highly successful diplomatic career. His first book, titled *Out of Muskoka* speaks of his childhood. He has published a trilogy of social justice novels, *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (2011), *The Redemption of Oscar Wolf* (2013), *Exceptional Circumstances* (2015). *As Long as the Rivers Flow* was a finalist for the 2013 Burt Award for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Literature.

Settler Colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty (Barker and Lowman). The settlers occupy the land with the goal of eliminating the indigenous altogether and replacing them with a settler society. In Canada, indigenous people were subject to policies of forced assimilation and cultural genocide during the nineteenth and twentieth century that the impact of it can be seen in the present life of indigenous community.

The distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism is that in the former, Europeans invaded countries, exercised power over the colonized, extracted resources and left the country after decolonization. But Settler colonialism deals with the European settlers' invasion of a place, oppression of the native community, with the goal of replacing those already living there and becoming the dominant group in those countries. This

has a profound negative impact on Indigenous communities as a whole and has pushed them to the margins of their own culture and heritage and Canadian society as a whole. It is evident from the words of narrator in the novel *A Matter of Conscience*, “The newcomers turned the Indian cabins into pigpens, built their own more elaborate homes, ploughed the Indian graves into the ground, threw the bones into the river, and erased the memory of the First Peoples from their collective memory” (Bartleman).

Postcolonial criticism emerged as a distinct category of criticism only in the 1990s. Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* is regarded as one of the pioneering works of postcolonial criticism. In it Fanon argues that if the first step in finding a voice which was hitherto silenced and an identity which was lost by the colonized is to reclaim their own past, “then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past has been devalued” (Barry 195). Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) deals with the Orient or the colonized and the Occident or the colonizer. It is centred upon Eurocentric universalism, “which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not” (Barry 195). In Edward Said’s words, the relationship between Occident and Orient can be seen as “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5). Hence, Orientalist discourse, for Said, is more valuable as a sign of the power exerted by the West over the Orient than a ‘true’ discourse about the Orient.

The colonized subject is distinguished as ‘other’ through certain discourses such as primitivism or cannibalism, in order to establish the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and to establish a relationship of ‘us’ against ‘them’. According to Said, Orientalism is more like a corporate institution “for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it...” (3). Orientalism exhibits clear distinction between the Occident (Self, the West, ‘us’) and the Orient (Other, Non-West, ‘them’). *A Matter of Conscience* revolves around this binary opposition of the Self and the Other, with characters fitting on two categories: The natives and non-natives, the whites and non-whites, the civilized and uncivilized, the us and them, and the Self and Other. In addition to this, racial discrimination is prevalent throughout the novel which produces power to dehumanize the natives.

Bartleman begins the novel with a note of the tragic practice of the 1960s which is later known as “The Sixties Scoop”, when government agents removed babies from Indian parents in order to assimilate them to mainstream culture. They wanted to scoop the Indianness out of them, so that they will be able to destroy everything Indian. This is how the settlers exercised power over the colonized. When government officials entered Maria and Isaac Makwa’s home and took their twin babies, they were not in a state to fight for their babies. Both have been to residential school, where they had been practiced to obey the White teachers and officials without much questions under penalty of receiving menial and corporal punishments. Here, their powerlessness to resist the coercion before the settlers brought out. The relationship between the Government Officials and the Indigenous can be seen as the relationship between Occident (Self) and Orient (other), as “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5).

Michel Foucault’s works are usually considered to be the forerunner to postcolonial philosophy in its dissection of the relation between power and knowledge. In historical and political contexts, Power has been understood as a negative force which an authority, government, or ruler possesses to ultimately oppress, crush, and dominate its opponents. He explores in his works, how knowledge operates as a part of political structures of power. This explains that the creation of knowledge itself is political and can be employed to marginalize and oppress those who do not conform to the norms of the dominant discourse. For him, power is the ability to bring about a desired result. In other words, if someone wants to do something and can do it, then they have the power to actually do what they want to do.

The relationship between power and knowledge is quintessential in a postcolonial discourse since knowledge of the Orient helps in constructing power in a political sphere and appears in the form of colonialism and imperialism. When Hilda shouted, “We’ve done God’s work today” when they actually sneaked on to the reserves, and snatched the babies from their families, it exhibits how they assume themselves as superior in this colonial context and exert power upon the ‘others’. The Occident utilizes this knowledge of Orient to execute their power upon them. This is evident in the document which was asked to be signed by Makwas when the government officials came and took their children away:

... and since the neglect of children is not tolerated in Canada, I hereby declare you to be unfit parents. Your children will be immediately removed from your care and transferred to the care of the Ontario welfare authorities to be put up for adoption to couples in Canada or elsewhere who will give them the love and protection they need. Death certificates will be issued, wiping out and destroying any record

of their Indian heritage, and they will receive new white identities. The adoptive parents will not be told the origins of the children, and the children will never know the names of the biological parents. To protect the children, the files relating to the case will be sealed, you will never be told where the children will be placed, and you will never see them again. This decision is final and you have no recourse under the law. (Bartleman)

By the process of Othering, the colonizers treat the colonized as 'subhuman' and dehumanizes natives. Othering gives the self the title of true human while the other as anything other than human. In Gayatri Spivak's view, "Othering is a dialectical process as colonizing Other is established at the same time when colonized others are produced as subjects" (Ashcroft 156). The colonizers consider themselves as the embodiment of true self while the colonized remain "savages". Bartleman has precisely brought out the plight of indigenous peoples who face systemic racism and discrimination because of the process of Othering:

...That proves they're not the same as white people like us. They don't feel things like us. Honest to God, they don't think, see, feel, hear, or taste things like us. They don't grieve their dead like us. That means we didn't throw a girl off that cliff. We threw something that looked like a girl into the Desolation. (Bartleman)

This racial attitude towards indigenous community is so deeply rooted in their lives that even the children of settlers view indigenous children as 'other' and inferior to them. When Brenda discovered that she was a native kid and she was adopted, she was shocked with the reality:

To Brenda's surprise, she discovered that some of the white kids said nasty things about the Indian kids when they weren't around. Things like "their parents lie around at home all day and live on welfare"; "they smell funny ... must be the raw meat and fish they eat"; "Indians can't ever be trusted"; "Indians leave old mattresses and broken-down wrecks of cars and trucks on their front yards"; "Indians are all drunks"; "Indians sleep on the streets"; "Indians beg to buy beer and neglect their families"; and on and on and on. (Bartleman)

The Indigenous community has been the victims of racial discrimination and violence for many years that they lost that resistance to fight for themselves. As a result, the racial divide in the novel is unbreakable. When Hubert calls them 'subhuman', he asserts the role of 'Self' here and sees 'other' as rather inferior to him:

Good God, kid, how many times have I got to tell you! Indians aren't like us. They're not real people like us. The white man found them living like animals in the bush when he came here years back in the old days. They lived like animals and thought like animals. In my opinion, they haven't changed that much. That's why the government set up those residential schools. To educate the animal nature out of them. But it hasn't been working. They don't know what's good for them and run away all the time. (Bartleman)

Throughout the novel, it is evident that the government is engaged in the process of forced assimilation by which they can define themselves against the indigenous community. Here the Canadian Government (the Self) locates its 'others' by this process in the pursuit of power within which its own subjectivity is established. The relationship between the natives and non-natives in *A Matter of Conscience* is in accordance with Said's concept of the Self (Occident, the West, 'us') and the Other (Orient, the Non-West, 'them'). The Polarity between the Self and the Other is so immense that keeps them fixed in their role as superior and the inferior. In this novel, the indigenous community is overlooked, overrepresented and marginalised by their white settlers. Thus, the representation of the Self and the Other follow Said's model, and this distinction cannot be disregarded.

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