

TRACES OF POSTMODERN DISMANTLING OF EURO-AMERICAN TRUTH CLAIMS IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *THE HEIRS OF COLUMBUS*

**Aamir Shehzad, Dr. Shaheena Ayub Bhatti*

We are no longer with those who want to possess the world, but with those who want to change it and it is to the very plan of changing it that it reveals the secrets of its being...Jean Paul Sartre, What is Literature

Abstract

Opposing historical artifacts and revealing silences or gaps pertinent to the representation of history involves audacious steps of re-textualizing literary discourses. Postmodernism as a literary discourse imbibes foregrounding of the crisis in construction and representation of knowledge, history and cultural identities. Since the representation of knowledge or history has ever been from a dominant perspective, postmodernism takes the oppositional stance to deconstruct its domination and victimization if not altogether denunciation of the validity of the history. This study explores postmodernism and its application to Native-American Literature in general and Gerald Vizenor in particular. Native-American Literature, though, considered as the youngest offspring of literature in American literary history, has a distinctive literary tradition. Like any other minority literature in America, Native American literature has been marginalized and stereotyped on account of nationalism, tribal stories and traditional narratives. The voice of American Indian literary artists has long been silenced but in the wake of postmodernism it has emerged on the literary canvas. Postmodern Native American writers challenge the Euro-American perspective of history and stereotypical representations of Indians in the repertoire of white American grand narratives. Deconstruction of pervasive history and tribal identity is one of the fundamental characteristics of the Native writers; they are attempting to subvert the history told from the dominant white perspective and trying to reformulate it from their own perspective.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Native American Literature, Euro-American and Native American perspective of history and tribal identity

Postmodernism is not an easy term to define in a comprehensive way as it is a multifaceted phenomenon in art, literature, philosophy and criticism. In its broadest sense, postmodernism, as a historical and cultural condition, is concerned with truth claims. It poses challenge to, or offers a skeptical look at the claims of absolute truth. Postmodernism, as a theory, was first proposed during the 1970's with the publication of

**PhD scholar at National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Pakistan
Director Women Research and Resource Center FJWU, Rawalpindi*

Jean-Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), and exerted a strong impact on literature and criticism along with other fields like philosophy, sociology, history, politics and cultural studies etc. It is based on a reaction to or rejection of the modernist or Structuralist stance of metaphysical inheritance of ideas; that is, the development of knowledge is based solely on super-rational functionalism. Rational solutions and explanations only guarantee the establishment of true overwhelming knowledge, and this notion still prevails in the Western hemisphere.

According to Lyotard, postmodern is the condition of knowledge produced "in the context of the crisis of narratives", which examines "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (p. xxiii). In explaining postmodern consideration in comparison with modernism Lyotard states that Modernism for him, is "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta-discourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subjects, or the creation of wealth" (p. xxiii) while, postmodernism is doubt about the truth of all meta narratives. He explicitly criticizes the grand narratives and advocates the essential significance of critically analyzing the prevailing narratives and presenting alternative ways of looking into the phenomenon. The Postmodern condition can be characterized by dismantling and replacing the totalitarianism of all hegemonic discourses, as in its essence it is "incredulity towards all metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv).

Since postmodernism as a literary discourse imbibes foregrounding of the crisis in construction and representation of knowledge, history and cultural identities, it is primarily manifested by "an internalized investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the language or discourse of art" (Hutcheon, 1986, p. 179). In the wake of Postmodernism all accepted and pervasive notions about knowledge and truth were challenged and contested. According to postmodernism, these truth claims are, "kinds of myths or grand narratives, rhetorically coloured, dominant discourses that should be replaced by micro-histories" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 91). Thus

questions pertaining to the representation and presentation of truth and historical knowledge emerge as critical methodological problems in the postmodern critical perspective. It is potentially revolutionary in nature as it opposes and challenges all meta-narratives and evokes particular interest to give opportunity of expression to the marginalized/othered voices that have been silenced under the oppression of dominant meta-narratives. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) comment about the non-arbitrary nature of history and assure that histories are fractured, “each of the earlier historical moments is still operating in the present, either as a legacy or as a set of practices that researchers continue to follow or argue against” (p. 20). The assumption appears to be that history maneuvers the present either conforming to the traditions or questioning its authenticity.

Postmodernism is a multi-layered phenomenon used by its different exponents in diverse ways. Jacques Derrida, although concerned with linguistic and discursive patterns emphasizing language, discourse and meanings, presents an altogether different manner of understanding and challenging status quo. He coins the *Deconstruction* methodology for analyzing discourse. Deconstruction is a strategy to destabilize and dismantle the claims of authority. Another important postmodern thinker Michel Foucault introduces more holistic attempts to rethink history and dominating ideas with the help of alternative ways of understanding. He offers new structure for historical research that is different from conventional historiography by “showing how the history of the present deploys genealogical inquiry and the uncovering of hidden conflicts and contexts as a means of re-valuing the value of contemporary phenomenon” (Garland, 2014, p. 365). For him history can be approached by posing questions in the present. In a conversation with John Simon (1971), Foucault talks about the formation and establishment of history and states that it is a system which has trapped us. This system, according to him, is “being shattered; more under the influence of a revolutionary movement, than of mere theoretical or speculative criticism... [and] presenting a critique of our own time, based upon retrospective analyses” (p. 192). He further states

What I am trying to do is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us; I am

trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape [...] what I would like to grasp is the system of limit and exclusion which we practice without knowing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent. (pp. 198-201)

Native American literature is a vast, varied and complex field having multiple aspects but some of the characteristics are more or less common: for instance, historical and cultural embedment, how history is conceptualized within Native cultures and how it has transformed the contemporary culture at the tribal levels, investigation of Native cultural history and its appropriation. In performing these tasks, Native American writers seek to revisit their historical and cultural shrines in order to search out the facts and explore their historical and cultural belongings.

Literature holds a mirror up to life, taking its seed from the contemporary social context and sprouting in the existing environment and also articulates the truth about the past that history has either ignored or misrepresented. Native American literature focuses on the silences and gaps in history and attempts to undermine and dismantle all previous preconceived notions about history. Native Americans have long been ill-treated by the dominant whites as victims of racial discrimination. They were deprived of their lands; massacred, and made slaves in their own motherland until the 1970s. The official records did not give voice to American Indian representation. Their concern was misrepresented in white discourse and where they were represented, the discourse about Native history was generated to serve the purpose of white hegemony. As a reaction, many contemporary Indian writers took the stance to explore the experiences of American history and historical facts, which were otherwise silenced by the whites. They brought forth some of the bitter facts of Indian history, which were shocking for Indians as well as for Americans. Apart from Native writers, some of the American writers, who had close acquaintance with Indian life tried to probe and present the Native perspective, in their writings. Native American literature is mainly concerned with the colonial experience of the Natives and its consequences on their lives. Native Americans suffered greatly from European exploration and colonization, which exerted enormous influence on native culture and identity leading contemporary Native

American writers to take up the task of revisiting and resisting colonial history in order to secure and keep alive their culture, identity and history. Most native voices like those of Thomas King, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko and Scott Momaday have given voice to native tribal history that had long been silenced or marginalized due to dominant European influence. Native American writings focus on self-invention and cultural reconstruction of their lost identity. While attempting to confront and recover native identity, writers present conflicting discourses of the native point of view in order to contest western ideologies. In order to appreciate the Indian perspective, one must know that “whatever they teach frequently runs counter to the teaching of the western tradition, and that the ways in which they delight is different from the ways in which the western tradition has given pleasure” (Owen, 1992, p. 19). Vizenor defines the nature and function of Native American literature in the following words:

Native American literature embraces the memories of creation stories, the tragic wisdom of native ceremonies, trickster narratives, and the outcome of chance and other occurrences in the most diverse cultures in the world. These distinctive literatures, eminent in both oral performance and the imagination of written narratives, cannot be discovered in reductive social science translations or altogether understood in the historical constructions of culture in one common name. (Vizenor, 1995, p.73)

Gerald Vizenor is the most prolific Postmodern Native American writer and Professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico and University of California, Berkeley. Vizenor achieved a distinctive position in postmodern Native American Literature by reconstructing Native American history. Instead of only narrating the dominant history he revisits it by annotating perceived ideas: “Vizenor does not seek to educate readers about history per se, rather, he points flaws in the prevailing teaching and misunderstanding of history from the point of view of the conqueror” (Weaver, 2001, p. 245). Vizenor is a Métis mixed blood –born to Anishinaabe father and French American mother in Minnesota. The concept of Métis or crossblood in native tradition is pertinent to the people who are hybrid and attempt to explore

reality out of the contradictory and prejudiced society and create a new consciousness for themselves; that's why Métis are called first earthdivers. As Vizenor asserts in his preface to *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent* (1981):

The earthdivers in these twenty-one narratives are mixedbloods, or Métis, tribal tricksters and recast cultural heroes, the mournful and whimsical heirs and survivors from that premier union between the daughters of the woodland shamans and white fur traders. The Métis, or mixedblood, earthdivers in these stories dive into unknown urban places now, into the racial darkness in the cities, to create a new consciousness of coexistence. (Vizenor, 1981, p. ix)

Vizenor's works embody the texture of postmodern perspective of historiography; and deconstructing and reconstructing the Native American identity. Following the trickster nature of language and characterization Vizenor provides epistemological understanding of historical knowledge that results in deconstruction of the formulaic knowledge. Using his tribal trickster discourse, Osborne shows how Vizenor in his fiction and non-fiction prose confronts dominant historical discourse and re-appropriates the possibilities of tribal identity. Osborne argues that Vizenor's "fiction, while clearly inspired and grounded in the tribal traditions of his people, is at the same time avowedly and aggressively postmodern" (Osborne, 1997, p. 115). He further states: "Vizenor is a word warrior employing every discursive weapon he can to undermine and overturn the assumptions that he feels are used to colonize and delimit the possibilities of tribal identity in the contemporary world" (p. 115). In his novel *The Heir of Columbus*, Vizenor revisits the history of Christopher Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic and challenges what has for a long time been the accepted and well established notion in the Eurocentric perspective of history. He not only distorts the history of Columbus and retells it from the Native perspective but also reformulates the distinctive tribal identity of Indians.

Alan Velie (1994) argues that the novel is a 'postmodern fantasy' and with its 'comic exuberance' it "raises serious questions about history and the source of narrative" (p. 5). Vizenor deconstructs

history and affirms native identity through trickster tradition. His purpose is to re-define the fabricated notion of Indianness thereby disjoining myth and reality. Louis Owens quotes a passage from Vizenor's interview; "I'm still educating an audience about Indian identity. The hardest part of it is that we are all invented as Indians... The inventions have become disguises... We're invented from traditional static standards and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts" (Owens, 1992, p. 4). Vizenor presents the postmodern discourse of encounter in order to change the world. In his preface Vizenor quotes Sartre – "we are no longer with those who want to possess the world, but with those who want to change it" – and stresses the postmodern revisionary stance of his novel which separates Eurocentric truth claims as propounded by western anthropologists. Elaine Jahner (1985) points out that Vizenor creates narrative "as entertaining as a side show; but they are not aside of anything; they are foundations for a way of looking at the world" (p. 24).

Vizenor published *The Heirs of Columbus* in 1991, a year before the quincentenary celebration of Christopher Columbus' arrival to the New World. Christopher Columbus was a renowned sailor in history and his name is associated with discovering America in the world atlas. Columbus' iconic personality has been revisited by Vizenor to challenge long established Euro-centric historical claims. According to European history Columbus was an Italian explorer who was sent by the Spanish monarch to discover the shortest sea-trade route from Europe to Asia, specifically India. He sailed towards the north corner of the world and on the way discovered a remote place where the people were removed from civilization. He promptly captured some of the people and took them back as trophies and slaves.

The Heirs of Columbus is a counter narrative in which Vizenor claims that Columbus did not discover America; he was of Mayan descent and so he had come to recover his native origin. The development of the novel entails two main parts; Blue Moccasins – the name of a game - and Point Assinika – the name of a new and hybrid nation. Both parts deal with the concept of deconstructing the history of Christopher Columbus and retelling it from the Native American perspective. In the first three sections of Blue Moccasins the focus of the story is to retell the history of Columbus while the rest of the sections deal with the history of the heirs. Stone Columbus is an important

character in the novel who claims to be the heir of Christopher Columbus. He possesses three ships; and runs a casino called Santa Maria, a restaurant named Nina and a tax free market which is known as Pinta on three floating ships on the Saint Lawrence river on the border between United States and Canada. On a radio talk show he claims that “Columbus was Mayan” (p. 9) not Italian. He further affirms the ancient nature of the Mayan civilization and says, “The Maya brought civilization to the savages of the old world and the rest is natural ... Columbus escaped from the culture of death and carried our tribal genes back to the New World, back to the great river, he was an adventurer in our blood and he returned to his homeland” (p. 9). According to Vizenor, Columbus acquired in his blood the tribal stories and genes of survival from his mother and she in turn inherited it from her maternal ancestors. By associating Columbus with the Mayan civilization and stating that the Mayan is the oldest civilization in the world, Vizenor contests the binary opposition of colonizer and colonized. According to the colonizer’s perspective, Europeans are the only civilized nation which has taken up the job of spreading enlightenment to the savage nations. Vizenor contests this with the stance that the Native people were not uncivilized, savage or irreligious before the arrival of Columbus; they had their own civilization and religion which was distinct from the Europeans. In a similar vein Vizenor also liberates Native Americans from colonial oppression as he affirms, “I made him (Columbus) an Indian. I am the first person who made him an Indian so he can stop being a victim too” (Vizenor, 1992, p. 20).

Vizenor amalgamates Columbus’ official documented descriptions in his journal and his fictional version of the story. He makes use of irony, humour and sarcasm while pointing out the gaps in the official and therefore Eurocentric history. He subverts the historical version of the purpose of Columbus’ voyage. Queen Isabella ascended the throne of Spain in April 1492. She was against the Jews and the Muslims and kicked them out of the country on priority. Columbus begged her for funds for his visit to the new world, “Your Highness, as Catholic Christian and princes devoted to the Holy Christian faith and to the spreading of it ... order me to go the east” (p. 35). At the same time Columbus compares his journey with Moses: “I saw this as a sign from

God and it was very helpful to me. Such a sign has not appeared since Moses led the Jews out of Egypt” (p. 52). These are words that Columbus wrote in his journal and which show, as nothing else before or since, the extent of his delusions of grandeur in that he compares his voyage with the journey of Moses leading the Israelites out of the bondage of the Pharaoh.

Vizenor challenges the accepted Eurocentric historical narrative by adding a humorous indication to a venereal abnormality of Columbus: “[He] was pained by persistent erection; his enormous clubbed penis curved to the right, a disease of fibrous contracture during erection. He was born with a burdensome penis that once was presented as comic in ancient dramas” (p. 31). According to Vizenor, Columbus was cursed with this venereal disease but when he came to the American continent and found Samana – a native golden hand talker – she saved him from this curse. He promptly fell in love with her and they had a child named Samana, thus establishing the crossblood heritage of Columbus through this somewhat colonial encounter.

The second part of the novel that is *Point Assinika* has an importance because it recalls the arrival of Columbus in America, although Vizenor ironically portrays the incident and tries to dismantle the facts which Eurocentric historians have wrongfully projected. The focus of history was a point in time not the process, meaning that historians wrote history from the perspective of the dominating peoples and projected their authoritative stance. Vizenor revisits the Eurocentric perspective of Columbian myth and brings forward his revised version, “When we say that Columbus discovered America, we are summarizing the outcome of an extended period of claims and definitions, and we are opting for a particular outcome sanctioned at a particular time by a particular social agency” (p. 188). Stone Columbus moves to Point Assinika or Points Roberts that is situated in the Strait of Georgia between Washington and Vancouver Island, Canada to form a new nation of tribal tricksters. The place is considered by the heirs as the state of memories and the genes of survivance in the new world. The heirs create a new place for Native American that becomes the symbol of liberty. The statue of liberty is replaced by the trickster of liberty that is “more than a hundred and eighty feet taller than the statue of liberty” (p. 122). Claiming the trickster of liberty to be higher than the statue of

liberty, Vizenor ironically portrays the racism and hypocritical stance of white America which promises liberty for all people but natives are deprived of freedom even in their own home. Stone Columbus claims Point Assinika as a natural state – free and ideal – where “humour rules and tricksters heal in our state, and we have no checkpoints, no parking meters to ruin the liberty of the day” (p. 126) presenting Point Assinika as the state that does not only make false promises of liberty, but actually guarantees freedom in its essence.

The episode of the moccasin game is also important in terms of Vizenor’s resistance against the white hegemonic stance. The heirs play a game with the Windigoo (cannibal). The rule of the game is that if the Windigoo succeeds in discovering the coin hidden in the moccasin which bears the image of Christopher Columbus; he would devour the children who are at Point Assinika. Vizenor points out the evil force of colonialism but he reverses the concept of the cannibal; according to colonial praxis the cannibal is associated with the colonized as being uncivilized, savage and the source of evil. Vizenor reverses the prevalent Eurocentric image and replaces it with the image of the cannibal as the colonizer rather than Native Americans. At the end of the game the heirs are declared victorious, thus showing the natives’ resistance and refutation of colonization. The Windigoo claims that the ‘game never ends’ (p. 183) underlining thereby the fact that the subjugation of the colonized (Native Americans) by the colonizers or the powerful forces of imperialism will continue. Windigoo, being a colonizer wants to engage natives in the game of moccasins which is an imperialist game in order to affirm the imperialist stance of the colonizer. The novel can be placed in both postmodern and postcolonial fiction as it confronts representation of history and colonialism. Vizenor attempts to challenge the validity of the Eurocentric stance of history and the evils of colonialism through the postmodern technique of deconstruction. Barry Laga (1994) commenting on Vizenor’s stance of writing, that “disrupts, destabilizes, and deconstructs conceptual systems that have led and continue to lead to oppression” (p. 73). The oppression on the part of colonizers has been intended to present the colonized (Indians) as belonging to an inferior and savage race. Laga further asserts that “by deconstructing the binaries of race, Vizenor reverses and displaces a conceptual order. Vizenor

deconstructs the fundamental philosophies of “Western patriarchal monotheistic manifest-destiny” which present terms in hierarchized binaries that displace tribal stories and chance” (Laga, 1994, p. 77).

The novel is structured on the struggle to reclaim tribal identity. The heirs claim themselves to be the genetic inheritors of Columbus. They form a collective tribal identity based on their shared stories and visions. They gather at the stone tavern to tell the stories in their blood. Tribal identity has been the victim of Western hegemonic gaze, in which tribes are given certain constructs pertinent to the images of savage and the dark other; “but we never believe anything the government has ever said about the tribes, least of all the information about the heirs and our nation” (Vizenor, 2013, p. 37). According to Daniel Woods

Vizenor is working toward a very specific goal, a goal not of definition, but undefinition ... stripping away all that has been mistakenly said, written, drawn, painted, created and ultimately simulated to define what colonizing forces and literary anthropologists believe, desire, to be Indian (p. 73).

The discussion of the postmodern dismantling of Eurocentric truth claims is appropriate to the analysis of *The Heirs of Columbus*. The novel not only subverts the formulaic historical truths about Columbus but also reformulates Native American identity. It proposes that the discourse on human history and tribal identity is not authentic and needs to be challenged. Vizenor challenges the Euro-American perspective of history and stereotypical representations of Indians in the grand narratives and thereby successfully reclaims tribal identity.

References

- Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. New York: Sage.
- Garland, D. (2014). What is a "history of the present"? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions. *Punishment & society*, 16, (4), 365-384.
- Hutcheon, L. (1986). The politics of postmodernism: parody and history. *Cultural Critique* 5, 179-207.
- Laga, B. E. (1994). Gerald Vizenor and His Heirs of Columbus. *A Postmodern quest for more discourse*. *American Indian quarterly*, 18(1), 71-86.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Osborne, S. D. (1997). Legal and Tribal Identity in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*. *Studies in American Indian literatures*, 115-127.
- Owens, L. (1992). *Understanding the American Indian novel*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Sartre, J. P. (1988). *"What is literature?" and other essays*. New York: Harvard University Press.
- Simon, J. K. (1971). A conversation with Michel Foucault. *Partisan review* 38 (2), 192-201.
- Velie, A. R. (1994).
- Vizenor, G. R. (1995). *Native American literature: A brief introduction and anthology*. New York: HarperCollins College Publisher.
- Vizenor, G. R. (1981). *Earthdivers: Tribal narratives on mixed descent*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Vizenor, G. R. (2013). *The heirs of Columbus*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Vizenor, G. R. (1992). Gerald Vizenor-isms. Interview by Mark Anthony Rolo. *SAIL* 4.1, 19-22.
- Weaver, H. N. (2001). Indigenous identity: What is it and who really has it?. *The American Indian quarterly* 25(2), 240-255.
- Woods, D.R. (2003). *Reclaiming the voice: Gerald Vizenor-Literary trickster in a postmodern language Game*, (Doctoral dissertation). Virginia: Radford University.