

# An Insight into the Psychological Issues of Indigenous Women through First Nations Theatre

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**Abstract---** *Many indigenous people in Canada have been victims of forced dispersal to various parts of the United States on account of the cultural erasure scheme endorsed by colonizers. They undergo acute pain and sufferings due to various atrocities and violence against them. This study explores the significance of First Nations theatre, which unravels the lives of many Indigenous children who have been ripped off from their communities and displaced to different foster home. Given the various forms of discrimination in terms of the settler's cohesive policy making, the lack of adequate facilities at present, the study interrogates the assumptions of the "Imaginary Indian" propagated by the colonial discourse. With the implications of articles and texts on First Nations theatre, the study seeks to explicate and contextualize Marie Clements' play, Tombs of the Vanishing Indian. The need to represent the real condition of Native people is vital so as to provoke social awareness and draw attention of the world towards the hideous plot of the colonizers which otherwise would go unnoticed. It also argues that First Nations theatre is a powerful platform of resistance against the inhuman colonial practice of cultural erasure which affects the equilibrium of Native people's lives. The study finds that First Nations theatre inculcate reality on stage so as to pave way for social change and to find a better space for the Indigenous people of the land.*

**Keywords---** *Indigenous People, Psychosocial Issues, Cultural Erasure, First Nations Theatre.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

With reference to colonialism and its impacts, like many minorities across the world, the indigenous people in Canada continue to struggle under the European settlers. Unlike the many colonized countries, Canada is one of the few settlers' colonies where the Indigenous or First peoples (the original inhabitants of the land) live under the settler's policies until today. As dated back to the 1400, the French and the British first came into contact with the First peoples through the fur trade alliances, the "French and the Hudson's Bay Company" (The Fur Trade, 18) [1]. The relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people lead to series of issues in terms of governing socio economic and political spectrum. Hence, the 'Two-Row Wampum Belt' of the Haudenosaunee was introduced to record their laws and governance systems (Trick or Treaty, 2015) [2]. Sooner or later, with the eruption of complicated pledge, a new practice in Canada the so called the 'treaties' were designed. The treaties include- the Peace and Friendship Treaties from 1725-1779; the Robinson Treaty in 1850; the Douglas Treaties from 1850-1854; the Numbered Treaties from 1871-1921; and the Modern Treaties from 1975 to the present (Miller, 2009) [3]. Unsurprisingly, the Modern treaties often involve the protection of land and resource development, to prevent from exploiting Indigenous traditional territory. Here, the study intentionally capitalizes the words 'Indigenous/ Native/ First Peoples' as it aims to denote who they really are, indicating the significance of reviving the Native identity.

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The First Peoples follow the parameters of holistic approach and they share close connection with nature and land. In this aspect, losing of their land is equivalent to losing of their identity, beliefs, cultures and traditions.

However, since the colonial intrusion, the colonial rule has marked a great tribulation with a horrendous impact upon the Indigenous people in Canada. The Indigenous people are left with a surge of apprehension and menace as the colonizers attempt to erase Native race with the implementation of institutionalized racism. Dian Million argues that, “Indigenism is loyalty to the land not the flags not the corporations if we are loyal to the land we will live and prosper and find peace and not live forever with the flickering image of the pinstripe man who takes his weapons and rapes us again and again” (Million, 2011) [4]. Apart from losing their land rights and culture, they eventually become the victims of various forms of atrocities and violence. Moreover, they become a paradigm of the ‘Vanishing Indian’ and “Imaginary Indian” (Francis, 2011) [5] as constructed and stereotyped by the colonial powers. Specifically, the indigenous women who enjoy the practice of an egalitarian principle before the colonial contact lost their values and position in families and communities. Indigenous women were objectified as sexist stereotype.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary context, discriminations and injustices towards First Peoples simultaneously occur that accommodate the few elites and people in power. On the contrary, the minorities, that constitute of Indigenous people in the urban and rural areas are marginalized from all benefits and opportunities. With the influence and the imposition of the settlers’ policies, Native Canadian’s lives are seemingly appeared to be at risk. If not considered towards the activism to upholding Indigenous culture, Indigenous cultures and traditions would perish completely sooner as their images and identity are tarnished and they remain almost an endangered entity at present. Although Native literature has been visible in different art forms and genres, it appears to be invisible to a larger audience.

## **II. DECOLONIALITY AND FIRST NATIONS THEATRE**

Researchers have framed the Indigenous studies within postcolonial perspectives, and yet, a few have established a framework in representing the present realities of the indigenous people in Canada. In the collection, “Report of the royal commission on aboriginal peoples,” Rene Dussault and Georges Erasmus highlight the colonial mass destruction of the indigenous people in terms of the loss of Native identity and cultures: “Regardless of the approach to colonialism practiced, however, the impact on indigenous populations was profound. Perhaps the most appropriate term to describe that impact is ‘displacement’. Aboriginal peoples were displaced physically — they were denied access to their traditional territories and in many cases actually forced to move to new locations selected for them by colonial authorities” (Dussault and Erasmus, 1996) [6]. Indigenous peoples are removed from settler’s societies in several forms as their existence challenge the settler’s access to resources such as land. The forced displacement of the indigenous people has led to negative impacts that effectuate a psychological effect, followed by a sense of low self-esteem and loss of indigenous culture.

With the emergence of post-colonial literature, there have been a loud protest against colonialism. In the Canadian context, this act of protest through literature is quite evident in texts written by the Native writers, which are not limited to voicing their plight and sufferings, yet they developed resistance. According to Emma LaRocque,

Colonization is not abstract, it is an experience. The outcome is loss and denigration. It cannot be restated enough that the characterization of Native peoples as savage has had a profoundly painful and destructive impact on Native peoples, an impact about which Native writers across historic periods have minced no words. (LaRocque, 2010, 100) [7]

The shrewd act of the Europeans settler's bigotry towards indigenous cultures and traditions evince a distinct inkling of how the whites look at Natives. These acts of the dominant power inflict negative impacts on Indigenous people which enkindle an impetus to interrogating the imperial discourse. While, in the process, it encourages to reinstate and reclaim Indigenous history. As we are aware that reclaiming the entirety of Indigenous lost cultures and languages at present is beyond reach. Yet, the process of decolonization which attempt to reclaim history would help to integrate one's values and identity. The term "decolonization" refers to the process through which colonial rule dissolved, and it encompasses the various political, economic, cultural and social dimensions of this process both in the periphery and in the metropole" (Klose, 2014) [8]. While questioning and voicing the concept of decoloniality, Sayan Dey points out that, "The socio-political hierarchies and the fragmentations, which evolved during colonialism, have further widened and have been weaving their web of universal domination in a very systematic and logical manner" (Dey, 2018) [9]. Given the concept of colonial circumstances, obviously the engagement of postcolonial research and decoloniality need to be traced back to history and past events (imperial powers). And one is aware of the hideous colonial institutionalized systems, that is the government's establishment of the residential school and the sixties scoop in Canada with the help of the Christian missionaries. This institutionalized racism led to several issues which ultimately becomes the core subject of the art of resistance. Besides, in the contemporary era, First Nations theatre or Aboriginal theatre functions as a medium of counter-discourse to recreate and revive the diverse indigenous tradition through story telling on stage.

The development of the First Nations theatre in Canada marked its beginning in the 1980s with the performance of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986). Alan Filewod points out that Tomson Highway's plays have broken through the mainstream theatrical performance with its authenticity and vigour that led him win the theatre celebrity as "Canadian theatre accords" (Filewod, 2005: 37) [10]. Subsequently, a pretty good number of Native playwrights emerged to find a new voice and a space representing Indigenous collective voice and community memory. Some of the renowned playwrights include, Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses, Drew Hayden Taylor, Maria Campbell's and Linda Griffiths, Monique Mojica, Marie Clements, and Margo Kane's. In terms of themes, plot construction, characters and dramaturgy, Aboriginal theatre developed its unique theatrical representation which subverts from the western theatre. According to Marie Clement,

Aboriginal theatre was born into Canadian theatre naked with only the spirit it came in with and "has built its infrastructures brick by brick, its audience one seat at a time" and a theatrical form that is distinctly its own and evolving. Like most surviving forces Aboriginal artists are accustomed to taking diverse fractions of their beliefs, lives, and art and reconstructing them to a hybrid of possibility. (Clements, 2005: 17) [11]

The Native playwrights integrate the wholesome of Indigenous traditional culture in theatre by incorporating the ancestral beliefs and myths (through the inclusion of trickster's characters and Native legends). This generates a new

form of representation and resistance in the contemporary times and hence make First Nations theatre different. Indigenous lives are threatened and disrupted at present and the government ignoring Indigenous voice and unceded Indigenous rights is a matter of concern. Therefore, it is apt to focus on the realities prevailing where the Indigenous people are silenced and stamped by the imperial hegemony. With the passage of time, it has been perceived that First Nations theatre act as an agent or a medium to instigate in addressing the real issues experienced by individuals and communities. Native theatre is informed and message centred, and often address multiplicity of knowledge and cultural traditions. The play of Marie Clements' *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* (2012) is examined to substantiate the title statement. The play showcases the heinous act of the whites and detailed the struggles endured by Indigenous women.

### III. MARIE CLEMENTS' TOMBS OF THE VANISHING INDIAN

The play, *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* explores the story of the forced removal of Native children schemed by the colonizers to erase Indigenous race. The play opens with a striking scene where the mother of three daughters (Janey, age three, Miranda, age seven, and Jessie, age nine) anxiously takes them towards the tunnel in order to escape from the three white men who appear as three Blackcoats in the play. The helpless mother fails to protect her daughters from the abductors as she is shot when she retaliates. Marie Clements unravels the lives of three sisters (Indian), Janey, Miranda, and Jessie, who have been ripped off from their mother and displaced in different parts of Los Angeles. In the following scenes, it displays different lifestyles of the three sisters, their struggles and challenges, who were completely void of their cultural ties, and yet, face all kinds of ill treatment as Indian women in the domain of the whites.

Further, the enforced imposition of the whites' ideologies is reflected in the lives of the three sisters whose rights and values are controlled and their lives framed by the white's government policies. Jessie, the oldest of the three, and being placed in a good foster home is assimilated outwardly towards the non-indigenous culture; however, inwardly, her conscious thoughts and attachment towards her roots are stronger as she endeavours to find her two younger sisters who have been separated since their childhood. Jessie expresses her strong regrets to Daniel, her husband: "I've searched for years, Daniel. They're nowhere to be found. It's as if they didn't even exist. Or I don't" (Clements, 35) [12]. Jessie's determination to find her sisters is evident as she remembers the past memories of her mother and her sisters with distressful thoughts.

Although drawing on the conceptual framework of colonial intrusion, the intention of the study is to move beyond colonial exploitation and emphasizes on physical violence against indigenous women, an ongoing crisis. Many Indigenous women in Canada have been victims of forced dispersal to various parts of the United states on account of the cultural erasure endorsed by colonizers. Clements depicts sincerely the violence against Indigenous women by portraying brutal killing of the mother of the three, and the hardships her daughters experienced aftermath. The playwright portrays the mother character intentionally so as to represent many Native mothers who have vanished silently. In an introductory note to the play, *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, Michael Greyeyes stresses on Marie Clements' technique of staging the actual realities of Indigenous communities through the tragic portrayal of one family: "In the life of one family, we see the displacement of communities, the legacy of Indian

boarding schools and missions, and finally the forced sterilization programs run by the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1950s and 1970s” (Clements, 2012) [12]. The play displays the action of the colonizers which aims at erasing the Indigenous race and culture completely.

In the book, *When the other is me: Native resistance discourse, 1850-1990*, Emma LaRocque brings in Native narratives into the light as she observes how Native writers aim to represent the realities that subverts the intention of mainstream writers: “Native writers record historical and personal incursions, social upheavals, a range of emotions, and unique individual and cultural backgrounds, and struggles for hope and determination” (LaRocque, 18) [7]. Marie Clements is one such Native writer who showcases the torments experienced by the Native people and their real-life situations. In the play, the character of Miranda, the second of the three sisters is introduced as a struggling actress in the realm of the mainstream movies. She struggles to get roles in movies for her living which many Native women experience in any kind of job, especially women who are displaced to urban areas. In her encounter with Bob Stills, the director of the American movie, Miranda expresses openly her dreadful experiences in an audition. On being asked about her childhood, Miranda condemned the residential school system.

BOB STILL. /Were you raised on a reservation?

MIRANDA. No, I was raised in a church that dressed itself like a school. There wasn't much freedom.

BOB STILL. Your family?

MIRANDA. There wasn't much family. The church that dressed itself like a school also dressed itself like a jail. Three squares and three institutions for the price of one. Indian boarding school. (Clements, 40) [12]

Miranda represents a Native adult who is brought up in a residential school who has no connection to her roots. The audience witness the hardships and sufferings of an Indigenous adult through Miranda who has lost her family and heritage. Miranda further discloses her surreptitious Indian identity to the director. She says: “An Indian mother who was shot dead, and two sisters who have vanished” (Clements, 51) [12]. On the contrary, for Bob Stills, the experience of Miranda does not surprise him as he posits that the Indians are meant to be shot / killed and destroyed. Bob Stills is the archetypal of whites' attitude in the play. Besides, in spite of all verbal and physical abuses and Negative stereotypes Miranda faces in an audition, she continues to venture out and stands as a strong Native woman.

Sterilization is one important feature in this study. In a note to the *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, Clements emphasizes the cruel action of the colonizers towards the Native people. She underscores that “between 192,000 and 548,000 women were sterilized each year between 1970 and 1977, compared to an average of 63,000 a year between 1907 and 1964, a period which included the zenith of the eugenic movement” (Clements, 2012) [12]. It is through Janey's character that the realities of extreme pain and agony experienced by Native women are displayed. Janey is deceived on the pretext of providing better care by Detective Fullen, the white government agent.

DETECTIVE FULLEN. They're just going to take you to a doctor. Get you checked out and cleaned up ...

JANEY begins to back away from him.

JANEY. No ... Why are you doing this? I didn't do anything to you. Why can't you just leave me alone?

(Clements, 2012, 31) [12]

These lines emphasize an authoritative inhuman deed of the whites. Moreover, the audience is shocked witnessing Janey's grief as she says: "Something is wrong ... Something is so hollow ... Something is wrong ...." (Clements, 68) [12]. The pathetic condition of Janey reveals the actual condition of Indigenous women whose wombs are removed by the white doctors to immobilize procreation. According to the stage direction, "*JANEY enters. There is blood flowing down her legs and staining her dress*" (Clements, 68) [12]. The life condition of Janey is worsen as she lives in an extreme physical pain and mental suffering as she walks in Dr. Daniel's clinic. Accidentally, Janey encounters her elder sister, Jessie in the clinic.

JESSIE. Oh, my God, you're bleeding, what happened?....

JANEY. He took something from inside me ... You have to fix it ... please ...

JESSIE. You're bleeding ... here ... let me ...

JANEY. Where are my babies going to live? .... (Clements, 68-69) [12]

Janey recognizes her sister, Jessie as she pleads for fixing her womb which Dr. Daniel has removed. To this, Jessie is left helpless and shattered witnessing that Janey is one of the victim of sterilization. She is also shocked to know that her husband, Daniel is involved in sterilizing Indian women. The emotional break down of Jessie, Miranda and Janey is shown towards the end of the play as they reunite by remembering the last words of their mother.

Raymond Orr, Katelyn Sharratt, and Muhammad Iqbal observe that the depiction of Native people in "media are often contradictory," (Orr, Sharrat and Iqbal, 2008) [13] and hence they urge to voice the concern of the Indigenous communities. They assert that the "representations of American Indians have generated considerable scholarly attention in American Indian studies, particularly in regards to the negative consequences of the narrow depictions of American Indians in popular culture" (Orr, Sharrat and Iqbal, 2008: 7) [13]. Hence, the playwright exhibits earnestly the bitter experience of the Native women which would have been unknown to the worldwide otherwise. Perhaps, apart from the story of these three sisters, there are many Indigenous untold stories. But through this play, one is aware of Clements's courage and strength to bring Native stories alive on stage that serves as a tool to restore history and revive its root.

#### **IV. RESISTANCE AND REVIVING INDIGENOUS SPACES**

In the article entitled "The Impact of the "Vanishing" Image on Indigenous Communities" Jenna Winton (2015) draws on the role of mass media, and how Indigenous people are doomed by the mainstream media:

Mass media is an invasive channel by which social representations are maintained in society and individual identities largely contrived. With little representation in media, indigenous people are obliterated from the contemporary world by omission. The psychological impact of being portrayed as vanishing or invisible in the media affects how indigenous and non-indigenous people understand individual and communal identities of present-day indigenous peoples. (Winton, 6) [14]

The playwright forges ahead honestly to bring out the harsh realities and sufferings of the Native people whose lives are determined by the dominant settlers, where the “colonial culture created a denigrating stereotype of Indigenous people which has had a devastating impact upon them” (Bielefeld, 260) [15]. Clements displays Janey’s character, the youngest of the three sisters as the most miserable woman. Janey expresses her long-lasting sufferings and difficulties that she undergoes throughout her life. She says: “I’ve been in twenty-six foster homes” (Clements, 53) [12]. The affliction of Janey does not end with her childhood experience, yet, her continual struggles in life are displayed intently on stage. As a young Native woman, she becomes the victim of sterilization, which is an outrageous action of the colonizers action to erase Native culture.

One important aspect in the paper is the illustration of the impact of the vanishing Indian. Apart from violence against Indigenous women, sterilization, abduction of children from their families and communities, it also draws on the loss of Indigenous culture by citing Drew Hayden Taylor’s play, *The Boy in the Treehouse* (2000). The play is an apt example of what a mixed parentage offers to a child in the contemporary modern world. The play revolves around Simon, a young teenage boy of a mixed-race parent (Native mother and non- Native father) who sets out to obtain a vision quest in order to come to terms of his mother’s death and embrace Native beliefs. Taylor highlights Simon’s strong passion and desire to experience a vision quest that would make him akin to his mother’s identity. On the other hand, it gives an emotional experience to many adults who are in between the Native and non-Native identity (Taylor, 2000) [16]. Thus, examining the emotional imbalances displayed through Jessie, Miranda, and Janey, it is also a way of consoling and strengthening the many victims who are in between two cultures, two worlds. It is also a reminder that they are not alone, but there are many who fight for justice and better position in their everyday life. In “Review: Tombs of the Vanishing Indian (Native Earth Performance Arts and Red Diva Projects),” Ryan Kerr highlights how Marie Clements uses the plural noun “tombs” which provides a significant hint to the theme of the play: “Tombs proposes several historical factors in this marked disappearance – from the sterilization already mentioned to emerging women’s Indian rights and human rights movements” (Kerr, 2011) [17]. Clements brings in helpless situations of the three sisters so as to bring in the struggles of Native women’s condition, which to the extent would create awareness of the basic human rights.

J.W. Berry has emphasized on the need to forge a new dimension in examining the Indigenous culture that is vanishing at the clutches of the colonizers: “On the basis of early consultations, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that threats to the cultural identity of Aboriginal Peoples was a problem area that required examination” (Berry, 1994,10) [18]. The RCAP initiatives have helped in igniting the Native writers in exploring the lived experienced of the Native people. The study is an attempt to support the “examination” so as to subvert the colonial power and transcend Indigenous people’s entity. *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is an eye opener in recreating a new form of Native resistance as the playwright is aware of the need to represent the real condition of vanishing Indian so as to draw the attention of the world towards the hideous plot of the colonizers which otherwise would go unnoticed.

## V. CONCLUSION

Since the objective was to evaluate the role of First Nations theatre and its positive impact, it proposes to

encourage theatrical performance in academic forum which will not only disseminate knowledge but also imprint traditional values and culture in the young minds which would eventually help them (practically) in uplifting their cultures in real life. The study affirms that the status of the Indigenous race depends on the children who will direct /lead the future generations. The purposeful act of the forced removal of Native children is therefore a deliberate white's policy in their attempt to erase Indigenous culture and race. Marie Clements ardently explores the experience of the three Indigenous sisters who struggles to retain their Native identity in the play despite all hurdles in life. Thus, it is vital to assert that the play sidelines the strength and develops resilience within the realm of the Indigenous literature. First Nations theatre plays a vital role in voicing the concern of the indigenous people who are silenced and powerless for decades. The study finds that First Nations theatre stands as a creative resistance against the inhuman colonial practice of cultural erasure which affects the equilibrium of Native people's lives. The very act of storytelling of the past events and performing individual experiences in theatre would ignite the audience and widespread the necessity of preserving and restoring Indigenous culture in a diverse contemporary world.

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