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Three Day Road: A Narrative of Survival in the Great War

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Abstract:

The paper proposes to analyze the theme of survival in war, taking into account Joseph Boyden's novel *Three Day Road*. *Three Day Road* is the first novel to examine the role of Canada's First Nations in the First World War. The paper discusses various kinds of survivals in a war and how the issue of survival becomes more pertinent in case of First Nations who are forced to survive on the fringes of the Canadian society.

Keywords: First Nations, World War I, Strategic Survival, Morphine Addiction, Redemption.

Three Day Road is the first novel to examine the role of Canada's First Nations in the First World War. It is also the first novel by Canadian writer Joseph Boyden. Boyden's maternal grandfather, as well as an uncle on his father's side, served as soldiers during the First World War, and Boyden takes his inspiration from this wealth of family narratives. This novel trails the journey of two young Cree men, Xavier and Elijah, who, for reasons unknown, volunteer for the First World War. Set in 1919, following the war's end, the novel takes place in the wilderness of Northern Ontario and on the battlefields of France and Belgium.

The story of the novel is narrated through the voices of two Cree Indians—Xavier, who has returned from the war badly wounded and addicted to morphine, and his aunt Niska, who comes to take him home and tries to restore him back to health. In the novel *Three Day Road*, Joseph Boyden captures the ethos of war with remarkable precision in a single sentence: "We all fight on two fronts, the one facing the enemy, the one facing what we do to the enemy" (BOYDEN 2005: 326). This novel tries to explore the psyche of the soldiers, how they have to fight two battles simultaneously; one against the enemy and the other, inside their hearts and

minds. How the characters and identities of the soldiers Elijah and Xavier, are affected and shaped by war is a significant theme of the novel. Xavier and Elijah, two close friends, respond very differently to the pressures and violence of the war. Xavier, on the one hand, hates his role on the battlefields and retreats into himself and Elijah, on the other hand, enjoys the experience and the attention he garners during the war.

“Both of them kill many men, but while Xavier feels a kind of spiritual revulsion, Elijah revels in it and tries to score more notch than any other sniper in the war.” He is entirely overcome by bloodlust and “kills with both detached coolness and frenzied violence, disobeying orders and committing atrocities against the enemy, against civilians and even against his fellow soldiers.” His addiction to morphine only quickens his moral dissipation. Their friendship is also seriously tested during these difficult times before finally reaching the breaking point.

Thousands of Indigenous individuals bravely volunteered to serve in the armed forces during the First World War and fought in distant lands. Initially, the Canadian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Robert Borden, did not anticipate such a high number of Aboriginal volunteers. Their initial intention was to discourage Indigenous enlistment and implement a policy that prevented Indians from serving overseas. This decision stemmed from concerns that the prevailing stereotypes of Natives as "savages" would lead to their inhumane treatment if taken as prisoners of war. However, this policy was revoked in late 1915 due to the overwhelming number of Indian enlistment applications and the urgent need for more troops. According to records from the Canadian War Museum, many military units embraced these Indigenous soldiers, recognizing their exceptional skills and abilities. Some even rose to the rank of officers, while others served as platoon leaders and combat instructors. The stories of their unwavering resilience in the trench warfare, as well as their remarkable sacrifices and achievements, continue to inspire the generations to come. Many Natives were used to live in isolated areas of the country, where the guns of Europe were significantly distant. Nevertheless, approximately 4,000 left their homes and families to fight an international war that raged on European battlefields. The war had very little to do with the everyday lives of the nation's first peoples, particularly of those living on Indian reserves. Yet, they showed enormous strength in fighting in foreign lands, thousands of kilometres away, for a cause that was embedded in European civilizations and unknown to them (“Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields: The Wartime Contributions of Canada's First People”). Additionally, Aboriginal Canadians faced many challenges in rallying with the rest of Canada. At the outbreak of the First World War, a

considerable number of Natives lived in remote communities and spoke neither English nor French. For these Native Indians, joining a Canadian battalion marked their first exposure to the dress, terminology and customs of British military tradition. However, Canada's Native soldiers overcame these challenges and many others, as demonstrated by the number of awards for bravery, they were awarded (“Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields: The Wartime Contributions of Canada's First People”).

For four short years our sons fought in European trenches beside their sons, our blood mingled with theirs, as for four hundred years in a different way our bloods had mixed. Four thousands of our Native brothers and now grandfathers saw the European homeland through the sights of rifles and the roar of cannon. Hundreds are buried in that soil, away from the lands of their birth. These Native warriors accounted well for themselves, and the Allied cause. ... They were courageous, intelligent and proud carriers of the shield. (AMMSA 1985: 9)

It is difficult to give exact reasons for this huge Native response in World War I. It is believed that many Native veterans volunteered for the same reasons other Canadians did, i.e. because their friends and relatives did, for patriotism, for the chance of adventure, or simply to earn a guaranteed wage. Also, the Natives anticipated that if they went to war, the Canadian government would give them more rights. First Nations lived on the margins of the Canadian society, and struggled to live by their Native ways. Perhaps, they believed that the War will pave a way for their assimilation in the pan Canadian identity, which was essential for their survival.

Survival is one of the basic instincts of all living beings. C. Vijayshree in her essay “Survival as an Ethics” talks about survival in two contexts: One in the Darwinian sense of “survival of the fittest,” and the other, in Margaret Atwood’s sense of survival, which is struggle to cope with the hostilities of nature (Vijayasree 2001:131). However, *Three Day Road* presents another scenario of survival, which is a combination of both the Darwinian as well as the Atwoodian idea. For the Natives, survival both in Darwinian and Atwoodian sense, was a challenge. They had to prove themselves fit in the changing Canadian scenario while living close to nature, braving the extreme climatic conditions of Canada was challenging. *Three Day Road* portrays this survival instinct in its protagonists, Elijah and Xavier.

Theme of Survival is also dealt with, in the novel as a ‘strategic survival.’ Elijah and Xavier were forced into trenches of France, where slaughtering and survival were synonymous:

The...day I killed my first human...I prayed to Gitchi Manitou for many hours on that day and the following day, thanking him that it was I who still breathed and not my enemy. (Boyden 2005: 224)

C. Vijayasree further talks about survival as a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. She refers to five different types of survivals, which vary from situation to situation and person to person. First, she says, is “Physical survival: a need to hang on and stay alive” (Vijayasree 2001: 132). There is an instance in the novel when Canadian soldiers were forced to go over the top, and into the German bunkers and Xavier’s only chance of survival was to fight, as treason at that time was punished by firing squad:

I turn from him to stop myself from throwing up, just as another soldier runs at me, this one much larger...he carries a war club in his hand and swings it clumsily... I jump to the side and the force of his attack carries [him] onto the ground....with both hands I drive the bayonet into his back. I can feel it bounce sharply off his spine before it finds a softer spot and sinks in. (Boyden 2005: 220)

Survival is presented as an ethos in the narrative of the novel. The Windigo myth which is constantly evoked in the novel is a strong example of this. Windigos are the people, who eat other people, and the author gives two examples of this. The first is of the woman who ate her dead husband and the second is of a man who ate his dead wife. The parallel between these two examples is that both windigos undertake this cannibalistic act because of their instinct for survival. They are both on the verge of starvation, and if they do not eat soon they will die of hunger. Out of this threat and the will for survival, they decide to eat their loved ones. Moreover, the war in general is a strong illustration of ‘strategic survival’ in Boyden’s narrative. Elijah and Xavier have killed countless number of lives but the excuse that they give to themselves is that “in war you must do what [is] necessary to survive” (Boyden 2005: 301). A further illustration of physical survival is manifested when Elijah kills one of his friends and his commander after his friend informed their commander about Elijah overdosing on morphine. Afraid of being thrown into prison or possibly even subjected to court martial, Elijah decides to survive by committing a sinister deed of killing the two.

Second, Vijayasree talks about “Cultural survival: the need to belong to a group, retain one’s identity, language, culture and religion in a new and culturally different environment” (Vijayasree 2001: 132). Elijah and Xavier, being natives, had this challenge to retain their indigenous identity in disparate conditions of war zone. Xavier chooses to practice his own culture and language and thus retains his native identity, while Elijah starts hating everything that was native. Xavier, on the other hand, hunts like a native, continues to speak Cree and

makes no conscious effort to change himself. Since Elijah turned to the white side, Xavier feels more obliged to stay as native as he can.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans in Saskatchewan, the Tribes of the Canadian Prairies had their system of friendships and animosities. Often, different Tribes would help each other fend off an attack. War was made only when necessary, as the Cree, Saulteaux, Dene and Sioux were not the blood-thirsty warriors that the first settlers made them out to be. The native people were inherently very reticent people who liked to stay by themselves and remained closer to nature. In the narrative, Xavier, in the middle of many battles, would stop all action and start staring a tree, attempting to understand its pain.

Elijah on the other hand, failed to retain his cultural identity because he has been morally corrupted by his “education” at residential school, where he was emotionally deprived, harshly disciplined, sexually abused, and was forced to believe that his language and culture were inferior. Boyden, thus, makes robust linkages between the destructive European war and the cultural genocide of the residential schools. “The Canadian government,” as Frantz Fanon puts it, “by excluding and secluding the Amerindians, created a class that has no purpose in itself” (Fanon 1963: 35). Even, Xavier’s aunt, Niska, also, had a brush with the colonial education system during her childhood. She was taken from her mother as a child and placed in a residential school where the nuns cut off the pride of her Oji-Cree identity, her long black braid. As a protest, she took a knife and cut off the remaining hair down to her scalp. The nuns horrified by her “heathen” behavior, keeps her isolation and punishes her by starving her.

Third type of survival, according to Vijayasree, is “Social survival: finding acceptance in the alien society” (Vijayasree 2001:132). This survival was not easy for Elijah and Xavier, who being natives, were excluded from the Caucasian populace. The First Nations were “othered” as they refused to give up their traditional ways. “The Indian name for us was awawatuk, and we had the unfair reputation of being thieves and murderers, all because we rejected the Wemistikoshiw” (Boyden 2005: 60). The extent of the First Nations exclusion in this story does not stop here as it also results in physical exclusion: “We headed south. A man in a uniform said to us, soon as we got on, ‘No Indians in this car.’ He pointed down the aisle. ‘You belong four cars to the back.’ We pick up our packs and walk through the river of people who ignore us.... A few other Indians sit here... The seats wood and uncomfortable” (Boyden 2005: 149). However, Elijah manages to gain social acceptance in the army by giving up his native identity.

Elijah joined the forces with grander and dangerous dreams. In the beginning, when Elijah joined the army, he quickly wanted to fit in with the other soldiers. Since he was raised in a residential school, he quickly mastered the English language and chose to use a British accent when among the other soldiers. He decided not to speak Cree when around his fellow soldiers. He dropped his Cree accent and adopted a British one, to blend better among the other soldiers. This was Elijah's first step in losing his own identity. When Elijah was asked after completing a mission, how he feels, he says: "It's in my blood" (Boyden 2005: 75). Elijah goes against the traditional Cree ways taught by Xavier and aunt Niska. Instead, he chose to embrace war and killing; but eventually it changed who he was. The war transformed Elijah into an emotionless killing machine. Initially, Elijah felt that he had to prove his killing abilities by collecting the scalps as trophies, but in the process, Elijah began to enjoy killing and the fame he received from it. Elijah feels that he must use every opportunity he has in order to impress his fellow soldiers. To Elijah, killing became instinctual. He was devoid of any guilt and emotion. Once ruminating over his killer skills, he says, "Three of them...I slit the throats of them so quickly that I surprised even myself" (Boyden 2005: 230). Though Xavier also demonstrated his leadership skills and was a dedicated and great fighter, but he was denied promotion only because he was Aboriginal. The prejudice against Native soldiers has its basis in a historical fact, for according to Brock Pitawanakwat, the Canadian Armed Forces displayed "little respect for their fighting or leadership abilities" (qtd. in Coates 2007:122-123) and thus refused such soldiers a commission. Elijah does receive a promotion, but primarily because he speaks "better English than the English" and attempts to downplay his indigenous identity.

The fourth type of survival that Vijayshree mentions is "Psychological survival: capacity to retain one's sense of well-being despite dislocation" (Boyden 2005: 132). Psychological survival is most important during a war. All battles are first won or lost in the mind. For psychological survival, Xavier and Elijah, like their fellow soldiers, resorted to drug addiction. Elijah started taking morphine to enhance his senses and slowly got addicted to it. His transformation was due to the loss of his identity, his quest for fame through war, and the use of morphine to escape reality. World War I, like the American Civil War, was a site for drug addiction. Morphine were supplied to the soldiers who were wounded as a way to let them release their pain and to turn them into emotionless killing machines. Morphine, the "wonder drug" was used as an anaesthetic in field amputations, a painkiller for the walking wounded and most commonly, as a way to stave off diarrhoea. Many wounded soldiers continued to take morphine after they healed to dull the aches that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Morphine abuse was so common during the World War I, that it has been estimated that as many as 400,000 soldiers went home addicted. "Soldier's disease" is what people call the addiction. By the end of the 19th century, there were one million morphine addicts in America. Morphine, in the novel, is used to show how addiction was used as a tool by the Empire to make soldiers do anything. Elijah views the morphine as an asset, as something making his senses work faster amidst the war. He fails to realize that this morphine has made him a lethal killing machine. He shows no remorse for his actions or kills but instead hungers for his next kill. Xavier describes Elijah while using morphine: "But when the golden liquid is in his veins! Even at night the world is bathed in a soft light...He can make himself float from his body at will and look down at the world below him" (Boyden 2005: 212). Elijah's natural talent for hunting combined with the morphine made him even more deadly. Without the morphine in his veins, Elijah becomes scared of the world which leads him to use it more frequently. Without fear and pain, war is a game to Elijah, a game he enjoys and becomes good at. While Elijah and Xavier are on a sniping mission, they mistake a woman for an enemy and Elijah shoots her. Xavier angrily questions Elijah's reaction, which killed the woman. Elijah defends himself by saying "I am trained not to hesitate in situations of danger" (Boyden 2005: 306). Elijah's response is robotic and emotionless. Eventually, Elijah starts to kill Canadian soldiers also, if they get in his way. Xavier realizes that Elijah has been completely broken by the war and needs to be stopped. Xavier is forced to kill his best friend; as he was no longer the person he used to know. By the end of the war, Xavier becomes subject to the morphine's addictive wrath and he feels that he can no longer go on when his medicine runs out and it is all that he has left for survival.

When aunt Niska meets Xavier, he was severely wounded and was addicted to morphine. In order to bring him back to health, Niska recurses to the traditional way of storytelling, which was considered to have a psychopathic effect on the listener.

The fifth type of survival is "Spiritual Survival: developing a sense of integrity, overcoming despair and alienation" (Vijayasree 2001: 132). Though Xavier undergoes spiritual revulsion at the battlefield and Elijah enjoys his killings, Xavier's native upbringing helps him keep his calm till the very end. It also prevents him from turning into a killing machine like Elijah.

As seen in the novel, war acquires and requires almost all forms of survival. War involves a "strategic survival" which includes physical, social, cultural, psychological and spiritual survival. In case of war, there is no place for human emotions and needs. The soldiers,

staying away from their home and family felt alienated and thus, lost their sense of integrity. It is often believed that “Prostitution and war often go hand-in-hand,” which was also true for the First World War. Thousands of sex workers catered to the soldiers of the Great War. Soldiers far from their families and plunged into the hell of war, found themselves needing female companionship. So prostitution flourished like anything ever since the onset of war and officially sanctioned brothels were established in the camp areas or in the surrounding towns. However, diseases also started spreading quickly— an estimated 20 to 30 percent of men contracted syphilis during the war, including both soldiers and the civilian population. Therefore, the French government took the drastic step of setting up brothels across the country known as Military Campaign Brothels (BMCs). Dr. Léon Bizard, in his memoirs of the First World War writes, “You could find anything you wanted in the brothels in the surrounding area and at the camps. It was a *mêlée*, a hard, dangerous and disgusting business. Fifty, sixty, up to a hundred men of all colours and races to see every day, all under the constant threat of air raids and bombardments.” In the novel, Lisette gives sexual favours for money to the Allied soldiers, who stay at her village. Xavier, however, does not know this and falls in love with her. Elijah, who knows that Lisette is a prostitute, instead of warning his friend, encourages Xavier to pursue that girl. Xavier falls in love truly and honestly. Eventually, when Xavier, one night, runs away from his section to see her, he is distraught to find her with another man- an officer.

The military greatly benefited from the unique abilities and experiences of Native soldiers during the war. Their skills as skilled marksmen, proficient in the art of sniping, and as adept reconnaissance scouts, proved invaluable to the Canadian army. These soldiers earned recognition for their achievements, receiving over 50 medals, including the esteemed Military Medal. Henry Louis Norwest, a renowned Canadian sniper, set a division record with 115 fatal shots. He was honoured with the Military Medal for his bravery and expertise displayed at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917. However, despite their remarkable contributions to the war effort, their aspirations for increased freedoms and voting rights went unrealized. For decades, there was almost nothing on record about the role of Canada’s First Nations in the First World War. (“Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields: The Wartime Contributions of Canada's First People”) Elijah and Xavier were excellent snipers. They were sent to France because of their extraordinary shooting skill. They won the admiration of both the Allies and the Germans. Elijah and Xavier, due to their sniping skills, became an asset for the allied forces. “Elijah has reached 356 kills as of today, and these are only the ones of which he is quite positive. Today is a new personal record for one day and he says as much to the others...They offer

congratulations... stare at the thin Indian with the sharp nose and blackened face”(Boyden 2005: 205).

Amidst the backdrop of World War, the novel presents a tale of two friends, drawn together by their shared history and heritage and pushed apart by their differing responses to the horrors of trench warfare. “The reader witnesses how war can bore into the soldier's soul latching on to some key aspect of his being and sharpening it, focusing it, until it defines him” (Thurlbeck 2005). Thus Elijah emerges as the killer, addicted to the adrenaline rush of battle and the attention his exploits bring. Xavier is the hunter who kills simply to survive; silent, efficient, but pained by the excesses of his friend's bloodlust. Though the novel deals with physical, emotional and spiritual horrors of World War I, as Boyden asserts in his interview, "There's no question this is a war novel, but just as importantly this is a novel about the healing power and love of family and how that can save you" (Wiley Interview 2007: 238). In the end Xavier also seeks redemption, not through modern technology and medicines but through the native way of storytelling. Though both of them aimed for an assimilation into the Pan-Canadian identity, Xavier survives the war because he refuses to give up his Native identity. At the end of the novel, Xavier seeks forgiveness for killing his friend, an act which was not pardonable even in the native way, “‘*Ponenimin,*’ Nephew says. ‘Forgive me...’” (Boyden 380). Forgiveness gives a future to the past—it helps us to understand and therefore prevent atrocities from happening again. According to Kristeva, through forgiveness we are able to reconcile ourselves to culture, language and the social (Oliver 2005: 89). We also need to forgive the past acts of violence and war and move on towards a better future.

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