

Citation: Akhtar, A., Rehman, R., & Almas, N. (2021). The Theatre of Historical Revision: An Analysis of the Native American Drama Tradition. *Global Language Review*, VI(II), 56-62. [https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021\(VI-II\).07](https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021(VI-II).07)



The Theatre of Historical Revision: An Analysis of the Native American Drama Tradition

Amer Akhtar *

Rida Rehman †

Neelum Almas ‡

Abstract

We attempt to analyse the form and content of major Native American plays to discuss their relationship with the traditional English drama and its content. By looking at plays of key Native American playwrights, we show that the Native American tradition goes against the English tradition of drama in its form by challenging the unities of time and place and characterization. It also brings in elements of Native American tradition of storytelling such as the blend of the sacred and the profane, the use of humor, the attitude towards facticity, to the tradition of drama to carve out a unique space for itself through which it attempts to challenge the dominant narratives of history, Native American culture, and at the same time highlight the problems the Native American nations face currently.

Key Words: Native American, Genocide, Drama, Historical Revision

Introduction

For readers set in the ways of the European tradition of literature and its later American dimension, coming across the Native American drama for the first time can be a surprise, a pleasant one at that. It is not an issue of ease of reading or the thematic concerns, and it is just the way the Native American drama achieves the dramatic effect through giving primacy to the Native American culture, Native American experience, and the Native American way of storytelling. Moreover, what makes the Native American drama interesting is the fact that the English tradition of drama and the Native American spin result in constant pushes and pulls as the Native American drama challenges the English traditions and the White man's dominant narrative. The roots of this challenge may be traced to the Native American resistance to white supremacy in politics

and society as a whole. The prominence of the Native American drama accompanies the rise of the movements like American Native American Movement (AIM) and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (Over, 2006). The Native American drama may not have the most consistent of outputs, but it is an effective attempt to show that “whites are just too damn close to their own practices, literature and histories to teach, study or write about them. Their problem is that they refuse to bend and accept that Native Americans might have something to teach them.” (Gordon and Howe, 1999). The blend of traditional English drama and the Native American way of storytelling results in an art form that is effective as a whole and beautiful in parts.

* HoD, Department of English, Foundation University Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: amerakhtar@fui.edu.pk

† Department of English, Foundation University Islamabad, Pakistan.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Foundation University Islamabad, Pakistan.

Statement of Purpose

The present article attempts to analyse the major works in Native American drama to discuss the ways in which it employs and subverts the traditional drama form to attempt to rewrite history from a Native American perspective.

Research Questions

The article seeks to answer the following questions to achieve its purpose.

- In what ways does the Native American drama follow the conventions of traditional English drama?
- In what ways does the Native American drama flout the conventions of traditional English drama?
- What thematic challenge does the native American drama pose to the mainstream historical accounts of the Native Americans?

Method

The study is based on the textual analysis tradition of qualitative analysis. Grounded in the frameworks of textual analysis given by McKee and Kirby, it aims to interpret text thematically and structurally to arrive at educated interpretations of the texts. Native American literature has moved from being orature to the print form, but political, economic and social challenges have kept Native American literature and drama away from the mainstream and, therefore, the public's access. We use key Native American plays by leading playwrights such as Yellowtail, Robe, Kneubuhl, and Momaday to serve as the representatives of Native American plays.

Analysis and Discussion

Ordinary as it may seem, we would like to start with a discussion of the unities in the Native American drama for the unities form a basic dramatic convention for Samuel Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, "his greatest work of literary criticism" (Folkenflik, 2021) chose to defend Shakespeare regarding his use of the unities. The Native American drama tears apart the conventional constraint of unity of time and unity of place. The violation is important because it challenges the English

conception of time as a constant movement forward. The Native American view of time is more liberal, where past, present and future merge in varied combinations to create not just a stylistic effect but to convey the cultural beliefs of the Native American way of life.

Native American Radio Days (Howe and Gordon, 2006) flouts the conventional concepts of time and place in drama as it moves to the past from the present to showcase the history and, of course, historical abuse of the Native Americans. The Fore American and the Native American Woman have been around since "the beginning of time". The narrator meets them but then takes the audience to the shore of Plymouth harbor, the place where William Bradford and the early pilgrims landed to start the subjugation of the Native Americans. He meets native American chiefs here. Afterwards, the narrator leaps a century to interview Eugenia in 1892, which is followed by a movement backwards to 1847, the time of the Meusebach-Comanche Treaty. Next comes a step back in time to 1847 to the Comanche. These, of course, are just some of the movements back and forth in time meant to inform on the Native American story of survival against the white man's oppression. The movements in time particularly convey that the oppression the Native Americans suffered was not a time-specific thing, but it was spread over centuries—and also was not a local affair constrained in a geographical location.

The four scenes of *The Star Quilter* (Robe) are set in each of the four decades between the 1960s and spread over decades. Contradictorily the radio's woman jockey is stuck in "twenty-nine minutes past the hour". The message that the playwright is aiming to give is that the Native Americans are stuck in a difficult time, a never-ending phase of oppression. So, the drama time not moving ahead shows that things have not improved for the Native Americans, and they have been frozen in a time of massive injustice.

The recurrent time-shifts in *The Independence of Eddie Rose* (1999) from Rose's lounge, to the Tribal Detention Center, to Katherine's house and finally to the cemetery violate the unity of place to summarise the Native American life of low-level criminal offence and death to "expand the voice of

Native people” (Pulitano & Robe, 1998) even as it shares an honest account of the demons of family relations, alcoholism and domestic violence that Native American face (Johnson, 1990).

Props take centre-stage in Native American drama. *Body Native American* by Geiogamah (1980) employs used wine bottles as props. Littered around the stage, making characters pick their way through the bottles, the props represent the pervasive presence of liquor in the lives of the Native Americans. Offering a contrast to the barren stages of *Waiting for Godot* and a striking similarity to that in *The Caretaker*, the littering of wine bottles shows the centrality of alcohol addiction as a bane for the Native American life. This use of the props is augmented by stage effects of projecting train tracks on the stage to bring the dangers of alcohol addiction into focus. Bobby had lost his leg to a train accident while he was drunk.

Native American dramas are bolstered by elements from ritual stories and dances. Geiogamah’s *Body Native American*’s (1980) “theatrical rhetoric intervenes in the assumptions about whiteness as a static, privilege-granting category and system of dominance” (Cerco, 2020). Singing and dancing create the mood for the play, and the accompaniment of music completes the quintessentially Native American storytelling. The musicality of the play does not force a change of genre to opera as it does in the European tradition. *Native American Radio Days* employs music to establish the setting of particular episodes. In the play, the sound and music technician becomes as important as a member of the cast. *Foghorn* too gives centrality to Native American music and rhythmic chants such as drums, Zuni sunrise chant, war songs etc.

While the traditional drama sees the audience as passive and non-integral to the performance of the play, Soliloquys and asides give a marginal and passive role to the audience. But Native American drama such as *Native American Radio Days* involves the audience in a manner that a TV show like *Ellen* or *Oprah* would. The “applaud”, “tear clothes off”, “trill”, “boo and hiss”, “whoop and holler”, “laugh”, shout “YES!”. These erase the boundary between TV and drama and become a characteristic of Native American drama. The active participation of the

audience in *Native American Radio Days* is also there when the audience plays bingo in the play and receive prizes for it. “The Native American Bingo Lady comes on stage periodically, and ad-lib’s about life on the Reservation where her brother is chief...After each performance, cast members can give the bingo prizes to the audience.” (D’Aponte 108).

In *Foghorn* (Geiogamah), the character of the tutor’s monologue directly addresses the audience: “I wonder if the people in Washington really know what they’re doing by trying to teach these savages how to speak English....” The grandmother in *Children of the Sun* (Momaday, 2007) does something similar when she says: “(to audience) Well, this is a kind of yuckiness, isn’t it? I mean lovey-dovey, sweetsie-neatsie, cutesie, tootsie. Eck! Let’s get on with it”.

The Native American drama is alive to the postmodern turn of the world. The chaos and fragmentation of the postmodern world become a chief characteristic of the Native American drama as it represents the fragmented lives of the Native Americans, particularly through Rose and Thelma. In addition to the characters, time is fragmented in the Native American drama mainly to represent the unending ordeal of the Native American existence. The disjointed time shows that the Native American struggle to survive the white man’s onslaught transcends the categories of years, decades, and centuries.

English literature has a certain devotion to facts and facticity, but the Native American drama does not hesitate from employing *deus ex machina* as characters. Spider Grandmother, Snake Chief, and Sun are characters in *Children of the Sun*. The audience also gets to witness a baby transforming into a woman of age. In a mythical occurrence, a bird sits on Aila’s cradle, which is followed by lightning, and when the bright light fizzles out, the infant has grown into a young woman. The play amends the traditional drama form and toys with the ridiculous for a reason: to display and preserve the Native American belief system.

Character, the second most important attribute of a play for Aristotle, is important for the Native American drama but is employed differently than in the traditional drama. While Aristotle and later the Elizabethan drama represented larger than life

characters, the Native American drama is about ordinary people. Downtrodden Native Americans, caught in the throes of financial difficulties, health issues, despair and overtly hostile society, form the typical characters in Native American drama. Generals filled with ambition or jealousy, princes occupied by thoughts of beloved or revenge have no place in the Native American drama. Instead, deserted sons and daughters trying to keep their fragile existence intact appear on the stage. Issues like putting food on the table and staying out of prison are immediate issues of the Native American characters.

Aristotle gave a nod of approval to taking personages from history to base dramas on, and Shakespeare followed the model in ten of his plays, including *Henry V* and *Richard III*. The Native American drama uses history but in its own signature manner. It focuses more on the historical events, the tragedies that befell the American Nations, the massacres they were subjected to, and the subjugation that was legalized under treaties. Fall Creek Massacre, Pound Ridge Massacre, Yellow Creek Massacre are just a few of the genocidal assaults on the Native Americans that the drama talks about. Even as the plays talk about historical events and, of course, include historical personages, the characters generally remain ordinary people from the Native American Reservations. Heroic figures overcoming odds to emerge victoriously are not there. Instead, the plays feature ordinary Native Americans trying to survive till the end of the day. Tonto, Thompson, Eddie, Bobby, Rodney and Marie are average joes trying to eke out a meagre existence.

The Native American drama also brings in characters from the Christian religious tradition. Susanna is taken from the Book of Daniel. But she is altered to represent the oppression of the Native Americans and also women in the contemporary system and patriarchal order. The desire to present the Native American perspective on things dominates the choice of characters and their use in the plays.

An interesting element of the characters is that they are simply not moulded as per the dictates of the European tradition. While this tradition wants to see characters grow, flourish and succeed or at times fail, the Native American drama has a different

perspective on characters. Character growth is not a major concern. Tonto is good at many things and but he is not concerned about finding his true calling. He remains happily engaged in whatever catches his fancy at the moment. The European perspective on Tonto would be that he had potential but failed to live up to it. But Tonto never wants to go by this model of success. Janice in the play voices this by saying that Rodney could have been successful if he had put his mind to something. But she does not realize that Rodney, as also Tonto, is working under an entirely different philosophy where he learns what he wants to learn and to move on once he thinks he has learnt enough. He does not go by the idea that learning should be dictated by the world's measure of when something has been learnt enough. So character development does not take place in the Native American drama as it does in the traditional English drama.

The Native American drama is also different from the traditional English drama in its language. The language is akin to that of rhymes that children make up for their play, such as:

Hearsay, hearsay, dogs and deer say,
Gossip, gossip, in the noonday,
Crangie, crangie, hobble and hop,
Dogspeak, dogspeak, gossip must STOP!

Even the dialogues do not conform to the usual refinement one expects from the diction of a play: 'He turns, don't you know, and he sees his spit and image. Crangie, crangie, coo, coo, coo! He sees his very own image. He is, he is, identical twins! and in another instance

Speckle, speckle, who will heckle?
Spit and image, in a pickle.

Catharsis, the purpose of the traditional drama, adopts a new dimension in the Native American drama wherein it becomes not about the reader or the audience but is mainly about the writer and the Native American people. It is the writer venting anger and frustration accumulated in the Native American nations over centuries of oppression. Equally importantly, the writers want to show the Native American way of life as a means of preserving it besides portraying the problems the Native Americans face on and off the so-called reservations. Geigomah feels that the theatre can help "stop the

erosion of [the] Native American way of life” (Aponte 3). His idea is to establish theatre groups or companies to create awareness about the Native Americans. If each Native American tribe were to have a theatre group, there would be around 512 companies producing genuine stories creating awareness about not just the Native Americans generally but about the specific history, heritage and problems of each tribal nation. Momaday’s *The Indolent Children* presents the hurt at how the system took away their children allegedly for education. Richard Pratt’s philosophy “Kill the Native American save the Man” (Momaday, Paul year) is one of the biggest causes of distraught to the Native Americans. The boarding school system took away their children and anglicized them, giving them even English names. De-linked from their culture, the children remain limbo as they can come to terms neither with the American culture nor the Native American culture.

The Native American drama also has its own ideas about the conventional division of scenes and acts. While it has scenes and acts, the division is different from the traditional drama, and one-act plays do not constitute a sub-genre and are presented as regular plays.

The Native American drama also has the spirit of experimentation. Knuebuhl’s (1996) *The Story of Susanna* experiments with the stage itself. It divides the stage into three circles, each of which signifies a separate setting. The upper and the smallest circle is the world of the Bible, where Susanna is shown suffering at the hands of the Elders. The middle circle, which is lower and more towards the centre of the stage, is in the modern world where Susanna is being treated as a lunatic and is being reformed. The lower circle is the past where Susanna is just a young girl enjoying her days of innocence and bliss.

The comic and the serious are usually compartmentalized in the traditional drama. Even when Shakespeare brings the two together, the comic remains an insertion. For Shaw, the two categories of drama remain distinct. In the Native American drama, the blend is more discreet, and the comic and the serious merge more intricately. The humorous and the serious come together seamlessly in *Native American Radio Days*. The Native Americans’

challenge to the white man’s conquest of their land, a matter of utmost importance, is accompanied by the humour of the insertion of an advertisement about toilet papers, and then the announcer asks the Midwest farmers to get into Native American Bingo. Jane Fonda is a dumb celebrity even as she talks about Native American issues. Tonto in *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* (Taylor, 1998) quips in the middle of tense situations.

At times, humour crosses the line separating gentle humour and bitter satire. The satire in Shakespeare on Polonius, the off-handed manner of Kings, Shaw’s satire on war and love, or Beckett’s satire on the meaninglessness of life are paralleled by the Native American drama’s satire. In *Native American Radio Days* (Howe and Gordon, Year), the satire is bitter and pinching: “Only fifty cents a day will provide a child with the physical and spiritual nourishment that he or she needs so desperately. Or several thousand dollars a day can provide us with a multimillion-dollar combination cathedral and luxurious vacation complex.” Howe and Gordon also ridicule the stereotypical images of the Native Americans made popular by the media as fortune-tellers and seers. ‘call the live, one-on-one Native American Psychic Association. Get your personal information on success, love and lucky bingo numbers.’ The satire becomes bitterer with ‘Call now and receive an authentic Native American drum from Taiwan.’ Satire feels stereotypes.

A key distinction of the Native American drama is its blend of the sacred and the profane. The profane is entirely missing from the English tradition of drama. Even the rebellious Theatre of the Absurd does not go into the territory of the profane. Christianity is often a target in this blend of the sacred and the profane. Commercial Announcer # 4 gives a number to the devout to call to prove their Christianity and to show themselves as good Christians. She says, ‘Call 1-800-4-CHRIST. This presents the Church as a corporate entity out to make money without any scruple.

One of the biggest issues facing the Native American nations is obesity (Joe&Young, 1994 and Narayan, 1996). This, too, is tackled through a blend of the sacred and the profane. It is presented as a promotion of Jane Fonda’s Native American workout

special. “That’s right, for \$39.95 you will be able to lose inches and stop overeating on the Rez. Also, a small portion of your money will go towards funding a Native Weight Loss Program. With that initial payment of \$39.95, you’ll receive a workout tape featuring traditional dances, and you’ll FEEL BETTER FAST.” The Native Americans’ religious ceremonies are turned into a diet gimmick and a means of making a quick buck. Sun Dance is the “biggest” of Lakota ceremonies (Hull, 2000) and one which is also the “centre of the spiritual life of the Plains Native Americans” (Yellowtail, 2007). It is turned into a diet scam to cheat people out of their money.

Foghorn (Geiogamah, 1980) sees a character clean himself with a tissue roll each time a girl announces the name of a treaty from a long list written on a roll of toilet paper. The scatological image is meant to reduce the importance of the treaties to utter disgusting trash (Kneubuhl, 2012).

Conventional English drama was renowned for its diction carrying forward the tenets laid down by the Greek tragedies. Even when the language became more colloquial with Shaw and Wilde, it remained refined and serious. The Native American drama employs colloquial language but sees expletives as a regular feature of the colloquial language, and so often, the language descends into being base and irreverent, profane and vulgar. *The Story of Susanna* (Kneubuhl, 1999) has children discuss intimate relationships of respect in crude terms. The following children’s rhyme from the play illustrates how

children are shown talking about love in an irreverent manner.

Johnny and Janey up in a tree
K-I-S-S-I-N-G.
First comes love,
Then comes marriage,
Then comes Janey with a baby carriage.

The thematic unity of the drama is also a point of difference between the Native American drama and the English drama. The English drama of the white man wants to be one thing, e.g. tragedy, or romance etc. The designation of a single genre is a major concern here. But the Native American drama is whatever the playwright wants it to be at any given moment during the performance. The genre is not a concern. The drama gives the dramatist the freedom to make the drama whatever suits the present concern. This is why Native American drama is such a varied blend. It moves in and out of times, present and past, erases the distinctions between tragedy and comedy, blends the serious and the profane, is historical and also entertaining. It does not seek the approval of tradition and is happy being what it is.

Conclusion

The Native American drama has carved a distinct place for itself by challenging the European tradition of drama, something that is matched by its challenge of the European view of the world, history and the Native American culture. It defies the narratives of the Native Americans being drunk, lazy, and superstitious at the same time as it defies the white man’s way of writing a drama.

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