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## Reconstructing Identities through Intertextuality: A Critical Study of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

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### Abstract:

Post-Colonial societies are cultural and linguistic mosaics because they reflect their Native culture along with the inescapable culture of the Colonizer. These medleys have inspired creative artists to interfuse the elements of Native and Colonial White literary forms weaving the stories of the colonized, racially discriminated and yet resilient ethnic groups. Intertextuality, propounded by Bulgarian-French critic Julia Kristeva, establishes the relevance of cultural influence on both the author and reader in writing and perusing the work. The present work under study *Green Grass Running Water*, by Native American writer Thomas King is a story which polyphonically reinterprets various dominant White cultural and spiritual texts like the biblical stories of Adam and Eve and Noah from a Native perspective rendered by Native spiritual figures like Coyote, First Woman, Thought Woman, Changing Woman and Old Woman. Iconic Colonial texts like Robinson Crusoe, The Last of Mohicans and Moby Dick are given a Post-Colonial perspective and superimposed on a story of four contemporary Native Americans coming to terms with their native roots and fractured modern lives. This palimpsest of characters, cultures, words and the fluid meanings is presented in a thought provoking and entertaining manner. King's work is suffused with strong Native humour etched with humanity and a conviction for a future with mutual respect.

**Keywords:** Post –Colonial, Native American Literature, Thomas King, Intertextuality.

A multiplicity of races, nations and perspectives describes the postcolonial world. Colonial and imperialist governments enabled the interaction between cultures which are otherwise remotely connected. The penetration of European colonial forces into unknown territories from the fifteenth century onwards resulted not only in genocide and widespread economic exploitation, but also as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue, “in radical changes, unparalleled in human history, to both tropical and temperate environments”.<sup>1</sup>

Interactions between different races heralded many changes in governance, religion and culture. After decolonization many post colonial writers recorded their experiences with the Empire in their works. Most of the post-colonial societies have evolved into independent nations and identities. But some ethnic groups in America, Canada and Australia are still facing discrimination. The term Native Literature is commonly applied to the writers of these communities. Most of these writers have a Native tribal and European mixed ancestry which naturally prompts the intermingling of both traditions and theorized as Hybridity. The fusion and interspersion of various literary texts in a single work is called Intertextuality. Mostly these theories found artistic expression in postmodern works (after World War II).

The word “intertextuality” is derived from the Latin word *intertexto*, meaning to ‘mingle while weaving’<sup>2</sup>. This term was coined by Bulgarian-French poststructuralist Julia Kristeva whose concept of Intertextuality is a synthesis of Saussure’s Semiotics and Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.

The Structuralist critic, Ferdinand de Saussure said that language derives its meaning from signs embedded in the text. Saussure proposed two aspects of language: *langue*, the abstract form of language and *parole*, the pragmatic usage of language. Saussure further elaborated about the diachronic and synchronic meanings of a text. Diachronic is the meaning derived from the context of a particular time and space and synchronic meaning is ideal meaning exclusive of external influences. Bakhtin discussed the prevalence of multiplicity of meanings in a text. The meaning of a text depends on the reader’s cultural and literary understanding. Theorists like Volosinov and Vygotsky emphasized the role of literacy and culture of the reader to negotiate the meaning of the text. Bakhtin’s propositions were called heteroglossia and polyphony. Heteroglossia is the multiplicity of meanings derived in a single text. In literature, polyphony in a narrative includes a diversity of points of view and voices.

Kristeva’s Intertextuality interfused these two theories. This theory states that a reader understands a text relying on the knowledge acquired from initial exposure to texts. Similarly each writer’s style is based on his experience gleaned from perusing other texts. Kristeva also says that meaning of the text is not transferred directly from writer to the reader. Instead it is filtered through the knowledge of other texts possessed by both the reader and the writer. So the meaning of any text is contextual, arbitrary and negotiable. Roland Barthes supported this view saying that every reader processes any text through a worldview of all the literary texts known to him and not just the text. This theory stresses the literary perceptions of the reader in negotiating the meaning of the text. Barthes says that it is not possible to get the literary meaning of any text. The author writes the text from his perspective but the reader understands it only from his own perspective. So the readers can discover multiple meanings- even those not envisaged initially by the author. In the post modern era many critics say that it is impossible to create anything purely original because all the existing art is accumulated from different sources knowingly or unknowingly.

The application of the theory is twofold- Reader’s perspective aiding his comprehension and Writer’s perspective in fathoming his articulation. Roland Francois Lack in his article entitled “Intertextuality or influence: Kristeva, Bloom and the *Poésies* of Isidore Ducasse” published in the book *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice*, (1990) says “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another...” (130)<sup>3</sup>.

James E.Potter in his book *Intertextuality and Discourse Community* says that there are two types of Intertextuality. They are Iterability and Presupposition. To paraphrase, iterability is “citation in its broadest sense,” or “repeatability”–anything that might be considered “borrowed” in any sense, even if unacknowledged. Presupposition, on the other hand, “refers to assumptions a text makes about its referent, its readers, and its context–to portions of the text which are read, but which are not explicitly ‘there’.”<sup>4</sup> Iterability is found in the Oral tradition of telling stories where a story is told in various versions at different points of time and each story teller borrows from what he heard previously and adds his own experience and contextual interpretation to his

retelling. Presupposition is found in all our interactions. We interact with people or a culture based on our assumptions about it which are, in turn, formed by our previous interactions with it.

The text under study *Green Grass Running Water* (1993) by Thomas King can be analyzed as a work employing Intertextuality. The title is a reference to the promise of the U.S. government to the Natives that they will have rights over their lands 'as long as the water runs and the grass is green.'

The setting of this novel is Alberta, Canada. The Native community depicted in this work is the Blackfoot community. Owing to the Intertextual perspective of the paper it is necessary to know something about the cultural and literary background of the author. Thomas King hails from Sacramento, California of mixed origins Cherokee, Greek and German American. He had a brief stint as a photojournalist in Australia, has the dual nationality of American and Canadian and is also the first Aboriginal person to be sought to deliver the Massey lectures. In an interview to Margery Fee he talks about his early exposure to Christian theology; "I was baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church, and then I was baptized in the Methodist and/or Presbyterian Church. And in my life I went to Greek Orthodox services, Catholic services, Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical sects that happened to come through town with their tents."<sup>4</sup>

While working on his PhD dissertation King developed a deep interest in the Native Oral tradition. His multiple cultural affinities made him an emissary between many realms.

*Green Grass Running Water* is narrated in the fashion of a Native narrative. The story starts with an anonymous narrator recounting this story to Coyote, a recurring figure in the mythology of many Native religions. In Navajo faith, Coyote figures in the Creation myths as a companion to The First Man and Woman. He is described as a stealer of the dreams of the people. Coyote also features in Trickster tales as an egoistic, cunning and funny character who tests and transcends the boundaries of the human world. Coyote is associated with witchcraft in the Pueblo community where he is an intermediary between human and spirit world. Despite the ambivalence of his status Coyote, undeniably, is a prominent aspect of the Native ethos. Guy Cooper in his paper 'Coyote in Navajo Religion and Cosmology' says that "It is not surprising then that he displays contradictions and ambivalence: no cosmology is capable of being a healthy, living, breathing whole if it does not accord a place for the unpredictable and restless spirit."<sup>5</sup>

Now the Coyote in the tale gets a dream and the dream animates and refers to itself as God. Coyote, amused on seeing that the dream gets everything backward names it Dog. Dog queries about the presence of water all around them and the nameless narrator tells the story of four Native elders from an American asylum. Here Coyote is the archetype Native spirit. The enlivened dream is the 'White' (Colonial) worldview. It gets everything backwards because its biased vision refuses to accept the sanctity and sanity of other cultures calling them primitive and barbaric.

Next the story describes the tales of the four old Native elders. They are described as patients from an asylum run by Dr. Joe Hovaugh whose name phonetically is similar to Jehovah (God). The Native Elders are named Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye. The names are based on popular Native characters from 'White' writings. The elders are each connected with the female figures of the Native tradition: the Lone Ranger with the First

Woman, Ishmael with the Changing Woman, Robinson Crusoe with the Thought Woman, and Hawkeye with the Old Woman. Thus we can see that Thomas King interfuses both White and Native – Centre and Marginal outlooks in his work. He has subverted the ‘White’ view and used it to expose the shallow ‘Worldview’ of the dominant Colonial culture. Each elder narrates one section of the story and each section recounts the story of a person in the contemporary world. The central characters of the four sections are Dr. Joseph Hovaugh, Lionel Red Dog, Eli Stand Alone and the fourth plot line includes the mythical characters of Native and Christian Creation myths.

Thomas King portrays the Blackfoot community of Natives, the legendary buffalo hunters from the Great Lakes region. Native communities do not have alphabet and they preserve their culture through Oral tradition which is passed from a generation to the next through stories and legends. Thomas King followed this tradition by using the first person narrative which makes the writer a part of the novel’s setting and lets the reader empathize with the characters of the novel. Further, orality also lends the story considerable amount of authenticity, realism and individuality from a western perspective. Orality is personal and human mode of communication whereas writing is objective. But in Native tradition Orality is a collective experience. So the ‘I’ in the story is the archetypal ‘I’. The linearity of the plot becomes circular in Native tradition because the stories are told and retold. The layers of the listeners make the story multi-dimensional by breaking the spatial and temporal barriers and making it a distinctive discourse. Renate Eigenbrod, in his paper ‘The Oral in the Written: A Literature Between Two Cultures’ says that “It is a challenge for any writer - Aboriginal or not - to express through the inherent fragmentation and linearity of the medium of writing a belief in the holistic construct of a person and beyond that of the total of creation.”<sup>6</sup>

The story then turns to the narratives of the Four Elders. Elders are revered in the Native society. And they conduct the rituals and guide the younger ones. The number four is also very significant in the Native culture. In which the symbol of a circle with four quarters is worshipped. It is called the medicine wheel and the four quarters are the four directions corresponding to the four cardinal points. Number four also refers to the four elements: air, water, fire, earth; four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter and four stages of life: infancy, youth, maturity, old age. The four directions are relinked to human attributes and the power animal which symbolizes that attribute. “North represents Wisdom. Its colour is white, its power animal is the buffalo and its gift is strength and endurance. From the South comes the gift of warmth and growth after winter is over, a place of innocence and trust. Its colour is green (or sometimes red), its power animal, the mouse. To the West is the place of introspection, of looking within one’s spirit. Its colour is black, its gift rain and its power animal the bear. The East is marked by the sign of the Eagle. Its colour is gold for the sun’s illumination, the new dawning sky and enlightenment. Its gift is peace and light.”<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned earlier the four elders are Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye characters from popular White (colonial) literature with imperialist overtones. Christian mythical characters like Noah and Adam are also alluded to in this work.

Lone Ranger is an American cultural icon, a fictional Texas Ranger (police) who fights injustice with his Native companion Tonto. The name Tonto means ‘wild one’ in the Native language and ‘stupid’ in Spanish. He speaks in Pidgin English and confirms to White ways. Lone Ranger’s interactions with his lieutenant clearly indicate the subordination of the Native by the White.



Ishmael is a fictional character from Herman Melville's book *Moby Dick*. He is the narrator of the story and his self naming at the opening of the novel- 'Call me Ishmael' suggests an assumed identity which indicates marginalization and subsequent exile. Biblically Ishmael is the stepson of Abraham who is also the forefather of the Arabs. He falls from the grace of Abraham when the latter gets a mono-ethnic son from his legal wife Sara. He is exiled from his own land like the Natives. From the above references it can be surmised that the character in *Moby Dick* could be a Native banished by the Whites or a person of mixed origin of White and Native prejudiced against by the White hegemony. In her review of *Moby Dick* Pamela Mackey raises some issues which are similar to the subtle allusions made by Thomas King. "The narrator, the man who asks us to call him Ishmael, submerges his true identity; in some way he can "not be true" because, for him, only "to be false were salvation." Is it possible that Ishmael's dualities have their roots in the core duality of his land? Has this teaching mariner, like his Biblical patron, experienced both "old established family" life and the torment of tribal exile? Is he a New World son of two tribes, the child of slave owner and slave?"<sup>8</sup>

Next comes the character Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe, a white colonizer, stranded on an island 'rescues' and tries to 'civilize' the 'barbarian' ethnic character Friday. Friday's rescue and servitude shows the puritanical and colonial indigenization of the Native by the White (Robinson Crusoe). Conversion of the land and Friday into possessions of the White reflects the patronizing thinking of the colonizers. Chandrima Chakraborty in her critical essay *Interrupting the Canon: Samuel Selvon's Postcolonial Revision of Robinson Crusoe* says "In Robinson Crusoe, after Crusoe encounters a 'native' (= 'Savage') at the boundaries of "civilization," the putative superiority of the European colonialist and Friday's supposed inferiority is unequivocally established. Difference becomes the rationale for colonization. Arbitrary relationships are made to seem preordained, natural and a given."<sup>9</sup> Crusoe refuses to follow the simpler and sensible ways of the Native and insists on imposing his methods on Friday because he feels it is business to teach Friday everything and Friday can be accepted only after his indigenization is complete.

Hawkeye, a character from Cooper's *The Last of Mohicans*, asserts his Native identity but is pragmatic enough to adopt the White technology when necessary. Though this outlook is different from the above mentioned Colonial references yet the story implies the decease of the Native as inevitable and no attempts are made for its resurrection. Richard Hancuff, in his paper Without a Cross: Writing the Nation in *The Last of the Mohicans* says "The narrative of the nation established in Cooper's text nostalgically recalls the nation's past without any threat of that past returning. The last Mohican implies a disappearance that we can mourn without having to attempt to recover what was lost."<sup>10</sup>

The four characters are thus based on literary and cultural icons of the White civilization from Colonial Era. These works have been written by White people from a colonial perspective glorifying the White-explorer protagonist and depicting his taming, commodifying and stereotyping the 'Other'. The Diachrony idea of Saussure is evident here because these icons represented imperialistic glory and cultural exclusivity in one perspective and a diametrically opposite regressive racial superiority from the post- colonial perspective which illustrates the ingenuity of King. Intertextuality is evident in the post colonial perception of these texts and the way in which King uses this collage of icons to subvert the Colonial canon and write back to the Empire from a Native viewpoint. The Intertextuality technique of choosing Colonial tropes to narrate a post colonial story interrogates and destabilizes the established canon while acknowledging the cultural endurance of these icons. Through the Intertextuality of interpolating

the Colonial and Native Creation myths King shaped a multiverse of morphing characters from parallel cultural milieu. Interlardation of the Christian and Native myths is intriguing and stimulating to the readers of both the ends of the spectrum. The brilliance of selecting these literary and cultural icons as the Native Elders, escapees from a mental asylum, foregrounds the issue of the sanity of the system which defines sanity. White hegemony, in blissful ignorance, questions the pertinence of the Native systems, religions and myths. Sanity is equated with the familiar and the unfamiliar is conveniently labelled insane. Thomas King exposes the 'fear and temptation' of branding and stereotyping the 'Other'. This can also be linked to the Dream of Coyote which calls itself God and who, Coyote refers to as Dog saying that it has an inverted perception of the world.

. The First Woman in Native myths meets the First Man Adam referred to as Ahdamn in this book. She sees the island and encounters God who scolds her for eating his nice red apples. He refuses her more pragmatic offer to let everyone share and says that the garden is his property and people living there should follow his 'rules'. The biblical view of Eve succumbing to the temptation and partaking of the fruit of knowledge is alluded to here. It also suggests the patriarchal notion of viewing the women as the weaker sex and carrying the burden of the first curse which expelled humanity from paradise. This is juxtaposed with the view of woman as an equal participant in the world offering her advice and help to her partner. Native religion offered this empowerment to a woman which was perceived as a threat by the patriarchal and Colonial mindsets. So their religion was systematically demolished as barbaric and uncivilized. King's use of polyphony in presenting opposite views and cultures is thought provoking. His writing is multi layered and though the canvas is painted in dark colours it portrays an honest picture. The tone is playful but underneath lies a deep concern for humanity and their values. It does not hesitate to show the fault lines in both colonial and post colonial society but also expresses an anxiety about the ethical earthquakes they may cause.

Ahdam is the Hebrew name of the First Man in the Bible- Adam. John F. O'Grady, in his book *Men in the Bible: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* says that Ahdam, cited in the first chapter of *Genesis*, prefers not to be the first male but the first human: before the distinction of the sexes. The first male Adam is revealed in the second chapter. "The meaning of *ahdam* as the male and female created in the image of God, however, remains a cornerstone of both Jewish and Christian theology. This, of course, remains God's gift with neither Adam nor Eve having any contribution to make to their blessedness as being "created in the image and likeness to the God."<sup>11</sup>

The word Ahdam also indicates an intended pun on the word Ahdam- Ah! Damn which is the state of the man fallen from the grace of God and His paradise. The First Woman and Ahdamn accost the Rangers and the First Woman disguises herself as Lone Ranger and introduces the First Man as her deputy Tonto and saves his life.

The next mythical character is Changing Woman. She falls out of the sky into a canoe full of animals. Noah, the biblical character who takes animals on his canoe during the Great Flood sees her and thinks that God has sent him a new mate as a gift. The Changing Woman in Native myths represents the cyclical path of seasons. The seasons also corresponded with the four stages of human life; Birth (spring) Maturing (summer) Growing old (fall) Death (winter). She will never grow old and be reborn again in spring. Changing Woman here tries to talk to the animals on board and Noah disapproves saying that according to his rules beasts are not

supposed to talk and trying to do so is bestiality. This again shows the attitude of stamping the unfamiliar as evil. Natives envisioned all of Nature as alive and spiritual and believed in coexisting harmoniously with the beasts. These views knit them closer to their land and made them love and protect it as their own family. Since it did not suit the Colonial interests it was also termed wrong.

Next comes the Thought woman who goes to an island where she sees Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe hails her as his servant Friday and wishes to teach her civilized habits. She says she does not need his teaching and remarks that in order to pass himself off as a knowledgeable person it is necessary for her to be termed ignorant. This satirically points out the futility of the indoctrinating Colonial traditions and dismissing the Native methods which are more sensibly applicable to their own land.

The Old Woman looks for something to eat and sees a tender root which she grabs. The root falls and jumps back into its hole. The old woman digs to retrieve it and falls down the hole into the sky. From the sky she falls into the water below. As she floats around, she sees a young man walking on water to reach a boat filled with a group of fishermen. This clearly suggests the Biblical image of Christ walking towards his apostles. The Youngman tries to save the people on the boat from drowning. He orders the waves to stop dancing. The waves refuse. The Old woman offers help by singing a song to make the waves obey but the young man refuses to take her proffered help saying that it is against the rules. The apostles also refuse to acknowledge the help of the Old Woman saying that she is a mere woman so she definitely can't be capable of helping them. King here suggests that the Sacred Feminine which is the cornerstone of many Pagan religions was eyed suspiciously by White cultures. They regarded women as children of Eve who brought about the fall of humanity from Grace. This gave the patriarchal societies considerable power over women and when they came into contact with pagan cultures through Colonization they felt that their hegemony might be challenged and so always tried to establish the pagan views as barbaric. They also vilified the Native women and marginalized them more so that they wouldn't be a threat to patriarchy. Many Native writers of both genders reiterated the importance of feminine power in their cultures through their writings. The specialty of King lies in his subversion of the White texts and images to emphasize this view.

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz in his article "Native American Humor as Resistance: Breaking Identity Moulds in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*" says that there is "...behind the façade of easy comicality and high volatility of the linguistic sign, a stubborn resistance and unflagging aspiration to change the ways in which Native Americans perceive themselves and are perceived by others."<sup>12</sup>

This Novel also has a contemporary plot line. This connects the story to crisp reality. The main characters of this plot are Lionel a T.V. salesman, Charlie Looking Bear a sleazy lawyer, Latisha, owner of a Café, Alberta, a college professor and Eli Stands Alone, a former professor. Lionel and Charlie are foils to each other. Charlie's financial success is due to the internalization of the white ways. Both covet the same woman Alberta who only wants kids without any 'baggage' mirroring the contemporary commitment-phobia. Latisha represents the stereotyped view of a Native woman –a victim of domestic violence deserted by an irresponsible husband. King lets her emerge victorious through her resilience and financial empowerment through business. The character of Eli Stand Alone, as the name suggests, shows his diehard idealism amidst grim realities. He fights for the rights of his people, tenaciously hanging on to his



mother's cabin (connotating the Native heritage) which is threatened by submergence in the Grand Baleen Dam (connotating white hegemony). His convictions win because the mythical trickster Coyote dances orchestrating an earthquake which breaks the dam and restores the natural course of the river. So the journey completes a full circle and the characters of four elders also return to their natural courses of life rejuvenated.

King's writing is multi layered. Though his canvas is painted in riotous colours it portrays an honest picture. The tone is playful but underneath lies a deep concern for the humanity and its values. He does not hesitate to show the fault lines in both colonial and post colonial society but is also apprehensive about the ethical earthquakes they may cause. Harnessing intertextuality he is able to subvertly reorder the relations of imperialist, capitalist and masculinist powers through this work thus making it an unusual resistive text suffused with witty humour and garnished with satire. King's depiction of stark realities does not veer him away from optimism since the novel ends with a new beginning promised to all characters.

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