

Citation: Aftab, A., & Akram, S. (2021). Schooling the Souls of the Savages: Theme of Negative Stereotyping in Native American Plays. *Global Language Review*, VI(II), 30-36. [https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021\(VI-II\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021(VI-II).04)



Schooling the Souls of the Savages: Theme of Negative Stereotyping in Native American Plays

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Abstract

The present article deals with the theme of negative stereotyping in the backdrop of identity and representation in Native American drama with special reference to Scott Momaday's *The Indolent Boys*, *The Moon in Two Windows*, and Howe & Gordon's *Indian Radio Days*. By assuming an explicit postcolonial angle, these plays consciously subvert the project of negative stereotyping of the natives by employing the ideological vocabulary of the mainstream Euro-American discourse. In this way, the native American drama has become a significant site of deconstructing the binary of 'us' and 'them' by reversing the logic of imperialism and by resisting against the exploitative history of colonization.

Key Words: Eurocentrism, Negative Stereotyping, Native American Plays, Savages

Introduction

Before a critical reading of the Native American drama, it is very pertinent to consider the history of Amerindian people, commonly known as American Indians, who were subject to humiliating and horrific degradation, extinction and cultural genocide by the European invaders touching the level of "ethnic cleansing" (Howe & Gordon, p. 120). The marginalized and excluded lifestyle which a reservation has given to these Indians has strong parallels with the ghetto lives of many Jews during Holocaust and its devastating effects on them. However, the duplicity of the European historians is made evident by the Native American writers when they demonstrate how has the sorry state of Indian existence been wilfully excluded or gravely missing from the history containing elaborate accounts of Jewish sufferings and persecution by the Nazis. The only version that these Native people are represented in historical archives of these Europeans is their proverbial savagery which can be eradicated only and if they are exposed to European ways of life. Hence all

foreign invaders seem to be burning with a kind of 'missionary zeal' to teach and civilize these Indians in order to mold them into decent human beings with sanity and sophistication.

Against this backdrop, the Native American dramatists have reinterrogated the discursive claims of European history by using the language of the invaders. Momaday highlights this resistive and unique use of the English language by the Native American writers in his play *The Indolent Boys*, where one of the characters expresses the white men's surprise and bewilderment on seeing the "originality and eloquence" of the native peoples who have "taken possession of (the language of the invaders), appropriated it, made it [their] own as if [they] were born to it" (p. 28). That such lucid and eloquent use and appropriation of the English language is something, they never expect from an individual of a so-called wild and uncivilized culture.

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Literature Review

The themes of colonization and imperialism with their ideological baggage to hegemonize many parts of the world have been represented in literature all around the world in different nations and languages. Chinua Achebe, Tayyeb Saleh and Jamaica Kincaid have talked about the insidious effects of colonial and neo-colonial hegemony in their specific contexts by underscoring how to 'use master's tool to dismantle master's house' (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 4). In different post-colonial nations of Asia and Africa, the idea has been used productively and creatively in many projects of decolonizing the historical, cultural, political and ideological apparatus of the former colonial master. However, in the history of Native American people, the idea has a specific genealogy as the native writers have invested the liberating potential of abrogation and appropriation in their use of the English language in order to engage and subvert the logic of empire.

In his study on the discursive construction of native identity, the unique contribution of Native American poet Sherman Alexie has established his distinct native identity regarding the other American poets and writers of European descent. During this project of subversion, Alexie has reconstructed the subject/activity of Native Americans while simultaneously viewing the white canonical literary tradition such as Hopkins as outside Native American discursive formation (Berglund, & Roush, 2010). In another research, Shafiq et al. (2019) have accentuated the crucial nature of this Native American project of Renaissance as it involves, besides many other things, a conscious struggle against "imperial authority" by challenging the so-called "transcendental signified" of the western cultural sovereignty around which the whole western truth is constructed" (p. 9). In this way, the Native American writers made a conscious point of departure from the official history and discourse of the invaders and realized that any revival of the oral tradition of their culture and history requires exclusion of "European or Euroamerican influence from a developing Native aesthetics" (Lundquist, 2004, p. 291).

Research Methodology

The article has used textual analysis as a primary methodology as theorized by Catherine Belsey. Belsey has connected this method with the multiplicity of meanings that the word text has enjoyed in recent cultural studies (Tariq, 2016). After the groundbreaking work of Derrida, where he expresses his scepticism about the possibility of anything outside the text (his words 'there is no meta-text, 'nothing outside the text') has allowed the cultural and literary theorists to invest much signification of the word text. According to Schwandt (2001), the word text in Post-Derridean times has come to mean everything, a word, a social act, a gesture, a sign, the unconscious and conscious pattern of thinking, perceiving and understanding the world around us. It is this idea that Belsey extends in elaborating her notion of textual analysis that has become the central research method, especially in the discipline of literary studies. However, unlike the close and narrow reading of the text in a Leavisian fashion, Belsey seeks to broaden its limits by adding the complex role of ideology in its construction and its more complex interaction with the culture that it both produces and is a product of. In saying this, she, in fact, creates a kind of nexus between three important elements – which are the text, the author and the reader (Arya, 2020). This triological relation is further compounded by inserting the historical and cultural realities that Belsey terms as extra-textual; nonetheless, they play their vital role in the making of text, with the effect that for Belsey, like many other cultural critics of her time, this notion of text becomes an all-encompassing blend of different signs, each becoming a meaningful discursive entity before us which we as readers mediate through our critical agency. The first principle to do this textual analysis, according to Belsey, is to look into the text literally by scanning what is obviously there in the text. However, this literal meaning should be subject to further scrutiny by posing different questions before the text, by locating possible clues to find the answers to these questions and most of all by employing our perception into play as, according to Belsey, the perception of the reader is and should not be necessarily similar to the perception of the author. In this way, Belsey gives an added dimension to the process of reading as it allows a critical reader to

invest his subjective views/interpretations within the text.

However, Belsey warns that during this process of inserting one's perception, the reader should carefully gauge his/her interpretation in the light of what is already written on the same text that they are reading. This textual analysis, in view of Belsey, is materialized within specific historical moments and their subjective interlink with the larger culture outside. In other words, the text, in Belsey's view, becomes a sign-system that means many things in present and past and is a product of the subjective perception of the reader in the wake of an objective tradition of reading and writing in its historicity. There is always a possibility that these different signs which constitute a text may signify different things which are not always mutually congruent. However, Belsey concedes that this mutual interlink between text and different signs that it evokes becomes productive as it renders text an almost inexhaustible significance. In other words, this mode of textual analysis offers multiple angles and interpretations of a text without insisting on one meaning as more privileged or true than the other, with the final effect that no finite or final truth can be located within a text.

This model of textual analysis has been used in the analysis of the selected parts of Native American drama with a particular focus to see how the literary texts engage themselves with the negative stereotyping of the native identity and, in so doing, reverse the political and ideological logic of the empire. Moreover, this textual analysis allows a critical reader to develop one's independent reading of the text by simultaneously attending to the concrete history and culture of Native American tribes. In this way, the text, despite its imaginative and fictional resonance, offers valuable cognitive gains to the readers by offering a blueprint of the political and historical struggle of resistance and subversion in the case of Native American literary tradition.

Delimitation

The present article has delimited itself to a selection of three plays by Native American writers, two out of them are written by Scott Momaday, a renowned

Native American writer with his writings in multiple genres, including fiction and drama. The two plays selected by Momaday are *The Indolent Boys* and *The Moon in Two Windows* (2007), whereas one play is written by Howe & Gordon entitled *The Indian Radio Days* (1999). The article has attempted to make a close yet critical textual analysis of the selected Native American drama in order to highlight the conscious project of deconstruction as well as restoration of a unique native identity by these writers.

Analysis and Discussion

In Momaday's play "*The Indolent Boys*", two characters Wheritt and Gregory, in their conversation about the innate savagery of these Indians, express their holy mission "to civilize the Indian, to save their souls", as they "deserve the best...our very best, the highest expression of Christian charity" that is in us"(p.21). However, to the great shock and indignation of these so-called custodians of civilization, the Indians remain complicit in their inherent savagery as their "dark, expressionless faces...fell short...to live up the (their) most modest dreams" (p. 20). With the only exception of Wheritt and Gregory, who are the healthy, happy, productive human beings, these Indians are presented in their debased instincts – something that Momaday refers to rather sarcastically as following: "how can they be doctors when sickness is their natural state, and they fall like flies to every disease they are exposed to" (p. 21) resisting "the glorious destiny...(the)times of greatness" (p. 21) they are exposed to if they accept the uncontested superiority of their European masters and their civilizing mission.

In the play, the conversation between Gregory and Wheritt represent the schematic design of these Europeans to project the identity of natives with a pack of myths, stereotypes and falsifications as "indolent thieves and beggars, those dreamers out there in the camps, the poor, befeathered, war-painted Ghost Dancers", even their "wise men" are deemed nothing but children" (pp.19-20). Unlike the real and rational posture and position of the Europeans, these poor Indians "prefer make-believe" (p. 21) and that is shown through their rituals like Ghost Dance which to these Europeans is the metaphor of their ridiculous faith that "their dead

will rise from their graves, that the buffalo will come back, that we whites will go away and leave them alone” (p. 22). On account of their innately primitive instincts, any sense of “maturity, intellectual maturity, sophistication, a sense of responsibility, moral responsibility” is unimaginable for them as they are doomed to be in an eternal infantile state. The only thing which can redeem these poor Indians and their even poorer lot is to give them the “English language, Christian names, and gainful employment” (by politely telling them that “their gods have forsaken them and that their way of life is unacceptable, *uncivilized*” (p. 22, emphasis original), hence have no place in this modern world.

The great ingenuity of the native playwrights is that sometimes they subvert these stereotypes by the mouth and personae of the Europeans, hence indirectly holding them responsible for the grave human and moral crimes they have committed against the native people. In this way, the Native American drama presents a critique by offering a blueprint of all loot, plunder and moral corruption lying underneath the European project of imperialism, voyage and discovery of remote lands. Sometimes, the native writers deliberately change their choice of narrative voice and modes of articulation in order to create a counter-discourse. For instance, Momaday, in his *The Indolent Boys*, portrays a bold and audacious character John Pai who holds these foreign invaders of all misery and wretchedness plaguing the Indians’ existence in time past and present and says: “I am a red Indian. Perhaps you have heard of us red Indians,... We are a savage race, rather good-looking, tall, dark, stoic, fierce, uncivilized, often dangerous. In some books, we are said to be noble” (p. 24).

In saying this, Pai, in fact, subverts the romantic as well as the derogative stereotypes for/against the Native peoples, which have been the root cause of deep epistemic and discursive violence against Indian culture, making the theme subject to what Gerald Gerald Vizenor has called the “world wars”(as cited in [Kimberely, 1996, p. 5](#)). In a similar manner of subversion and appropriation, Vizenor criticizes the dominant and discriminatory stereotypes about Native identity by arguing how this invented Indianness has a discursive and subversive function simultaneously. In this way, the Native American

drama restores the lost or forgotten humanity of these natives by presenting them as “people... in fact, people before people ([Howe & Gordon, p. 112](#)) (who) have always been here” (p. 11) before the “dangerous and foolhardy trips (of Columbus) across the ocean in those flimsy boats” (p. 11). At another place, the writer makes a direct reference to how the native Indian identity has been “distilled, dissuaded, disbanded, dug up, and ... lied to, lied about, worked over, robbed, and damn near ruined” (p. 117). In this way, the Native American playwrights attempt to deconstruct the so-called mystique, which reduces the natives into a dream-like status by romanticizing their names and locales, customs and costumes and other cultural artefacts. Such discursive construction of native identity allowed the European masters to mold, shape, reshape, even destroy the native subjective and collective self according to their political intent and power interest. The arbitrary and makeshift nature of native identity morphs from a characteristic “dirty and naked” (p. 118). Indian into a wise savage who could render the modern world the strange and sacred mysteries of his vision and insight. Likewise, the radical transformation of an Indian from an ignorant, wild savage with a painted face, holding bows and arrows into a sage, serene and stoic mystic with visions and dreams signify how such discursive strategies serve the political interests of those in power who define and represent their subjects into eternal categories of stillness and stasis having no life and vitality of their own.

By tracing the complex and subtle dynamics of European invaders to acculturate and erase the native people and their history, the Native American drama mentions the role of different European schools and boarding houses where the young Indian children were kept in an attempt to stop them from indulging in “meaningful family communication” with their families and tribes ([Boyd, 1974, p.117](#)). By means of “re-educating, acculturating, Anglicizing, modernizing or Christianizing” ([Boyd, p.118](#)), these erstwhile primitive and savage people, the European invaders, fulfilled their vicious agenda of annihilation and cultural genocide. This has been represented quite poignantly when John Pai in *The Indolent Boys* mentions how the colonial masters “provided us with schools, schools in which we learn how to slough our red skins, forget our languages, forget our parents

and grandparents, our little brothers and sisters, and our dead ancestors” (p. 14). By connecting himself with the unique consciousness of the Indians for whom memory and story constitute an integral part of their history and culture, he terms these schools as camps “where memory is killed”, and they are taught to “forget our past...(and) not to remember but to dismember” their selfhood (p. 24). Even the very act of cutting their hair and giving them Christian names is tantamount to annihilating their identity as Natives whose religious and spiritual beliefs are considered as a pack of whims and myths, having nothing to do with the true spirit religion or spirituality.

In another play, *The Moon in Two Windows*, Momaday once again touches upon the theme of Boarding schools as the ideal breeding ground for the cultural genocide of the young natives. That these schools were deliberately established in remote lands where the boys and girls were forcibly sent with the effect of being separated from their parents, tribes and communities as one character in the play said: “through my years at Carlisle; I was to peer again and again into the chasm that lay between the world in which I was born and the world beyond” (p. 123). It is very pertinent to mention that Momaday’s deliberate choice of Carlisle School in his dramatic setting points to the conviction of the European to transform these indolent and unruly Indian boys into “responsible citizens of the United States, a productive member of society, a Christian servant and a bona fide human being” (p. 132). However, Momaday lays bare the reality underneath this noble mission when the Natives, after being educated and trained in the business of the empire, were abandoned and deprived of any rightful custodianship of their land and lives and were treated as mere objects in the civilizing mission of Europe.

Besides subverting the romantic or anti-humanist stereotypes of Native identity, the Amerindian plays also become the most robust expression where an independent native identity is articulated, which is “more than bloodlines, earth tones and stuff like that. Indian is not an identity that can be purchased cheaply with mere money” (Howe & Gordon, p.135). In his play *The Moon in Two Windows*, Momaday argues that the eternally unschooled and unsophisticated souls of Indians will

remain so as long as the European invaders could not purge their innate “impertinence” (2007) out of them. He makes an ironic remark to the infamous notion of European civilizing mission that suggests “kill the Indian and save the man” (Momaday, p. 68) by demonstrating the undying resentment and resistance of native children from such haughty and domineering control of their masters. Whether it is evident from some boarders’ attempt to run away from the school or their insistence to keep their hair in line with their cultural norm, Momaday represents the relentless defiance of the native boys, and their struggle for their distinct identity as one character says:

“It was good that you cut your own hair. It was your sacrifice and not theirs. And it was your mourning, not theirs.... You were your own being and not theirs. You are an Indian. Always be an Indian; that is who and what you are. That is yourself, and it is the best thing you have” (p. 145).

The play *Indian Radio Days* has one or two strongest and boldest sites of assertions that it makes on behalf of the Indian people and their culture when it does not merely subvert the reality of these romantic and prejudicial stereotypes, rather unearths and unveils the true tribalistic identity of the Indians that “is more than bloodiness, earth tones and stuff like that. Indian is not an identity that can be purchased cheaply with mere money” (Howe & Gordon, p.135, emphasis original). Instead, it is something that they acquire and maintain painstakingly by undergoing test and trial by the Europeans in different times of their history

Conclusion

What is the most remarkable contribution of these playwrights is their deliberate straightening of the historical record by subverting the European history at one hand and rewriting what Leanne Howe has termed as “tribalography” by emphasizing the “intellectual assets of their ancestors” in each tribe (Howe & Gordon, p. 104). One significant instance of this is their critical engagement with the Eurocentric myths of voyage and discovery, especially their obsession with maps and maritime adventures, which have the discursive currency of their ultimate political and military triumph. On the other hand, in

rejecting the mythical figure of a European traveller or discoverer with his so-called chivalry, the native writers have overwritten the project of enlightenment and progress by reversing the “misbegotten interpretation of Eurocentric tribalism” (Howe & Gordon, p. 118). They have vociferously rejected the so-called glorious history of the modern west with its rational and political superiority by reversing the colonial logic and making a pun to the entire connotation of the word cannibal – the proverbial man-eater in Columbus’s diary entries (Ashcroft et al. 2000, p. 26). In one play, the native writer makes a direct criticism to what it calls the “cannibalistic tendencies of Judeo-Christian traditions” (Howe & Gordon, p. 139) and declares rather provocatively: “the history of colonization on this continent is already littered with examples of European tribalism that constructed the body of the native OTHER as edible” (p. 140). Similarly, in another play, the whole myth of Columbus is reversed by making an interesting yet ironical distinction between the oral (the native) versus anal (Eurocentric) history in the backdrop of the practice of cannibalism as one character says, “unlike the Trickster in our own cultures, the European culture has constructed its own trope of the flesh-eater. This anal history, as this study fondly calls it began with Chris “Cannibal” Columbus, who ventured into Indian country with his famous shopping carts: the *Pinta*, the *Nina*, the *Santa Maria*” (p. 140). On a related note, the dialogues here seem to make fun of Europeans’ obsession with the idea of origin or originary myth of human civilization that they see in the west, whereas in reality, the so-called beholders

of enlightenment and civilization were once caught in the darkness of ignorance, superstition and religious fanaticism. In this way, the play subverts the European myth of cultural or racial purity and precedence as one of the characters says: “I recently discovered that one of my ancestors was an Eighteenth-century English Princess who was on a boat to America at the time of her death, so you see, the argument that I am an outsider is misinformed” (pp.141-42). Moreover, he questions the notion of any unqualified superiority of the Europeans by saying 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 Indians might have something to teach them. Only those with a history should study the history of others” (p. 142). These words do not merely question the Eurocentric assumption of having some kind of monopoly on human history and civilization. They also unmask the Europeans’ claims of being objective and unbiased historians, whereas, in reality, their outlook seeped with biases and bigotry against other racial and ethnic groups, including Amerindians. In this way, the article concludes that Native American drama, like other genres of Native literature, has been instrumental in presenting the “voices and perspectives of Indians to contradict or counter (the) stereotypes” (Shafiq et al., 2018, p. 105) which demean or demonize their subjectivity, and at the same time offers a rich spectacle of the cultural diversity and spiritual depth of native cultures before the onset of European colonial project with its unitary and power-hungry outlook.

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