

Alternatives in *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*

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Abstract: *In the Eurocentric tradition, there are four worlds: First World, Second World, Third World and Fourth World which refer to, respectively, Britain, USA, and Europe; the white populations of Canada, Australia and New Zealand; developing nations in Asia, South America, North Africa; and indigenous populations subjugated, colonized and governed today by the white settlers such as Native Americans. In the play Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth written by Drew Hayden Taylor, a Native girl, Grace, adopted by a White family, is asked by her birth sister to return to the Reservation for their mother's funeral. Scared of opening old wounds, Grace refuses to visit the Reserve and her family but her sister, Barb, who has been left behind trying to compete with the memory of her sister who has managed to achieve a level of perfection only possible in the imagination is unwilling to let go of her resentment particularly given that their mother has since passed away. The double visions/double consciousness of these two sisters are juxtaposed in the languages of English and Ojibway. The feeling of being caught between two cultures and two languages leads Janice/Grace to suffer from the trauma of the displacement, which Homi Bhabha refers as unhomeliness. To be unhomed means to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee. The purpose of the article is to tackle the identity crisis of the Ojibway nation and to dwell upon the alternative solutions brought in the play.*

Keywords: *identity, Ojibway, ethnic literature*

Sadece Sarhoşlar ve Çocuklar Doğruyu Söyler'deki Alternatif Yollar

Öz: *Eurocentrik gelenekte, dört dünya vardır: İngiltere, ABD ve Avrupa ülkelerinden oluşan 1. Dünya; Kanada, Avustralya ve Yeni Zelanda'nın beyazlarından oluşan 2. Dünya; Asya, Kuzey Afrika ve Güney Amerika gibi gelişmekte oluşan ülkelerden oluşan 3. Dünya ve kolonileşmiş gruplardan oluşan 4. Dünya. Drew Hayden Taylor'ın yazdığı ve 4. dünyaya ait olan Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth beyazlar tarafından evlat edinilen Grace ile yerli Ojibway kabilesinde büyüyen Barb arasındaki kardeşlik ilişkilerini ve kimlik konusundaki travmalarını içermektedir. Her iki kardeşin de yaşamış olduğu nereye ait olma ama özellikle Barb in beyaz dünya ile biyolojik ailesi arasındaki çatışması ve çözüm yollarını irdeleyen oyun, Homi Bhabha'nın barksızlık kavramıyla makalede açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Makalenin amacı Ojibway kabilesindeki kimlik arayışı ve Taylor'ın getirdiği alternatif çözümler üzerinedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *kimlik, Ojibway, etnik edebiyat*

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Introduction

What makes an American Indian writer different from other writers is the tribal identity they have been raised with in mind and emotions and leads them to think in virtually every way as members of that tribe think. A popular definition of what a Native American is "Native Americans are Native Americans if they say they are , if other Native Americans say they are and accept then and possibly if the values that are held close and acted upon are values upheld by the various native people who live in the Americas." (Swann xx)

Most Native American writers including Simon Ortiz, James Welch, Joy Harjo, Luisa Erdrich, Scott Momaday and Drew Hayden Taylor have widely varying degrees of Indian blood, sometimes as little as an eighth and in several cases too little to be anything (Berner 6) and they grew up close to but not within the traditions of tribes, and this is believed to give these artists a creative balance of subjectivity and objectivity about the tribal experience. Berner (9) mentions the fact that the 1980 census reported a seventy-two percent increase in the Indian population of the US over that of 1970. This shows many people have started to consider themselves as Indians if they have even one Indian ancestor in their family to report and when they seek for the economic advantage.

The first thing to say about an American Indian tradition is that Indian authors write in English and most do not know their tribal language such as Joy Harjo who confesses that English is very materialistic and very subject- oriented compared to Creek, of which she knows nothing but a few words and the Indian authors are the products of a mixed culture and most have acquired their literary education in university English departments and their work is a hybrid of American literary tradition and the oral tradition of their tribes (Bruchac 94).

The defining characteristics of American Indian literature are listed by Momaday (Bruchac 180) as the importance of the land , a sense of place within the natural environment and the whole worldview of the Indian predicated upon the principle of harmony in the universe. The Indian has the advantage of a rich spiritual experience and a sense of community and of tribal heritage, the sense of knowing one's relationship to one's ancestors. The problem faced by American Indian writers is related to the concept of unhomeliness; they are not so sure of where they belong to.

Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth

Drew Hayden Taylor's vision is comic and it seems that the only strategy for the Indian writer is comedy because comedy is compatible with an Indian vision of community along with scepticism he constantly applies to his nation. Taylor has more than 60 mountings of his work under his belt, eight of his scripts have been published, and he has authored six books of essays, humorous articles, and short stories. Asked how he manages to be so prolific, he replies over the phone from his home in Toronto: "I subcontract. I have a

Jewish writer in New York. I just change everything from Jewish to Ojibway. Taylor has a very clear idea of what he hopes audiences will get out of his works. “I want them not to believe that Native people exist completely for land claims, alcoholism, and oppression. I want them to see the humour that we have. I want them to see that we laugh, we cry, we have cathartic moments. I want people who see my play to acknowledge the fact that we have a multifaceted life, that it’s not all the gloom and doom you see in the media. It is a sense of humour that’s allowed us to survive the darker aspects of our history” (Thomas 2). His play *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* is the emotional story of Janice’s, a successful lawyer’s struggle to acknowledge her birth family. Janice who is called Grace, is a Native girl adopted by a White family, asked by her birth sister to return to the Reserve for their mother’s funeral. Afraid of opening old wounds, Grace hesitates to go and to find a place where the culture of her past can feed the truth of her present. Upon their mother’s death, her sister, Barb, raised in the native community, takes her boyfriend Rodney and her friend Tonto to visit Grace in her apartment. The way Taylor brilliantly depicts Tonto and Barb and their teasings is the foreground to their miserable past. Oftentimes, people do not know that they have been accepted into a community until they start teasing you, because it is impolite to tease a stranger, at least to their face. There is actually an anthropological term for that: it is called permitted disrespect.

Rodney: I don’t have my license since that little altercation with the O.P.P., for which I still think that breathalyser was rigged. You do not like to drive on the highways. Kind of limits our alternatives.

Barb: I do not want to stay here.

Rodney: we are housebroken

Barb (to Tonto) : how bad is your night blindness?

Rodney. Trust me, it is very bad, we do not have a choice.

Tonto: how long have I had night blindness??Is it fatal?? (1937)

Tonto: I tried this decaf stuff once. Sort of like kissing a relative.
Tastes the same but no spark. (1947)

Janice: I do not go anywhere without my car.

Rodney: Neither does he. Which makes sense considering there’s no place to go in or around, Otter lake, without a car. (1952)

Taylor’s conception of language may be understood as every word is originally a poem, and words are the only means by which the poet can give meaning to reality, achieve self definition, and, in the process, restore vitality to the words. The three main divisions of the play may be understood as the origins, meeting Janice/Grace, juxtaposition of Grace and Barb, and the return to colors by Grace. A word possesses power, although the play is written in English, it is full of Ojibway words. Janice tries to learn some words when she

goes to the Reserve along with her sister and the two boys. However, nobody speaks the Ojibway language proficiently in full sentences.

Janice: what do you call a bottle of beer?

Barb: Beer, let's see(Thinking) Shinkopiiwaabo. That sounds like it.

Janice: Shinkopiiwaabo. Wine

Barb: wine is Zhoominaabo

Janice. Window

Barb: Waasechikan

Barb: Ahneen, hello. Co-waabmen, I will be seeing you.

Janice: Ahneen, co –waabmen. Next

Barb: numbers, want your numbers?

Janice. Shoot. (1963)

After a short lesson on teaching the Ojibway language, Barb presents their mother's gift to Janice when they go to her place on the Reserve: a dreamcatcher. Dreams are so important for Ojibways, they are not results of deliberate acts, but they come without bidding and are believed to be the cause of all events. A man who dreams of being sick believes he will become sick. All of the myths and legends of the Ojibways are the products of the men who dream them. Dream catchers are especially important to enable the newborn to see all good dreams and filter the nightmares or dreams of ill omen. Their mother's gift is a large dreamcatcher with a tag which reads "Good dreams pass through the webbing, bad dreams are caught and dissolved by the early morning light" (1965). Dreamcatchers are usually given to newlyweds to hang over the windows in their bedroom or to the mother of a newborn baby, to ensure that her baby will only have pleasant dreams

This tribal gift for Janice is more than she could bear who confesses why she could not come to the Reserve. She accepts that she has scars of her own. She grew up wanting to hate her mother, thinking her whole life was the mother's fault. However, when she came to the Reserve for the first time to cry out at her to accuse her of having abandoned her child, she was struck and shocked to find the wonderful, sweet caring mother that had her baby taken away by the system for no good reason. A baby she loved and fought to get back was not returned to the Reserve. Janice was ready to hate her biological mother for what had happened but when she found the reality on the Reserve, she faced a total disappointment and sorrow, rather than vengeance and hatred. The play adroitly juxtaposes Janice raised by a white family, living in the city, getting a degree, working as a lawyer and earning more money and her sister Barb who is left behind on the Reserve, who got her mother's love, who is left uneducated, who has to live in the downtrodden

conditions and who had to bear and go on life by herself after her father and brother's untimely deaths. The male characters, Rodney and Tonto, are raised together by the tribal community and neighbours took care of Tonto when his father went to the city Toronto to work. Tonto has had many job experiences, from being a mechanic, to a locksmith. Rodney knows only two books implying the scarce education he got but both boys listen to the Elders. They speak only some Ojibway words but they have managed to retain the traditions and have a clear sense of the reality that surrounds them.

Tonto: The whole difference between Native people and white people can be summed up in that one single three-letter word: *why*. White people are preoccupied with *why* everything works. *Why* was the universe created? *Why* is the sky blue? *Why* do dogs drool when you ring a bell? *Why* is the altar of worship. Their whole civilization is based on finding out *why* everything does everything.

Janice: And Native people are different? What is your answer to *why*??

Tonto: *why* not? That is it. (1949)

From the beginning it is easy to see Janice torn between two different cultures. At the beginning of the play, when Barb, Rodney and Tonto break into Janice's apartment and explore her place noting many items reminiscent of both Indian and English ways. Janice is not part of either the foster parents' world or the biological parents' world. Her double consciousness seems to be trapping her and making her feel frustrated in her life and being unable to decide. After having embraced both cultures, she attains the fulfillment in her life. The half breed consciousness is a burden, but it also is a source of strength and wisdom, a kind of blessing. Taylor seems to hold the same grip as Harjo whose description of this mixed blood is painful "I walk in and out of many worlds. I used to see being born of this mixed-blood/mixed vision a curse, and hated myself for it. It was too confusing and destructive when I saw the world through that focus. The only message I got was not belonging anywhere, not to any side. I have since decided that being familiar with more than one world, more than one vision, is a blessing. I also know that it is only an illusion that any of the worlds are separate" (Swann and Krupat 266). This half breed metaphor shows divisions in all of us, we are in fact all half breed in this world.

In the contemporary world, ethnic identity is purely symbolic (Song 14), Barb, Rodney and Tonto live on the Reserve, speak English, eat the white people's food but they are natives, what makes them natives is the fact that they are discriminated and are being forced to live on the Reserve, even their idol, Amelia Erhart, is white, their favourite series is Star Trek. Ethnicity is not something that influences their language and culture. Their culture is sort of hybridized with the predominance of the white mainstream culture. Ethnicity may be said to constitute a "passive" as opposed to an "active" identity

(Bradley 25). In contrast with most White people, members of nonwhite minority groups are likely to experience their ethnicity as an active identity because as Bradley notes” active identification often occurs as a defense against the actions of the others or when an individual is conscious of being defined in a negative way” (25). Active identities are promoted by the experience of discrimination. Using the distinction between active and passive identity, many racialized minorities are constantly aware of their ethnic identities in a variety of social situations. A comprehensive or thick ethnic or racial tie is one that organizes a great deal of social life and both individual and collective action. A less comprehensive or thin ethnic tie is one that organizes relatively little of social life and action (Cornell and Hartmann 73). In the case of Native Americans, ethnicity is experienced as a relatively thin identity because it may be celebrated and significant in some respects, it does not tend to fundamentally structure their lives today. Nonwhite minorities cannot exercise ethnic options in the same way as White Americans because racial identities are constantly imposed upon nonwhite minorities.

For racialized minorities, their identities and their lives are shaped by race and they are faced with a socially enforced and imposed racial identity whereas white Americans can be said to celebrate individualistic ethnic identities. Ethnic minorities are able, although in limited ways, to exercise ethnic options. Ethnic minority groups and the individual members of these groups are active in re-creating and reinventing the meanings and practices associated with themselves. There is now more interest and emphasis on the active ways in which people may shape and assert their own ethnic identities and the strategic ways in which they invoke their ethnicity. Some scholars including Song and Swidler talk about how cultural practices and resources provide a kind of tool kit of symbols, stories and rituals which can be used by individuals in a variety of ways such as the dreamcatcher motif in the play and the story of a cowbird which lay their eggs in other birds’ nest then fly off, when the baby bird grows up, it is still a cowbird.

The striking thing about the new work on ethnicity is the insistence upon the present and the changeability of identity formations through time. Janice’s ethnic identity is acquired later, although she is raised by the English parents, she accepts her native roots in the end. For Janice, it is an assertion and choice she is making regarding her identity. Stuart Hall (225) asserts that cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past it is subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.

Disidentifying strategies have been employed successfully by the Ojibway people living on the Reserve in order to break up an otherwise coherent picture, the use of disidentifiers disrupts the often stereotypical assumptions people make about one another . One such strategy is to substitute a range of positive images of Ojibway for the negative imagery which is used in the popular representation of native people. Tonto’s being unemployed is substituted for his skills in repairing cars and other kinds of manual jobs.

Natives' alcohol consumption is replaced by Barb's drinking with her sister only to show how she feels and why she has that superficial dislike for her and to make her sister open up her feelings and Tonto never drinks including beer.

Conclusion

The crucial question of what it means to be an Ojibway today remains contested throughout the play. Does it mean living on the Reserve? Does it mean being able to speak the language? Does it mean being informed by both the mainstream and Ojibway cultures? Ethnic groups are real to the extent that they are socially and politically recognized and reconstructed by their members and by the wider society. An Ethnic group, the Ojibway nation, exists only where its members possess a conscious sense of belonging to it. This difference of the distinct ethnic Ojibway identity is invoked to exclude and marginalize outsiders and others and celebrate their rich hybridized culture. The fact that there is no clear cut consensus about the cultural content of the Ojibway shows that the meanings of culture and ethnicity are fluid and contested rather than fixed; their cultural practices are not perennial and clearly defined. There are two different types of hybridity (Young): fusion or merging or creolization which involves the new form and dialectical articulation (or dialogization), which produces a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity. Janice's hybridity is positioned in the white community, radical heterogeneity and Barb's hybridity is a new form of hybridity tinged with the white people's language but constituting her own. This play is a very tender, engaging look at two culturally hybridized strangers learning to be sisters. Witty one liners and snappy dialogue has crafted likeable, real characters bring a satisfying sense of closure to the struggles of Barb and Janice/Grace. It is a welcome ending, one that reflects hope for the future - not only for these two sisters, but also for all the others who have yet to find their way home.

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