



## An Analysis of the North American Indian's Plight in *Borders*

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### Abstract

The novel *Borders* is a rather classic novel of Thomas King. It mainly describes the plight of the North American Indians through the experience of the Laetities, further more, it reveals the status quo of the racism in the North America. Because the North American Indians' social development is stagnant and cultural level is low, and there is a long existence of the racism in whites, so the North American Indians live in the plight for a long time. This thesis aims to analyze the plight of the North American Indians in two aspects: the objective reasons and the subjective reasons.

**Keywords:** Indians, Plight, Racism

### 1. Introduction

Thomas King is a contemporary Canadian writer, and he is famous for his description of the contemporary life of the Indians who live in the North America. And in his works, he could realistically reveal the plight of the North American Indians. And the novel *Borders* is picked out from his collection works-*One Good Story, That One*.

The novel *Borders* depicts the Indians living in the borders between the America and Canada based on the experience of the families of the Blackfoot which is also one of the ethnic of the Indian. Especially in the problem of the citizenship, Thomas King uses a long passage to tell us that although these Indians live in the North America, they can't really enter the white society of the North America. In this novel, Thomas King uses the ways of sarcasm not only to satirize the fruitless ethnic extinct policy that the North America ever carried out to the Indians, but also to reveal the essence of the cultural colonization of the white. All these make us learn clearly that in North America, the Indians are still oppressed by the racism now. And the whole passage tells that the North American Indians are in the plight, they live in the "border" of the human. And this paper mainly analyzes the two reasons causing the plight of North American Indians: one is the subjective one: stagnant social cultural development; the other is the objective one: long-existing racism in the whites.

### 2. The plight of the North American Indians in *Borders*

First, the Indians were forbidden to leave the reserve. Laetitie decides to leave the reserve to Salt Lake to find a job without getting her mother's allowance. It refers the word "reserve" just now, and at the beginning of the novel *Borders*, we also see the word "reserve" for many times, for example, "to visit my sister who had left the reverse, moved across the line"(King, 24) and "Our father was from Rocky Boy on the American side"(King, 24) and so on. What is reserve? What does the reserve stand for on earth? The so-called "reserve" is the residence that the white partition for the Indians. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the white society speed up the exploiting and developing on the North America, so the population increase rapidly and the economic also grows in a high speed. However, the Indians' original hunting or barbaric state requires a great of region to be maintained. So the North American white force almost all the indigenous tribes to move to the west of the Mississippi River region, and partition the living area for every tribe to establish the so-called reserve, and the remaining land will be open to the white residents to stay away from the tribal reserve that the regular army was hunting. Though now the limitation for the reserve has been dissolved, but from the word "reserve", we still could learn that the social status of the Indians in the North America is the rather low. They don't have the right to own the land that should ever belong to them at all. So leaving the reserve and moving across the border is like a struggle for the Indians. And this point can be clearly proved from the description of the Laetitie's mother driving toward the border. "My mother straightened the dress across her thighs, leaned against the wheel, and drove all the way to the border in first gear, slowly, as if she were trying to see through a bad storm or riding high on black ice." (King, 25) Through these

words, the complicated mood of Laetitie's mother at that time is thoroughly delineated.

Second, the Indians' identity is not recognized by the white. According to the novel, there is a duty-free shop lies between the two borders and the manager has a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other. This name tag shows that as an Indian, if you want to have a foothold in the North America, you must admit that you are American or Canadian. It means the Indians do not have their own citizenship. This point can also be fully proved from the experience of Laetitie's mother when she went across the line. At the time of Laetitie's mother going across the border, she was asked many question, one is the problem of citizenship. She said she was Blackfoot, but further more, the border guard then asked her which side did she belong to, Canadian or American. She insisted on saying she was Blackfoot, so there is such a dialogue, "'I know', said the woman, 'and I'd be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian'." (King, 22) These short sentences show that in North American white's eyes, the Indians have no their own citizenship, they can exist only subject to the America or Canada, that is to say the white does not admit the Indian as an independent ethnic. This also reflects on the other hand that the North American white society enslave the Indian on their thought, they want to assimilate them from their mind and let them forget their own race which also is one important reflection of the essence of the white's culture. There is another detail worth us to think about, that is Laetitie's brother ever asking his mother before their setting out, "'But we can stop at one of these restaurants, too, right?'" (King, 23) The word "can" indicates that the Indians do not have the same right as the white, they can not act freely, for example, the Indians can not be mailman and they can not work in the governmental electoral office and so on. Clearly, it is not easy for the Indians to live in the white society.

Third, the Indians can not really enter the white society. When Laetitie and her boyfriend breaks up, Laetitie decided to go to Salt Lake, but, after her mother came to see her, Laetitie decided to go home, this also attests to the point we just analyzed that it is not easy for an Indian to live in the white society. At the same time, it also tells that the Indians are not treated equally in the North American white society and the Indians themselves can not adapt to the life of the white society, let alone enter into it. When Laetitie's mother went back and gave the manager of the duty-free shop-Mel a hat, he was very excited, he even cried, because he thought it was an inspiration for all of them. Obviously, the Indians are deeply and heavily oppressed by racism, and they yearned for freedom and acknowledgement very much. The last paragraph of the novel says "I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, and then they rolled over a hill and disappeared." (King, 32) The novel ends with this sentence which leaves us a worthy question. What does the disappearance of the flagpoles really mean? Maybe it is all the Indians' good wish, so do all of us. We all hope that there is a day in the future will be the day for the disappearance of the racism and the free day for the Indians who get the acknowledgement from the world at last.

### **3. The reasons contributing to the plight of the North American Indians**

#### *3.1 Subjective reasons*

First, the North American Indians' social development is stagnant. When the European whites came to the North American continent, the indigenous Indians who lived here for thousands years were still in the initial stages of human society, and their society was in stagnating state. This is the basic reason that the Indians suffered huge impact by the European whites and finally they were enslaved by the whites. When Columbus arrived in the America, from North to South, numerous Indian tribes were spread throughout the continent. However, in addition to the Maya and Aztec had created a relatively complete settlement agricultural culture, the vast majority of tribes were still in the fishing and hunting Acquisition times. At that time, the Indians did not domesticate horses and invent the wheel. Moreover, they did not have the technology of smelting iron and they had no metal tool, no effective development and utilization of resources, and means of livelihood is very limited. Meanwhile, because their tools for production were very original and the products were not surplus, so they can not develop the exchange of property and the private ownership. However, those who transplanted to North America were the more developed European social elements in Britain, France, and Nether lands and other countries. These countries were gradually moving toward to a business-led capitalist era, and the capacity and system of developing and utilizing the nature were stronger than the Indians. So the great gap between the North American white and the Indians in the social development decides that the contact of the two worlds can not be peace and equality.

Second, the North American Indians' cultural level is low. According to some western scholars who put the cultural superiority roles, the cultural system that can effectively develop the energy resources in the established environment will expand on the survival environment which the backward system depend. According to some scholars of the Canadian investigation, many business executives complained that the Indians employee were not reliable, they often returned to reservation at any time, and they lacked initiation and initiative and so on, so they vowed they would not employ Indians. And for the Indians, many of them saw the land as the highest revered god, farming as silting her mother's chest and mining as peeling the flesh from her mother's bone, so they were unwilling to engage in modern production. So in the 1960s, the numbers of the Indians who left reservations to enter the city were increasing. These people enjoyed the material life and educational opportunities of the city on the one hand, on the other hand, they can

not adapt to the tense pace of life, the indifferent relationship, the overcrowded transportation and the pouring paper, and so a lot of people went back to the reservations. In those early resettlement of people in cities, and the portion of returning to the tribes was as high as 35 percent. In the novel, Laetitie went back to the reservation at last. And it also referred in the novel that before Laetitie went to Salt Lake, there is such an episode. When Laetitie found out that her brother had told her mother her thought going to Salt Lake, she got very angry and said “‘You got a big mouth’ and ‘Well, I’m going for sure, now.’” (King, 23) Her words are full of unwillingness apart from the anger. These may confuse us a little. Since it is herself says she wants to go to Salt Lake, why does she get so angry when she knows the fact of her brother telling her mother? But if we think about it carefully, we may get something from the last sentence. In fact, Laetitie does not really want to go to Salt Lake, she says so just because she broke up with her boyfriend, so the Salt Lake hurts her deeply and she can not forget it forever. As her brother said “I think the idea of Salt Lake struck in her mind.” (King, 26) So when Laetitie sees the action of her mother sticking up for their own nation, she feels very proud for her mother and herself as Blackfoot. Thereby, she let her mother and brother tell her their experience over and over again. Clearly, the delay of the culture is a big stumbling block for the Indians to catch up with modern life.

At last, in contact with white culture, the Indians have a painful experience, particularly in their spirit. The physical environment they live has taken place tremendous changes, but their spiritual values still stay in the past era. For example, some Indians build a new shelter, have running water, light, radios, refrigerators, vehicles, and other modern equipments, but they do not give up their tribal way of life and religious ceremonies. Their material life and social organizations are in sharp contrast with their spiritual life.

### 3.2 Objective reasons

As we all know, the white society have the existence of strong racism tendencies for a long time, not only for the Indians but also for many other nationalities. So, for a long time, racism is the important factor that impedes the Indians to enter into the white society. So from the objective aspect, the Indians’ participation in modern life depends on the white community overcoming racial prejudice, implement the tolerance of ethnic and cultural pluralism policies.

For a considerable long historical period, the white society has been operating racism discrimination and oppression to the Indians, its outstanding performance is the implementing of the assimilation policy. The assimilation policies include many elements: One is the religious proselytism: they spread the Christian faith in the Indians. The second is the development of the education which aims at making the Indians learn the cultural acquisition and corresponding survival skills from the white society, so they can access to the opportunity of modern life. The third is the land reform, with the goal of privatization of property, through which the Indians had settled on the farming life to become a small farmer, thus entering the mainstream of society. The fourth is the granting of citizenship, which means the Indians enjoy the legal recognition of civil rights. However, all of these assimilation efforts are the reflection of the unilateral will of the white society, and are imposed on the Indians. They aim at the eradication of the Indian from the culture, which is a kind of racial oppression and the outstanding performance of the racism. Moreover, these assimilation policies have not fundamentally help the Indians out of the primitive and backward state of survival. In the novel, when Laetitie’s mother sends her away, there is such a dialogue, “‘You can still see the mountain from here’, my mother told Laetitie in Blackfoot. ‘Lots of mountains in Salt Lake’, Laetitie told her in English.” (King, 26) The using two different languages shows that the opinion about the problem of assimilation is different. Because, before Columbus arrived in the America numerous Indian tribes were scattered throughout the continent, but every tribes had their own languages and dialects, not in the larger context of common language, so the white had ever implemented the assimilation policy for a long term in order to eliminate the cultural identity of the Indians, and the first is in the language term. Laetitie’s speaking English shows that if she wants to enter the white society, she must give up her own ethnic notion, language, and ways of life and so on. This equals to lose herself completely and this is the price for the Indians to enter the white society. Also, it is what the whites hope.

Now, along with the social progress and cultural development, the tendency of the racism of the white society tends to show restrain, and the value of the Indians is gradually understood and recognized. But it does not mean that racism has disappeared from the scene of the white society, on the contrary, hidden and open racial prejudice and discrimination still exist in various forms, which hampers the Indians to access to the pace of modern life. For example, in the novel, after staying in the border for two days because of Laetitie’s mother refusing to admit she was American or Canadian, there came a group of journalists. So they were asked many questions, an important one of them is “how it felt to be an Indian without a country.” (King, 21) That means, the racial problem of the Indian is still the central point that the entire world are paying attention to. At the same time, it also proves that the Indians are still oppressed by the racism, particularly in the North America. There are also other examples, in the 1970s, many whites were opposed to the policy of the government’s assistance of Indians in the United States, because, they thought that ran counter to the equality principle; in 1969, the Canadian government published “Indian Policy White Paper”, and advocated the abolition of the ex-gratia of indigenous tribal policy. That is in fact a kind of equality under the banner of the new racial discrimination. And, in the novel, among the questions of the border guard, he also asked that if they take any tobacco, liquor, or

firearms. This question reflects the notion the whites have. The white society in general sees the Indians as barbarians and thinks they are bloodthirsty, bellicose, lazy and incompetent. Even more, some whites also say the Indians as “animals”, saying that “they have the appearance of human, perhaps a human, but we can confirm that the situation that they now closer to the devil in their characteristics. And, for the Indians themselves, the root of the race and the national consciousness are the obstacles for them to enter the white society. The Indians from generation to generation are living in the American continent, they have an unique ethnic characteristic and cultural traditions and the feature will not disappear forever. For the Indian health, you are always the Indians, so do their descendants. The proliferation of modern life as well as common interest ensures that the Indians have the growing ethnic identity in a larger context; they increasingly feel that they are all Indians. So the formation of the national consciousness and ethnic roots has reinforced the Indians to recognize and maintain their own cultural identities. So, in a word, the racism is the main factor to hold back the communication between the Indians and the whites.

#### 4. Conclusion

Since the maiden voyage of Columbus, centuries of the racial and cultural exchanges and contacts make the North American Indians enter into a profound historical predicament. As a primitive cultural group, the Indians’ social development and cultural level are lagging behind the capitalist white society of high modern civilization. Moreover, the racism existed in the white society brings the history and destiny of the North American Indians with a dark color in the past several hundred years and hampers the North American Indians to enter the white society. So the Indians are unable to extricate itself from the impact of the white society, and unable to enter it, thus they withstood the pain and paid a heavy price. Clearly, the problem of the Indians is different from the Blacks, it is not just a racial issue, but more of an issue of culture and history. And the history of the North American Indian is a record of suffering after the meeting of the Indians and the North American white. The acceleration of the process of human history failed to give the North American Indians full time and opportunity to find the road to go out the primitive state in accordance with their own social development. Also because of a potential powerful cultural encounter, the Indians dislocated on the stairs in the evolution of the society, so they had to face a profound changeable new world with traditional social organization, primitive values and backward technology tools. Overall, because of many factors, though the Indians have been close to a modern society in the material life, in psychological and cultural aspect, they still fall short of modern culture, which has made them still stay outside of the white society as a whole ethnic groups. They only live in the “borders” of the society and are oppressed by the racism.

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