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## Demolishing stereotypes, constructing identity: A study of Emma Lee Warrior's compatriots and Thomas King's a seat in the garden

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### Abstract

Native American literature has carved a distinct niche among the Native literature of the world. Native American literature not only constructs an identity for the Natives and establishes the difference between the worldview of the Natives and Europeans, but also smashes the stereotypes of the Natives constructed and perpetrated by the colonial narratives and popular culture. The short story has emerged as an important genre in this case. The length of the short story allows the reader to concentrate on the specific points of the writers. The length of the short story also allows a deep penetration among the readers. The current paper studies the two short stories by Emma Lee Warrior and Thomas King.

**Keywords:** Stereotype, native, drunkard, Indian, worldview

The recent decades have seen the advent of Native literature across the globe. With the arrival of Native literature on the scene, the world has come to know about the societies which were considered backward and savage. However, the Native literature is changing the perception of the Native societies. Native literature is acting as a catalyst for the Native societies, but it has also become an important site for the construction of Native identity and to bring out the reality about the people. Native literature also challenges the notion of universality imposed by Western hegemony. The Western powers sought to impose their culture, civilization and traditions as universal constants over the world. The best example can be found in the belief of the Europeans that only cold regions can nurture civilization. This belief emanated from the ethnocentric myopia of the Europeans. They believed that only cold regions could nurture civilization because Europe was cold. The Europeans wrote in glowing terms about Tibet:

The kingdom of TRIMIC is all surrounded by mountains which give rise to many fountains and lives. This land has a very healthy climate and agubiloda so that those who are born and live here have very long lives. They are men of clear understandings and good memories, learned in sciences and live according to law. They say that the men who first heard of science and learning were these and that Persians heard of those things from them. This is because they are the birthplace of the east and the rest of the towns and great cities and roots of this kingdom are all due to the temperate climate which tempered their bodies and the good extended to their spirits and gave them a better understanding and clearer memories. (Espada 49)

Espada is very liberal in the praise of Tibet because it has a cold climate and many springs. The people in Tibet lived healthy lives because they lived in a healthy climate. However, the hot and tropical climates were not considered healthy. That is why Africa was declared to be uncivilized.

The example of a cold climate is only one instance of how the Europeans tried to universalize all that was European. This is further extended, however, to religion, culture, traditions, architecture etc.

The longer periods of colonization did induce cultural amnesia among the colonized people and they started treating Europe as the role model for everything and automatically started considering their traditions as deviant.

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However, the Native literature has started demolishing this universalism perpetrated by the Europeans. Master Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, calls this process “re-storying.” In his book *Home and Exile* (2000), Achebe writes: “The Twentieth century for all its many faults did witness a significant beginning, in Africa and elsewhere in the so-called Third world, of the process of the re-storying peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kind of dispossession.”

The Native writers have started the process of “re-storying” by asserting their differences in the worldview. Short stories by Native writers have become an important vehicle to demolish the images and ideology perpetrated by the colonizers. This paper is a study of Emma Lee Warrior’s short story “Compatriots” and Thomas King’s “A Seat in the Garden.” Both stories demolish the stereotypes of the Natives and assert the difference between the Native societies and the Whites.

Emma Lee Warrior’s story “Compatriots” raises questions about the identity of the Natives. The identity of Natives was constructed by the Whites according to their needs. The Natives were exterminated brutally, by the Whites, so they had to be declared backwards and savages by the Whites. The Natives were declared as “murderous”, rapacious”, “primitives”, “one-dimensional”, “naked”, “heathenish”, “wooden”, “full of gibberish” or “devilish” (Vickers 5).

The common people were not the only ones who were affected by this propaganda, rather the intellectuals also fell to these devious depictions. Even the learned intellectuals like Horace Walpole used the references to the Natives of the Americas to insult the people they did not like (Bickham 96).

In the story “Compatriots”, readers come across the Natives who are different from the people they have been taught about. In the story, readers come across a Native Woman Lucy, who has not been brought up in an Indian way. The story indicates that the cultural and religious practices were lost during the period of colonization. In the story, Lucy tells Hilda:

You see, Indian religion just came back here on reserve a little while ago, and there are different groups who all quarrel over which way to practice it. Some use Sioux ways, and others use Cree. It is just a big mess. (184)

Lucy’s statement shows that people living on the reservation did not know much about the Indian religion and the resurgence of the same is taking place. Moreover, Lucy has not attended even a single “sun-dance” (184) in her life. Sun-dance is an important cultural practice of the Native Americans. This shows that Natives like Lucy have not been trained in Native culture. Lucy has not been trained consciously in Native culture, but unconsciously she is an Indian.

The difference between the Native and White societies has been termed as “communitarian-individualist difference” (Tinker XII). The Natives live in closely-knit communities and help one another. There is no concept of individual ownership of property among the Natives. In the story, Lucy’s behaviour shows that though she has not been trained in Indian culture, she is communitarian to the core. Readers are told that Lucy does not earn much:

She ate heartily, complimenting Lucy on her cooking even though it was only the usual scrambled eggs and fried potatoes with toast and coffee. After payday, there’d be

sausages or ham, but payday was Friday and today was only Tuesday. (183)

In the above statement, it is clear that Lucy does not earn enough even to afford sausages or ham for her children throughout the week, but even then she does not shy away from helping other people with money. In the story, Lucy tells Hilda about a man who dogs them:

He wants money. He’s related to my husband. Don’t pay any attention to him. He always does this. I used to give him, but he just drinks up. (184)

The above utterance by Lucy shows that despite her frugal means she helps other people. This helping communitarian attitude of Lucy is further accentuated by the author when she buys food for her uncle Sonny (185).

Her helping behaviour is reciprocated by Sonny, who carries her laundry bags despite being frail and sick. Sonny tells her: “You’re not supposed to be carrying big things around in your condition” (185). Sonny knows that Lucy is pregnant. It seems to be a simple act of Sonny, but readers realize the difference between the Natives and the whites as Hilda did not do this for Lucy. This shows that the Natives still are communitarian in their behaviour.

In the story, Emma Lee Warrior also addresses the questions regarding the identity of the Natives. The questions have been asked if anyone can assume Native identity. In the story, Warrior introduces a character Helmut walking Eagle who happens to be a German, but he lives among the Indians. Hilda wants to meet him:

I want to see him. I heard about him and I read a book he wrote. He seems to know a lot about the Indians and he’s been accepted into their religious society. I hope he can tell me things I can take home. People in Germany are really interested in. (183)

Helmut Walking Eagle shows how the Whites have been exploiting Native heritage and culture for economic purposes. White people have a long history of using assumed Native identity and culture for economic purposes. A White man called Sylvester Clark assumed the identity of Chief Buffalo Long Lance and published his autobiography *Long Lance* in 1928. This autobiography portrayed the Natives in a poor light and fostered the images which already existed in the minds of the Whites. Another instance of such a case is Jamake Highwater who impersonated a Native Indian and wrote a book *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (1981). The book was an economically profiteering venture for the writer. However, it was discovered that the writer was Gregory Markopoulous a person of Greek ancestry.

In the story, Warrior also points out the same thing:

She’d read in the papers how some White woman in Hollywood became a medicine woman. She was selling her book on her life as a White woman. Maybe some White person or other person who wasn’t Indian would get fooled by that book, but not an Indian. (186)

In the story, Warrior settles the question of the identity of the Indians. She makes clear that a person who is brought up in an Indian community can become Indian in his/her worldview. A person cannot become Indian in his youth by living among Indians. In the story, Sonny tells Lucy:

Shit, that guy’s just a phoney. How could anybody turn into something else? Huh? I don’t think I could turn into a White man if I tried all my life. They wouldn’t let me, so how does that German think he can be an Indian. White people think

he can be an Indian. White people think they can do anything- into Chinese or Indian-they're crazy! (186)

Hilda finally meets in the story. After meeting Helmut, readers realize that Sonny was correct about anybody becoming an Indian. Readers at once realize that Helmut may have become Indian by his appearance, but he has not become Indian in his worldview. One of the distinguishing features of Native American society is that the head of the family is the mother. The note Native writer Leslie Marmon Silko writes in ceremony that everything belonged to women: "The house belonged to Grandma and Auntie" and all the material possessions also belonged to the women: "The sheep the horse, and the fields everything belonged to them, including the good family name" (*Ceremony* 29). Paula Gunn Allen calls her people "the last surviving Mother-Right peoples on the planet" (*The Sacred Hoop* 11). When compared to the Natives, the Europeans are a patriarchal society where the father/male is the head of the family. The noted Native critic, Allen further writes about the distinguishing features of the matrilineal society: Some distinguishing features of a woman-centred social system include free and easy sexuality and wide latitude in personal style. This latitude means that a diversity of people including gay males and lesbians, are not denied and are in fact likely to be accorded honor. Also likely to be prominent in such systems are nurturing, pacifist, and passive males (as defined by Western minds) and self-defining assertive, decisive women. In many tribes, the nurturing male constitutes the ideal adult model for boys while the decisive, self-directing female is the ideal model to which girls aspire. (*The Sacred Hoop* 2)

In the story, the reader realizes that Lucy's house follows the matriarchal system where she is the head of the family and makes all the decisions in the household. On the other hand, when readers come across Helmut, they realize that he is a patriarchal man and his wife has an inferior status. Even his tepee is unlike an Indian home. It reflects his economic status. The ostentatious lifestyle showcased by Helmut is not found among the Natives. Warrior writes about his tepee:

The inside of the tepee was stunning. It was roomy, and the floor was covered with buffalo hides. Backrests, Wall hangings, parfleche bags and numerous are were magnificently displayed. Helmut walking Eagle sat resplendent amidst his wealth. The women were dazzled. Lucy felt herself gaping and had to shush her children from asking any questions. (189)

His economic riches are an outcome of his selling of Indian knowledge. He has written a book *A Revival of Ancient Cures and Ceremonies* and sells that book for twenty-seven dollars. He has become an Indian for economic benefits. However, the biggest question that remains is if he has become an Indian in his worldview. Warrior makes clear that he has become only in appearance. He dresses in Indian style. Warrior tells the readers, "Lucy had never seen Helmut in anything other than Indian regalia" (188). He wears Indian clothes and wears his hair in braids. Whenever Lucy looked at him, she was reminded of the "Plains Indian Museum across the line."

Outwardly, Helmut has become an Indian but, in his worldview, he has remained a European. He appears to be an arrogant man who does not treat the visitors courteously. Warrior writes about the encounter of Helmut with Lucy and other visitors:

Helmut looked at them intently and rested his gaze on the Hilda. Hilda walked toward him, her hand extended in the greeting, but Helmut ignored it. Helmut turned to his wife and asked in Blackfoot, "Who is this?" (189)

This behaviour cannot be found among the Indians. One of the basic traits of the Natives in to treat all the visitors kindly. Even Columbus acknowledged this. He wrote to the King of Spain:

So tractable, so peaceable, are these people that I swear to your Majesties there's not in the world a better nation. They save their neighbor as themselves and their discourse is ever sweet and gentle and accompanied with a smile. (qtd. in Brown 1)

In *The Light in the Forest*, Conrad Richter writes a story of True Son, a white boy who was found by the Natives and was brought up like their own son. The charms of egalitarian Native society had enamoured so many Whites that they preferred to live among the Natives. Famous historian and critic Wilcomb E. Washburn writes: "Most of us know how an extraordinary number of Whites preferred Indian society, while almost no Indians preferred White society" (52).

Helmut had not imbibed any of these traits into his personality. Many Native writers have argued that a person can become a Native only and only if he has imbibed the Native worldview. However, Helmut has remained a European in his worldview. Warrior further accentuates the behaviour of Helmut and tells the reader that "he barked in Blackfoot" (189) at his wife. He also looks "meanly" at his wife and his "jaw twitched with resentment" (189) and his anger seemed to be tangibly reaching out to them" (189). The response of his wife to his behaviour shows that he is habitual of behaving like it. She shakes "her head in the shamed manner" (189). Her response to the 'barking' of her husband also confirms that her husband is a violent and arrogant man and is still a European at the core of his heart who still believes in patriarchal values.

In Thomas King's story, readers come across the stereotypes that were perpetrated by the colonial narratives and are fostered by popular culture. In the story, Thomas King uses humour to convey the truth about the Indians and at the same time exposes the stereotypes perpetrated by the Whites. Thomas King's literary endeavours have concentrated on demolishing the stereotypes of his people. Stereotypes are typical images which are very difficult to demolish. Gordon W. Allport writes: "A Stereotype is an overstated assumption connected to a group. Its purpose is to defend (justify) our actions regarding that category" (191).

In the story "A Seat in the Garden", King exposes the fallacious images of the Natives perpetrated by whites. Through the white characters of the story, he also shows the resilience of the stereotypes. In the story, two white men Joe and Red believe that all the Indians are drunkards. The conversation between the two indicates that the image of a drunkard Indian has been engraved deeply in their hearts while talking to the RCMP officer they say:

They sit down there by the hydrangea crush the cans and eat their lunch. Sometimes they get to singing.

You mean drink their lunch.

Well, they could have anything in that bottle. (194)

Both of the white men were sure that the Indians were drunkards and that they "could smell them" (195). They strongly believe that the Indians are drunkards which is why

they decide to “grab a couple of beers” (195) to show them that they are friendly. They approach the Indians thinking that they will reek of alcohol, but they are surprised to find “they didn’t smell as bad as he had expected” (195).

The Indians themselves confirm that they do not drink beer or wine, but they drink “lemon water” (195). The confirmation from the Indians and the observation made by the whites fail to shatter the stereotype of “drunkard Indian” and they are still referred to as “winos” by them.

“Here’s where those winos crush their cans and drink their Lysol” Joe continued marking a spot and drawing a line to it. (197)

Joe is reminded by Red that the Indians do not drink Lysol, but they drink “Lemon water”. However, Joe continues with his utterance and continues to refer to the Indians with the derogatory word “wino”:

If you draw lines from the house to where the big Indian stands and from there to where the winos crush their cans and back to the house. Now do you see it? (197)

Through Joe, King shows that the stereotypes are very difficult to demolish. Joe continues with the derogatory word “winos” throughout the story.

It is indeed ironic that the “lemon drinking water” Indians are referred to as winos by Joe who himself is shown drinking beer in the story. King writes: “Joe snapped the tab on one of the beers, took a long swig, and jerked his thumb in the direction of the garden” (196). Towards the end of the story, King writes: “Joe and Red spent the rest of the day sitting on the porch, drinking beer and watching the big Indian in the garden” (199). The depiction in the story confirms that the “winos” are Joe and Red, but the stereotypes of the Indians have been constructed in such a way that they are believed to be drunkards even without drinking.

In the story, King accentuates the drunken status of the white men by another incident. In the story, Joe and Red both see a big Indian in the kitchen garden of Joe. It is indeed interesting to note that the big Indian is only visible to these two men. Although Indians believe that the spirits of their ancestors keep visiting them to help them in different matters, here the case is different because the “big Indian” is visible only to the whites. Thomas King drops the hints that the big Indian seen by the whites is a projection of their minds. The appearance of the “big Indian” was weird:

The big Indian was naked to the waist. His chair was braided and wrapped with white ermine and strips of red cloth. He wore a single feather held in place by a leather band stretched around his head and even though his arms were folded tightly across the chest, Joe could see the glitter and flash of silver and turquoise on each finger. (192)

This is a stereotypical projection of an Indian. The story also despite three more Indians, but none of them is dressed like the Indian seen by Joe and Red. This shows that they might be seeing the Indian in his imagination. It is further stressed by King that the “big Indian” is nothing but a figment of the imagination of Joe and Red as the other Indians are not able to see him. The Indians also realize that the “big Indian” is being seen by Joe and Red because of their drunken States. In the story, Red asks the Indians:

“We were just wondering”, Red began. “If you woke up one day and found a big Indian standing in your cornfield and all he would say was, ‘if you build it, they will come’, what would you do?” (196)

To this the Indian replies: “I’d stop drinking” (196). This is clear that the “big Indian” is not visible to any of the Indians. They just pretend to see the “big Indian.”

Moreover, the “big Indian” keep on saying “If you build it, they will come” (196) is not audible to any of the Indians. This makes clear that the “big Indian” is not an ancestral spirit. It is just a projection of Joe’s mind in an inebriated state.

Both Joe and Red can watch and listen to the “big Indian,” but even the camera is not able to take his photograph. Red takes a photograph of Joe attacking the ‘Big Indian’ with a shovel and sees “Joe and his shovel run right through the Indian” (198). Red gets the photograph developed, but nothing is seen there:

Red fished a photograph out of the pack. It showed Joe and the shovel in mid-swing plunging through the corn. The colors were brilliant.

Joe looked at the photograph for a minute and then he looked at the cornfield “Where’s the big Indian.”

“That’s just it. He’s not there.” (198)

Human eyes can be deceived by the human mind, but the machine cannot be deceived. The blank photograph with “brilliant colors” shows the big Indian is indeed the projection of their minds. Moreover, the utterance of the ‘big Indian’ also does not convey any meaning.

The Indians also understand this. That is why they give a simple solution to the ‘big Indian’ problem to Joe and Red: He is tired of standing; he says He wants a place to sit down. But he doesn’t want to mess up the garden. He says he would like it if you would build him a bench right about here. (197)

At the end of the story, Joe and Red watch the ‘big Indian’ sitting on the bench while drinking beer.

Thus, both stories show that the stereotype of drunken Indians has to be demolished because they do not convey any truth. Moreover, the Natives cannot be judged from the European perspective. The Natives lived in a closely-knit society where the individual idea of ownership was alien to them. Through these stories, the Native writers establish their distinct identities and convey that they are different but not deviant.

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