



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Cultural Evolution Through Narratives In *The Storyteller* By Llosa

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ABSTRACT:

Post colonialism in literature explores diversifying themes such as imperialism, hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry and liminality with the dominance and amalgamation of different cultures under one roof. The theory of hybridity was embarked in the field of bio sciences (botany and biology), but later Homi K. Bhabha used this theory in the field of literature and philosophy which has become a debatable and often discussed topic in literature. Homi K Bhabha coined this term Hybridity in *The Location of Culture* published in 1994. The concept of hybridity clearly shows how two very different cultures blend into one new culture and redefine the beliefs and values of the third nations. The present paper is going to throw light on how an indigenous tribe from Amazon rainforest hybridized, but still sustains its culture and tradition in the novel *The Storyteller* by Mario Vargas Llosa. Peruvian Spanish author, Mario Vargas Llosa won Nobel Prize in 2010 for writing in historical and political genre. Most of his works investigate the themes from his own region, Peru and his community. His major works explored myths, struggle for freedom, social evils and community culture in different zones of the world. Llosa wrote his novel 'El Hablador' (1987) translated in English by the title of 'The Storyteller' in 1989. The novel *The Storyteller* is a replete of theme of hybridity depicting narratives and challenges of Machinguenga tribe and their transformation to new set norms of storytelling and acceptance for certain issues of the primitive taboos such as physical disabilities, witch doctoring, supremacy of male sex, animism etc.

KEY WORDS: Hybridity, Machinguenga, indigenous, ambivalence, Post Colonialism

INTRODUCTION:

Cultural hybridity is the outcome of blending two different cultures, in the form of their set norms, beliefs, practices, myths, ethnicity, languages and identities. Mikhail Bakhtin, was the first to highlight the term hybridity according to whom,

It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1975).

The Storyteller explores the themes of cultural hybridity and conservation of cultural norms and beliefs of an indigenous Amazonian tribe called Machiguenga from western modernization. The novel talks about cultural displacement and hybridized identities in a Peruvian rain forest around the banks of river Urumba, which has just begun to mix up with western culture and modern people.

Post colonization has created a transformation in all these aspects because of the long stay and habilitation in the different location than own. Homi k Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* writes about the cross cultural exchange creating hybridity with a mutual barter between the colonizers and colonized. According to him the term Hybridity is,

the integration or mingling of cultural signs and practices from the colonized cultures. Furthermore, Hybrids are a mix of original cultures and adopted ones. However, they undergo a state of double vision of the social, political, and cultural changes caused by colonialism. Also, they live with no distinct identity as they are between two different cultures (112).

The novel also talks about the set norms and rituals being followed by the Machiguenga community, who are far behind from the westernization. But then begin to evolve them into modernity, especially in the term of religion that is Christianity. *The Storyteller* by Llosa describes the norms and rituals followed by the Machinguenga Amazonian tribe slavishly and blindly and deny accepting the transition in the beginning of the novel. Saul, the leading character of the novel leads to mystery where he is declared settled in Israel, but eventually found by one of the narrators of the novel who once was a friend to Saul. The novel begins on the note of an art exhibition by a fashion photographer Gabriele Malfatti in Florence where the first narrator finds a familiar face in a photograph of an Amazonian tribe which reminds him of an old friend Saul Zuratas. Saul was once a student of law and then anthropology had been his friend in the university who had a dark purple color birthmark on his face covering half of his face whom he called, "the ugliest lad in the world", but had a heart full of compassion.

Saul Zuratas had a dark birth mark, the color of wine dregs that covered the entire right side of his face, and unruly red hair as stiff as the bristles of a scrub brush (8).

In his college days he had been to jungle several times and enthralled by indigenous tribes and their culture. Saul himself was a hybrid offspring as his father was a Jew and mother was a Creole, from Talara, Spanish American. For the narrator, Saul along with his father was shifted to Israel for a long time ago. But he did not only move to Amazon, but became a part of their community where he adapted the ritual of storytelling in which he would narrate mythical and moral stories to the Machinguenga tribe.

Llosa wrote the novel referring myths and traditions practiced by the Machinguenga people where Christianity has already knocked the door through some anthropologists trying to imply their western culture into the tribe. Here this situation in the novel can be compared to the novel *Heart of Darkness* where Kurtz also tried inflicting his western practices to the people of Congo. Kurtz succeeded to become their master, but in this novel Saul is shown selfless and very much defensive to protect the all time traditions being followed by the tribe. The norms in the Machinguenga tribe like nomadism, hidden meaning of engraved tattoos, coloring their bodies in color red, odd ways of child births, evils and deities, and their mythological tales were being practiced in the aboriginal community of Machinguenga. The writer stressed on the cultural amalgamation in both ways where the indigenous tribe had to lose their cultural authenticity in search of modernity, but Saul, the storyteller succeeded to protect and conserve their originality along with eradicating vices and flaws in the tribe.

Many of the habitants are already half tribal and half whites. They also work as their superiors in the community. A coffee plantation has set up in the jungle and the owner Mr Fider Pereira; called as Viracochas is also an outcome of hybridity, half White and half tribal.

The legendary Fidel Pereira, "The son of a white man from Cusco and a Machiguenga woman, he was a mixture of feudal lord and aboriginal cacique." (18).

Saul gets impressed by the resilience of Machinguengas to protect their originality till date. Saul, the protagonist and one of the narrators, plays a role of bridge to maintain a connection between aboriginals and western thoughts. Initially as student he frequently visits Amazonian rain forests and eventually decides to stay back there, hiding his own identity as a Western Jew, a student of anthropology to an indigenous tribal

storyteller. The ritual of storytelling serves as an emotion which makes indigenous people connected to their past as well as their originality. All the stories serve here in the novel to keep them enlightened, entertained and still stick to the roots. The various stories include the mystical powers in the tribe like Tasurinchi, god of goodness, Kientibakori, god of evil, Morenachite, god of thunder etc. The tribe would listen to his stories while at a resting point, after walking all the day. His stories had a blend of biblical tales and religion with a note of moral values. An incident at a bar in city Lima, Chapter II showcases the reason why Saul became an integral part of the aboriginals. In an argument with a young boy at bar Saul accepts the cruel practicing like witching, polygamy, slavery etc were being performed in the tribe. He also assures that had he been born in the tribe with the deformity of a huge birth mark, he would have never survived. Still he defends the tribe and its odd cultural values and says,

These tribes had survived because their habits and Customs had the docilely followed the rhythms and requirements of the natural world, without doing it violence or disturbing it deep, just the minimum necessary so as not to be destroyed by it. The very opposite of what we civilized people were doing, wasting those elements without which we would end up weathering like flowers without water.

Saul defended the aboriginals aggressively and with such passion that his friend, the other narrator was astonished to his reaction. Llosa showcases many instances of hybridity in the novel though the characters and events in the novel. Saul adopted the culture and people of Amazon rainforest unconditionally. Others, including the first narrator and linguists came and tried to assimilate with tribal for their own professional interests, nothing personal. In fact they find acculturation a need of hour so that according to them this uncivilized tribe could lead to some progress. On the contrary, Saul becomes one of them and helps them to uphold their ethnicity and originality. He says.

The people who walk are my people now. Before, I walked with another people and I believed it was mine. I hadn't been born yet. I was really born once I began walking as a Machinguengas. That other people stay behind. It, too, had its story (215).

Here in the novel storytelling becomes a powerful tool of enlightenment. According to Cruz, "This narrative, in its inner discourse, however, shows the narrator Saul, caught between the Western and Machiguenga cultures and telling stories in order to change certain tribal customs." (134)

Saul, the storyteller narrates them didactic and virtuous stories in order to change the mindset of tribe. With the help of his stories Saul succeeds to change their way of thinking. Earlier the new born babies with deformity were abandoned by the tribe. Earlier they had a taboo that the imperfect and deformed children were the children of devil Kientibakori. But with his moral tales dictating kindness and goodness convert their heart with empathy. In spite of having a huge birthmark on his face, he was accepted by these very people of Machinguenga. Saul was not only accepted but revered and adored by the tribe. He never experienced such emotional affectation by the people in the city or university. He had always been treated as marginal, as he was a Jew in a Christian community and having a very unusually huge birthmark covering half of his face for what he was called a monster.

Cruz asserts that "the novel represents marginality through the creative "voice" of the hablador, - literally, "speaker" or "one who talks" – a tribal bard or storyteller who is marginalized because he is both a Machiguenga and a Jew." (134)

Main reason why Saul settled here was the acceptance and acknowledgement he never gotten from the people back in the modern world. Here Saul represents liminality where he makes certain transformation in the lives of Machinguengas, but still holds them back not to function beyond their roots. He pulls them back to retain their culture and rituals, but also inspires them to have a broader outlook. With the passage of time he becomes one of them where all listen to him and his mythological and didactic stories carefully. Discussing identity crises a prominent psychoanalyst Erik H Erikson wrote in his famous book *Identity Youth and Crises*,

the adolescent mind becomes a more explicitly ideological one, by which we mean one searching for some inspiring unification of tradition or anticipated techniques, ideas, and ideals. And, indeed, it is the ideological potential of a society which speaks most clearly to the adolescent who is so eager to be affirmed by peers, to be confirmed by teachers, and to be inspired by worth-while "ways of life." (135).

Saul realizes his purpose of life in Amazon rainforest where he feels home. Saul is an intellectual suffering identity crises while living in Peru where he seems confused about his identity.

Saúl experienced a conversion, in a cultural sense and perhaps in a religious also.

The other purpose of Saul is to keep the tribe and its culture uncontaminated. He wanted the tribe to be left alone as he knew that the intervention of the western world was merely to exploit the natural resources. The linguist couple Schneils who settled there came here with propaganda of so called civilizing the tribe. However Saul is assured by their hidden agendas and doesn't wish them to exploit the tribe with their hideous motives. Here the hybridization functions on limited way where the change takes place on the basis of convenience.

The novel presents different kinds of Western intervention. The main example are the Institute's missionary couple, the Schneils, who present the argument in favor of intervention. The missionaries' way imposes a cultural (linguistic and religious) intervention and thus presupposes a transformative action. (Cruz, 9).

In his frequent visits Saul, the storyteller observes the vices of the tribe such as animalism, polygamy, infant mortality (with physical deformity), and female subjugation. But steadily changes the perspective of the tribe through various moral stories. Through the instances and events in his mythological stories he bewares the tribe from the intriguing plans and cruel intentions of Viracochas (White people). These people enslaved Machiguenga men to work of stripping rubber from trees and killed those men denied their service.

"Viracochas were devils. They wanted to bleed us like they bled the trees." (50)

On one side he tries to change the living aspect of the tribe, but at the same time he wants the tribe to follow the tradition like nomadism and dependence on nature. The nomadism (keep walking) shows the constant existence of one of their cultural ritual which saves them from outer worldly invasions and keep them close to nature. They believe that if they stop walking, sun will fall out the sky. Their belief helps them to survive in the brutal circumstances.

The day you stop walking, you will disappear completely.

Who is purer or happier because he has renounced his destiny I ask you? Nobody. We'd best be what we are... It seems we'd best go on walking. (220)

One of the revered old men, Tasurinchi, said that only "Walking, fulfilling their destiny, matters." (209)

Chapter VI of the novel showcases the transition of the tribe, symbolizing hybridity on a large scale. The narrator visits the settlement, a village called new light whose chief was a young Christian man with a modern haircut and a western dress. A church and a school were built in the village where their children were learning Spanish.

Talking the way a storyteller talks means to be able to feel and live in the very heart of that culture, means having penetrated its essence, reached the marrow of its history and mythology, given body to its taboos, images, ancestral desires, and terrors. It means being, in the most profound way possible, a rooted Machiguenga, one of that ancient lineage. (244)

Here in chapter VI only the linguist couple Schneils confirms the identity of Saul as the storyteller referring his purple birthmark on his face to the first narrator.

"He had a huge birthmark," said Mr. Schneil. "And hair redder than mine. A strange person. What the Machiguengas call a serigorompi. Meaning an eccentric; someone different from the rest.... you've doubtless realized how hard it is to tell how old they are... What you might call a Machiguenga age. But certainly younger than I am. About your age, or perhaps a bit younger. 181-82).

Chapter VII reconfirms the radical changes happening in the community of Machinguenga tribe where their life style is transformed into modern way, where nomadism is not taken seriously.

"Good things happen and bad things happen,". The storyteller narrates a story of a hunter who rejects all the taboos and suffers afterwards. Through the story he warns the tribe not to reject the primitive ways to avoid further obstacles in life. The tribe didn't have a particular religion or culture. They were totally inclined towards nature and had gods and deities represented in the various forms of nature. So in that way, Machinguengas were a soft target for the Westerners. The storyteller, Saul narrates the biblical story of Jehovah- Tasurinchi symbolizing wisdom and sanity. Through his tale he tries to convince the tribal to change their mindset especially regarding condemning deformity in new born children. The final story does help to transform regressive approach of Machinguengas, but retain other rituals and tradition of the tribe. Thus the novel ends on the note of a transgression of Saul in order to protect the primitive tribal laws from Westernization to balance the law of nature.

CONCLUSION:

The novel provides a framework to the challenges and obstacles the Machinguenga tribe experience from outer as well as inner world. Western world definitely succeeds to invade and foist their propaganda in the aboriginals. The concept of cultural hybridity can positively seen in the novel *The Storyteller* where with the passage of time culture did expose to the western culture and mixed up their own culture to create “third space”.

This critical hybrid subject creates a new cultural “third space” which counters the dominant representation of cultural, “ethnic,” and racial identity (Bhabha, 1994).

Saul creates his own third space where primitive traditions are still followed along with abolishing some evil rituals earlier followed and performed in the tribe. Thus Saul is undoubtedly a source of liminality who serves here as a bridge between modernity and tribal legacy. Hybridity has highlighted in the novel as an emergence to create new identity of the aboriginals with a check on following some of the primitive rituals of the tribe. So Saul is succeeded to retain the originality of the Machinguengas by welcoming the positive aspect of western culture.

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