

Modeling the power of indigenous storytelling to address contemporary intergenerational trauma

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ABSTRACT

Alicia Elliott's latest novel is a journey into the meandering mental turmoil of a Native American woman as she tries to reconcile her ancestral roots and traumatic background with a new, privileged life that contains all the greatest paradoxes of the aftermath of colonialism. A powerful, gritty, horrifying, and ultra-modern read which nonetheless touches on the innermost urges of the human soul by exposing what it entails to live with their very denial. Elliott's style is brutal, sarcastic, acutely entertaining, and draws the reader in with a pace that gradually increases to challenge our perception of the events. The author's fictional strategies serve as an opportunity to initiate the healing of generational rifts through a brash vision that can address the contemporary.

Keywords

Postcolonial, indigenous, horror, fiction, mental health, racism, motherhood

The startled face of a dark-haired girl in beaded earrings, tears in her eyes, is trapped among the branches of a nearly bare tree. A living, eerie cage from which pink cockroaches emerge. The cover of the Canadian edition of *And The She Fell* predicts what it ultimately delivers: the tale of an indigenous woman ensnared in a tangled, psychedelic skein the reader begins to unravel with her, eventually finding its unsettling end in the closing pages of the book.

Alicia Elliott is a Mohawk author whose family is originally from the Six Nations Territory of Grand River, Ontario, Canada, and a prolific writer of many articles published by *The Globe and Mail*, *CBC*, and *Hazlitt*. Her first book, an autobiographical essay titled *A Mind Spread Out On The Ground*, was published in Canada by Penguin Random House in 2019 and the United States by Melville House in 2020. Winner of multiple literary awards in her home country, she is also garnering great recognition with her latest work this review is dedicated to, which entered physical and virtual bookstores in Canada and the United States on the same day, September 26, 2023, for Penguin Random House and Dutton, respectively. Despite the work being listed under the keywords of literary horror and indigenous fiction, the more appropriate one turns out to be postcolonial literature; behind what plays out as a typical first-person novel

among many, a tale of hardship marked by incidents of racism and relational problems, lie those hinge points which are no longer the exception but have become an unquestioned statistic, a norm, a state of affairs for Native American people for decades:

The historical trauma of the Indian residential school system has had ongoing intergenerational effects on the psychological well-being of Aboriginal communities: [...] higher rates of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts and attempts [...] childhood adversity, adult trauma and perceived discrimination [...] drug use and abuse [...] they remain, on the whole, among the poorest and most socially disadvantaged people in Canada. (Boksa, Joober and Laurence 2015)

Elliot does not wait to delve into the novel's events to discharge her first decolonial bullet. She does so through the psychedelic, Westernized, bleached, and distorted voice of Matoaka, better known to most as Pocahontas. In the prologue, we meet the protagonist, Alice, who shares much of her name and origins with the author. She is a Mohawk girl raised on an Ontario reservation whose background begins to surface through snapshot depictions of her youth, typified by a disrupted domestic setting and a frantic urge for acceptance by her white circle of friends. This is where her voice doubles, the story forks, Alice walks through the looking glass, and the narrative thickens by one layer. Something leaks out of her TV screen as she is engrossed in watching a Disney-designed story for Western children, concealing the sheer brutality of rape and kidnapping under catchy melodies and romantic escapes, betraying a continent whose name is still an all-Western brand of ownership:

"I'm definitely not Pocahontas." She straightened her spine, then lengthened her neck. "Matoaka. That was what everyone in my village called me. This was back before John Smith and his stupid little stories. Don't bother trying to pronounce it, by the way. Your clumsy English tongue will ruin the rhythm. [...] I have a message for you. [...] Stay away from Mason. He is your John. One of them. You're meant for other things —better things [...]" (Elliott 2023, 17)

Such an unlikely, hallucinatory encounter, such a virtual epiphany, remains suspended between the imaginary and the real world. Alice does not come to terms with it and relegates its recollection to a corner of her mind, as one does with an awkward dream upon awakening. She is not yet ready to chase the White Rabbit down its hole. However, this ancestral voice will continue to echo in the back of her mind and will recur in a variety of forms. When we meet her as an adult, it is within a different frame, that is, a fine neighborhood in the metropolis of Toronto where she lives with her husband, an accomplished university professor, and their daughter Dawn, barely six months old. Her life on the "rez" is long gone, yet this new dimension is far from being as idyllic as it seems or should be. Beneath a seemingly perfect patina, Alice strenuously battles on numerous fronts. The blatant racism of her neighbors who resent living next door to an indigenous woman, her failure to emotionally bond with her newborn child, whom she perceives as an alien refractory to any meaningful approach, her husband's

eagerness for her culture and mother tongue with whom she instead has a clashing rapport due to past trauma:

Colonialism tries very hard [...] to ensure I cannot speak my language, think as my Ancestors did [...]. It tries very hard to get me to think in a particular way. It tries very hard to get me to resist in a particular way. [...] It tries to control the relationship I have with my children [...] and how I parent with escalating magnitudes of structural and interpersonal discipline and violence if I do not conform. It creates a world where I am never safe. (Simpson 2017, 39)

The crippling stillness of her existence glides over a thin layer of pretense, soon starting to expose a dark pattern as the narration creaks under the weight of the events. Her husband potentially embodies the epitome of the politically correct Westerner, the apologetic white man hosting indigenous land acknowledgment. Alice is left feeling like an impostor within her own skin, trudging to find a balance that would enable her to engender some sense of belonging, “He has intergenerational wealth; I have intergenerational trauma” (Elliott 2023, 86). And this fragility and displacement of hers is further exacerbated by paranoid incidents. The plague of depression, a gift from her visionary grandmother, a mental disorder inherited from her mother: nothing can be ruled out in this scenario whose edges gradually grow fainter and fainter, leaving room for yet more intricate assumptions. Among these are linguistic meditations like the following:

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about why there is no Mohawk word to differentiate between reactive and melancholic depression. No scientific jargon to legitimize and pathologize. Just wake'nikonhrèn:ton and wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on. A mind hanging by a thread, and a mind spread out on the ground. A before and an after —the same way we measure ourselves against colonialism. What does that mean about our culture? (Elliott 2019, 11)

The choices the narrator employs in order to depict the episodes of her mental breakdown make their way through the story by means of small details, gradually accumulating and mingling myth, horror, imagination, and the dissection of depression in a sort of magical realism with pop overtones:

An image falls into my mind: a construction worker in a reflective vest wielding a screaming chain saw, cutting limbs from me in bloodless chunks. But the limbs aren't from me, I quickly realize. They're from this tree. This is a memory from this tree. (Elliott 2023, 60)

Elliott crafts a game of cross-references between the precarious state of the identity of the natives and the feeling of puzzlement of the reader. Mental instability is a consequence of cultural annihilation, the questioning of the truthfulness of one's perceptions, one's view of reality, and one's very essence. This fall, this swooping descent into the tunnel of Alice's derangement does not lead to Wonderland. Or, at least, not the one drawn by the very Disney of Pocahontas. Perhaps closer in allegorical terms to Lewis Carroll's original tale, as its

Cheshire Cat used to argue, "We are all mad here," Alice's insanity finds a distressing genesis in the genocidal and systemic violence perpetrated against her ancestors where colonization is merely a contingent event but colonialism is a strategy whose end is nowhere in sight:

I want to be entirely unnecessary, ignored, forgotten. No responsibilities. No mistakes making others hurt. No memory of the mess I've made. No me. This is what the colonizers would want, I think first. Then, who gives a fuck? (Elliott 2023, 82)

The fil rouge that connects her attempt to walk the tightrope with the abyss into which she is accustomed to gaze is the storytelling tradition of her people. The Creation Story, a mighty tale with the power to merge minds into one and generate a single sensibility, was a legacy left behind by her father's warm and firm voice. Alice becomes persuaded that rewriting it is the only viable route to her survival out of a life woven in the balance, "I was convinced it was my duty to the next seven generations of Haudenosaunee girls to give them something to aspire to besides the Disneyfied lie that was Pocahontas" (Elliott 2023, 64). Although the attempt to recover aboriginal oral tradition to restore historically erased identities is an age-old concern, a common practice among minorities, in Elliott the whole picture shifts. Her freshest, most modern strategy entails a change in perspective. No longer didactic, dusty, stereotypical accounts of native legends but an unfiltered conversation channelled through the language of an apologetical young woman:

Another surprise for *Mature Flowers* was the sex. I know, I know. Bad Native woman narrator! I'm not supposed to mention that word. It offends those real traditional types who like to pretend nothing exists under our skirts and our children pop into the world out of thin air. Well, rest assured. *Mature Flowers* was as ignorant about all that as most of your kids are when they start having sex. She didn't like it, if that helps. She endured it because she had to. She was a good, pure, virtuous woman that way. Someone has to be. (Elliott 2023, 139)

The novel itself turns into its embodied portrayal, interspersed with excerpts from the tradition she rewrites, reinvents in order to reinvent herself, or rather, find herself. In recent decades, indigenous artists have resumed employing storytelling in diverse and novel forms as a means to circulate their stories, to unhinge imposed restraints, to heal from trauma. It is words, the most basic building blocks of language, which hold the ultimate potential to heal such long-standing wounds. The retelling of experiences, both traditional and individual, may restore a legacy bearing the seeds to regenerate the core of aboriginal selfhood withheld for centuries. The game changer for forward-thinking artists like Lee Maracle, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Cherie Dimaline, and Alicia Elliott herself lies in recasting such practices of rebirth into decolonizing political endeavors serving the transformative function of restoring social justice; contemporary antidotes for ancient maladies:

And then she fell —scared, alone, tumbling fast through the black, tumbling slow through the black, tumbling so long time started to feel both solid and liquid, like the insides of a raw egg. And even though she didn't know about the endless ocean or the gossipy animals or the rumors of this mysterious thing called clay, they were still there. They were always there. They were waiting. (Elliott 2023, 251)

References

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Positioning Statement

The author of this article identifies as a queer Caucasian woman and does not intend to 'speak for' but rather to 'speak in proximity' with respect to the indigenous women authors she cites. This agenda is based on a willingness to take distance from colonial epistemic hierarchies and stand in a position of attentive listening and loving dissemination. Despite acknowledging the existence of several native nations in the described territories, the author refers to specific aboriginal people whenever possible. Otherwise, she uses the terms 'indigenous' or 'native' as a descriptor for the sake of practicality.