

Divulging the Truth through Re-presentation in Indigenous Literature

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Abstract

Literature has evolved along with the evolving humankind and its varying circumstances. It depicts almost all aspects of human life through various forms and genres. On the verge of exploring the undiscovered horizons and expressing the concealed truth, writers cross the boundaries of genre, form and structure. On this track, indigenous literature sets a trend in the current literary era.

The indigenous writers primarily strive to bring out the voices that are misrepresented in the Western literary canon. They re-present their stories, which are represented by the colonizers, in their own style. They break the literary conventions to break the sham ideas, facts and identities about their communities, framed by non-natives, through their writings. This quest for truth and identity prevails as a core concept in many writings of indigenous writers. This concept has been vouchsafed through the dichotomy of representation and re-presentation and has become one of the current literary trends in Indigenous literature.

Keywords: Indigenous, re-presentation, representation, conventions, truth, identity.

Literature unfolds the interiors and exteriors of humans and their constructions, and also its impact on each other. It has rapidly progressed along with the astonishing development of the living world and its various circumstances. It explores the evolving relationship of the human species within its community and also with other communities of this widespread biome. On the verge of exploring the undiscovered horizons and expressing the concealed truth, writers cross the boundaries of genre, form and structure. Various narrative styles are adopted to perfectly picture the writers' thoughts and intentions. New forms and styles emerge which do not oblige the conventional standards of literature. Stepping beyond the conventional boundaries and searching for new insights have given immense opportunities for budding writers. This has paved the path for new trendsetters in the current literary era.

Indigenous literature is one of the emerging areas that constantly holds the interest of readers, irrespective of their age. Employing new techniques has been so spontaneous for the indigenous writers as they draw from their oral tradition. Indigenous people are one of the few communities that live harmoniously with Mother Earth. They live a contented life, akin to the nature of nature. They strongly believe and establish that all the creatures on this earth have equal access to all the resources and also acknowledge their role and significance on earth. This stands as the reason for their immense love and respect towards Earth and all its creatures. Their entire tradition and culture are developed based on their relationship with nature. All these make them want greed for materialization and modernization developed by the so-called civilized people, who recklessly go against nature. They are considered Barbarians and also humiliated and discriminated against by the other superior communities. Indigenous people have become the want of opportunities from the modernized world when their lands and rights to live are seized. So, some of the upcoming younger generations abandon their customs and traditions and try to adapt to the culture of the modernized community, mainly for the means of survival. All these ultimately lead to the gradual extinction of native communities.

'Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter'. Similar to this anonymous African proverb, readers of this world glorify the Westerners and colonizers, who have subjectively represented the people of third nations and native communities. Such distorted representations are being overtaken by the re-presentations of the people of suppressed societies. This has given vent to bringing their authentic identity and unspoken truth into the limelight.

According to the 2021 census, only 1.8 million Indigenous people are living in Canada, which is only 5% of its total population. Such an unequal ratio in population is mainly due to the invasion of non-natives and also some of the brutal injustices done to the indigenous people in the name of civilization. On such a modernized mission, many indigenous communities have lost their lands, lives, and also their identity, due to the personalized and partial representation of their communities by the westerners. Eventually, this has led to the extinction of their communities.

One of the most celebrated Indigenous Canadian writers is Rudy Wiebe, a descendant of a Russian Mennonite family in Canada. He is a part of the last generation of homesteaders to settle in the Canadian West, whose population is around 250. He mostly focuses on the common traits of both Mennonite heritage and Canadian aboriginal, which are almost extinct. In his short story, "Where is the voice coming from?" (1974), Wiebe vouchsafes the amount of accuracy in records and documentation of colonizers. The narrator strives to reconstruct the last days of the Almighty voice's life, which happened nearly 150 years ago. He examines every piece of evidence that is available and related to the Almighty's voice. He's quite puzzled over the contradictory nature of various sources. These reiterate the biased and subjective nature of the colonizer's history and literature. The colonizers have portrayed him as a

subhuman creature and justified their act of killing him for stealing the government's cow. The colonizer's records about this incident are quite ambiguous. There are many sources related to the Almighty voice, but none of them match one another. Even the Almighty voice's physical description does not accurately match his picture. Their description concludes that the Almighty voice has a "feminine appearance", but from the picture, it is obvious that "no believed face is more man than this face" (Theme 404).

The narrator is believed to be the author himself. He has explicitly made this attempt to reveal how history and literature are woven out of convenience. The truth is not completely outspoken. He has successfully tried to re-present the represented character of the Almighty voice. This is effectively done through parallel analysis of what is documented about him and what is originally available about him. This binary discourse helps to unravel the concealed and undiscovered truth.

This story breaks all the valid conventions in short story writing. Neither is there a linear plot nor linear narration. The first two paragraphs of the story state the problem with making a story. The third paragraph gives a list of names of various characters, in which few are indeed related to the plot and some others do not even have a role in the plot. The fourth paragraph suddenly shifts to a proclamation or announcement sort of thing, which mentions a reward of five hundred dollars. The next three paragraphs give some accounts of a few objects in a museum. Then, the eighth paragraph mentions the description of the police guard room. After this, comes a stanza of three lines.

Hey Injun you'll get hung for stealing that steer

Hey Injun for killing that government cow you'll get three

Weeks on the woodpile Hey Injun (Theme 402)

This is how the scenes of the story move on seemingly irrelevant. But once a reader completes reading, he/she will get a holistic picture of the plot. The chaotic and uncertain state of Almighty voice is vouchsafed through this fragmented and incoherent narration. This creates a sense of unity between the structure and action of this story.

Various characters are introduced, but there is no definite characterization. As there is an ambiguity in defining the character of Jean-Baptiste, otherwise known as Almighty Voice, due to the irrelevancy between the picture and descriptions of him by the police, even the protagonist lacks a definite characterization. This also underscores the identity crisis of the indigenous people.

Instead of various scenes and actions, it has numerous contradictory facts. So, it seems like a historical document. These are a few examples to show how this short story stands differently from other short stories in literature. Ultimately, Wiebe has re-presented the whole story by recreating both the form and plot.

The poem "I Lost My Talk" is written by Rita Joe, who is a Mi'kmaq poet and songwriter. Mi'kmaq is a native community that lives in Canada's eastern Maritime Provinces. This poem was published in her collection Poems of Rita Joe in 1978. It highlights how the native language and traditions are sabotaged in the name of education and upliftment, and cultural hegemony takes place. Their language, culture, customs and tradition are treated as a recessive trait. The children studying at Shubenacadie School are punished for speaking in their native language. They are made to speak, think and create like the colonizers. This is an indirect attempt to make the people of First Nations rootless and also to eradicate their community. The colonizers have represented the natives as uncouth, uncivilized and ignorant beings. This is revealed through the speaker's acknowledgment that "Your (colonizers) way is more powerful" (Joe, line 12). The speaker re-presents how she is put into a pathetic state. As she is forced to abandon her native language and learn a foreign language, she becomes ineffective in communication, which is a major medium to pass on the legacy and tradition. She desperately seeks to get rooted in her community and cling to it. So that, she can build her identity stronger and re-present her community by herself. She resolves to teach about her and her community to the colonizers, in her native language and style.

This poem also does not strictly follow poetic conventions. It does not follow any particular meter or rhyming scheme. It is more like a story narrated in lines. The poet uses this unique narrative style, which is probably due to her oral tradition. This can also be considered as a way of preserving the heritage and customs of indigenous communities.

Drew Hayden Taylor is an Indigenous Canadian playwright, journalist and author. His writings mainly focus on the culture of First Nations people. One of his plays is The Berlin Blues, which was published in 2007. This play emphasizes the actual needs and priorities of the Ojibway community. The author vouchsafes the viewpoints and perspectives of non-natives about this community. In this play, two Germans named Birgit Heinze and Reinhart Reinholz approach Donalda Kokoko, who is a native woman working in the Economic Development office at the Band Administration building, regarding their business plan. These men are business partners with the company called German Recreational Entertainment, Arts and Technology. They express their plans for a native theme park called OjibwayWorld. They consider native people's lifestyle and culture as an object of attraction. This great interest is developed due to the representation of North American Indigenous people by Karl May in his adventure novels. They are portrayed as people who live a bizarre lifestyle in an uncivilized and earthly way. All these create a preconceived notion about the indigenous community. These German business people have introduced their theme park project as a welfare scheme for the Ojibway community which could lead to the improvement of everybody's life. Initially, Ojibway people have welcomed the scheme with great pleasure, except Angie, a native woman who places the culture and tradition of native communities at a high stature. She does not let anything exploit them at any cost. She says,

OjibwayWorld is not the world of the Ojibways. It's some genetically modified, bastardized, hybrid, freak show. As Native women, it's our obligation, our right, to protect and preserve the culture. (2.3.18-21)

One Ojibway woman is worth a dozen men, Native or non-Native. (2.3.73-74)

Angie re-presents her community's authenticity and third-world women's strength, power and role in society. She protests against the Germans and also her own community's people, whoever supports the theme park plan. She fights as a single woman against the entire team and untiringly tries to make her own community's people realize the hidden hazards behind the so-called welfare scheme. She puts forth the importance of her community's culture and tradition, which comes before anything and everything else. Finally, everyone in her community understands and joins her protest. Despite economic and societal developments, embracing and protecting their culture from being exploited in the name of civilization and modernization led them to live a contented and ecstatic life. This notion is re-presented in this play.

Many other indigenous writers have also reiterated the represented nature of their communities by re-presenting them through their writings. Through such binary discourses, they voice out the unheard and unrecognized voices of their community, in their style. They do not confine their imagination and creativity to any particular convention. Their way of writing remains as unique as their culture and tradition. This staging of the dichotomy between the representation and re-presentation, in a unique style, tops the literary trends in Indigenous literature.

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