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NATURE - INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY - HUMAN HARMONY IN THOMAS KING'S  
*THE BACK OF THE TURTLE*

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ABSTRACT

Nature is the miracle mother that makes life possible on planet Earth. Earth's invaluable resources like water, air, land, and food as well as many material resources make life possible on planet Earth. Only after billions of years since the emergence of planet Earth that it has evolved to bear homo sapiens. As the homo sapiens evolved into modern man, Nature is put under threat of depletion. Capitalistic exploitation of Nature and Natives in the pursuit of profits and to meet the demands of the ever-increasing population has been on the raise. For more than a hundred thousand years, Indigenous peoples have been custodians of nature, protecting their landscapes, respecting wildlife, and utilizing traditional epistemology transmitted through generations. Many studies found that Indigenous epistemologies can make a great significant contribution to sustainable development. This paper examines how Native Canadian writer Thomas King in his novel "*The Back of the Turtle*" (2014) addressed the issues relating to Environment destruction and manmade disasters. This novel ushers into a comprehensive and self-sufficient universal outlook of the Native epistemology. In this book, King talks about the role of industrial capitalism in destroying the eco-balance and consequent loss of spiritual connection of humans to eternal Nature. This paper sheds light on how indigenous people suffer from this loss of spiritual identity with the exploitation of nature. The paper advocates eco centric perspective which is the panacea for this disoriented world.

**Keywords** – Storytelling, Eco Centric, Indigenous epistemology, Western science, industrial capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Human is a segment of the perennial cycle of Nature. Nature nurtures humans by catering to everything needed to survive and thrive like, food, air, water, etc. Nonetheless, like all systems, we need to understand how nature works so that we do not destroy nature and face increasingly negative consequences. Pandemics such as coronavirus are the result of manmade destruction of biodiversity by cutting down forests and building more infrastructure. The illicit and unsustainable deforestation as well as the wildlife trade are still the reason behind the increasing number of diseases originating from wildlife to humans. Epidemics that outbreak over the years such as Swine flu Ebola, Nipah, Anthrax, Aids, and Zika emerged from wildlife under conditions of severe

environmental stress. These epidemics are manifestations of our hazardous unbalanced relationship with nature. Therefore, it is of vital importance to address the issues that diminish ecosystems, biodiversity, and wildlife, and cause habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change. Native Canadian writer Thomas King, in his novel *"The Back of the Turtle"* (2014) explores how dominant and ecologically destructive stories are created and maintained by individuals, multinational corporations, conglomerate chemical companies, and the media. Although *The Back of the Turtle* is fictional, it vividly depicts the current environmental, corporate, and socio-political climate and mass media manipulation.

In his novel *"The Back of the Turtle"*, the turtle represents mother Earth, Thomas King talks about environmental destruction and its effect on indigenous people and their resilience in the face of adversity. The novel is written in the third person point of view and can be seen as interfusional text as it mixes oral and written forms and employs oral storytelling. By blending oral and written form in *"The Back of the Turtle"*, King juxtaposes Native cultures, worldviews, and traditions with non-Native, and elucidates how important it is to take care of our mother earth. King creates a world in which he depicts the clash of indigenous traditions and western science. On the one hand, we see a native community where everybody is trying to get together again and rebuild after an environmental catastrophe that hit their reserve. On the other hand, we see the life in a city like Toronto that is exemplified by the novel's antagonist Dorian Asher, chief executive officer (CEO) of agribusiness conglomerate Domidion, who is self-centered and believes himself to be omnipotent.

#### **Bio-Wars -The Ruin of Natives:**

In the process of colonizing the Native lands, the White capitalist and power seekers conducted many bio-wars. Thomas King sheds light on this historical fact in his novel. The novel, *The Back of the Turtle* is set in a fictional town Samaritan Bay on the west coast of Colombia. The town is next to a native reserve called Smoke River reserve. In this novel, King contrasts life in the city and life on the reserve and the role of multinational companies in destroying our planet and environment through their experiments and bio wars especially how indigenous people are affected by since they are closer to nature. The novel is set aftermath of an environmental disaster referred to as The Ruin. Gabriel Quinn, an aboriginal biochemist working as a leading scientist in a multinational company Domidion, returns to the smoke river reserve where his mother grew up. He goes through overwhelming guilt for the role he has played in the environmental catastrophe. He created a defoliant called GreenSweep which inadvertently turned into poison due to a mistake in the concentration of chemicals and eventually leaked into Smoke River thus killing wildlife and people on the Reserve. Upon his return, Gabriel discovers that the entire Native reserve is abandoned after the occurrence of the Environmental disaster "The ruin" and rendered the place uninhabitable. The catastrophe killed many people, including Gabriel's family, and destroyed the wildlife that once lived off the land.

#### **Guilt and Resurrection of Gabriel:**

After Mara comes to know that Gabriel is responsible for the environmental disaster The Ruin that eventually kills her family and his own, she yells at him to go drown himself, but eventually, she changes her mind. When Gabriel says, "I don't want to save myself," Mara reiterates, "All right. . . Then you can save me" (475). He feels an overwhelming sense of guilt and decides to commit suicide by drowning himself in the sea. However, as he walks into the sea at low tide, a hand reaches out from the water in his direction. Gabriel discovers a little girl who is drowning and rescues her. This incident makes Gabriel abandon his plan to commit suicide, feeling that maybe he can do some good in this world after all.

Gabriel continues to live in the Samaritan Bay. He feels that without the indigenous people who once lived there, it is a strange place. He encounters the few remaining members of the community. Sonny, a boy who is naive and lives in an abandoned motel Ocean Star and scavenges on the beach; Mara Reid, an artist who has returned to Smoke River from Toronto to alleviate her own guilt for being away from the family on That One Bad Day; and Nicholas Crisp, a wise old man with a generous heart. And then there is a dog, Soldier, who stands by each of them in turn to impart comfort and alerts people whenever it senses danger. Mara used to live on the Smoke River reserve, alongside Gabriel's family and was best friends with Gabriel's sister, Lilly. Both Mara and Sonny become interweaved in Gabriel's life as the story goes on, as does Soldier, the dog, and Sonny's uncle,

Nicholas Crisp. Dorian is a narcissist and represents corporate evil; and in the midst of causing the largest environmental apocalypse in history, all he worries about is what to watch on TV tonight and chides himself for purchasing only one posh wristwatch instead of two. "You can't just make money...you have to spend it" (2014:35). By addressing the issues pertinent to multinational conglomerates, the novel emphasizes the interconnection between industrial capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources, the rise of social inequality and man-made environmental disasters.

In contrast to Dorian and his executive assistant, the enigmatic and robot-like Winter, King creates Nicholas Crisp who works relentlessly to rebuild life on the reserve and somehow draws Mara, Gabriel and Sonny together. He tells various Native stories to inspire hope in the people.

#### **Recollection of indigenous epistemologies and eco-centric perspectives:**

The novel features multiple stories from Native mythology, which King ties into the plot. One of the most significant stories central to the novel is "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky." It is a Native creation story; Crisp narrates this story to Mara during his Birthday party. Crisp depicts the narrative as being in dialogue with the land, an essential nature of life for the First Nations people. In this way, it is more about the connection of people with the land than some kind of deity. The story is about a woman who lives in a world above the sky. One day she got curious and started digging for tubers under the roots of a tree. All of a sudden, she loses her balance and falls, transporting her into the world beneath her that consists of only water. When she is about to hit the water, her fall is broken by birds who place her on the back of a turtle. In this world, there is no land, only water, so the woman must reside on the back of a turtle. The woman is pregnant, and while she lives on the turtle's back, she gives birth to twins, one who is right-handed and the other left-handed. The left-handed twin, Gabriel, represents evil. And it is believed that Gabriel must learn to become right-handed and simultaneously right his wrongs in the world. The woman conducts a contest in which all the creatures of the water world must dive into the water and the first one who reaches the bottom and resurfaces with a ball of mud will be declared as winner. All the animals are excited to participate. Some of the animals die in the process. In the end, the Muskrat returns to the surface with the mud and places it on the back of the turtle. The woman along with her twins and animals creates a world out of mud. And the world is believed to be Earth.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Nishnaabeg author, and activist, finds this story in conflict with the individualistic western paradigm, and the collective efforts it evokes appeal to all of us to acknowledge "the responsibility to get off the log and dive down no matter how hard it is and search around for that dirt" (Klein 2013, 9). The story emphasizes a kinship between all the animate and inanimate objects that is central to indigenous systems of knowledge. Throughout the book, King emphasizes the importance of community and helping each other in opposition to western individualism. In one of his interviews, King opines "By and large, we don't have a particularly good sense of community. We're mobile and so a lot of us move around – and you don't get attached to a place or neighborhood,". We can observe the importance of community in "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" when Gabriel thinks of the story it reminds him of our responsibility toward others: "He thought about the woman who fell from the sky, how it would have been to have seen her streaking through the heavens like a falling star, plunging towards the earth. And how different the outcome might have been if the birds hadn't caught her" (2014:255). Vine Deloria emphasizes in his book *God is Red* (1973) the significance of Nature and its species,

In the worldview of the Native Americans, all living things share a creator and creative process and, therefore, relate to one another. Their spiritual quest is to determine the proper relationship that people have with other living things. The universe manifests life energies, 'the whole life-flow of creation'. The person is dependent on everything in the universe for his/her existence. Rather than the determination to subdue nature... 'the awareness of meaning of life comes from observing how the various living things appear to mesh and to provide a whole tapestry' (Deloria, vine. *God is Red*. 1973)

This origin story reveals to Gabriel and the readers that humans have an inseparable bond with Nature. This synch with Nature imbues the essence of an ambilocal bond with Nature and universal brotherhood. Thus, Gabriel in the novel determines to resurrect his Native reserve by meditating on his Native consciousness of

unity with Nature and re-build the Native community. As he resumes his Native identity, he recognizes that Science is just a tool in the hands of the Corporates to achieve their self-interests. As such he turns back to his Native consciousness to build a world conducive to the universal brotherhood which is against the idea of the selfish greed of the capitalists. Such a world begins with protecting Nature and bringing eco-balance. So, he challenges the ecological imbalance and destruction of Nature that is being posed by the Western world view of sufficing selfish individual greed. The novel marches towards reconstructing the lost Universal human identity of Gabriel as he tries to reconstruct his reserve to its ideal eco-balance.

#### **Native Creation Story vs Genesis story:**

In the novel, King contrasts Native creation stories with Genesis story. Native creation stories are about the people who work together and build a harmonious society whereas biblical creation story depicts a world that is created by God but ruined because of humans' foolishness and recklessness. Nicholas Crisp:

"'Tis a hard story," he said.

"It's long," said Gabriel. That's for sure."

"Not the length," cried Crisp. "But the sadness of the thing."

Gabriel nodded. "Sort of the like the garden of Eden."

"Nothing like it," roared Crisp. "For in that story we starts with a gated estate and are thrown into suburbia, because we preferred knowledge to ignorance. In our story, we begins with an empty acreage, and together, the woman, the animals, and the twins creates a paradise what gets pissed away."

"Free will."

"True enough, Master Gabriel," said Crisp. You've nailed me there. And in the end, whether we was tossed or whether we was the architects of our own ruin, the end's the same". (2014:236-37)

Gabriel discovers salvation in his interaction with the woman who narrates the story of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky. Gabriel realizes his own salvation comes from saving Mara whom he befriended, probably in love with, but not himself. In the end, it is not one that one twin is bad and the other is good. It is a union of the two binaries that creates meaning. On the human level, the relationship between Gabriel and Mara seems to come together to start a new life. They are probably better at it than Adam and Eve.

#### **Threat to Nature from western capitalistic signs**

On the other hand, King depicts how western science is misused by corporates in the name of modernity, advancement, and civilization, and these narratives are delineated by Gabriel Quinn and Dorian Asher. Gabriel, a strong believer in science, alienates himself from his family and native stories, rituals, and traditions: "If he believed in anything, he believed in the laws of chemistry and biology and physics. He could see these gods, negotiate with them, anticipate what they would do. He liked that kind of certainty" (139). For Gabriel, Science was necessary for humans to survive and thrive and provides the best solutions to global issues: "Science was supposed to have been the answer. World hunger. Disease. Energy. Security. Commerce. Biology would save the world. Geology would fuel the future. Physics would make sense of the universe. At one time, science had been Gabriel's answer to everything" (2014:446). René Descartes observes in his treatise "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences" that "Science can make man master and owner of Nature." This thought of Descartes persuaded western political and economic thought. Gabriel as educated in the Western ideas got convinced by this idea to master Nature and own it. As his Native consciousness awakens, he becomes disillusioned after realizing that science has become a tool to serve corporate interests. Now, Gabriel sees that science is often linked with capitalist interests and corporate mistakes. This view is delineated by Dorian's statement: "everything we do, all of us, is in pursuit of profit" (2014: 79)

In contrast to western science and worldviews, Indigenous cultures, traditions, and lifestyles protect the environment and promote Biodiversity whereas western science, anthropocentric perspectives destroy nature.

Native peoples' contributions play a crucial role in designing and preserving ecosystems. Native worldview springs from the origin stories which bind human life with nature. Thus, Nature is a vein of life that is worshiped and revered by the Natives. Their traditional wisdom and heritage can contribute to environmental assessments and helps in managing a sustainable Ecosystem. For instance, the balanced production and consumption of indigenous change. Although Indigenous people are the custodians of nature and the environment, they are the most affected people by Man-made and natural calamities. Thomas King's Novel showcases the path to retrace the Native eco-friendly wisdom and lays a path for us to reconstruct Natural balance for universal brotherhood. The novel underlines univocally the impending need for the present generations to revere nature as the Natives do to build unity in the human race.

### Conclusion

*The Back of the Turtle*, with distinct indigenous stories at its core, underscores the essence of indigenous knowledge in creating a balanced and harmonious society. In this article, I have argued that King's narrative suggests opening up western discourse to the indigenous body of knowledge that induces the balance, conservation, sustainable use of nature, and Eco centric perspective so as to move beyond the destructive industrial capitalism, anthropocentrism, and individualism of dominant western thought. King's adoption of the story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" to depict the resurgence of the Samaritan Bay community emphasizes his belief that "that there are other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations" (King 2003, 110).

The novel starts with chaos and disorder and ends with a possible restoration of balance and order. Thomas King tells life-affirming stories based on community, cooperation, and resilience to inspire hope in the face of perpetual apocalypse and gives a sense of satisfaction that nature will always renew itself despite the fact that human greed knows no bounds and it is still not too late to take care of our mother Earth. When mismanaged, science and capitalistic projects can be destructive and detrimental to sustainable development. However, with diligence and vision, sustainable urbanization is one of the solutions to rapid population growth. Indigenous epistemologies offer a new perspective looking at the world that is unconventional to western culture. They are holistic, Eco centric, which places vital importance upon the totality of existence, that makes human-race equal to all elements in the nature but superior to none, and gives mankind the greatest responsibility for the care of the world. The world needs this Eco Centric vision of life which will only be found in the indigenous cultures, and traditions and provides us the best solution to face the threat of environmental apocalypse.

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