Amnesty International's "Stolen Sisters" Report

Martyrdom and Unintended Challenges of Life Narratives

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Trigger Warnings: Discussions of MMIWG and generational trauma

Abstract:

This paper examines the efficacy and ethical implications of using life narratives in representing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis (MMIWG) in Canada, focusing specifically on Amnesty International's 2004 "Stolen Sisters" report. Through a critical analysis informed by Tuck and Yang's theoretical framework on refusal in research and decolonial pedagogy, this study argues that while third-person life narratives can be effective tools for raising awareness, they risk perpetuating harm through unintentional political martyrdom. The paper demonstrates how these narratives, though well-intentioned, can facilitate settler moves to innocence through conscientization, where empathy becomes a substitute for actionable change. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how such representations can lead to revictimization and reduction of Indigenous women to mere symbols of a cause, ultimately undermining genuine decolonial efforts. The research concludes that alternative approaches, particularly first-person narratives and Indigenous kinship-based storytelling methods, may offer more ethical and effective means of representation while avoiding the pitfalls of martyrdom and exploitation. This study contributes to broader discussions about ethical representation in Indigenous studies and advocates for a shift toward more community-centered and consent-based narrative practices.

Illustration by Namya Kohli

Introduction

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) crisis in Canada refers to the human rights crisis and movement that centres the disproportionate racist and sexist acts of violence towards Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA folk. It is a relatively new social and political focus, despite the long history of this violence. The movement manifests in projects like the National Inquiry into MMIWG, different literatures, research initiatives, and reports such as the 2004 Amnesty International Report "Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada." This report argues for a "comprehensive national response to the crisis" (Hargreaves 72) by presenting qualitative and quantitative research, as well as calls to action. Notably, the fourth section of the report uses life narratives to shed light on nine Indigenous women who are victims of disappearance or murder. Activism initiatives use life narratives as a means to educate the public, raise awareness, and encourage

remembrance (Hargreaves 66). Life stories can also highlight alternative and marginalized histories (Hargreaves 73) and "serve as vehicles of social and political transformation" (Lénárt-Cheng & Walker 141). The first story that the report shares is Helen Betty Osborne's, a Cree woman who was murdered in 1971 in The Pas, Manitoba at the age of 19 by four white men. Since her murder, Osborne has become a martyr-like figurehead for violence against Indigenous women. Her symbolism has brought an important amount of attention to the crisis over the years, and she continues to be an instrument for education. However, the presumed transparent relation between telling MMIWG stories like Osborne's and a hopeful outcome of change may present certain risks (Hargreaves 66). In this essay, I argue that although third-person life narratives, such as those used in the Stolen Sisters report, may be a useful tool for representation and activism in the MMIWG crisis, they may also pose the challenge of false or unintentional political martyrdom, which in turn may cause more harm than expected.

What is Martyrdom in the MMIWG Context?

Traditionally, martyrdom has a religious background referring to the voluntary suffering, persecution, or death as adherence to a faithful cause. It has a focus on intentionality and self-infliction. The individual's unnatural or violent death, consecrated and made sacred in history, then transmitted to following generations is a defining process of martyrdom (Murphy 269). Rooted in early Christian tradition (Murphy 466), discourse of martyrdom has evolved to acknowledge a contemporary and political shift as evident in cases like George Floyd's death in 2020, a man that became a martyr at the hands of social movements and community as opposed to self-driven intention. Contemporary martyrdom differs from traditional definitions in the sense that it is not always born from intention or a willing death for a cause. In the representations of the MMIWG crisis, women like Helen Betty Osborne take on this contemporary, political, and unintentional shape of martyrdom; they were inducted into martyrdom on account of their consecration and memorialization, less so in regard to intentional suffering. While martyrdom serves as a tool for community solidarity and collective memory (Murphy 466), it is also problematic in the sense that many of these individuals are first victims, not martyrs. In activism efforts like the Stolen Sisters report, the use of life narratives can give rise to martyr-like characteristics in women victims by putting their experiences on a pedestal and painting them as a symbol of a cause. This brings in the question of how victims should be remembered and if they should be used as a tool for activism. Is it a meaningful method to honour the victims and the cause? Or does it inflict further damage?

Life Narratives, Martyrdom, and their Consequences

The martyrdom generated through the life narratives in the Stolen Sisters report may encourage a settler move to innocence, understood through Tuck and Yang's critical lens of damage-centered research (Tuck and Wayne, "Unbecoming Claims" 811), as well as the revictimization and reduction of the women in the report. Damage-centered research focuses on people's pain as objects for observation, instead of the spaces or conditions that surround that pain. This gaze refers to the "logics of pain" (Tuck and Wayne, "R-words" 231) that overshadow structures around tragic events and uphold racial hierarchies. Damage-centered research confines what is otherwise a complex and dynamic history and reality of a person or community (Tuck and Wayne, "R-Words" 231), by only considering trauma, tragedy, and loss. Among the consequences of revictimization and reduction of women through damage-centered research is the underlying irony that by being inducted into martyrdom as symbols for a cause, action-driven decolonization falls to the side when in reality, "decolonization is not a metaphor".

Essentially, settler moves to innocence entails a set of evasions that attempt to "reconcile settler guilt and complicity" (Tuck and Wayne, "Not a Metaphor" 1). It refers to the growing casual and surface level approach to decolonization, and can be exhibited by

settler nativism, fantasizing adoption, colonial equivocation, conscientization, at risk-ing or asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples, and re-occupation and urban homesteading (Tuck and Wayne, "Not a Metaphor" 4). A settler move to innocence through damage-centered research is in part orchestrated by fetishizing life stories and commodified pain narratives, especially regarding how they place empathy as a substitute for action. Tuck and Yang refer to this as "conscientization". Subscribing to the idea that "critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism" (Tuck and Wayne, "Not a Metaphor" 19) allows for a critique of the life narratives presented in the report. Although such stories build empathy that may be subsequently mobilized for social change, they might restrict activism by keeping the public in a position where they assume that they are sufficiently enlightened. In other words, because they are no longer ignorant to these stories and they have done the mental work of being exposed to victims' experiences, people may presume that they are on the "good side" of the cause and do not need to push much further. In stories like Pamela Jean George's, the public can read about two men who "beat her severely and left her lying face down in the mud" (Amnesty International 26) and then move on with their days because they are now enlightened to the crisis. Martyrdom plays an important role in this given that it brings in a somewhat parasocial effect that makes information more appealing, compared to being shown an exhaustive list of facts or dense literature. If decolonization is not a metaphor, then why are these women being used as metaphors for the MMIWG crisis? In this case, settler guilt is replaced by a "freed mind" which can be mistaken for decolonization efforts. Likewise, poverty porn and complacent voyeurism of traumatic stories contributes to the irony of conscientization. Ultimately, the lack of responsibility to the cause and tendency towards performative activism is reinforced by the martyrdom created by life narratives, where empathy without action only further contributes to the critique that decolonization has become metaphorical.

The damage caused by this settler move to innocence is further engineered by the pedagogic purpose of the victims' martyr-inducing life narratives. While education regarding settler colonialism is important to decolonization, the way in which it is carried out is precarious because it can easily revictimize individuals and reduce their identities. This revictimization is facilitated by how "easy" it is to do research on people in pain (Tuck and Wayne, "R-words" 234), and in the case of the Stolen Sisters Report, it is even easier to do research on the pain of people who are no longer living because it feels more objective or entails less emotional responsibility. Revictimization is also invasive in the way that it pries into victims' lives and their communities by mining for trauma to share (Tuck and Wayne, "Unbecoming Claims" 813), which is exploitative regardless of it being used in activism. The irony here is that in aiming to tell marginalized stories to decolonize and move society forward, the subjects or the victims carry the brunt of it; they must continue to face their trauma and undergo emotional labour rather than benefit from tangible actions of change. In regard to reduction, victims are essentially treated as objects instead of subjects. In academia, they are misrepresented as "anthropological objects" (Tuck and Wayne, "R-words" 241) of study for social science, and in public life they are used as tools for activism. This instrumentalization is a significant part of martyrdom because the whole point of such characterization is to be an image or token. It is devaluing if these women are only deemed as important or useful when they are deceased and ironically, victims seem to lose some of their voice and agency in efforts to represent MMIWG. If they never chose to be martyrs, who are activists to turn them into one? It seems cheap to use abused women as potential instruments of change when there are less exploitative and less spectacularized forms of storytelling (Hargreaves 87) as outlined in the following section. If decolonization is not a metaphor, then the use of MMIWG victims as martyrs needs to be reconsidered to avoid harm in the form of settler moves to innocence, revictimization, and reduction.

Looking Forward

Among other issues generated by political martyrdom in the context of the MMIWG crisis are confirmation bias and the propagation of stereotypes regarding Indigenous women, as well as the exploitation of victims' communities. These would be relevant subjects for future study and may be guided by Tuck and Yang's work regarding refusal in research. Furthermore, it would be positively impactful to shift further towards first-person representations, such as memoirs, instead of relying on third-person life narratives to move social movements and activism forward. An example of such work is MMIWG survivor Brandi Morin's memoir *Our Voice of Fire: A Memoir of a Warrior Rising*. Some scholarly work encourages sharing autobiographical narratives because first-person, willing, and enthusiastic story sharing is more impactful and less damaging than third-person life stories about victims (Lénárt-Cheng & Walker 151). By relying on a form of expression where the subject of an experience chooses to tell their story on their own volition, criteria, and boundaries, the public benefits from the same empathy and pedagogy but escapes some of the harmful effects that come with the implied martyrdom. Overall, the life narratives used in Amnesty International's report succeed at sensitizing the public to the MMIWG crisis but by turning victims into martyrs, they undermine actionable decolonization efforts and pose greater harm to victims and their communities.

Author Positionality Statement

I am a second-generation South African Indian settler born on Treaty 6 territory, the lands of the Nehiyaw, Denesuliné, Nakota Sioux, Anishinaabe, and Niitsitapi peoples, otherwise known as Edmonton. My father's family immigrated to Yellowknife, Treaty 11 Chief Drygeese territory, and my mother's family to Saskatoon on Treaty 6. Upon settling, our people's history of indentured labour and enduring values of ambition, curiosity, and humanity to others married local ideals of collectivism and generational well-being, particularly of Denendeh communities. I acknowledge the systems and structures which afford me unearned privilege on Treaty 6 and Turtle Island, and I intend to contribute to decolonizing literature through the research presented in this paper.

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