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The Paradox of Native Americans in *Black Elk Speaks*

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Abstract

Black Elk Speaks is a book describing the spirituality and social life of Native Americans. It contains values of living in balance with nature and the respect towards the Great Spirit. Black Elk himself is a prominent figure believed by Native Americans or the Indian as having vision of the future. The book is the words of Black Elk as told through John G. Neihardt (*Flaming Rainbow*). By reading the book, we learn how Native Americans survive in the land that does not belong to their tribes. The pain and sorrow of watching relatives and family vanished in the war. Yet, the identity of Native Americans remains among the uproar of social changes in the history of America. The purification of mind and soul in viewing modern life is in line with the American individualism. Furthermore, the study of Native American literature will enrich the spiritual journey of individuals in interpreting life in a multicultural society. Here, I would like to explore the paradox of living in the Indian reservation and the facts faced by Native Americans as told in *Black Elk Speaks*.

Keywords: Black Elk; vision; spirituality; paradox; Native Americans

1. Introduction

I always remember Emerson's statement on society whenever a discussion upon society and culture emerges. He says, "Society never advances. It recedes on one side as fast as it gains on the other" (Brodie, 1991: 21). Here, society is considered as a dynamic phenomenon in which it changes from time to time. Society always seeks for its pattern and shape based on its era. Therefore, studying a certain society shall include its past and present in order to see the future. This basic approach is the typical American Studies approach.

The history of Indians has been part of American history. The Indians or Native Americans have been tortured and expelled from their sacred lands. They have been the victim of the advancement of society. In *American Myth, American Reality*, Robertson writes that

The policy of the federal government toward the Indians has clearly reflected the myths and metaphors of all white Americans. From the late nineteenth century until the 1930's, that policy was to make farmers of the Indians, to distribute all tribal lands to individuals (under the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887) and so remove the "un-American" communal ownership of land, to encourage missionaries on the reservation to Christianize the pagans, and, through missionaries, teachers, and agents, to destroy tribal organization and obliterate the languages and customs of the tribes (1980:110)

It is obvious that the Indians have to render not only their precious lands but also their culture. The policy of the frontiers as stated above gives clear description of the White's supremacy in changing the culture of a certain society. In other words, it is part of the "Manifest Destiny" spirit of "gradually occupying an accessible, sparsely populated and richly endowed continent instilled some of our most commanding habits of thought" (Luedtke, 1992:35). These facts of the status of Native Americans are enticing in term of analyzing and observing the life of Native Americans based on Black Elk's vision.

2. Discussion

Black Elk is considered as a holy man by Oglala Sioux tribe. He was related to the great Chief Crazy Horse. *Black Elk Speaks* as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow) contains 25 important chapters describing the vision of Black Elk toward his people, Native Americans. Nevertheless, I would only like to discuss four chapters of the book—"The Offering of the Pipe", "Early Boyhood", "The Great Vision" and "The Bison Hunt".

2.1. The Offering of the Pipe

"The Offering of the Pipe" is the first chapter of the book. It is about the story of all life that is holy and is good. Black Elk reveals the bravery and greatness of his people.

It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit (Neihardt, 2000:1).

Black Elk starts his first chapter by revealing the mutual need between man and the surroundings. It shows how great the Great Spirit sets all beings and nature that they fulfill each other. Yet, the paradox of the vision is clearly seen on Black Elk's statement, "although I have made much meat in my time and fought for my people both as a boy and man. So also have many others done, and better than I" (Neihardt, 2000:1). From the line, the ideal living of harmony seems to pull Black Elk away from the reality. The tribes have to survive and endure hard living in order to protect children and family. This is what I say as the paradox of Black Elk. Black Elk also tells about the role of the Great Spirit in determining every stages of man's life.

So I know that it is a good thing I am going to do; and because no good thing can be done by any man alone, I will first make an offering and send a voice to the Spirit of the World, that it may help me to be true (Neihardt, 2000:2)

The lines as quoted above reveals the spirituality of Black Elk in asking guidance from the Great Spirit. He says, "no good thing can be done by any man alone...". It means man needs the blessing and help from the Great Spirit to walk the right path. Black Elk has to be carefully and precisely certain for the decision he has to take. He has to make an offering to the Great Spirit in order to acquire an answer for his decision. Here, the pure knowledge of the Indians or Native Americans consider the Great Spirit as the one defining the path of life.

The pipe as it is regarded as a sacred means of communication to the Great Spirit has a unique story. It was told that two scouts were out looking for bison. They saw a beautiful woman coming from a distance. One scout had bad thoughts about the beautiful woman. This beautiful woman knew and asked him to come closer. The other scout said that this was a sacred woman and that the scouts had to throw all bad thoughts away. The foolish scout ignored his friend's advice. He came close to the woman. The woman said " You do not know me, but if you want to do as you think, you may come" (Neihardt,

2000:3). It was told that the foolish scout eventually came close to the woman. As soon as he stood before her, a white cloud covered the woman. The cloud blew the foolish scout and he became a skeleton covered with worms. The other scout was afraid and ran away. The woman said to him to tell the people what happened and asked him to build a big tepee in the center of the nation. The story was passed down from generations to remind the Indians of the sacred relationship between the Great Spirit and the Indian people.

And as she sang, there came from her mouth a white cloud that was good to smell. Then she gave something to the chief, and it was a pipe with a bison calf carved on one side to mean the earth that bears and feed us, and with twelve eagle feathers hanging from the stem to mean the sky and the twelve moons, and these were tied with a grass that never breaks (Neihardt, 2000:3).

The pipe here is actually a symbol for a tight bond between the Great Spirit and the Indians. It also symbolizes the bond among the Indians. Yet, the paradox of the pipe is the fact that Indians or Native Americans have to experience dispute among their tribes with the coming of white civilization. The white came to occupy lands and also culture. The domination over the Indians has explicitly shown the down of the Native Americans.

2.2. Early Boyhood

In the “Early Boyhood”, Black Elks tells us about how he got his name. It was told that “his father name was Black Elks, and his father before him bore the name, and the father of his father, so he is the fourth to bear it” (Neihardt, 2000:6). This chapter focuses on the early life of the Indians before the coming of the white. Here, it is told that the white was called as “Wasichus”. Yet, the chapter also reveals the facts of the coming of the whites and the fear of losing the Indians land. It has been predicted that the white would conquer the lands and the Indians will vanish.

I had never seen a Wasichu then, and did not know what the one looked like; but every one was saying that the Wasichus were coming and that they were going to take our country and rub us all out and that we should all have to die fighting (Neihardt, 2000:7).

Black Elks know that life will never be the same. The previous chapter about harmonious life seems to be a paradox comparing to this chapter. As man grows older, things get more complicated and the life of the Indians is even worse. Once Black Elk said “ I do not remember where we camped that winter but it must have been a time of peace and of plenty to eat” (Neihardt, 2000:13). It is clear how difficult it is to live as Indians in America that time. The land that should give life and support to the Indians has been taken away. The suffer has made Black Elks senseless that he could not remember the feeling of peace and tranquility.

2.3. The Great Vision

This is the important part of the book since it tells the origin of Black Elks’ vision. The chapter reveals Black Elks’ experience when he got the ability to see the future. He was only nine years old when he remembered that the Wasichus had made the iron road along the Platte. “Now and then the voices would come back when I was out alone, like someone calling me, but what they wanted me to do I do not know,” Black Elks describes the calling of the Great Spirit and points out at the fact that everything happens spontaneously (Neihardt, 2000:17). Once, he was eating when a voice came and said “It is time; now they are calling you” (Neihardt, 2000:16). This chapter is the longest ones among other chapters of the book. There are 21 pages in *The Great Vision* describing the vision of Black Elk.

The paradox still lies on the fact that the visions are actually far from being true. Black Elks' grandfathers frequently comes to his visions and teaches Black Elks about the life of the Indians in the future. Black Elks, as a prominent figure, is highly respected and honored. The characteristics of tribal people who adore supernatural power have put Black Elk as both the leader and the shaman of the tribes. Black Elks was given the power to lead his people, "Take this, he said. It is the power to make live, and it is yours. Take this, it is the power to destroy and it is yours" (Neihardt, 2000:20). Black Elks has the power to manage his people. However, the facts were devastating that the Indians had to live in the reservation. This is the paradox of the chapter.

2.4. The Bison Hunt

"The Bison Hunt" is another chapter telling about the greatness of little Black Elk. The story starts with Black Elks who was ill. He was dying until a medicine man came and cured him. It was told that his Grandfathers, in a plural sense meaning there are more than one, cured little Black Elk. They came into the Flaming Rainbow Teepee and cured him.

Everybody was glad that I was living; but as I lay there thinking about the wonderful place where I had been and all that I had seen, I was very sad; for it seemed to me that everybody ought to know about it, but I was afraid to tell, because I knew that nobody would believe me, little as I was, for I was only nine years old (Neihardt, 2000:37).

From the quote above, little Black Elk did not tell that the spirit of the Grandfathers had come and had cured him. He was afraid nobody would believe him since he was only a little kid of nine years old. Here, it can be assumed that the Indians do not believe the words of a kid regarding supernatural phenomenon. The Indians have lived in traditions and habits of the spirits, yet, it is still difficult to accept the kid's point of view. For those who believe in the roles of the ancestors through their spirits, such phenomenon experienced by little Black should not have been something new. The paradox is quite obvious here. The fact that the Indians still hesitate on the power of the spirits is clearly shown here. "The Bison Hunt" tells not only the early childhood of Black Elks, but also the culture and roles of man and woman in the Indians culture.

And we practiced endurance too. Our adviser would put dry sunflower seeds on our wrists. There were lit at the top, and we had to let them burn clear down to the skin. They hurt and made sores, but if we knocked them off or cried Owh!, we would be called women (Neihardt, 2000:46)

In the Indian culture woman also holds an important role as man. A woman can also be the medicine woman who also acts as the advisor of the tribe. Yet, in term of masculinity, the quotation above shows the reaction of the other fellows boys when a boy is crying. It shows that a man is considered stronger and more capable in managing life. This can also be considered as the paradox of the Indians life.

3. Conclusion

Black Elk Speaks reveals the life of the Indians or Native Americans which is related closely to nature and the roles of its elements towards Indians. The story is told himself by Black Elks. It tells the values held by the Indians in order to survive. The coming of the *wasichus* had swept all those values and changed the Indians civilization. The Indians have to endure poverty, torture and isolation. The Great Spirits seems to leave the Indians. This is the paradox that Black Elks would like to reveal in his book. He would like to show his people that they still have the root of their ancestors eventhough things have changed.

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