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Theatre and Canadian Political Identity: A Study of contemporary First Nation Plays

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Abstract

The dilemma that seems to haunt the Canadian theatre audiences and makers alike has been the ever-pervading sense of national consciousness and identity whereby both the theatre going audiences and that of the theatre producing ones are grappling with the duality inherent in the subjective identity of their own. Theatre has been intricately connected to the notions of identity and selfhood within the ambits of national identity. While on the one hand they have been the mediums of highlighting a national identity, on the other hand they have also been seen as tools for propagating social and political changes in Canadian society. The theatrical stage become another source and space for subjectivising the natives in the mould of the colonizer, namely, the French and later the British in Canada, especially during the later cultural skirmishes for a bilingual and bi-national identity. This paper aims to study the notions of race, colonization and marginality in contemporary Canadian perspective. It was seen that that from its very inception Canadian theatre can be thought of to be as political theatre of protest against the other dominant culture while at the same time also as a tool by the said cultures to entrench nationalistic fervour and values espoused by the state.

Keywords: Canadian Theatre, National identity, colonization.



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Introduction:

Theatre and plays have been seen as synonymous to reflections of the evolution and progress of society. They are one part of culture and the arts whereby they help in the formation identities, traditions, norms, more and values of a society are both constructed as well as decimated. They pave the way in which deviant, often taboo and anti– authoritarian values are expressed in an aesthetically and visually appealing manner. Social, cultural and political issues which are obvious, yet veiled within the bounds of cultural and political norms get expressed through the visual aids of theatre. As a result, they end up enlightening and educating the masses in a manner that would enable them to formulate opinions of their own thereby broadening their vision regarding certain situations in society. These situations are seen, more often than not, to be fraught with social and political dissent within factions of the society as well as between the society and the state. Following the precepts of western philosophical thought it cannot be denied that dramatic theatre has had a lot to do in the building up of political opinion of the masses and has been a part of the ‘soft power’ of a nation whereby dominance of a nation is created more through the cultural hegemony over others rather than through military domination over other nations. These have been solidified over the decades through the tools of globalisation. Theatre has been playing a significant role in the formulation opinions that affect the formulation of public policies of the electorate. Although having lesser influence than other electronic media, theatre has had a continuous influence as a visual art and therefore has been able to influence through the projected images of the nation and its people. On the other hand, policy makers are also part of this same electorate. They have realised the potential of theatre as a tool of both propaganda as well as that of voicing dissent within the cultural sphere. Through this paper, issues of race and nationality in the sphere of Canadian theatre will be traced through instances of various plays by First Nation playwrights or through plays about them. They form the crux of



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racial identity in Canadian theatre and have been used to derive newer ideas of nationality and identities through time.

Historicity, Identity and Theatre:

Ric Knowles points out in his allusion to the term ‘intercultural’ as being important for bringing into focus the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces between cultures, spaces that can function in performance as the sites of negotiation (Knowles, 4). This neoliberal embrace of cultural difference celebrates the possibilities of cultural fusion and the construction of radical subjectivities beyond national and ethnic boundaries. Intercultural practice in this sense is deeply imbricated in globalization and the perceived de-territorialization of social, cultural, and political boundaries for those in the developed world Canada has for long tried to eke out a national identity of its own based on certain natural and societal issues (Lo and Gilbert, 40). Theatre belonging to this category embraces various cultures that fall within the ambit of the different cultures within the nation. However, with Pollock’s *Walsh*, we see the foregrounding of territory as part of nationality on the basis of colonial control rather than that of inclusion. The play traces historical instances whereby First Nation tribes are denied citizenship on the basis of their belonging to a different colonial rule. Contrasted to that we can see that with the evolution of the Canadian nation, newer identities are being built through this matrix of multicultures and are seen as being constructed to counteract the various other global identities as a unit rather than through the differences. As a matter of fact Collins had implied in his work that for Canada the rise of nationalism was a response to international demands. However, in the recent times it has been seen that for Canada, nationalism has been a curious admixture of the global and the local and more in defining of what they are “not” rather than what they are. Again, the concept of the local is itself a bifurcated reality since from the very beginning of its existence as a nation Canada has been seen to share the dualities of the Anglophone and the francophone



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cultures. What strikes the passive onlooker is that in the dominant Canadian psyche national symbols are mostly manifested in external symbols rather than any uniquely cultural practice.

Racial identity and the First Nations:

According to Raymond William's formulation of the dialectical development of discourse, in any cultural conjunction there are "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" discourses. In the Canadian context, ethnic writing currently constitutes a "residual" discourse. Ethnic writers experience the conflict of heteroglossia in a specific way as a deterrent to participation in a national tradition. The traces of this conflict have been defined as a translation effect or the "test of foreignness (Godard, 157). While starting with language, dominance over certain ethnicities and cultures make inroads into other socio-political aspect of the minorities which ultimately result in racism. Racism as a theatrical notion is read through the works of the playwright Drew Hayden Taylor. His plays have been noted for their satiric comment on society and as such also reflect upon the effects that certain public policies have had on the people of the First Nation. Again, racism and political separatism and the law of 'divide and rule' are seen in the plays of George Ryga and Sharon Pollock. The First Nations have been the colonized since the very inception of Canada as a nation. With the development of certain global issues regarding human rights, the Canadian First Nations have been coming out in the open regarding their treatment as the 'other' in the very nation that is their native land. Playwrights like Hayden write in the contemporary times in a manner that is quite conscious of their selfhood. His plays echo what Awam Ampka calls 'a conscious development of subjective selfhood'. One does agree when Ampka points out how the playwrights of the once colonized people tend to write. He opines that the colonized subjects are historically coerced into a cosmopolitanism and globalism within which their subjectivity is limited to at the most mimicry and at the worst subject-less-ness. Colonialism and European languages were not simply imposed on people, but also reorganised social relations, reinvented ethnicities, and sparked off varying cultural practices that



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identified and disidentified with its hegemonies (Ampka ed Goodman, 118). Following this strain of thought, Ampka again points out the discrepancies that creep into the works of colonized peoples in the post colonial times. Thus, one does tend to agree that whereas in the earlier times the `natives` were positioned to perpetuate colonial hegemony , their development as a counteractive force coupled with their sense of alienation led to contradictions in their cultural politics and practices. The traces left in cultural representations demonstrate a set of discursively negotiated nationalistic identities and counter hegemonic tendencies. Hayden`s primary character in his play *AlterNatives* belongs to the First Nations and is on the verge of marrying a `White` woman in the play. His character reveals his wish for assimilation into the majority through his marriage. What the play does reveal is the paradox intrinsic in the multicultural nation where multiplicities in national identity are being encouraged through governmental policies yet the minorities want to assimilate in within the politically powerful majority to regain a sense of their self as a part of the nation. It is here that we find the echoes of what seems to be the political reality that had been professed by Will Kymlicka when he denoted assimilation as being essential for political stability and that of national consciousness (Kymlicka,14).

Theatre, space and colonization:

The onus of building a sense of nationalism is often a part of the discourse of culture and cultural symbols. Within these symbols lie various aspects of citizenship that have already been ingrained within the citizens of the nation as being part of popular discourse and narratives. Canada`s multiculturalism has often been beckoned as a beacon of tolerance. Yet, within this scenario numerous instances of intolerance arise despite the attempts of its federal governments in making and implementing policies of social and cultural cohesion. Nationalism is seen as a primary tenet for a country`s identity. However, Canada`s multicultural aspect has often led to multifarious identities that seem to be at cross-purposes to a uniform sense of



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national consciousness. What comes to mind is that culture is being used now as a means to bring about a social and national cohesion which had hitherto been absent in the Canadian context. The absence was a result of the continual tussle for political power amongst the founding 'nations', that is, the English and the French. At the same time it becomes obvious that natives of the country were indifferent to a sense of national consciousness as there was no cultural or political cohesion among the various tribes and clans. In the terms of Benedict Anderson one realises that the 'nation' was still at a stage where it could not be 'imagined' as a 'community'. Isolation and marking of territories between these native communities marked a sense of national alienation. This was later augmented by the fact that these native communities were relegated to 'reservations' by the colonising powers, that is the British and the French. There was a sense of resentment among the native communities against these nations as invading forces. This resentment among the founding nations, the native communities and even recurring immigrant communities often found outlet through culture and art. However, culture and art also became a medium of cohesion among these communities as they served to portray the interest of these communities in conflict. Conflict of men amongst themselves, as well as with the wilderness of Canada became a constant theme in literature, culture and the arts. Canada as a nation also started growing in the consciousness of these communities and people. The nation Canada became embellished as a landscape that needed to be tamed and civilised. Theatre formed a part of an oral tradition that would try to make sense of this new and truncated form of nationalism that was being formulated at that time. As a matter of fact, theatre was successful to a large extent in not only being a tool of colonisation and 'civilisation' but also as a medium of harnessing a sense of belonging and identity created through the image and symbol of Canada as a specific territory with its own unique and idiosyncratic brand of nationalism. At the same time, theatre as a tool of survival narrative in the continued consciousness of Canada as being a vast wilderness tamed by man and his efforts, were a continual presence in the cultural landscape specific to this notion of a national consciousness.



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While the notion of Canada as being ‘tamed’ by man has been part of its national discourse for a long time, recent events have also been marked in theatre by bridging the *urban-rural divide*. Immigration has led to a change in the national discourse of Canada leading to the formal adoption of *multiculturalism* as a national policy to embrace as well as ‘protect’ its citizens from cultural clashes. At times it seems almost as if multiculturalism had been adopted to contain diversity rather than for just integration. Theatre *has been used often in this case as a tool for knowledge discourse*. It enables the viewer to inculcate a sense of the nation through cultural symbols. Thus, it not only provides a sense of shared identity but also the language used is one where the narrative of ‘shared’ nationhood is most obvious. In this context a reading of the connection between Bill 101 and that of national consciousness would not be amiss.

One of the primary concerns of national identity is that of spatiality and citizenship. However, theatre has not only been restricted to that of spatiality alone. While colonialism has wrought upon the Canadian society a keener sense of space, the continuing influx of immigrants have also added to the debates of space in the socio-cultural space as well as in the economic space. Earlier narrations of Canadian nationalism would concentrate on the conquest and ‘civilization’ of a space. Recent narratives, however, concentrate more on the concept of displacement and re-claiming. Theatre reflects that as well. *In theatre, space is always seen as a trope of nationalisation akin to the civilization of the land.*

Again, governmental policies regarding welfare are also connected to that of national cohesion. *Welfare and poverty* form a dominant part of citizenship and belonging. Canadian welfare system and its availability to its citizens form a cornerstone in the current scenario of citizenship and therefore national consciousness. On the other hand poverty seems to



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emphasize a sense of disenfranchisement where the federal and provincial government are often thought to discriminate between citizens thereby violating the basic right to equality. This brings us to the inference of the state being the ultimate site of identity, where the notion of citizenship is embalmed within both practicality as well as the ideology of the welfare state.

Finally the question of *marginality* arises. Theatre has been successful in depicting the marginal in society in the language of the dominant class. Political policies and theatre have gone hand in hand when matters of protest arise. Societal norms that have led to marginalisation have been challenged through theatre and arise from them as a mode of visual political protest. However, rather than the seat of politics, i.e. the Parliament, the arena of theatrical protest is the stage. In fact, it has been the arena for the voice of the marginalised for ages. Thus, we hear the grievances of women, children, Aboriginals and homosexuals from within theatre. Within these parameters of social and economic exclusion, the plays by Sharon Pollock, Judith Thompson, Drew Hayden Taylor and Rick Salutin will be analysed for this chapter. Through these plays all the above discussed issues would be traced in an effort to read deeper into the problems that arise out of the official policies of nationhood, including that of multiculturalism.

‘Political theatre’ or ‘Theatre of Crisis’ which has egged on social change has been described by Phillip B. Zarilli as those publicly enacted events that often take place during , and /or inspired by periods of social or political crisis and/or revolution (Zarilli ed Goodman and Gay, 222). Marginality and discrimination that had earlier risen out of the colonial context are now seen to be the products of xenophobia, poverty and global issues based on foreign policies and immigration laws. Whenever these plays and are staged they interrogate the hegemony of a



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certain section of the populace that have become internalised and therefore accepted as the norm. This questioning of established norms leads to greater discourse and therefore is the harbinger of social and political change. Theatre on race and nationality embrace this notion of protest in political theatre.

Conclusion:

It cannot be denied that theatre has been a continual source of images that represent each aspect of the country of Canada and which have helped to shape public opinion and garner a form of national consciousness. The crisis in national identity has for long been a bone of contention in Canadian literary and dramatic history due to language debates and that of the races within the multicultural nation. The recent and ongoing changes in perceptions of identity along with the evolving and changing national indicators of such identities can be through theatre in an ever changing globalised economy. Public policy has been affected by theatre. At the same time, theatre has been affected by public policies in such a way that they have had a lasting impression on the minds of theatre spectators. At the same time, the continuity of a national ideology is possible through these public policies as they lead to the creation of a national consciousness that will linger and then grow within the spectators of these kinds of theatre.



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