

Canadian Indigenous Writings and Tomson Highway: A New Form of Resistance

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Abstract: From 1960's, indigenous activism was felt at all levels by Canadian society for the recognition of indigenous distinct rights as a means to define indigenous identity. One such movement was indigenous literary writings which started in 1960's to document the processes of colonization and narrate the stories of marginalization, dispossession, displacement, pain and hurt experienced by indigenous peoples. Written from indigenous point of view, it also provides an insight into indigenous values, traditions, concerns and needs. For example, *Tomson Highway*, the subject of this study, chronicles the damages done to indigenous peoples with the establishment of residential schools in Canada. Hence, the present study seeks to examine, first- indigenous literature as a new form of resistance and second- *Tomson Highway's* contributions whose works have become a vital part of Canadian literary canon in the recent years.

Keywords- Resistance, Identity

Introduction

For many decades, White-European's rules and regulations led to colonization of indigenous peoples in Canada. It was also believed that, in nineteenth century, through various assimilationist policies, indigenous race would either disappear, die out, or become assimilated meaning that they would give up their traditional mode of lifestyle and live and act like white Europeans. However, instead of disappearing or assimilating, these indigenous peoples survived and from 1970's indigenous protest movements picked up pace and agility attempting to 'construct' an identity for themselves. One such protest movement was indigenous literary writings in Canada which emerged out of experience of colonization and emphasized their differences from their nation-states. Such writing back was an attempt to tell the history from indigenous point of view means telling their histories which involved recovering their own stories of the past and asserting their epistemological foundations as well as documenting processes of colonization from the perspectives of those who experienced it.

Through their writings, indigenous writers, "represent richly diverse tribal backgrounds and experiences. This diversity is manifested in many ways, through the multitude of cultures, languages, histories, land bases, treaties, governments, populations and other facets of tribal life". Thus, these indigenous writers "work

to recover land, language, knowledge, sovereignty, voice and indeed, entire peoples and nations¹. Commenting on contemporary indigenous writers, Louise Erdrich notes that, "in the light of enormous loss, they [indigenous writers] must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of culture left in the wake of catastrophe"².

This urge of writing back and telling the story from indigenous point of view which led to rise of Canadian indigenous literature has its origin in the oral tradition in the form of storytelling which includes myths, legends, folklore, traditional stories etc, transmitted from generation to generation verbally. These oral traditions which are didactic in nature, helped to communicate indigenous histories, beliefs, religious and cultural practices.

No doubt, residential schools had an adverse impact on indigenous peoples and their cultures, it is primarily because of English language taught at these residential schools, gave an opportunity to indigenous peoples to write in English and there are many indigenous peoples who support residential school have stated that it gave the indigenous "a better chance of integrating into mainstream society" which "they could not get from their own people in the traditional villages"³. Interestingly, *Tomson Highway*, the indigenous writer, the subject of this work, seems supportive of residential school education. In an

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interview [quoting his exact words], he stated, “residential schools experiences were fantastic. So much that, is reported about residential school....is screwed. It is not quite right. They don't have the whole picture. Lot of us have positive experiences in residential school. People heard about and discuss about me being gay is because of the fact that I had horrible tragic life....when the matter of the fact is that I have a life when most of street people in this country [Canada] can only dream about. I have a spectacular life”⁴. Thus, a residential school survivor himself, Tomson Highway, a person of Cree identity, turned out to be a famous pianist, dramatist, novelist and theatre artist. Like him, many other indigenous children who attended residential school, grew up to become teachers, novelists, musicians, politicians and lawyers. It is also because of residential school education that these first generation indigenous peoples make use of English to express the traumatized state of indigenous life, found in Canada today.

History

Desirous of being heard, indigenous peoples of Canada started writing from the middle of the 19th century. Ojibway writer George Copway⁵ was the first Canadian First Nation writer to publish a book in English in 1847 with his autobiography, *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh*. After its success, it was reprinted six times and republished in London in 1850 under the title, *Recollections of a Fresh life*. Copway also wrote the first volume of indigenous history titled *The Traditional History and Characteristics Sketches of the Ojibwa Nation*. Similarly, Pauline Johnson, an indigenous woman wrote *The White Wampum* in 1895 which was acclaimed⁶. These 19th century writers, “attest[ed] to the innate rationality, intelligence and humanity of Native peoples”⁷.

After six decades, indigenous writers reappeared on the Canadian literary scene. Before 1960's indigenous literary writings were sparse. The politics of 1960's and 1970's, leading to the publication of *White Paper* in 1969 by the Trudeau government, led to the growth of indigenous literature in Canada. This literature

came to be known as 'protest' literature and included Howard Adams' *The Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native point of view* (1975), Harold Cardinal's *The Rebirth of Canada's Indians* (1977), autobiography of Maria Campbell, *Half-Breed* (1973) and Duke Redbird's *We are Métis*⁸ (Heiss 2003). “The beginning of Aboriginal writings in the 1960 was dominated by political concerns, most importantly by the struggle for Aboriginal rights and the attempt to reclaim an Aboriginal identity”⁹. It aimed at conveying a political message rather than contributing to the literary subtlety. They were confrontational in nature which led to an outburst in creative writing and gained momentum through the “emergence of a new generation of college and university trained Aboriginal authors and the sudden interest of the publishing industry in Aboriginal writing”. As a result 1970's saw the publication of a wide range of literary forms such as traditional and personal narratives, autobiographies, poetry, drama, children's literature and prose fiction. Among the earliest publications are of George Clutesi's works *Sons of Raven, Son of Deer* (1967) and *Potlatch* (1969). These works have traditional narratives and tales which continued over the following decades¹⁰. All these works and publications through the tradition of oral storytelling in written form, aimed to preserve the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples in Canada. As a protest literature, indigenous authors and writers had polemical style, and were referred to as “Indian lament” as they deplored the consequences of colonial oppression on indigenous cultures and identities, and “voice the pain over loss and the outrage at the injustices and racism experienced at the hands of the dominant society”¹¹. Further, being political in nature, these works emphasized the need for federal government to recognize, acknowledge and redress the legacies of past injustices done on indigenous peoples¹².

Thus, Indigenous literature meant “Native people telling their own stories, in their own ways, unfettered by criteria from another time and space”. It reveals “the depth and status of the culture, expresses Native wisdom and points of

view familiar to other Natives, reveals the beauty of the Native world, beauty rarely recognized by non-Native writers. Native literature records oral narratives, values, beliefs, traditions, humour, and figure of speech. It emphasizes communal living and portrays a mingling and sharing...For Native readers, the literature is a source of strength and personal development”¹³.

In their process of rebuilding their crumbling edifices in more ways than one, indigenous literature in Canada has become relatively young and new. This has resulted in indigenous writers voicing and putting on record their quest for self-determination, representation and identity which has been called “postcolonial writings” by Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffith in their influential work *Empire Writes Back*. They argue: “What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the empire centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post colonial” (Ashcroft et al. 2003).

Therefore, indigenous writings are considered postcolonial with their “cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to present day”¹⁴. Here, “the *post* rather articulates a desire, a utopia, a work-in-progress, the struggle for a truly postcolonial, de-colonized world”¹⁵.

Indigenous writings were also recognized because of indigenous and Metis publishing houses such as Theytus Book, Pemmican Publications Inc., Kegeonce Press, Gabriel Dumont Institute Press. Canadian Publishers like Fifth House, Talonbooks, University of Manitoba Press, and University of British Columbia Press were also actively promoting such publication. International publishing houses such as Oxford University Press have also shown interest in publishing Native North American writings¹⁶.

Indigenous Theatre

One of the most important developments in indigenous literature is the emergence of indigenous drama in Canada. It was with the popularity of Tomson Highway works *The Rez Sisters* (1988) that indigenous theatre gained prominence. The play was certainly not the first by a Canadian indigenous playwright but it is arguably the best which won Dora Mavor Moore Award¹⁷ for the best new play of 1988. It was also a runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers Award¹⁸ and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award in drama¹⁹. Highway followed the *The Rez Sisters* with *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in 1989.

Tomson Highway's contribution to theatre is immense. In true sense he has given voice to indigenous peoples of Canada through his insightful plays. His “ambition in life is to make “the rez”[reserves] cool, to show and celebrate what funky folk Canada's Indian people really are”²⁰. He was born on 6 December 1951, in a tent, on the Brocket Reserve in northern Manitoba. He is the eleventh of twelve children, born to legendary caribou hunter and world championship dogsled racer, Joe Highway and mother Pelagie Highway. At the age of six, he was sent to a Roman Catholic boarding school at the Guy Hill Indian Residential School in The Pas, Manitoba. He was at the boarding school until age 15 where he learned to play piano. Later, he was sent to Churchill High school in Winnipeg. After high school, Tomson Highway, went to University of Manitoba to study music (piano) for two years. He also went to London to study music from University of Western Ontario from where he graduated with a Bachelor of Music Honors in May 1975. He also did Bachelor of Arts in English from the same University²¹. After his return to Canada, he worked with James Reaney, one of Canada's famous playwrights. For the next few years, he engaged himself in connecting himself to indigenous peoples at an indigenous cultural centre and worked with indigenous organizations. This gave him an opportunity to familiarize himself with indigenous lives on reserves. This formed the basis of his plays. He wrote his first play *The Rez*

Sisters in 1988 which established his reputation on Canadian indigenous theatre circuit²².

Like *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, was also received well by the audiences and it became the “first play in the history of Canadian theatre ever to receive a full production and extended run at Toronto's legendary Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1991”. It also won Dora Mavor Moore and Floyd S. Chalmers Awards. After this, Highway's plays are being studied at Universities and produced in theatres. Later he wrote many plays like *The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool*, *Aria*, *The incredible adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito*, *New Song*, *New Dance*, *The Trickster Tale*, *Rose*, *Annie and the Old one*, *A Rediculous Spectacle in one act* and many more. His tragic-comic allegory *Ernestine Shuswap Gets her Trout*, had its world premiere at the Western Theatre in Kamloops in British Columbia. Tomson Highway was also artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto, from 1986-1992. Native Earth Performing Arts is Canada's most celebrated and accomplished indigenous theatre. In 1998, Highway published his first novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* which was again nominated for several awards and introduced him to the larger audience. Along with all these, he has also published three children books namely *Caribou Song* (2001), *Dragon Fly Kites* (2002) and *Fox on the Ice* (2003)²³.

Thus, Tomson Highway is Canada's celebrated and important figure. His success is attributed to his “skilful fusion of Native mythology and Western (or mainstream) dramatic structures”. His works serve two purposes: First, “they are intended to raise the consciousness of Native peoples to their own forgotten culture, primarily through the figure of the Ojibway/Cree trickster Nanabush/Weesageechak”. Second, it serves to “educate non-Native audiences about the reality—both the pains and the pleasures—of reservation life, employing classical allusions and dramatic frameworks reminiscent of Shakespearean comedy that would be familiar to a sophisticated Native and non-Native audience”²⁴.

Qwo-Li Driskill explains Highway's plays thus: “If Colonization is a kinesthetic wounding, then decolonization is a kinesthetic healing. We carry the wounds of the past in our bodies, and it is through our bodies that we find ways to mend them and continue our lifeways. We must heal historical trauma in order to help our nations and homelands. It is in our bodies—and as bodies—that we tell our stories and understand what it means to be Native people enacting decolonization and continuance”²⁵. Thus, indigenous theatre is a logical extension of the storytelling technique and means to can carry their oral traditions and imagine new stories for a decolonized future²⁶. It is a form of knowing through actions. Diana Taylor posits, “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices. Performance...functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis”²⁷.

As has been mentioned earlier, it was not until 1970's that indigenous drama was given recognition in Canada. The indigenous had no tradition of written drama. The first in Canada can perhaps be traced back to Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* in 1880. Ever since there have been no developments in indigenous drama until 1970's. This period saw the flowering of many indigenous plays such as Nora Benedict's one act play, *The Dress* (1970), Duke Redbird's *Wasawkachak* (1974), George Kenny's *October Stranger* (1977), Minnie Aodla Freeman's *Survival in the South* (1980), Assiniboine-Dakota Playwright William S. Yellow Robe's *The Independence of Eddie Rose* (1986). This also led to the formation of numerous indigenous performing groups in the 1980's for example Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto, Spirit Song in Vancouver and De-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre on Manitoulin Island and many more²⁸.

Along with Highway, there are other indigenous playwrights who are equally well acclaimed. According to Agnes Grant, “although Tomson Highway (Cree) is likely the most well known Canadian Aboriginal playwright today, there are many others. Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), Margo Kane (Saulteaux, Cree, Blackfoot and

French), Monique Mojica (Metis) and Daniel David Moses (Ojibway) have all made outstanding contributions to the field of drama". Further, he writes that, "works of authors like Jordan Wheeler, Maria Campbell and Thomas King have been adapted for film and television and many vibrant theatre companies are exploring both creative drama and social issues using different venues"²⁹. It is interesting to note that each playwright is unique, but there are many similarities among them. It is set apart from mainstream Canadian experiences in drama. The characters are indigenous with their own distinctive experiences. Therefore, there are issues of race, class, colonialism, discrimination, oppression, loss of culture and redefinition of culture that are repeatedly brought out in the plays. The only differences are how these stories evolve or are conveyed in spite of these common themes. Human feelings of humour, pathos, rage, and grief are present in the dramas, but love, joy, optimism, pride, ritual and celebration are also found. "This," the playwrights say, "is what it is to be an Aboriginal person in Canada"³⁰.

Today, indigenous drama is growing in Canada and their plays are, "inspired by contemporary social problems facing native Canadians: alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, wife battering, family violence, the racism of the justice system, loneliness, rejection, youth awareness, as well as modern-day environmental issues. The politics of the streets, of the sub-culture, is a recurring theme"³¹. Penny Petrone, further explains that, the reason for the earlier neglect of indigenous literature is due to White-European imperialism, their antipathy attitude towards indigenous oral traditions and finally purist attitude of White-European literary critics towards indigenous literature which were thought to be invaluable³². Adding to it, Agnes Grant states that, "much of this Aboriginal artistry was either ignored as colonizers attempted to portray the inhabitant of this as ignorant savages, or it was suppressed by missionaries and eventually forbidden by laws. It is only in recent times that Canadians generally have become aware of the rich heritage that once existed. Contemporary Aboriginal artists are picking up the strands of this rich heritage, often producing materials which interpret the ancient

beliefs and values, albeit in a foreign language and through foreign art forms". According to Tomson Highway, "Aboriginal artists have not only a unique role, but an obligation to reconstruct this suppressed heritage"³³.

Now, indigenous literature is being acclaimed both at national and international arenas. "Canada's Native writers are creating a body of new writing that has an amazing versatility, vitality, and commitment. They are questioning why they should be expected to conform to the constraints of Eurocentric critical theories; they are using the language of 'the enemy' to break from a colonized past, bending and stretching mainstream rules of genre, reinventing new ones, and redefining traditional notions of orality and literacy to enrich and extend Canada's literature"³⁴.

A major contribution by Tomson Highway to the indigenous theatre in Canada is the establishment of a 'Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster' in Toronto along with Daniel David Moses and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in 1987. The reason for establishing such a Committee according to Margery Fee, "was to get attention for their work and that of other indigenous artists". Through the traditional figure, "Trickster" borrowed from indigenous mythology, indigenous writers are combating stereotypes which often freeze indigenous culture in a traditional past³⁵.

Through the trickster figure, indigenous artists have infused humor in their works as a means to deal with their [indigenous] sufferings and pain. Drama is considered a better genre for "the portrayal of Aboriginal mythology than any other genre....Native people cannot be portrayed accurately without humour and laughter. Native humour is hearty and spontaneous and is often directed at misfortune turned into a joke. It is often used to deal with the pain that inevitably accompanies poverty and marginalization"³⁶ (Grant 1995). Here, Tomson Highway's works can be taken as prime example. Therefore, it can be said that "Canada's native writers have come out with their literary output that show extreme vitality and commitment. They do not want their writing to be evaluated on Eurocentric critical

models. These writers have enriched the body of Canadian literature by delving deep into their rich culture and tradition and thereby contributed new perspectives and insights into Canadian literature”³⁷.

In conclusion, it can be said that indigenous literary writings in Canada especially the works of Tomson Highway, have marked a turning point in the history of Canadian theatre and established him as one of the foremost contemporary playwrights in Canada. His autobiographical novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, introduced him to an even larger Canadian audience.

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