

What a Text is, is What it Does: A Critical Study of Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk"

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Abstract

The paper admonishes the readers not to cultivate either Cain or Caliban complexes while reading Aboriginal literatures. The paper renders a critical appreciation of Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk", and enables the readers to become aware of the issues the Indigenous people face in general and the Natives of Canada in particular. In the paper, the terms such as "Indians", "Aboriginal," "Indigenous", and First Nations" are used interchangeably with "Native".

Key Words

Aboriginal, Indigenous, Indians, Native, Half-breed, Cain and Caliban complexes, etc.

Introduction

Readers' reaction to literature is vital to interpreting the meaning of the text. But the readers need to approach the text of the Aboriginal writers with a sense of caution. Therefore, the readers of the poem "I Lost My Talk" should not try to belittle the pivotal plea of the poet by taking an indifferent stance as Cain towards his brother Abel. For example, the following words portray a complex characterized by rivalry, competition and extreme envy or jealousy which leads Cain to hate and kill his brother Abel. "And the LORD said unto Cain, Where *is* Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: *Am* I my brother's keeper?" (<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>, "Genesis" 4: 9). Similarly, the readers should not try to find fault with the poet who takes the stance of Caliban towards Prospero who is an alien and has coveted his native land. Caliban is the original inhabitant of the island where Prospero, the former Duke of Milan and a learned magician, has been shipwrecked with his daughter, Miranda, for 12 years. Caliban says that Prospero teaches him language, and all he can do with it is that he damns Prospero for teaching him the colonizer's language! "You taught me language, and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (*The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines: 368-370). In *The Tempest*, Caliban is depicted to be an uncivilized halfbreed from the colonizer's (Prospero) stance. But the fact is that coveting/colonizing the Natives' land is truly a dehumanizing brutal act.

What Prospero had done in the island of Caliban, England had done in India and in its former colonies through the British East India Company. In 1600, Queen Elizabeth I granted permission to the British East India Company to trade with India. William Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* around 1610-1611. The European powers came to India initially with trading interest. They soon realized that political strength in India would easily help them amass wealth rather than just trade (Alam 1). In due course, they studied the political situation that prevailed in India and took advantage of it and started capturing territories. By adopting various means like war and treaties, the British consolidated their right to rule over the Indian territories (Grover 59). Thus, like Prospero in *The Tempest*, the British ultimately built a political empire on the soil of India.

Like the island of Caliban, Canada is the land of origin for Aboriginal peoples, and the history of Canada begins with them. As the first people of Canada, the Aboriginals' contributions to Canada's mosaic are unique. Thus, understanding of the First Nations societies of Canada is central to an understanding of the social fabric of this country. In the context of published Indians' literatures in English, the Indigenous voices are not noticed and listened to.

The readers lack knowledge of First Nations literatures. The readings of literatures from different Aboriginal cultures characterize a nation. The knowledge of the Aboriginals' past and present existence is enfolded in their oral traditions. The oral traditions of the Natives can also greatly influence Aboriginal literatures written in English. There has been no generally accepted standardization of (oral) Aboriginal languages. Sometimes several variants of the same names have been used in the Aboriginal literatures. Therefore, the readers should listen to or read the authors' commentaries as authoritative texts on Aboriginal literatures in culture-specific contexts of Canadian Native Literatures in English. The narrative comments along with the explanations, interpretations, and suggestions are meant to encourage the readers to fine tune to the frequency of the voice of the Aboriginals through the medium of their literatures, and engage themselves in a dialogue with these texts. For example, the telling title of a preface by Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque to an anthology of literature by Native women of Western Canada is "Here Are Our Voices - Who Will Hear?" An earlier autobiography *Halfbreed* written by Métis author Maria Campbell, published in 1973, is the seminal text drawing attention to Aboriginal writing in Canada (Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance xv-xxx).

Aboriginal Literatures in Canada

In the history of every nation in general and Canada in particular, Aboriginal literatures remain untold for decades—even centuries—for all the wrong reasons of racism, marginalization, dishonesty, even censorship and all manner of media manipulation. Aboriginal authors write from the heart about the truth of living as a nation within a nation. Such literatures of First Nations transcend the psychological, geographical and linguistic borders and are universally accepted.

There is a variety of native literatures such as Mohawk, Okanagan, Métis, Cree, etc., because as writers move around, so do Aboriginal writers. Aboriginal writers cannot be pigeonholed because when one talks to the Aboriginals, the question where one is from is the most important in introductory identifications.

Language is a linguistic as well as a cultural entity of an ethnic group. Literature is one of the fundamental phenomena of identity which is embedded in language and culture. The use of the common denominator “Indian” for all Aboriginal peoples often overshadows the fact that the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are culturally diverse and that each cultural group produces its own literature.

All literatures are culture-specific, region-specific, language-specific, history-specific, and at the same time universal. The Aboriginal literatures are also pertinent to all Aboriginal cultures in Canada and around the world. They are also pertinent to all peoples universally. Indigenous writing emphasizes commonalities because the writers come from diverse regions, cultures and histories. What the entire galaxy of Aboriginal writers share is their connections to their homelands, their histories of colonization, genocide and displacement, and their will to survive and pass the treasures of their cultures to future generations.

Critical Study of Rita Joe’s “I Lost My Talk”

The poem “I Lost My Talk” which is penned by Rita Joe addresses one of the challenges the readers and the Natives face on the road to reading and comprehending Aboriginal literatures published in English. The poem acts as a medium for the poet to register her protest against the colonizers through their language. The poem may be considered an introduction to Aboriginal writing, as the central theme is about loss of language/culture/identity and voice in residential schools which pertains to all indigenous cultures of the world.

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.
You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.
Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.
So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So, I can teach you about me.

This poem records the gentle but firm revolt of the poet against the disempowering effects of the Shubenacadie residential school in Nova Scotia, which creates a double danger: the school is run by the colonizers, who take away the Aboriginal language of the poet and they teach the settlers' language. The mentioning of the spoken language ("talk") should be read metonymically as referring to a way of life vastly different from that of a written culture. The oral traditions are "taken away" with the intension of silencing the medium of talking in their own language and making the Natives incapable of communicating their emotions, feelings and thoughts not only through their mother tongue but also through the language of the colonizer. The first statement brings the readers face-to-face with the colonizers' attempt to destroy the Natives and their rich and varied cultures, including their mother tongues. It echoes the angst and the poignant plea of the unborn child in Louis Macneice's "Prayer Before Birth", lines: 13-14: "... , my words, /when they speak me, / my thoughts when they think me, ... " (Green, 1974, p. 200).

The Natives are isolated from their families, and forced to undergo physical and sexual abuse, and punishment for any other kind of cultural expression, during their education in the settler-owned educational institutions which results in "a scrambled ballad." Native writers emerge to find their language and make it survive. It is worth-noting that Rita Joe repeats the word "talk" four times, though she refers to the term several times in the poem. But at the end of the poem, she herself does not talk but does write. It seems that she wants to make a point about the continuation of talk in the written word and thereby a statement about the continuation of her culture despite major disruptions. The readers need to be aware that the poem emphasizes the irreparable loss done to the spoken form of the poet's mother tongue. The speaker seems to be ashamed of the ideas that the colonizers speak through her in their language. Though the poem is composed in the colonizers' language, the humble gesture with which the poet reclaims her voice at the end: "Let me find my talk/ So I can teach you about me". These words can be considered an evidence that the poet genuinely takes efforts to reclaim her lost mother tongue. Though the poem does not fail to emphasize the loss, disempowerment, and victimization, the tone of the poem is self-assertive which indicates the angst of the poet to retrieve and restore her lost mother tongue.

Conclusion

Thus, the paper admonishes the readers not to cultivate Cain and Caliban complexes while reading Aboriginal literature. The critical appreciation of Rita Joe's poem "I Lost My Talk", increases the readers' awareness and understanding of one of the inevitable issues of the indigenous people.

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