A Comparative Study of Native Cultural Heritage in Tomson Highway’s
*The Rez Sisters* and Gopinath Mohanty’s *The Ancestor*

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Abstract

Canadian First Native writer Tomson Highway in his drama *The Rez Sisters*, and Indian writer Gopinath Mohanty in his novel *The Ancestor* have contributed to literature, a detailed cultural template in the form of a story, on which many researches could be carried out in empathy with cultural ethos. The paper analyses the cultural heritage of the tribes and how they strive hard to rise above the rest, and how their sufferings have become universal, be it in India or Canada or any other country in the world.

Key words: Tomson Highway, Gopinath Mohanty, Indigenous Literature.
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Both the tribes of India and Canada are invariably culture bound in celebrating their heritage. Canadian writer Tomson Highway’s _The Rez Sisters_ and Indian writer Gopinath Mohanty’s _The Ancestor_ are rich in cultural heritage bestowed to the tribes. _The Rez Sisters_ explicates the crisis as well as the culture of Cree tribes in Canada whereas _The Ancestor_ portrays that of Odia tribes in India. Tomson Highway, one of the first nation writers of Canada has sketched the Aboriginal culture in a lively and easily understandable way by which anyone from any part of the world can candidly visualize as well as empathise with the first peoples of Canada.

First peoples naturally live a life concomitant to maintain equality among themselves. Tomson Highway has symbolized this Native consciousness in his play _The Rez Sisters_ by adopting no single central character. All are given equal importance encircling variegated stories for each woman. The egalitarian norms of tribal societies are best compared to that of Marx and Engels by Felix Padel in his article _Living with the Durwas_ published in the Sunday magazine of _The Hindu_ newspaper as follows:

As Marx and Engels recognized, what differentiates ‘tribal’ from ‘modern’ societies most radically is the prior importance of communal land over any form of private property. These societies are communist in essence, in their egalitarian norms of behaviour as well as in their forms of ownership and exchange. (5)

All the women characters in _The Rez Sisters_ feel spiritually void in their lives after the colonial influence on their culture. In spite of their nostalgic longing for the past, their culture within helps them become self-assertive and resilient to western civilization. This resistant as
well as resilient power of sisters in *The Rez Sisters* reflects upon the admirable heritage of Native culture. The desire of Native women in *The Rez Sisters* for empowerment underlies the oppression of the treasure house of Native culture by Western ideologies.

The number 7 and the multiple of 7 are considered to be auspicious ones in Cree Native mythology. Pertaining to this, Tomson Highway intended to write 7 stories in sequels but he was able to complete the first three dramas only: *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and *Rose*. In addition, the number of characters in *The Rez Sisters* and its next sequel *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* is 7 and the lucky number in Bingo game is B14, the multiple of 7.

Cree Native mythology discloses the two-spirited (having both male and female spirit in one body) Nanabush, the identity of which is hard to be understood by Western Christianity. Cree language reflects this by not having gender indications. Language spoken by a group illustrates the culture of the particular speakers of the group. As far as the language of *The Rez Sisters* is accounted, though the play is written in English, the constant presence of Native languages, Cree and Ojibway, throughout the play is very much obvious and this speaks for their special features of cultural representation about which American English can never explain in detail. Both Cree and Ojibway are Algonquian languages spoken by 45,000 to 50,000 people living in Southern Canada and Montana. These languages have five main dialects which are mutually understandable to the communities closest to them.

Tomson Highway enumerates three main traits of his language and says that they are absent in English since English voices for Western culture. Firstly, Cree is hilarious. Funny and boisterous characteristics overwhelm sober and tragic feelings throughout the play. Similarly, Cree people too, in real life love to lead a happy life in funny mode rather than
serious and moody life style. Even their sorrows and tragedies are draped in joy and happiness.

Secondly, Cree is visceral in such a way that bodily functions are openly discussed. For example in *The Rez Sisters*, Philomena throws “the toilet door open, sits there in her glory, panties down to her ankles (43). Pelajia says “Philomena. Get your bum out here. Veronique St. Pierre is about to lose her life” (43).

Finally, Cree is quite surprisingly genderless. Trickster figure, Nanabush, which is important as Çhrist is to Western culture, is genderless and picks up different roles as a Seagull, a nighthawk and the bingo-master. In *Comparing Mythologies*, Tomson Highway observes:

There is, for one thing- and most importantly- no concept of gender in the Cree language. In that language, we are all, in a sense, he/shes, trees are he/shes, ocelots are he/shes, budgie-birds in cages are he/shes, even rocks on the beaches of Rio are he/shes. And God –most essentially is one big fat he/she. (40-41)

Sisterhood is another impeccable cultural strength which should never be missed by the critical eyes, albeit they often bicker about each other with obscene words and sometimes added with violent actions too. Their communal strength is realized when they play stages their fundraising activities for participating in the biggest bingo in the world to be held in Toronto. Through biggest bank sale, babysitting, laundry, blue-berry picking, house-repair, biggest garage sale, biggest bottle drive and country singing, they help each other to raise the needed money for the trip to participate in Bingo.
Child-bear and child-care are dutifully as well as affectionately handled by Native women. Even on the verge of suffering from life consuming cancer, Marie-Adele bothers much about the motherless condition of her children after her death. Her dream of owning an island is also for the comfortable life of her children. Even after her death, her children are not left uncared. Veronique cooks for all of them and absorbs them all under her care. She being childless never finds them as burdensome and this maternal care is also the reason behind adopting Zhaboonigan whose parents lost their lives in an accident. Her maternal affection is not family bound but goes beyond familial limitation. When her praiseworthy feeling is traced back to her dream of owning a stove, her motherly instinct is found at her words:

After I win THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD…. I’ll have the biggest stove on the reserve. I’ll cook for all the children on the reserve. I’ll adopt all of Marie-Adele Starblanket’s 14 children and I will cook for them. I’ll even cook for Gazelle Nataways’ poor starving babies. (36)

Though Emily’s pregnancy is unwanted against her unsuccessful married life, she never thought of forsaking it. How she feels void after the death of her child is extensively explained in Tomson Highway’s play Rose one of his planned sequel plays. Annie too takes pride in reporting her daughter’s well settled life with a French person. Philomena’s dream revolves around hiring a lawyer to find out her lost child.

Pelajia, being senior to all sisters, voluntarily takes the headship and plays her role of controlling all her sisters and this echoes her inherent sense of responsibility to take care of not only her sisters but also her community.

Native mythology of Cree and Ojibway people is both alive and electric though being magical. The trickster figure, Nanabush in The Rez Sisters is actually played by a male dancer.
and it adopts three guises of a white sea-gull, a black bird, and a bingo master. His first appearance is outside Marie-Adele’s house and then it accompanies the seven sisters on their march towards the store, to the band office. He playfully joins the scene of fund-raising efforts. Zhaboonigan chooses Nanabush for sharing her traumatic childhood experience.

Don’t fly away. Don’t go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. (47-48)

In the Bingo scene, it is Nanabush in the form of a black bird who comes to take Marie-Adele away beyond this world.

Come….come…. don’t be afraid….as-tum… come..to…me… ever soft wings…beautiful soft…soft… dark wings.. here… take me…as-tum… as-tum. (104)

Out of the above explained two scenes, it is deducted that Zhaboonigan finds the trickster figure as her confidant to give vent to her unpleasant experience and nerve racking of being gang raped by White boys. Marie-Adele who has been suffering from cancer and has not been willing to face death and leave back her family uncared of, collects herself to face death which has come to take her away in the form of a night-hawk at the bingo riot sceneinstilii. The trickster instills hope and joy in mentally suffering Zhaboonigan whereas the same trickster drives away fear and life-threatening worries from the timid Marie-Adele and sows mental courage and fearless attitude in her to bid adieu to her life on the earth.

Natives consider circle as a symbol of life circle. Tomson Highway, under the influence of Native circle, has dramatized the last scene at the place of Palajia’s roof top where the drama’s opening scene is also situated.
The cultural heritage so far analysed is as explicated by Tomson Highway in *The Rez Sisters*, and the point to be recorded is that he, being the son of the soil of Canada, has best delineated, including his own indigenous experience, the cultural solidarity of Cree tribes in Canada during 1980’s. Next to the analysis of a Canadian tribal culture, an Eastern tribal status follows and the analysis runs through the short novel, *The Ancestor* by GopinathMohanty, a celebrated Indian fictionist.

Mohanty’s *DadiBudha (The Ancestor)* is packed with the tribal customs and beliefs that stand as their own. The remarkable heritage of Odisha tribes represented in *DadiBudha* attracts the researchers to study and sympathise with the people.

The stories pertinent to tribes stretch over a hill, their conventional habitat. Eventually, stories of tribes always consist of excerpts of hill narratives. Like *The Rez Sisters*, GopinathMohanty’s *The Ancestor* too begins with an indication of a hill as follows:

Hills stand one piled on the other creating an illusion of innumerable *vimans*. The peaks of the hills, small and large, incline towards a valley at their centre. The valley is covered by the green forest. The river, Muran, flows through this beautiful valley, from one end of the highland to the other. (1)

The novelist sketches how the men of Lulla village, play with fire that is developed from blowing the ‘phiri’ grass into fire. He also narrates through the conversation among the village men that they are the strong holders of the belief in occult power. They believe in the spirit after death and its rebirth on the hill to engender the next progeny.

The tribes revere their hill-old beliefs recorded in palm leaf manuscripts rather than the new Bible. Ram Muduli, the village headman interrupts Eleo Sunna, the old man from the Christian settlement and says:
Yes, I know, once the pastor brought the book. A new one, white like a piece of new cloth. But you have not seen our pothi in the house of the dishari. So many things are written there—about the weather, about the rain and about the dumas. It’s quite old— as old as the hill, as old as the darkness. Yours is new.

(3)

The scenes like gathering round the fire in front of the houses at night, roasting the goat skin, the dusty smell of the soil, the smell of the smoke, and so forth explicates the tribal life set up.

Every village has its own gurumai, the children offered by their parents to the mercy of Gods. In the background of the drumbeats, the gurumai keeps on dancing and falls into a trance. Women, hair dishevelled follow him. Cocks and pigeons are sacrificed.

The people consider the bare trunk of the date-palm tree on a hillock as their DadiBudha, the eternal ancestor. This tree is cut at a man’s height and a white cloth is wrapped on the top of it looking like a turban. There are twenty-one marks on the tree and different colours on the marks. Both Dadi and Budha mean grandfather in Paraja as well as Kondh languages. The trickster figure in The Rez Sisters is ever present in tribal landscape. Here in DadiBudha, the people of Lulla village believe that everything is his play. He is their deity. Anyone could speak on behalf of DadiBudha, since he is mute.

For those who are childless, those having indigestion, those who has been ailing for a long time, it becomes a routine to offer their homage to DadiBudha. A lot of prayers from both men and women, of personal and general, of petty and important matter are daily placed before DadiBudha. Chicken, wine, bullock, flowers, and so on are the tribes’ offerings to DadiBudha. Everyone believes that their prayers would bear fruit. People pay their veneration and homage to DadiBudha in all walks of life. He is the saviour of this tribal community.
Dadi Budha can cure a sick, can bring back a lost cow and can make fruits grow in the garden. He remains silent to witness both joy and sorrow of these innocent tribes. At times, cows are stolen and infants die. The tribes at that time blame their fate but they retain their faith in Dadi Budha. When diseases spread and tigers attack them, Dadi Budha descends on *gurumai* the medium of the deity and orders people to leave the village for safer place. Dadi Budha is also a hold for thieves. They come to Dadi Budha’s mound at midnight and pray:

Oh Almighty Dadi Budha, believe us. We are not wicked at heart. We shall tell you the truth. It is our poverty that has driven us to steal someone’s cows from his cowshed or a couple of plates from someone else’s house. We take such risks only for our family. But these inspectors- these heretics- they don’t believe in you. How can they understand our misfortune? You alone know it, Lord. (36)

Tension and distressed minds of the civilized modern world are unknown to the nature friendly tribes. They enjoy doing their work. The hurly-burly life pattern of the modern job oriented employer-employee concord does not devour the happy working pattern of these tribes. They enjoy executing their committed work. Even village headman’s son is not an exception from doing field work. The headman, Ram Muduli’s son also works committedly in looking after his father’s field. The short novel *The Ancestor* vouches for the sincere work of ThengaJani to support his father and an excerpt to speak for his praiseworthy character is as follows:

When the boy was eight, he looked after his father’s cows. At the age of twelve, Thenga started working in the fields. When he became fifteen, half the responsibility of his father’s family had already rested on his shoulders. He would take the labourers to the field, search for the cattle in the forest and find
them one by one in the rain and in the storm. Thenga was such a nice son; like a machine he would work for the prosperity of his father.(34)

Ram Muduli’s prayer to Dadi Budha reaffirms the same. Though he is the headman of the village, he does not want his daughter-in-law to enjoy the luxury of being idle at home. Every day Ram prays to Dadi Budha: “Dadi Budha, please give me a suitable bride for my Thenga. She should be beautiful and strong enough to work in the fields. She must also take care of us, the old parents” (13). This excerpt further exemplifies that the tribes lead a balanced life between laborious work and frolicsome enjoyment.

The people especially young men (dhanga) and young women (dhangdi) spend their evening in a frolic way. In dhanga-hall, young men sang to the accompaniment of the dungdunga, a musical instrument made up of a dried animal skin over a dry gourd. Unmarried young women are also not barred from the evening enjoyment. They too sing in reply to the song of dhanga-hall from their place, dhangdi-hall.

The hilly habitat is ever blessed with river, streams and waterfalls. River Muran of the village is also a source for fishing. Fishing balms the mind into calmness and this rejuvenates man’s thinking process. The art and effect of fishing is beyond the reach of city life. Thenga too forgets the present while fishing:

Thenga Jani would forget to apply castor oil to his hook. He would forget to smoke. And gazing at the water he would think; his thoughts knew no bounds.

The shadow of his own face lengthened over the water. (15)

Familial bond is much strengthened when its members take pride in discharging their duties to one another. Ram Muduli and his wife are proud of their son. They believe that ThengaJani and his wife are the support in their old age.
Bride-price is the practice among these tribes. It is given to the bride’s family from the bridegroom’s family. Ram Muduli and Hari Jani dare not to speak about the bride price though both of them are willing to yoke together their son and daughter- Thenga Jani and Saria Daan. Having sensed her husband’s delay in getting their son married, she lets an outburst to her husband:

Yes, I know. I know. You think that you will have to spend a lot on bride-price. Moreover, if your son gets married who will go and watch the ripe corns in the fields at night? Do you really find it difficult to arrange a bride for him?

That’s only an excuse, I know. (25)

The people do also follow the custom of udulia marriage. As per this custom, the boy kidnaps and brings his would be bride to his house and gives a small feast to a few. No elaborate ceremony is conducted. Finally the girl’s father too accepts the marriage after getting a small amount of bride-price settled by the village panchayat. This custom of udulia marriage is more common among the poor. It was udulia marriage that united Thenga’s parents.

Wood cutting and wine making are also in practice among the tribes of the Pachedi Hill. Illicit wine is prepared as the description follows:

On the hearth was a pot full of stale mahula. On its mouth was fitted a small earthen pot plastered with cow-dung. It was connected to a covered pot by means of a pipe. Inside it there was yet another small pot in which wine was being collected. (17)

The tribes stick on to their beliefs and rituals in an unshakeable manner. People start leaving the village after a tiger’s appearance and they consider that the misfortune of the
village is because of the elopement of Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari, the Christian Domb girl.

Mohanty also projects how the tribes succumb easily to the influence of Christianity, the symbol of modernization. The Dombs are the tribes who converted themselves as Christians and this conversion may also have changed the minds of the Dombs to dissent from the traditional beliefs and customs of the tribes. This is exemplified in the dreams of Santosh Kumari. “For her the forest was like a desert, always the same. Only the drowsy forest, rocks and trees and fields, here and there” (20).

Thus Tomson Highway and Mohanty’s inscriptions in the form of drama and novel on the rituals, customs, beliefs and traditional values of the tribal community faithfully record their cultural heritage reading about which the readers could in a way step into the realm of the tribes and understand their pattern of life.
References


