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## American Indian Identity and Indianness in Aboriginal Plays

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**Abstract-** The quest of 'Indian' identity is the prime characteristic of the American literature. The period of colonization damaged the Indian identity, the way American Indian children were taken away from their parents with a strategy to make them "civilized" individuals, sent to boarding school with Richard Henry Pratt's slogan of 'Kill the Indian and save the Man'. The American Indian writers strive hard to maintain their image if 'indianness' thus negate the stereotype image of the red Indians. This paper aims to analyze the American Indian identity in American Indian plays. The main focus of this paper is examine the identity construction and deconstruction in the American Indian plays. The American Indian Plays elucidate the 'Indinness' of the American Indian tribes and the dilemma of identity.

**Keywords:** American Indian Plays, Indianess, Identity Conflict, Discourse.

### I. INTRODUCTION

American Indian plays are set in the milieu of American Indian lives, cultural and traditional values and the struggle and conflict of American Indian Identity. The term 'Indian' is used to define the aboriginal, indigenous people of America and is given first to the tribes by Christopher Columbus who defined American Indians with this term 'Indian' hence marginalized the American Indian Identity and stamped it with terms like 'savage' 'barbaric' 'primitive' and 'uncivilized'. The American Indians were displaced to such an extent that their identity as an Indian was measured with the 'Quantum of Blood' by the Government of United States. The American Indian misrepresentation as an 'Indian' was to subjugate them as a 'subject' and to maintain power over them. Native Americans appropriated and owned the 'Indianness' to determine their place and membership in the main stream of America. Native American's self-identification as Indian is the amount and extent to which they carry their culture, tradition and language with an appropriation in the main stream of America. The officials of the Government of United States titled the tribes with the term Native Americans but the Native Americans preferred to be called 'Indian' or American Indian thus appropriated the term 'Indian' with their tribal identity.

The American Indian Plays elucidate the 'Indinness' of the American Indian tribes and the dilemma of identity. The pursuit for 'Indian' identity is the overriding characteristic of the American Indian plays. The period of colonization damaged the Indian identity, the way American Indian children were taken away from their parents with a strategy to make them "civilized" individuals, sent to boarding school with Richard Henry Pratt's slogan of 'Kill the Indian and save the Man'. The 'Indian' identity was snatched away from the children as their names were changed, they were not allowed to speak their native languages, their hair was cut down, their voices were stolen and their histories silenced. The whole process left them in a 'Third Space' of where neither they belonged to one nor to other. The American Indian plays shed light on the same process of the construction of 'Indian' identity and then the bereavement of American Indian writers for the cultural and tradition loss and the quest for the lost 'Indian' identity. American Indians Plays triumphantly celebrate the tribal traditions and culture which is very much rich and at the same time bemoan the loss of cultural heritage and are drenched with the grief of displacement and the trauma of identity which leaves them in a 'Third Space' with chaotic souls. The American Indian plays somehow are a conscious effort by the American Indian playwrights to retrieve the 'Indinness' as the writer of *Body Indian* Hanay Geigomah says in the introductory remarks of his play :

Let me try to stimulate your imagination a little. There are 512 Indian Tribes in the United States today. If each of these tribes ...produces one new work based on that tribe's history, culture, and heritage...the theatre can really help us stop the erosion of our Indian way of life (Cited in D'Aponte 5).

One of the main aim and focus of American Indian Playwrights is to celebrate the traditional values and Indian identity to fill in the gaps of cultural genocide and historical amnesia so to repossess and retrieve 'Indianness' in their people.

N. Scott Momaday, one of the most prominent playwrights of American Indian literature bemoans the trauma of displacement and dislodgement of Indian identity and writes about the Indian Children and the boarding school system which snatched away 'Indian' identity of the Indian Children. Momaday in his play *The Moon in two Windows* laments the lost Indian identity which was damaged through a very well knit strategy of the White-Americans as the slogan of Henry Pratt was 'Kill the Indian and Save the Man'. The discourse of White-Americans subjugated the American Indians and marginalized them .The Screen play *The Moon in Two Windows* bemoans the displacement of Indian children in Carlisle Indian industrial school and craves for 'Indianness'. Scott Momaday traces the history in a very beautiful way and illustrates the ways and discourse through which the American Indians were made to send their children to the Carlisle boarding school. Henry Richard Pratt convinced the tribal leader Spotted Tail to send the American Indian children to the boarding school to understand the language of the country as he makes him believe that the Indians were betrayed because they couldn't understand the language of treaties and they had to trust the translators as Henry Richard Pratt says :

But Spotted Tail, You cannot read or write...you must trust interpreters to tell you the meaning of the treaties you sign...you have said that the white man lied to you and stolen your land...consider this, Spotted Tail: if your children were educated in the ways of white man, they would be better able to avoid the mistakes of their elders (Momaday 117).

The Indian identity of the American Indians was crushed in the boarding schools. Scott Momaday elucidates the pain of the parents and children which they suffered and gone through by giving up their children as the women wailed and man cut their hair in grief of their children. The journey of the children towards the boarding school is drenched with tears as many of the kids die on the way. One such example is traced by Momaday in *The Moon in Two Windows* as he illustrates the death of Gray Calf who dies in a very sympathetic way in train on the way to Carlisle boarding school. Scott Momaday's plays poignantly trace the history of colonialism which snatched away the 'Indianness' from the American Indians and imposed another 'civilized' identity on them by killing the Indian inside. These plays are a deliberate effort by the American Indians Playwrights to revert the Indianness with a cultural appropriation. The Indian children were left with chaotic and traumatic souls because they couldn't easily accept and adopt the white ways as Jhon Pai in *Indolent Boys* says :

It was the pain of humiliation.Shame.i was made to do what I had to do when I first came to the school,as a little boy.They cut my hair...it was as if I was mourning my own death.Then I had to stand naked with the students...and then I had to choose again my Christian name from a list on the blackboard,pointing with a stick.it was like counting coup.my name was my enemy.(Momaday 33).

The boarding schools were a kind of a cultural genocide which took away all traditional ways of life from Indian children such as Jhon Pai bewails the loss of his own death which is in fact the death of his Indian identity, death of his indianness which was replaced with a new attire, new language, new getup and new Christian name. The Boarding schools provide the Indian Children with warm clothes, good food but they preferred their traditional ways of life and escaped whenever get a chance too. Scott Momaday is bereaved by the incident of January 7<sup>th</sup> 1891 of the death of three boys who escaped the Kiowa school and were frozen to death in a heavy eight inches snow. The indolent Boys chose freedom over replication and cloning. They wanted to survive with their own original identity and dignity and chosen death over the caged life. The Christians names and Christian and white ways of life were not acceptable for the Indian Children and they protested through different means such as the three boys escaped and denied to accept and adopt the brand new imposed identity.

The American Indian plays are an effort of the American Indian Playwrights to reconnect to their own community and Indianness which is taken away from them in a very strategic way. The playwrights want to raise their voice against the oppressors which is silenced in the process of colonization. They strive to retrieve Indianness in their tribes by highlighting the problems of American Indians on stage. The American Indian Children in the boarding schools were the victims of child abuse too as Lenny narrates his story of sexual abuse at the boarding school to Katherine in the play *The Independence of Eddie Rose*. Lenny talks about the pain he suffered as a kid in the boarding school as he says to Katherine :

But there was this young kid...one night, one night, they decided to throw him a blanket party, everything echoes in the halls...There was This guard. He had to hear...but he didn't even bother to check. but no one heard him that night...no one listened to me when I tried...No One"(Yellow Robe 89-90).

The trauma of this incident became a part of Lenny's identity and made Lenny react in a very atrocious way. The reaction was not according to his Indianness as children were considered very sacred to American Indians but the trauma was so high in intensity that Lenny ended up in a brutal rape of Theia. Yellow Robe highlights the cultural genocide and wants the American Indians to get reconnected to their Indianness and identity. Mike and Eddie both are victims of sexual abuse and suffer the distress of it with their own mothers. Eddie narrates to his Aunt Thelma and says "our own mothers have tried to "have" us.(Yellow Robe 70). Katherine's sexual attraction towards her own son is the extreme distress which is highlighted by Yellow Robe. The intensity of distress and fear is so soaring that Theia the poor kid hides herself in the trunks as Eddie tell his mother Katherine:

We won't find her. Only if she lets us. She was in a trunk in the basement last time. She almost stopped breathing, so I punched a hole in the trunk, and she won't be blue in the face anymore" (Yellow Robe 50).

Theia doesn't feel safe at home is a symbolic representation of the American Indians who feel alien, threatened and in extreme danger in their own lands. American Indians suffered the pangs of cultural genocide and ended up in stress, distress and depression which headed them to extreme alcoholism, sexual abuses and suicide. The historical oppression silenced the American Indians, snatched away both Indian identity and voices from them, American Indian writers carry out a deliberate effort to retrieve the cultural heritage through their Plays.

Drew Hyden Tylor illustrates the issue of Indianness in a very different way and bemoans the loss of cultural and traditional identity of American Indians in his play *Only Drunk and Children Tell the Truth*. The play elucidates the problems and traumas of American Indian children who were taken away from their parents by the Government and given to Foster Homes and in this way the Indian children lose their cultural heritage hence the Indian identity. The story of the play *Only Drunk and Children Tell the Truth* revolves around Janice who was given to the foster home by the federal government when she was only 3 months old. The federal government accused the father of being negligent of the family and the mother as careless and irresponsible and made a lame reason to take away the kid. The play raises question of Indianness and asks in an ironical way that what makes an Indian a true Indian? Jenice is the name given to Grey Wabung by the white family and She reminds Tonto and Barb time and again about her name Jenice and shows irritation if called by the name Grey, but they keep on calling her Grey instead of Jenice as they want her to retrieve her American Indian identity. The whole play is an effort of Grey's family to bring the isolated individual in the community, connect her to the traditional ways of life hence retrieve her Indian identity. The federal government accused Jenice's father of being negligent of the family was not true, the truth was that her father joined military and was away for that very reason and her mother was not irresponsible at all. Her mother Anne tries her level best to get her daughter back but in vain. Drew Hyden Taylor in this way criticizes the white Government for the displacement of Indian children. Janice was an Indian by birth and gets back to her Indian identity, visits her mother's grave, introduces herself with her Indian name Grey and says hello to her mother in Ojibwa language. Drew Hayden Taylor in this play illustrates the fact of being Indian and answers the question that an Indian will always remain an Indian, no matter whatever the circumstances are.

American Indian traits are discussed by the American Indian Playwrights to illustrate the Indianness. *Body Indian* highlights the issue of alcoholism in American Indians and the influence of it which demolish the moral fiber of society. Hanay Geiogamah elucidates the destruction of alcoholism on American Indian identity and

morals and shows the life of American Indians individuals soaked in alcoholism. Each and every character in *Body Indian* is shown a drunken Indian who's only concern is to get alcohol by hook or by crook. Bobby is the protagonist of the play and often passes out because of the extreme alcoholism. The characters of the play are shown always concerned about alcoholism from the very first scene of the play to the last scene. The play opens in a room where American Indians are shown unconscious and drunk and empty bottles spread everywhere. Alcoholism is in fact a weapon used against the American Indians which destroyed their lives. Yellow Robe illustrates the same issue in her play *The Independence of Eddie Rose* through the character of Theia and aunt Thelma as Theia asks aunt Thelma about the American Indian addiction to alcoholism and says:

Theia: Is drinking something we always do? My teacher ...said it was because we always drink is why we lost everything we had.

Thelma: No this is a lie...we never used to drink at one time. Your grandma, my mother as old as she was, never drank. She used to say it was never a part of the Indian people. (Yellow Robe 68-69).

The alcoholism was a strategy used against American Indians which demolished their life system and health. The whole system of American Indian life is disturbed because of the alcoholism and the values and morals are forgotten by them as at the end of the play *Body Indian* James and Howard take away Bobby's artificial leg just for a little amount of drink. Hanay Geiogamah illustrates the frustration of American Indians for alcohol for which they put each and everything on stake without thinking of the results and consequences as the Lease money ,the money they earn ,they money the borrow all is spent in alcoholism .*Body Indian* sheds light on the indianness of the American Indians and highlights the Indian traditional traits of American Indians as though they put each and everything at stake for a little amount of alcohol but still they don't drink it in isolation rather share it .The paly *Indian body* bewails the tragic conditions and lives of the American Indians and the excessive use of alcoholism which shattered the social fabric of American Indian Life.Hannay Geiogmah in his introductory remarks about the play says that he wants to discuss the real issues of American Indians so to retrieve the cultural heritage and Indian identity. The Play *Body Indian* sheds light on Indianness and the problems which dismantle the Indian identity.

American Indian culture is very much rich and the playwrights celebrate the cultural norms and stories in a very beautiful way to retrieve their indinness. *Children of the Sun* elucidates the Indian ways and life style and the importance of stories in American Indian culture. Grandmother Spider illustrates the sacred power of stories in the very start of the play as she says "Blowtha blowtha,blowtha ,boo...story story sad and true"(Momaday 96).Children of the Sun narrate stories about the rich past of American Indian lives where they had serenity with Mother Earth and non-human objects and talks about the times when "no one was hungry"(Momaday97).The significance of stories is discussed by almost every writer in his play so is Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl .She sheds light on the importance of stories in American Indian culture as in the play *The story of Susana* a character Molly asks Adele for a story and says "a story, we need a story"(Kneubuhl 369).The stories have sacred healing powers for American Indians and they tell stories to heal that's why Molly asks Adele for a story to get healed. American Indians plays are a deliberate effort by the American Indians writers to retrieve the indianess in their people.

Sharman Alexei's *Smoke Signals* discusses the issue of Indian identity and indianness .His characters never compromise on their Indianness and never concede their struggle of the maintenance of Indian identity in the Euro-American dominated society. The character of Thomas Builds the Fire is the one who preserves the tradition of stories which is a very sacred component of Indian culture, tradition and identity. The Screen play celebrates the rich tribal heritage of the American Indians and the ways they share and celebrate things and occasions. Alexei's works are always drenched in a laughter mixed with tears as the incident of 4<sup>th</sup> July in which by the mistake of Arnold Joseph Thomas Builds the Fire loses his parents .Alexei raises the question of Indianness through his characters as in the screen play *Smoke Signals* Victor asks Thomas Builds The Fire and says" Thomas, How come Indians have always been measured by what they have thrown and not by what they have kept"(Alexei 131).The Indian identity is snatched away from the American Indians by the Euro-Americans but they still maintain it with cultural appropriation as the characters Thomas Builds The

Fire and Victor keep their tribal heritage and at the same time they assimilate with the Euro-American ways too. Thomas Builds the Fire helps Victor in reconciliation with his dead father and make him bring the remains of his father and they put them in to the Spokane falls and found a salmons jumped from the falls the moment they put the ashes into the Spokane falls. In the Screen Play Smoke Signals Victor is shown irritated by the un-indianness of Thomas Builds the Fire and asks him to put the expressions of a warrior Indian on his face because it is demanded by the Euro-Americans. The same thing is discussed by the Leanne Howe and Roxy Gordon in their Play *Indian Radio Days* in which Chief Leflore answers in an irritated way when the narrators asks him that why doesn't he look like Indians, he answers "I don't know what an Indian is supposed to look like...because being Indian is a very complicated matter"(Howe,Gordon 119-120).The Indianess and Indian identity is complexed and complicated by the United States Government with the law of blood quantum. The blood quantum is also criticized by Princess Wanna Buck in *Indian Radio Days* as she says "Inquiring minds recognize that tribal identity is more than bloodlines, earth tones and stuff like that, Indian is not an identity that can be easily purchased with mere money"(Howe, Gordon 136).The blood Quantum is not the only way to assess Indian identity but there are so many factors involved which make an Indian.tribal Indian identity is very much significant for American Indians and they don't compromise on their traditional identity and never give-up their traditional identity rather appropriate it with the current times and culture .

## II. CONCLUSION

The American Indians Plays celebrate the American Indian tradition, beliefs,and life system in a very beautiful manner .The American Indian Playswrights elucidate the 'Indinness' of the American Indian tribes and the dilemma of identity. The pursuit for 'Indian' identity is the overriding characteristic of the American Indian plays. The playwrights commemorate the issue of Indianness to retrieve the Indian identity.

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