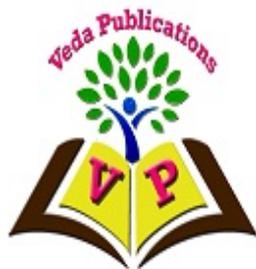




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE THROUGH DRAMA IN THE CANADIAN FIRST NATIONS SOCIETY**

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'Resistance in Drama' deals with the recuperation of the cultural practices and downplaying of imperial master narratives, resistance to falsification of history and suppression of language, a tendency reflected globally in the stage performances. Nostalgia for the lost biocentric and eco-friendly culture reflected in Drama and Poetry of First Nations writers is discussed in the article. The resistance to falsification of First Nations image as part of the decolonizing project is also contextualized

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Hugh MacLennan in his popular novel *Two Solitudes* (1945) says that Canada is caught in between British Solitude and French Solitude. Canadian Literature in general was tremendously influenced by the British and French Culture. This has obviously shown the dichotomy in Canadian Culture. As Canada has evolved into mosaic nation, there were voices that disagreed with the general perceptions of Canadian literature.

Native Canadian literature strongly registers a desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society. Native Canadian writings often refer to the rhetoric of decolonization which argues that colonialism needs to be replaced by the recovery of pre-colonial, indigenous ways. The multicultural nature of Canadian society makes the issue of what constitutes the pre-colonial native culture in contradiction to single dominant cultural group. Native literatures have also challenged the homogeneous, unitary concept of the state and the historical and cultural legacies of colonialism

First Nations literature of Canada has made a distinctive stride in consolidating Fourth World literatures. Natives of America, First Nations of Canada, Maoris of New Zealand, Aboriginals of Australia and indigenous people across the world are addressed as 'Fourth World'. Among the various streams of Fourth World literatures, First Nations literature of Canada has made a tremendous contribution for the enrichment of Canadian literature.

"I'd feel the conqueror, the oppressor, making me use his language, and I know I'd never use it as well as him and I'd feel so powerless, and think, They stole everything and now we can't just speak any more, the old language is almost gone and we don't know the new language well enough to help each other, heal each other [...] we're just hanging there in the middle (Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell. *The Book of Jessica* 73)

In *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1990) Monique Mojica attempts to establish a space for the First Nations women, by exposing the European imposed paradigms on the First nations women Juxtaposing the colonial constructs with contemporary reality. She contests the negative definitions on the First Nations women. Deconstructing the assigned semiotic field of the First Nations woman she counters their White defined stereotypical identities by presenting representatives of contemporary Indian society. The *Moonlodge* (1990) by Margo Cane again is an attempt with the same motive.

David Diamond and others' "No Xya" (1990) reclaim First Nations culture and practices. Incorporating First Nations rituals, it props up the First Nations land claims against the provincial government. Among the North Americas tribes there is a practice of invoking the Gods for protection of the actors by drawing a sacred circle. Maria Campbell, the Canadian First Nations writer suggests the need for this kind of protection to the actors by "doing the circle every morning and every night" while beginning and ending rehearsals (Griffiths and Campbell 40).



A similar practice is pursued among certain East Indian stage performance, especially of the Hindus. They commenced the performance with a "Rangapooja" or prayer with lighted traditional lamps called "Nilavilakku". Devotional rites like propitiating the God Ganesha "Ganesha Pooja"—to avoid obstacles also is in existence.

The Eurocentric theatre practices had perpetuated the paradigmatic status of Shakespeare which provokes the Australian writer Penny Gay to raise the question: "How can one aspire to write plays when Shakespeare has already, incontrovertibly written the greatest dramas in the English language?"(204). Gayatri Spivak has termed this molding of dramatic practices on received performance traditions as the "epistemic violence" of colonialism (*Critical Inquiry* 251).The status of Shakespeare as the paradigm of dramatic art, is challenged by indigenous writers by the rendition of Shakespeare texts with the fusion of indigenous elements. Counter discursive strategies are attempted on canonical texts to deconstruct the cultural significations of the imperial legacy and colonial conditioning, which Helen Tiffin terms "canonical counter discourse" (Kunapipi 22).Though dismantling the canonical assumptions, the counter discursive enunciation retain many of the significations of the canonical texts. Among counter discursively reworked texts, Shakespeare's plays are the most targeted ones. The reworking of *The Tempest* encodes the colonial resistance of European imperialism, by the refrigeration of the character Caliban as a representative of the resisting colonized (*Gilbert and Tomkins* 19).

The reworking of *The Tempest* was initiated by the publication of O.Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*(1950) and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*(1952). The Prospero/Caliban relationship was reworked in the light of post colonialism as the relationship of the colonizer/colonized. To the Third world writers, Caliban is the representative of the colonized Third World Nations, subjugated by the imperial power.

In 1989, Skylight Theatres of Toronto demonstrated a counter discursive performance of *The Tempest* by a rendition of Caliban and Ariel represented as First Nations of Canada. First Nations themes were integrated into the character of Ariel as Raven, the Trickster, who is the cultural hero of the Indians. Traditional cultural elements like the potlatch were incorporated into the presentation, where the Europeans were presented as "Visitors from hell" whose presence ended up in the death of the lives and culture of the First Nations (*Gilbert and Tompkins* 26).

Though drama is one of the earliest forms of literature, it developed only very recently in the Canadian First Nations society. The Society for the Re-establishment of the Trickster helped a great deal in the development of First Nations drama. The First Nations stage performance tradition is not free from the influence of French and English Drama.

The establishment of the various theatres of drama like the Red Roots Theatre Group, in Winnipeg, the De-ba-jeh-mu-jug Theatre Group in Manitoulin island, Ontario, Native Earth Performing Arts Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, the Upisask Theater of Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan are some of the theatre companies that act as catalysts in the



development of First Nations drama. Men dominated the field of First Nations drama and the Women dramatists in Canada are few in number. Why it happened like that is a problem to be discussed. The subordinate status of women in society may be a reason for women to keep away from this sphere.

Since theatre practitioners have immense opportunities to intervene explicitly in the social and political organizations and stage critiques of their structures, multiplicity of strategies were employed by First Nations dramatists to encounter the dissolution of the signifiers of the First Nations.

The playwrights of the suppressed peoples of the empire began exploiting stage space to implicate their displacement and disempowerment consequent to colonial expansions of the Europeans. As Ashcroft and others maintain, "[t]he dialectic of space and displacement" (*Empire Write Back* 9) became a key issue in postcolonial drama. The meagre output by First Nations women dramatists necessitates the inclusion of male writers to exemplify the counter discursive tactics in stage performance.

The Incorporation of regional ritual in association with cultural practices in postcolonial drama are sites of resistance, attempts to assert their culture, performed according to the specificities of the regional theatre, instead of pursuing the complex representational matrix of the colonizer. Rituals stand out as signifiers of cultural difference. It further revitalizes the community by reviving their belief system and re-establishing their lost culture, history and tradition. Further postcolonial drama seeks to disengage themselves from the conventions of the imperial centre (*Gilbert and Tompkins* 55).

Language is rendered as a tool in the imperialist tactics of the Europeans. In order to control the colonial subjects, the colonizers endeavored to stifle the First Nations languages and impose English, the imperialists, language. Regardless of the exigencies of the colonial subject, the inculcation of English language and literature had been enforced as part of the agenda of "civilizing" them. George Ryga exposes the stupidity of this manoeuvre in his *Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) through the title character who is forced to learn Wordsworth's poem. The context remains incomprehensible to the First Nations girl, however hard the teacher tries. The introduction of the other communicative systems like song and music in stage performances is part of the attempt to dismantle English from its pedestal (Ashcroft 117). The loss of language effects the loss of culture, history and connections with geographical space. As Ashcroft and others points out, languages' "system of values-its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction become the system upon which social economic and political discourses are grounded" (*Postcolonial Studies* 283). By suppressing their language, the First Nations' sense of autonomy and dignity is erased by the colonizers. Campbell expresses concern at the hegemonic oppression by the English Language.

"I'd feel the conqueror, the oppressor, making me use his language, and I know I'd never use it as well as him and I'd feel so powerless, and think, They stole everything and now we can't just speak any more, the old language is almost gone and we don't know the new language well enough to help each other, heal each other [...] we're just



hanging there in the middle" (*The Book of Jessica* 73).

Characters with speech impediments are cast in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*. Their muteness is a symbol of linguistic suppression effected by imperialism. Dickie Bird in *Dry Lips* writes his ideas out due to this handicap. Dickie Bird's use of English and Cree represents the First Nations "forked tongue" in the colonial world. His speaking and singing in his native Cree consequent to his vision of his mother symbolically suggests the reclamation of his mother tongue. Daniel David Moses writes in Cree with English interpretations in his "Almighty voice and His wife". There are writers who confine to English in their play writing. Agnes Grant maintains that it is suggestive of their loss of language. (109).

First Nations writers' excavation of the orality of First Nations' languages, is to rebut the accredited notion that high -flown language as in Shakespearean tragedies is appreciated in plays. The First Nations language brought the stages close to people eventually displacing the colonizers' language. Highway's *Dry Lips* thus got unprecedented acclaim in the playhouses and critical circles. In Lieu of this assumption, Australian writer Alex Buzo employs vernacular language in his play "Norm and Ahmed" (1973). To effect a postcolonial discourse of alterity, traditional forms of gestures, mine etc are employed to express linguistic autonomy by way of political resistance. As Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin contend that the application of First Nations languages and other theatrical signifiers "localizes and attracts value away from a British "norm", eventually displacing the hegemonic centrality of the idea of "norm" itself" (*Empire Writes Back* 37)

First nations forms of documentation of events, is put into requisition in dismissing the falsification in imperial history. The East Indian playwright Utpal Dutt undermines the presumptions of White superiority applying oral narrative traditions in recounting the rising against colonial government in his *The Great Rebellion 1857* (1973). The play dislodges the imperial history and galvanizes the spirit of the people to establish their authority in imperial India.

Postcolonial theatres immensely exploit theatre practices as a critique of the political structure that had been imposing its hegemonic approach in subjugating the people of the colonial world, offering resistance through language, theme and performance techniques. Australian aboriginal writer Louis Nowra through *Inside the island* (1980) and *Sunrise* (1983) charts his visions of the termination of imperial control and the reinstallation of a more enabling and eco-friendly First Nations system of social order.

Political intervention often curtails theatrical freedom by censorship, banning the play and even imprisonment to the playwrights as in the case of Ngugi Wa Thiongo in Kenya. However in the wake of the theory of deconstruction the white manifestations of their hegemony are crumbling and the cultural isolation imposed on the First Nations writers is being lifted. The recent movement like Marxism, Feminism, Ecological movement etc have resulted in a resurgence of the First Nations voice, speaking against centuries of suppression and subjugation.

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