



VOICES OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE POETICAL WORKS OF KATHERENA VERMETTE AND BILLY-RAY BELCOURT

Rajib Debnath,

Assistant Professor of English

Department of English

Acharya Prafulla Chandra College,

New Barrackpore, Kolkata 700131

West Bengal, India

Abstract: The sustainable development and inclusive growth of any nation consists in its capacity to inclusively engage every cultural factor and aspect into its comprehensive wholeness. The nation-building process of Canada has been fraught with a series of hostilities in the form of climatic challenges racial dissensions and cultural diversities; but mostly by the fact that the indigenous People such as the First Nations, the Metis and the Inuits are outnumbered by the Euro—American settlers. Consequently the minor aboriginals culturally remained eclipsed and felt a strong sense of alienation from the nation's mainstream modernization. But recognizing the plurality of its cultural artefacts and encouraging a cosy ambience for even the native aboriginals, noticeably for the last few decades, the Canadian statehood has progressively revolutionized itself in strengthening its unified future or hood and solidifying its socio-political strong roots. The greatest testimony to this fact is the recent but rapid rise in the literary output by the native aboriginals who are putting firm feet and looking a lasting corner in the cultural dissemination by profusely writing about their own identity as indigenous.

Index Terms: native, inclusive, plurality, aboriginals, identity

Introduction

Of a lot of the socially conscious and culturally sensitive Canadian artists the most noteworthy are Katherena Vermette who belongs to the Metis ethnic group from Winnipeg and Billy-Ray Belcourt who belongs to the category of First Nations. Vermette's collection of poetry, *North End Love Songs* and her novel *The Break* do not only deal very consistently with the natural scenario and environmental milieu, but also the psychological trauma and social crisis of the indigenous people. In the novel she explores the traditional primitive traits of the characters' lifestyle as truly native and originally deep-rooted Canadian. The essential conflict between the pre-settling rusticity and the post-settling city is thematic stronghold of Vermette. The sympathetic treatment of the savage barbarity of the native characters is what stamps her as one who is grovelling for an identity for the indigenous different from the so called civilized majority. On the other hand, the young poet Belcourt is more outspoken and radical in his proclamation of the indigenous sentiments and feelings in his poetry so as to culturally assert their presence in the changing socio-political plight of Canada. His *This Wound is a World* poetizes the wretchedness and spiritual loneliness of the native people. Also his obsession with the body serves to work as a metaphor for the indigeneity of the primitive Canadian. The existential loneliness, sexual queerness, and other modes of perversity are

poetically equated with the native licentiousness and primordial impulsiveness of those indigenous people. Thus in their effort to survive the onslaught of civilizing principles and ideologies by analysing the native culture and sexuality, both the writers resurface the nation's cultural past and reminds the global readers of the ways of the indigenous Canadian world. It is by their prominent exposure to the literary aspiration to rewrite the cultural identity of the truly local that the so long outcast and detached old Canadians do feel themselves at home and participate in the larger context of nation building.

Methodology

Katherena Vermette, the young budding Canadian poet of the contemporary time from the Metis ethnic group, hails from the Winnipeg's North End that has been identified as a locale which is largely populated by the aboriginal natives, namely the Metis and the First Nations. Vermette in her childhood days experienced the sordid reality of political exclusion and cultural marginalization of the native. The hegemonic society of Canada with its wide range of geographical, communal, political and ethnic diversities has long been the critical focus of the anthropological study and sociological exploration. Her creative career, young but mature, is characterized by a strong sense of nationalistic awareness and indigenous sympathy as is substantiated by the poems in her collection *North End Love Songs*. In fact, first generation Canadians more strongly associate their ethnic identity with their country of origin than subsequent generations born in Canada who develop a hybrid identity, one whose primary reference becomes closer to the receiving culture, although mediated by that of their ancestors' country of origin. The undercurrent of dissension between the original native Canadians and the Euro-American settlers as regards the possessiveness over the nation is what Vermette tries to address in her poems. Though North End is poetized with a passionate fervour as a neighbourhood of colourful birds, stately elms, and always wily rivers, politically and socially it is propagated as a region mostly populated by the lowly criminals, rogues and other inferior regressive people.

Discussion

As illustrated in the collection, some characteristics of aboriginal identity stress cultural, as opposed to political, factors, thereby avoiding a discussion of how the small size and economic marginalization of aboriginal groups would make it difficult for them to demand a zone of their own. She was probably aware of the history of Canada's evolutionary process of emerging as a nation, and that is why she obliquely mixes with the pastoral glitz of Winnipeg the colonial historical records, oral histories are pointed to as evidence of pre-contact aboriginal nationhood and sovereignty. The way she has represented her birth place Winnipeg's North End, especially her colouring of the place as one merged with her aboriginal self and her defining of the locale as an indispensable part of her indigenous existence, allegorises her vision of a nation of their own right. North End is then her miniature metaphor for an aboriginal utopia. A remembrance of the aboriginal history and political legacy of Canada might have propelled her to glorify her native countryside. Her work is raw and her honesty is a reflection of the amount of suffering the ancestors of the past have endured. She gives her mother a voice who was never heard, but who now has a voice. She credits her children and her own want for healing to be the vehicle to understanding the ripple effects of colonization. The writing process is her way to bridge the gap between losses and to understand the reasons for those losses. Her first collection of poetry, *North End Love Songs*, J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing, 2012, won the 2013 Governor General Literary Award for Poetry. This book was also the 2015 selection for *On the Same Page*, Manitoba's Book Club. She was even a member of the Aboriginal Writers Collective of Manitoba and her work has also been published in the literary anthology *Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water* (2012). Her beloved neighbourhood in Winnipeg, by way of popular notoriety, has a reputation for violence and racism. But, the Governor General Award-winning Métis poet has used the power of words to change that.

She herself said, "This was my way of responding to what the world has been saying about my neighbourhood. So much of the attention has been from an outsider perspective, calling out our city in general, and the North End, in particular for being an awful place to be, especially if you are female and indigenous." It is sort of an ode to her neighbourhood. In an interview with CBC Radio, Vermette described her childhood as not being "picturesque", in the usual sense of the word. For Vermette, growing up in the North End of Winnipeg meant that things were not always simple and, from a young age, she bore witness to the kind of injustice and prejudice that young people are typically spared from. An example of this

injustice came when a 14 year-old Vermette lost her older brother, the just 18 year-old Donovan, who was missing for six months prior to being pronounced dead. Vermette asserts that the combination of Donovan's young age, the circumstance at his having been at a bar with friends prior to his disappearance, and because he was Cree meant that his disappearance did not get adequate coverage by the media. Vermette cites the general apathy shown by the people of her community and the media surrounding her brother's disappearance as being the factor which instigated her own sense of the unfairness of the discrimination against the Aboriginal populations of Canada by non-Aboriginal Canadians, leading to her desire to activate for change. She even confessed having considered not accepting the award, as a means of protesting the Canadian government's treatment of the many missing and murdered Aboriginal women at the time, and disagreeing with the government's policies in general. In the work, she describes her neighbourhood with respect to nature, highlighting the animals, foliage and rivers that coexist within it. In writing *North End Love Songs*, Vermette sought to replace the prejudiced perceptions held by people outside of the North End with the beautiful way that she knows her community. In an interview with Jessica Johns she said about the setting of her poem "the setting didn't give me anxiety per se. Trying to portray the weighty subjects and give due justice to the characters kept me up at night, but the setting was easy for me. On one hand, it was home, so it was comfortable and familiar. But also, I was keenly aware that my version of that home was and always will be very particular to my worldview and set of experiences. In the end, that version is only a very small part of many long, varied histories of a real place and only a fraction of what that place is all about. My north end is very different than someone else's north end. It is more of a character. Things change when they are portrayed artistically. In writing, no matter how true to life you try to be, things become fictionalized, symbolized, and really say more about the writer than they ever do about the subject, I think." She further said, "When I wrote the poetry book *North End Love Songs*, my friend Duncan told me that my first book had to be about me introducing myself. As Indigenous people, we introduce ourselves by where we are from first. To know something about where I come from is to know something about me, so that's what I did. I think that's what most writers do with their first books, but Indigenous writers seem to do so very deliberately."

Joanne Arnott comments on the work by saying that "In *North End Love Songs*, Katherena Vermette uses spare language and brief, telling sketches to illuminate the aviary of a prairie neighbourhood. Vermette's love songs are unconventional and imminent, an examination and a celebration of family and community in all weathers, the beautiful as well as the less clement conditions. This collection is a very moving tribute, to the girls and the women, the boys and the men, and the loving trouble that has forever transpired between us." Duncan Mercredi hails the work thus: "From a mixed-blood Métis woman with Mennonite roots, Kate weaves a story that winds its way through the north end of Winnipeg. It's a story of death, birth, survival, beauty and ugliness; through it all there are glimmers of hope, strength, and a will to survive whatever this city throws at you." The work is aptly titled, and Vermette earns her street cred with clear-eyed poems about young women in love and in trouble, in motherhood and in mourning, girl children left alone and young women on the stroll on Selkirk Avenue. The structure of poetry is magnificent and is a throwback to Modernist poets. There is no punctuation and the author doesn't stick to any stylistic constant – be it enjambment, stanza structure, etc. This is free verse in its most pure form. Lines contain as few as a single word and individual poems can range from a few lines to extended sequences over 10 pages. This use of free verse and colloquial north end Winnipeg language really takes one inside the poet's thoughts. One could even argue that Vermette is using a poetic stream-of-consciousness style in her writing. Finally, my last thought on structure, the poet ties her sequences together with highly intertwined themes, images, and symbolism – be it birds, seasons, holidays, or music.

Billy-Ray Belcourt from the Driftpile Cree Nation was named one of six Indigenous writers to watch by CBC Books, and was the winner of the 2016 Page Founder's Award for Poetry. Readers' first reactions to texts like *Halfbreed*, *In Search of April Raintree*, or *This Wound is a World* have been to turn away or, to insist that the Indigenous experience in Canada can't have been all bad. This kind of historical revisionism makes it all the more important for writers like Belcourt to set down their experiences in straightforward, unmistakable statements. At his most political, Belcourt's directness can border on the acerbic. His poem "God's River" stems from Health Canada's response to the 2009 swine flu pandemic, which hit Indigenous communities in remote northern Manitoba hardest. Along with a shipment of face masks and hand sanitizer came dozens of body bags, a gesture then Grand Chief David Harper equated to sending body bags to soldiers in Afghanistan. "Don't send us body bags," he said. "Help us organize. Send us medicine." To this Belcourt responds: "remind them / that canada is / four hundred / afghanistans / —call it 'colonialism.'" "It is very easy to fall into the ruts of agony and rage when writing about the ongoingness of oppression," he

says. “But I see fit to always return to love, because I think there’s more room for one another in that style of writing.” For Belcourt, that kind of connection is everything. Before it met mainstream acclaim and landed on the Griffin shortlist, *This Wound is a World’s* goal was to resonate with young, queer Indigenous readers—to offer them a rare opportunity to see themselves reflected in literature.

He says, “As a poet, I struggle with language—the English that America force-fed down my ancestors’ throats during assimilation and the Boarding School Era. My mouth struggles to reclaim the language of my ancestors as I try to learn words in my mother tongues.” and even more radically “I think about my First Nations relatives to the north and our relatives from south of these manmade borders in what is known as México. I think about the caravan of relatives traveling north, the voter suppression of Indigenous people in North Dakota and of our Black relatives in Georgia, and the heavy history of a country that has weaponized words in so many unspeakable ways.” In “Ode to Northern Alberta”, one of his poems, one can sense the reverberations of his overt political activism. He beautifully writes, “history screams into the night but it sounds too much like the wind”. Belcourt is perhaps suggesting that in every “ordinary” sound one hears, like the wind, there is a trace of colonial history. Indeed, a city like Toronto clamours with the reverberations of colonial devastation. Elsewhere, Belcourt has described this as the “sinister hummings” of settler colonialism.

Conclusion

This is how Belcourt is to some extent more proclaiming and assertive of the Indigenous cause than Vermette. Indeed, his political overtone of feeling deprived, marginalized and culturally jeopardized chime through his poetic cadence. Whereas Vermette is metaphoric in her treatment of the indigenous issues such as a law, media and geographical demonization, Belcourt is radically vocal against the injustice and alienation of the native people from the dominant foreign culture. It is this deep sense of crisis as regards their ‘belongingness’ that echo through the poetry of these brilliant young poets. They represent the hushed voice of their indigenous people who feel plundered and robbed of their cultural stronghold once enjoyed in the past. However all is not so bleak as the raising voice of such contemporary artists and thinkers might in future gain such a degree of confidence and might restore the cultural status quo of the pre-colonial past in such a commanding way as to remove the sense of displacement and uproot the social crisis. The promotion of the voice of protest and the tolerance of the social criticism through literature can really solidify the socio-cultural unity of Canada in spite of its diverse facets.

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