

Decolonization and Foregrounding of Indigenous Culture and Tradition: Selected Indo-Canadian Plays

Neelu Tiwari

“Dramatists have a right to look at history and interpret in the way they see it,” said Oliver Stone.

We all know and understand that life is a harmonious blend of social, cultural, economic and political structures. Dysfunctioning of any of these hampers the development of society and individual as a whole.

Indigenous societies have suffered a lot as a result of colonialism. Therefore, the foremost task of all the indigenous communities is to keep enlightened themselves with an assertion of national and individual identity in the post-colonial world. Decolonization is a process of returning to one's roots and revival of local culture and tradition. In, almost, all the post-colonial societies the onus of getting back to one's roots has successfully been carried out by the indigenous writers. Their writings serve as a bridge between indigenous traditions and the English-speaking world, allowing for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. These indigenous writers not only challenge and subvert dominant western paradigms of literature but also provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, acknowledged, and respected.

Indigenous writers serve as advocates for cultural preservation and decolonization. Their writings, in fact, are a tool for resistance, resilience, and healing within indigenous communities. They have emerged as powerful story tellers and cultural ambassadors to challenge colonial narratives and explore their own complexities of indigenous identities and promote cultural revitalization and decolonization.

History says, with experience, that colonization of any nation does not restrict itself to the political boundaries only rather it encroaches its cultural and social value system too. This results into unprecedented change in not only social and cultural ethos but also the traditional arts and crafts of the colonized. In all the post-colonial societies, the process of decolonization demands the return to roots and revival of the local culture and tradition.

Canada and India resemble each other in this regard. Both share the same post-colonial status along with their own distinct cultures and colonial histories. Distinct cultural societies, with a strong presence of indigenous traditions, culture and ethos, which was once subjugated by the dominant alien culture, make them feel like one. Time and again both the nations have put in their endeavours to retrieve the indigenous treasure of culture and traditions.

The post-colonial societies of both Canada and India, however, faced another onslaught of cultural invasion in the form of neo-colonization by the American superpower. India, though geographically situated at a greater distance from America, is no less affected on account of the Globalization process via satellite transmission. Eugene Benson quotes:

. . . ninety six per cent of television drama in Canada is foreign, largely American; ninety seven per cent of film is foreign, largely American; ninety per cent of record and tapes sales is foreign, largely American; seventy per cent of book and magazines sales is foreign, largely American. (Benson 59)

The above quote aptly fits in not only for Canada but for every nation of the world facing the McDonaldization or KFC or V-Martization of their culture. Therefore, a voice is needed for breaking the barriers and amplifying the indigenous voices and paving the way for future generation. In Canada, the native Canadian writers contributed, through Cultural and Literary movements, to free themselves of the Imperialist ideology and thus, retain their national identity

As the oral transmission of the cultural and traditional history is almost on the verge of extinction so the attempt of the native writers to bring

forth their indigenous identity to centre and preserve their culture and tradition is commendable.

Tomson Highway the Cree writer, is the prominent Canadian dramatist, in this regard, who shared aboriginal experiences in the mainstream Canadian stage with the performance of the play *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

The Rez Sisters launched Highway's career as a notable and influential playwright in Canada, and earned him a Dora Mavor Moore Award in 1987. The play was initially performed only in indigenous communities, but then moved to major stages across the country.

The Rez Sisters tells the story of seven Aboriginal women at the fictional Wasaychigan Hill Indian reserve. The word 'Rez' comes from 'Reserve'. The plot of the play revolves around the Bingo game – "The Biggest Bingo in the World". The ultimate goal of the seven sisters, in the play, is to try hard to gather sufficient money to participate in this game and they dream of transforming their lives and hardships by winning this game. Along with the seven indigenous characters was another male character- the Nanabush who is part of the Aboriginal mythology. Highway once said, "We grew up with myths. They're the core of our identity as people" (172).

The Legend of Nanabush Nanabush is a trickster figure in Native American mythology, as central as Christ is in Christian stories. Nanabush goes by many names and can assume any guise he chooses. In *The Rez Sisters*, he appears as both a seagull – a spiritual guide who observes and enters into the action of this life — and a nighthawk – a warning of death and a guide to the spirit world. He is the bridge between this world and the next, a messenger from the Great Spirit, and a teacher of the nature and meaning of existence. According to the playwright, "some say that Nanabush left this continent when the White Man came. We believe he is still here among us – albeit a little worse for wear – having assumed other guises. Without him – and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever."

Highway includes a note on Nanabush in the sequel to this play, *Dry Lips*, which follows seven men from the same reserve. Nanabush, he says, is “. . . as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. . . . Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence . . .”(12).

Highway sees Nanabush as one of his artistic goals as re-acquainting Native people with their own mythologies, which were “almost destroyed or . . . obliterated by the onslaught of missionaries.”

The play ends in a grim reality in which the women’s journey reaches. The narrative blends the unfiltered vision of life with tinges of humour in harmony with Aboriginal spirituality. The language of the play also includes portions of Cree and Ojibway dialects. First Nation Terms used in the Play:

Wasaychigan (Ojibway): window Nee (Cree): Oh, you Awas (Cree): Go away Astam (Cree): Come Anishinaabe (Ojibway): Native people Ojibway song lyrics: “Heaven, heaven, heaven, I’m going there.”(<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/rez-sisters>)

The Rez Sisters thus asks many of its implied readers to deal with an unfamiliar context (the reserve), unfamiliar languages (Cree and Ojibway), unfamiliar mythologies (Nanabush), and the lives and concerns of people who they might not otherwise encounter on the Canadian stage. Through the story of these indigenous characters Highway problematises the indigenous identity, thus offering a critique of the native life and culture. He affirms the Red Indian values and mythology in his plays .

The so called ‘Cultural Renaissance’ left its mark on post-colonial Indian Literary scene also. Among the various factors, responsible for the unsatisfying growth of Indian English Drama, one of them, as suggested by Iyengar, is the lack of a living theatre and enthusiastic audience. Another constraint is the English language as English is not the mother tongue of India which is a great barriers before the actors and the audience. Supriya Shukla finds: “the inherent inadequacy of the English

language to express temperaments, sensibilities, and realities which are essentially Indians” (9).

However, Indian drama has flourished in regional languages and Indian English Drama, in a translation of it, to a great extent. But with the advent of talking films in 1930, this genre faced its downfall. Films provide more refined entertainment at the cheaper rates. The performances of Indian English Drama have also been affected by regional drama. As Savita Goel says,

During 1960 s, dramatists pondered over a significant question, i.e. how to draw upon the various strands in the traditional theatre—some of which had lost contact with urban civilization during the colonial era and many of which seemed deeply rooted in religious sensibility—so as to revitalize and enrich their own work. (204)

As opposed to Canada, Indian mythology is based on written textual tradition rather than oral. Thus, it survived through time and colonial influences. Despite all this, a lot of Indian folk tales and traditions, that are part of the rich cultural ethos of the country, need to be preserved from extinction. Modern Indian Dramatists, definitely, have taken the cause in their hands.

Girish Karnad is one such contemporary dramatist who was well aware of the challenges which Indian playwrights had to face after independence. He belongs to the post-colonial breed of writers and his plays display a rich sensibility of Indian tradition, myths, folk-lore and legends. His genius lies in the fact that he draws a parallel between antiquity and contemporariness. Tutun Mukherjee comments, “Karnad has made available the rich resources of both the Great and the Little tradition, the classical and the folk elements of Indian literature” (134).

Girish Karnad’s genius lies in the fact that he draws a parallel between antiquity and contemporariness. He explored new horizons to enhance the Indian English Drama. It is through his plays that Modern Indian English Drama gets new ways to address social and individual issues. His plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandal* are based on history, myths and legends. In Sanskrit plays there have been the uses

of Nandi, Bhagavat, masks, puppets and the like. He believed in staging the Sanskrit plays with historical and mythical set-up so that the audience can connect with them. Girish Karnad “went back to myths and legends and made them a vehicle of a new vision” (Dodiya 44). His use of the complex cultural fabric of India, to discover less known and obscure myths, is significant to understand the contemporary and to relate them to the chosen story.

Karnad picks up the myth but uses only the relevant part of it in his plays. Myths and mask provide a rich texture to his plays and at the same time enhance the knowledge of the viewers about our ancient scriptures. In *Yayati*, Karnad presents the age-old story of the mythological king who, as a result of a sage’s curse grows old before time and in his longing for eternal youth, borrows the vitality of his own son. Karnad borrowed the myth from the Mahabharata, the story of Yayati revolves, thus, in the epic manner. Apart from the *Pauranic* mythology upon which the play is based, Karnad has employed the character of *Sutradhar*, modelled on the narrator –commentator of folk theatre, who informs the audience about the theme as well as the mythical origin of the play.

In *Hayavadana* Karnad employs the story of Devdatta and Kapila-which is based on a tale from Thomas Mann’s *The Transposed Heads*. Originally sourced from *Vetal Panachavimshati* and Somdeva’s *Brihat Katha Sritsagara*, Karnad’s *Hayavadana* deals with the complex human relationships and man’s longing for perfection. In other words, the mythic in *Hayavadana* aims at transformation of the fractured self into a composite whole.

Hayavadana is structured on typical *Yakshganaplay*. Here, Karnad shows that there is a man having horse head, Devadatta and Kapila after transposing their heads, lost their identities. The play starts with invocation of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre. The worship of Ganesha is, actually, a symbol of ‘incompleteness’ and theme of the play is the quest for ‘completeness’. Through the character of Bhagvata, the narrator-commentator, singing verses in the praise of the deity, the central theme of the play is also revealed:

An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly-whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. (Karnad)

The manner in which Bhagvata narrates the story is also in keeping with the style adopted from a folk-lore. The supernatural, the Goddess Kali, is also used as a device. She is 'terrible' in appearance but is given all the characteristics of a human being. The other theatrical devices, extensively used, are masks and dolls for portraying both human and non-human characters along with chorus, mime, painted curtains, props supernatural elements, etc.

Thus, Hayavadana is also a bold experiment in dramatic technique. The way Karnad handles the sources of his plot is interesting as he makes substantial changes in the originals by interpreting the ancient Indian myth in his own way. It also indicates a bold attempt at investing an old legend with a new meaning which has an urgent relevance to present day thinking about man and his world.

The play *Nagamandal* is a mythological play based on a folk tale and the snake myth. The play though uses the elements of folk lore yet questions the patriarchal codes of society and deals with the modern concepts of repression.

Keeping in mind the setting and structure of the play and taking in account the different narrative levels, Indian mythology and symbolism inherent in the stories, the whole play can be encompassed in a complete mandala in a graphic form. Graphic representation of the play Nâga-Mandala includes :

1) **Square.** Base of the ruined temple, 2) **First circle.** Ring of the Flames, 3) **Second circle** Acoustic wave of the song, 4) a. **Upward triangle:** Kurudavva-Rani-Appana, 4) b. **Downward triangle:** Appana-Rani-Cobra, 4)c. **Inner triangle:** The triple endings of the play. S. Govindappa in his research paper has rightly explained that – “The graphic representation of this play Nagamandala, which comprises of the geometrical figures such as a square, the circles and the triangles complement each other and lead to the required balance of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a mandala.”

By the use of myths that have timeless relevance and are a part of the consciousness of a people, Karnad's plays establish a contextual continuity with the best works in world literature. His work defies the western culture and the playwright employs it for his benefit. Thus the plays of Girish Raghunath Karnad are imbued with Social, Existentialism, Feminism, and Elements of Myth.

Both the Canadian writers like Tomson Highway and Girish Karnad have contributed immensely to foreground the indigenous culture and tradition through the use of folk tales, myths, legends, and the form used in folk theatre. Each has, in his own unique manner and style, helped in re-affirming and establishing the national identity firmly on the contemporary ground of foreign cultural influences and invasion.

Life comes full circle with complete overall development of various aspects. Thus, the impact of the above two playwrights, though confined to their specific regions, helps in understanding and accepting their history which, in turn, contributes to the decolonization of their literary canons.

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