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## Literature and Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary Approach with Reference to Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*

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Tomson Highway

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Courtesy:

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## 1. Introduction

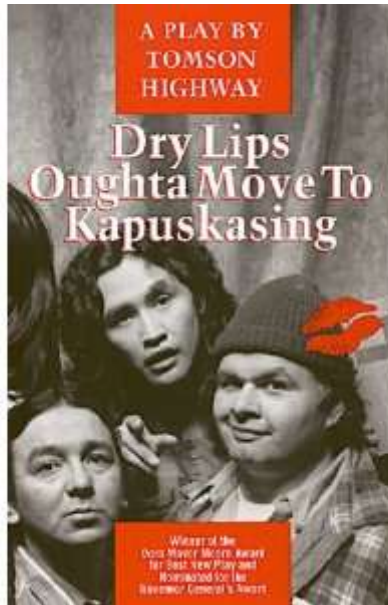
The highest aspiration of the common man is to lead a life where he can enjoy freedom of speech and freedom of belief, and has no fear of suppression. The one factor that ensures the hopes of a common man is human rights. Sometimes, the basic human rights have been taken, and are being taken away from a vast section of the population across the globe. Cultures, language, religion of the minorities and sometime the whole race of the minorities have been abolished by economically and politically powerful society or governments. The regretful thing is that these kinds of tragedies, sometimes, don't come to light at all and nobody knows the pain and sufferings were undergone by people. Here, literature, being reflection of reality, has been playing a vital role to restore the rights of human beings by exposing the ground reality. World literature always addresses events that arguably comprise human rights stories. According to *Novel Rights*, literature has a unique capacity to touch the hearts and minds of people and engages them in a way that is distinct from political or academic texts. It can even lead to a personal or general positive change. As such, literature is an important tool for promotion of human rights. Literature has been and will continue to be the great promoter of a culture of human rights.

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This paper examines the responsible role played by Aboriginal Literature of Canada in showing suppression, sufferings and pain undergone by their people due to cultural and political domination of the white settlers in Canada. Considering how the two disciplines such as literature and human rights might inform each other for the common purpose of bringing human rights into life of common man to ensure his dignity, Aboriginal literature always reflects the ground reality to meet the purpose. In particular, this paper explores a Canadian play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* by Thomson Highway to show how the denial of cultural rights to the natives of Canada leads to the destruction of their culture and identity. This paper also analyses how this play strives to protect the cultural identities such as mother tongue, rituals and native medicine of Canadian Natives by exposing the threat to their cultural and human rights by the white domination. This paper examines how literary texts strive to be engaged more ethnically to retrieve the cultural and human rights.

## **2. Aboriginal Literature in Canada**

Canadian native writers' works deal with the problems of native community. The native literature enables us to hear voices of the native people, and bring us to the life style of native people, places, experiences and problems that are uniquely Canadian, yet universal too. The

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native writings were in the beginning controlled by the European standards of writing. They were in the condition, in which they had to struggle to create their own identity. This struggle is a part of their writings and part of their life. Canadian literature shows the spirit of revolution against all taboos, political, social, moral and verbal. It shows the conflict of whole society or community against the imperial attitude of Western society (Penny Petrone, **Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present**). P.A. Abraham, in his article “Writing the Land Alive: A Sense of Place in Canadian Drama,” says, “it is part of their struggle to establish their identity in the face of a threat of their cultural identities brought in by colonial encounter” (85).

Aboriginal writers emphasize the importance of their oral cultural heritage both as a source of meaning in their lives and as a resource for the writing. Penny Van Toorn, in his article, “Aboriginal Writing” in Eva-Marie Ksoller’s edited book **The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature** says that aboriginal writers debate about native sovereignty, not only in a relation to land and law, but also in relation to culture, language and writing (39). They wanted to revive their native culture, language and religion by using literature as a powerful medium to present the dangers and problems of native people in their writing. So the aboriginal writing aims to create a separate identity for their people. European culture and Christianity threatened and tried to change the native identity of aboriginal people. Hence, aboriginal writers had to face identity crisis. Their writings were not accepted by the white writers and other European scholars. They judged the aboriginal writings based on their own cultural paradigms and customs. They neglected the originality of the native culture and customs of the aboriginal people. (Ramamurthy, K.S, ed. **Canadian Literature and Society: National Dream and Regional Realities**)

The aboriginal writers have used the native myth and mythical characters in their writings as they believed that myth and literature of the native people will generate close identity with the native people. Their stories have given voice to those who had no voice. To make the native people aware of the destruction of the native culture by white people, they used mythical

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elements in their writings. For contemporary aboriginal writers, the trickster is at once a spiritual entity and a literary device for introducing the life style of aboriginal people.

### **3. *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing***

Tomson Highway wanted to present culture, customs and sufferings of the native people. The native literature presents not only of the oppression and tragedies of native people, but also the hope about their future. Tomson Highway has used Canadian native mythical elements and characters in his writings to make effective presentation about native culture. His play ***Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*** appeared in 1989 and won a number of awards for best new play not only in Canada but also in European countries. It was co-produced by native earth and theatre Passe Muraille and directed by Larry Levis. In this play, Tomson Highway has presented his native people's life style, culture hegemony of white people, and their sufferings in a realistic tone. The playwright Tomson Highway has used the Cree language which is mother tongue of the native people of Canada. He has also used the mythical character Nanabush or Trickster as he thought that the native language and the mythical elements are very important to create separate identity for Canadian native people.

In ***Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing***, Tomson Highway focuses on the life style of seven native men in the Wasachigan hill. In this play, there are seven important male characters, among whom Big Joey, Spooky Lacroix Creature Nataways and Pierre St. Pierre adopt Christianity and English language. People like Simon Starblannet, Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik and Patsy Pegahmagahbow try to revive the native culture, language and medicine. In this play, the character 'Nanabush' has the power of transformation. It can adopt any female character. Anne Nothof, in an article titled as "Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway", says that In ***Dry Lips*** Nanabush is played by women, and acts out of the roles of all the women in the play –the casualties of cultural collision and the transformative possibilities (5). In this play, Nanabush is a representative of Canadian native people both in their cultural destruction and even in transformation. There are some important female characters in the play. They are Gazelle Nataways, wife of Creature Nataways, Patsy Pegahmagahbow, lover

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of Simon, Black lady Halked, mother of Dickie Bird Halked and Hera Keechigeesik, wife of Zachary. In this play Christianity is symbolized by the Crucifix and the Indian religion is symbolised by their dance and the drum. Spooky Lacroix believes that all the non-Christians will go to the hell while Simon stands for salvation through the Indian religion. In this play, Spooky always preaches Christianity and carries a Crucifix with the Bible, whereas Simon always wants to revive native dance and drum. He also wants to revive native medicine through his lover Patsy who is a step daughter of the reserve's last medicine woman Rosie Kakapetum. Patsy is learning the native medicine from Rosie Kakapetum. Patsy also loves Simon. (Jerry Wasserman, ed. **Modern Canadian Plays**. Vol. II. 4<sup>th</sup> ed)

The natives live like slaves in their own country. For each and everything, they have to approach their colonial masters. Big Joey wants to start a radio station. Zachary tries to start a bakery. Both of them apply to the band council. Only Big Joey gets permission to start 'Wasy-Fm' because he speaks English language and follows Christianity. He helps the white officers to spread their language and Christianity. But Zachary is not permitted to start a bakery because he wants to help the native people by giving job in his bakery. That is why Zachary's appeal is rejected by the band council.

Dickie Bird Halked is one of the important characters in the play. His mother is Black Lady Halked. But he is not aware of his parentage. He is always mute. He is mentally affected by the uncertainty of his parentage and his mother Black lady's addiction to alcohol. He does not have language to speak. Big Joey is responsible for the birth of Dickie Bird Halked. But he is not ready to accept his parentage. Dickie bird Halked lives with Big Joey without knowing that Big Joey is his biological father. He always used to carry his uncle Spooky Lacroix's Crucifix and the Bible. In the play, Dickie Bird Halked represents the precarious life of native people.

Dickie Bird Halked wants to know his parentage from his mother Black Lady Halked. But Black Lady Halked is not ready to answer to his questions. Dickie Bird was disappointed with Black lady's answer. Patsy meets him in the form of 'Nanabush' to help him, but Dickie Bird suddenly rapes her. While Dickie Bird Halked tries to rape her, Big Joey comes there but he is not ready to

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help her. Big Joey is also accountable for the destruction of his own community. After knowing this brutal rape, Simon wants to shoot Dickie Bird Halked. But unfortunately, he shoots himself in his stomach. (Jerry Wasserman, ed. **Modern Canadian Plays**. Vol. II. 4<sup>th</sup> ed). Judy Steed, in a review on Tomson Highway titled as “Tomson Highway: My Way”, says, “In the rape scene, a woman is raped with a crucifix, on a metaphorical level, the scene symbolizes the matriarchal religion is raped by the patriarchy; the goddess is raped by the god” (3). Tomson Highway has placed this rape scene to give an effective presentation of the destruction of native culture.

Tomson Highway also wants to show the recklessness of some native people as they are not committed to rescue their people, culture and medicine from the dangers. Big Joey is one of the finest examples of these kinds of people. Anne Nothof, in an article titled as “Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway”, says that Big Joey is the least responsible person denying his paternity and blaming the women for his powerlessness (3). Big Joey is the representative of weakness and evil in the native society. Tomson Highway, in this Play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, has used Simon as his spokesperson, because Tomson Highway wants to revive the native mythology and culture through ‘dance’ and ‘drum’. He does not like to speak in English. He uses only Cree language. Simon Starblankent also speaks only in Cree. Jerry Wasserman quotes the words of Tomson Highway in his article “God of white man! God of Indian! God Al-fucking-mighty: The Residential School Legacy in Two Canadian Plays”, “In **Dry Lips** the powwow dancing bustle carried by activist Simon Starblankent symbolises the indigenous religion and culture. He hopes to bring back the native culture to Wasaychigan Hill First Nation”(8) Tomson Highway uses this play as a tool to show the importance of native culture, language and medicine.

## 5. Conclusion

Tomson Highway finishes this play with the death of Simon but gives some optimistic note in the final scene where Zachary reunites with his wife Hera and raises his female baby. This baby represents the rebirth of native culture, language and medicine. Zachary believes that his child will speak her native language. Tomson Highway concludes this play with the hope that the future generation will follow the native culture and language. By presenting the sufferings of Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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native men, he wants to make the future generation free from all these kinds of sufferings. Highway focuses on the next generation. Though this play ends with tragic note, he finishes with an optimistic note on the next generation. The young characters expose the vision of Tomson Highway.

Literature and society always complement each other to guide human beings to lead a better life. Whenever the problem arises in the society, literature takes initiative to find right solution to the problem or discusses the ground reality of the problem to make the people understand the real cause of the problems. Thomson Highway has successfully used Canadian stage to disclose the sufferings of Canadian natives. He has used the characters as the representatives of their native society. So, here, literature has been a tool to inform the society to find out poison of their problems. Literature and human rights are always interdisciplinary for the betterment of the society. Literature is indeed a window into the soul of humanity.

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