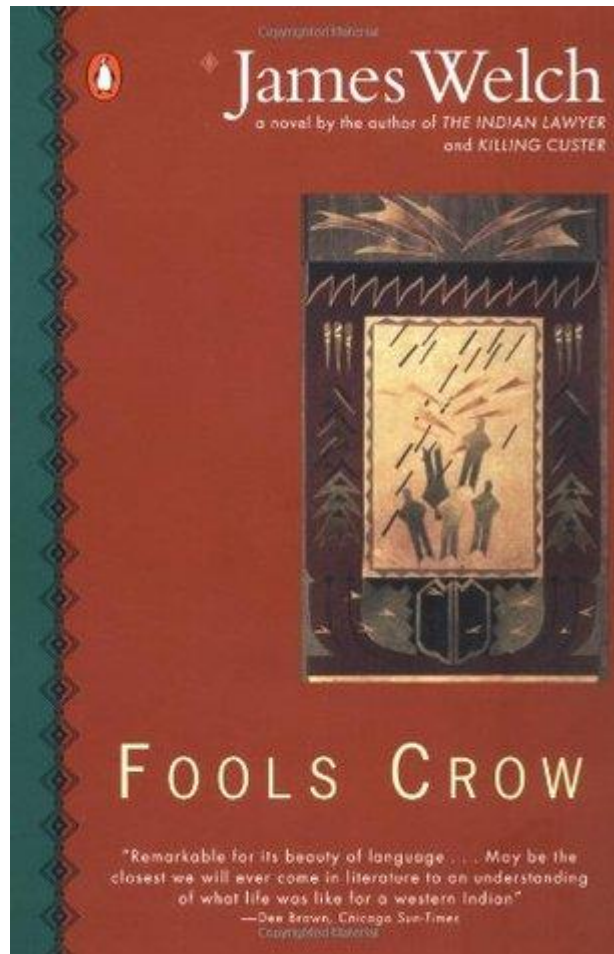


**Decolonization and Reclamation of Traditional Values  
in James Welch's *Fools Crow***

**G. Ravichandiran and Dr. R. Suresh Kumar**

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This paper proposes to study James Welch's *Fools Crow* as a novel that aims at decolonizing the Native from his sense of possession through traditional Native modes and values. The novel taken-up for study postulates decolonization at three levels: political, cultural, and social. In re-visioning, re-claiming and re-voicing history there are a number of aboriginal and

minority writers who address the silences of the past in their writing. The modes used by the Native writers are history, oral narratives, myth, and autobiography, respectively. Partly these strategies of writing by Native writers entail for a move towards decolonization. Within post-colonial theory decolonization is one move towards neo-colonialism. Since Second World War, wars of independence and struggles for decolonization by former parts of European Empires have revealed the indigenous people and their attempts to break and involve in monstrous violence: cultural, physical, socio-economic, and psychological. Thus, their struggle for freedom is unavoidably a violent process between two forces opposed to each other by their very nature.

**Keywords:** James Welch, *Fools Crow*, Decolonization, Neo-Colonialism, Native Writers, Violence, Myth

A novelist and poet of Blackfoot-Gros Ventre ancestry, James Welch is one of the most influential Native American authors of the post-1968 era. Welch has labelled himself as both an Indian writer and an Indian who writes. This two-fold vision of American Indian experience which is uncommon and yet representative, lies at the heart of his novels. All his novels are all set in or around reservation Montana, revolving around protagonists, like Welch himself, of Blackfeet lineage. Possibly this is no more than stating that, like any genuine author, Welch arrives at the universal through the particular. But the particular - the strains and stresses of Native American culture in an anxious contact with the culture that almost destroyed it has not much featured as a theme in serious American fiction. Welch has helped to change that, and he has done so without resorting to sentimentality.

Like colonization, decolonization is a social process. Quoting from Virgilio Enriques' processes of colonization - Poka Laehui in his article "Processes of Colonization" offers five different stages of decolonization from a Hawaiian context. The first stage is rediscovery and recovery. This stage of rediscovering one's history and recovering one's identity, culture, language, and so on is elemental to the movement of decolonization. The second stage is mourning - a natural offshoot of the first stage - a time when people are able to regret their victimization. The third stage is dreaming - most significant for decolonization. It is during this stage that colonial people are able to explore their own culture, experience their own dreams for their future and regard their own systems of government and social structure to encompass and express their hopes. The fourth stage is commitment, which will culminate in people fusing their voices in a clear statement of their desired direction. The action in the fifth stage is not reactive but a pro-active step taken based on consensus of the people. This susceptible action seeks survival. To rewrite themselves into existence and maintain Native solidarity the Natives in Canada and America are employing the traitor's language, English to eliminate the delusions held with respect to their people. As a kind of resistance, the Native writers are establishing a new Native World order untainted by White ideology for their real sense of self-determination and freedom. In *The Post Colonial Studies*, Ashcroft Tiffin observes: "Decolonisation is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural faces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved" (63). In a post-colonial society at the core of decolonization the recovery of geographical territory is preceded

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by delineating of cultural territory. It involves a two-way process. The first being the time of early resistance that literally means fighting against outside invasion. The second is the ideological resistance where attempts are made to rebuild a shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system. According to Africans, decolonization meant to imagine an Africa stripped of its imperial past. The process of radical decolonization suggested by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, most significant African writer, involves denying English in place of his mother tongue for reviving an ethnic or national identity. Likewise, for the Native Indians of North America decolonization is the solution to structured oppression inflicted on them by the colonizers. It is also a means to contest the land claims issue in order to attain self-sufficiency.

The Native writings of the post 1960 manifests in an acute critique of colonialism. The presentation of day-to-day life is marred by domestic violence, disintegration of the joint family, suicide, self-destructive behavior, poverty, alcoholism, and the lack of faith between generations of Native people. The political proportion has been an ingrained feature of this sort of writing and has always been ultimately political addressing their oppression and betrayal and summoning their sources for resistance. In particular, Native writers recount what they experience every day. Accordingly, the theme of cultural conflict and dilemma of Native Indian's identity is the principal phenomenon of inquiry. This sort of representation has marked Native writing as protest literature. While criticizing White colonial power politics, Native writers also assimilate traditional beliefs to cure their scars and become free. Freedom for them rests on their old Native Indian traditions and rituals that have for centuries enabled their forefathers to survive in extreme unsympathetic conditions.

As hailing from Blackfeet and Gros Ventre ethnic background, Welch makes use of his Northern Plains background in both his fiction and poetry. The essential feature of tribal sensibility pervades his writing so intensely and are sometimes so imperceptibly woven into the Westernness of his writing that they can be most comprehensively addressed in terms of his finesse in reducing the distance between the reader and the landscape infested by desolation, mental pressures and a sense of loss.

The novel, *Fools Crow*, is a departure from Welch's earlier novels. A novel possibly more intensely grounded in the landscape than his previous ones because it recreates a period in the history of the Blackfeet tribe, engrossing the reader in a tribal world in predicament. Set in the 1870's when the tribe is being plagued by epidemic disease and hostility with White culture, the novel takes the reader into a world that is charged with potent dreams and a landscape that is alive with signs and sacred beings.

In the novel Welch cultivates a sense of the land in a totally new way. For White Man's Dog, the protagonist who promptly gets the name Fools Crow, the land is peopled with topographical markers and animal-helpers, as in the following passage:

Finally, he stood at the top of the ridge, sweating and panting, and looked around. To the south and west he could see Heavy Shield Mountain, and at the base,

Jealous Woman Lake. Beyond, he could make out Old Man Dog Mountain; then south again, Rising Wolf and Feather Woman - all mountains of the Backbone, and he prayed to Old Man, Napi, who had created them, to guide him and to allow him to return to his people. He looked down the other side of the ridge and he saw the raven sitting in a snag beside a pothole lake that is covered with snow. Below the lake, in a grove of quaking leaf trees, he made out the shiny ice and open water of a spring that led away to the north. 'Oh, Raven,' he cried, 'do not lead me too far from my people, for the day approaches its mid-point.' At that, the raven glided down to the shiny ice and lit on a rock beside the bubbling dark hole of water. (46-46)

In this episode, the protagonist locates himself in the topography, naming the peaks that people the Rocky Mountain range, powerful portrayals of mythological creatures directly connected to the history and continuance of the Blackfeet as a people, and directly connected to the protagonist's undefeated journey and return to his campsite. They drive him instinctively to urge guidance and protection from the god who has created them and himself.

The protagonist takes up his place in the landscape graciously with other entities - lake, mountains, spring, and raven - no mental distancing here. The closeness of his relationship to the beings of the landscape is deepened as raven speaks to him and directs him to a task he has been asked to complete by a medicine dream. The alienation and fragmentation so distinctive of Welch's previous novels is absolutely missing in this scene. As perceived with a Native eye, the world is enlivened and unified, and the sacred language of prayer is a powerful force for harmonious action. Welch does not make an issue of the landscape in this novel; it is simply there, only rarely illustrated in much detail. In this novel, the protagonist does not think about his bond with the land, ponder the importance of landmarks, and contemplate on the actions of those who pioneered him. He knows he is part of a continuation of affiliations between people, animals, stars, mountains, seasons and rites stretching into the mythic past. These affiliations are even more apparent in the vision that marks Fools Crow as a man opted to totally understand and connect the mythical past and the apocalyptic present of his people, to keep alive the identity of the Blackfeet. In the vision, Feather Woman-wife of Morning Star, and mother of Star Boy, who brought the Blackfeet the Sun Dance ceremony - not only teaches Fools Crow in the mythic history of his tribe, but she unveils to him the future of his people, literally mapped out on buffalo skin. It is a gloomy prophecy of soldiers, disease, suffering and pain. He views a landscape barren of all game:

He searched around the Sweet Grass Hills, the Yellow River, the River-where-the-shield-floated-away, Snake Butte and Round Butte. But he did not find the black-horns. He looked along the Breaks north of the Big River and he looked to the country of the Hard Gooseneck and the White Grass Butte, the Meat Strings. But there are no black-horns. And there are no long-legs and no bighorns! There are no wags-his-tails or prairie runners. It is as if the earth had swallowed up the animals. Where once there are rivers of dark black-horns, now there are none. To see such a vast, empty prairie made Fools Crow uneasy.... The scene faded into the design, and that too faded, until there is nothing but the yellow skin. This time

Fools Crow did not attempt to call it back. He had seen the end of the black-horns and the starvations of the Pikunis. He had been brought here, to the strange woman's lodge in this strange world, to see the fate of his people. (291-292)

The skin that outlines the future of the Blackfeet, magical record of dream that it is, comes from the mythical mother of the most crucial of Blackfeet rites, the ceremony that keeps the world in balance that preserves the people. The message of the dream is gloomy - a sterile landscape, a land of starvation and death - but the story that accompanies the map vision proposes that perfect ritual behavior, which has saved the Blackfeet over centuries, still has power to save them. He balances misery with survival when Fools Crow identifies with the destiny of Feather Woman in admitting his own and his people's future.

*Fools Crow* is the most optimistic novel of Welch: far as the Blackfeet surface from a winter of epidemic and massacre they proclaim with their traditional Thunder-Pipe ritual. The buffalo have returned to the Pikuni hunting grounds "all I around, it is as it should be" (391). The real historicity of this novel endures in its portrayal of the Blackfeet lifestyle and its redefinition of Blackfeet heroism in epical terms. By re-telling and extending sacred Blackfeet myths within the context of tragic historical occurrences, Welch has provided to the children of the ancient Blackfeet a new myth and a hero whose acceptance of the future tells them be alive. Novels like *Fools Crow* mend particular ideas of cultural identity and connect identity with ideas of literary genre and critiques of notions.

The road to decolonization is one of the principal features in post-colonial world order to challenge the Western/European hegemonic power. With almost four centuries of colonial rule, for the Natives of North America it is through decolonization that they could comprehend themselves differently from their received versions. The revival of the Native voice in literature arose out of a feeling that non-Natives have ignored and misrepresented much about their history and their lives and have not understood them culturally, historically, philosophically and spiritual. Adopting the foe's language, English, the Native Indians are attempting to eliminate the delusions held with respect to their people. As a type of resistance, the Native writers are creating a new Native World order untainted by White principals for their pure sense of self-determination and freedom.

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