

## Reading first nations' power of oral voices in the short stories of maria campbell's *Achimoona*

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### Abstract

The First Nations of Canada are known by various labels: Indigenous people, Aboriginal people, Amerindians, First Peoples, Tribal, Indians, Native people, etc. These expressions are used interchangeably and appear to be emerging preferences in the Canadian literature or New Literature in English. The First Nations Canadian author Maria Campbell's *Achimoona* is a collection of nine different children stories and a special poem written by eight Native authors in the course of a workshop in 1985. In *Achimoona*, she raises the magnitude of oral narratives in creating and telling stories in past and transmitting them from one generation to other. They are rich in creative and deluge myths but different than Western mind-set. In this work, Maria Campbell and other native authors have perfectly presented their philosophical and spiritual perspectives on the world through the power of oral voices.

**Keywords:** First Nations, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Orature, Storytelling, Native literature or studies

### Introduction

Canada is known for its prolonged and eventful history which has made it a nation. It is a multicultural country inheriting diversity in terms of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. In Canada, many ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are known in the form of the First Nations. They are also known by various designations: Indigenous people, Aboriginal people, Amerindians, First Peoples, Tribal, Indians, Native people, North American Indians, and so on. These phrases are used interchangeably and appear to be emerging preferences in the Canadian literature. The First Nations have performed a vital part in shaping Canadian society. Also, they have tremendous role in preserving the ethics, primeval loyalty and a strong political, economic, social, linguistic and cultural identity of the nation.

The First Nations of Canada believe in the power of oratory through storytelling tradition as it is the fact that spoken words came first into the use rather than the written words. They have been using the sacred power of words since ages in order to control the dynamic cosmic forces governing their lives, which can be easily found in their folklores. The oral narratives or storytelling have always been associated with natives being part of their history, legends, beliefs, customs, traditions, and so on where as the written one has been linked with the politics, injustice, colonial rule, power, hegemony, and dominance of non-natives or whites over natives. The oral narratives help in strengthening the native identity by transmitting the specific cultural knowledge, with its specific meanings and messages through storytelling. Mainly indigenous stories convey message of highest thought of thinking about the welfare of one's people or community. These represent an arena of knowledge about the essence and workings of traditional Native cultures. These narratives are also based on the various experiences which the native tribes have been facing since ages. The native oral literature governs the oral format of all types of spoken stories in an Aboriginal context and therefore it is also called 'orature.' This is the reason why Canada's native writers have moved towards their

traditional oral or storytelling literature and drawn inspiration and direction from various oral sources. As Penny van Toorn defines the term 'orature' in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, "'Orature' is a term widely used to refer to forms of oral discourse such as stories, songs, and various kinds of ritual utterance. The word was coined because 'oral literature' was a contradiction in terms" (van Toorn 24).

The First Nations, Canadian author, Maria Campbell belongs to Métis, Scottish, and French ancestry and her writing reflects various storytelling practices related to the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Her father was a mixed-blood white and her mother a heartfelt Scottish-Catholic Métis. She knows four languages and that are - Cree, Michif, Saulteaux, and English. She is considered as the spokesperson for the people of First Nations. Her chief works are – *Halfbreed* (1973), *People of the Buffalo: How the Plains Indians Lived* (1975), *Riel's People: How the Métis lived* (1976), *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977), *Achimoona* (1985)<sup>[4]</sup>, *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (1987), *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995) and so forth. However, she has also written and directed stage plays, documentary films, and videos. She has used theatre to bring her Métis voice to large Canadian audiences including natives and non-natives both. Her play *Flight* was the first of all Aboriginal theatre production and included storytelling, drama, modern dance with Indigenous arts. Campbell's script *The Red Dress* (1977) is a recognized film for the National Film Board. Between 1985 and 1997 she has produced thirty-four community film documentaries and a weekly Aboriginal TV series, *My Partner, My People*.

Nevertheless, apart from being a foremost author, Maria Campbell is a redoubtable cultural and political activist. According to Kim Anderson and Jessica Ball in the chapter named "Foundations: First Nation and Métis Families" of *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*, "Maria Campbell teaches that rebuilding piece by piece can involve something as small as a song, a story, or a gesture, working with traditional ways to reconstruct families and communities

into the centuries to come” (Anderson and Ball 80). Maria Campbell’s collection of children’s stories known as *Achimoona* is a noteworthy work that reclaims her authentic and essential Native identity. Based on oral tradition and storytelling practice, *Achimoona* comprises several tiny native tales and native mythology in it. Through this, Maria Campbell also emphasizes that in Indigenous communities the storytellers are not ordinary people but equally play the substantial role of teachers and historians as well. They are helpful in passing on the cultural knowledge and also they have tried to induce their vision and wisdom for upcoming generation.

The oral storytelling practice symbolizes the cultural values, traditional knowledge, and tensions within a society. The use of appropriate language in personal or collective storytelling actually expresses the crude reality of society by creating social cohesion and a future, which is not defined in terms of the individual but of the universal. As author LeAnne Howe elucidates in her essay named “The Story of America: A Tribalography” of the work, *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*:

Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history), seem to pull all elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus (present and future milieus means non-Indians). (Howe 42)

*Achimoona*, a collection of nine different stories and a special poem for the children of eight and above were written by eight Native authors in the course of a workshop in 1985. This work has become a platform for the first generation authors from amongst the First Nations. Native oral storytelling technique is precisely employed by these different native writers into the written words of the mixture of Métis language and English. Métis author Maria Campbell has written an introduction that enlightens the value of storytellers in Native cultures and their changing role. She depicts the manner undertaken by Jordan Wheeler, Bernalda Wheeler, Pricilla Settee, Wes Fineday, Harvey Knight, Peter Deranger, Darlene R. Frenette, and John Cuthand to convey their little stories for today’s children. These tiny stories are ten in number and they are entitled with – “The Boy and The Eagle” by Peter Deranger, “Tale of the Stone” by Harvey Knight, “The Pillars of Paclian” by Jordan Wheeler, “Play With Me,” the second story by Jordan Wheeler, “The Hockey Game” by Wes Fineday, “On The Road” a poem by Bernalda Wheeler, “Phoebe’s Trip To Mexico” by Pricilla Settee, “A Feather Story: The Legend of the Laser Queen” by Darlene R. Frenette, “A Mountain Legend,” third story by Jordan Wheeler, and “Naska,” the last story by John Cuthand. It is believed that each story has some energy or source of power or strength that feeds and revitalizes the listener. In *Voices in the Waterfall*, Beth Cuthand articulates the importance of a storyteller and the storytelling tradition:

We come from a tradition of storytelling, and as storytellers we have a responsibility to be honest, to transmit our understanding of the world to other people ... In this process, there is something more than information being transmitted: there’s energy, there’s

strength being transmitted from the storyteller to the listener and that is what’s important in teaching young people about their identity. (Cuthand 54)

The word ‘Achimoona’ means stories in Cree language. The Cree is an aboriginal language or a Native American language spoken by approximately 117,000 people across Canada, from the Northwest Territories and Alberta to Labrador. The first story of *Achimoona*, “The Boy and The Eagle” is a story of a little Chipewyan Indian boy called John Bullmoose who comes to the trap line along with his father, Harry Bullmoose in order to cut woods for setting traps. This short story reveals that how spirituality brings the human beings and other creatures together and how they have been surviving together for thousands of years with balance and harmony. W. H. New quotes few lines from *Kindred of the Wild* into his work, *A History of Canadian Literature*:

The animal story ... helps us to return to nature, without requiring that we at the same time return to barbarism. It leads us back to the old kinship of earth, without asking us to relinquish ... the wisdom of the ages ... The clear and candid life to which it reinitiates us ... has ever the richer gift of refreshment and renewal, the more humane the heart and spiritual the understanding which we bring to the intimacy of it. (New 116)

The second story of *Achimoona* entitled “Tale of the Stone” is about a tiny girl called Lindsay and a magical stone. “The Pillars of Paclian” by Jordan Wheeler, is another delightful children’s story which is similar to “Tale of the Stone”. It portrays a miraculous world of ‘The Pillars of Paclian’ in which an eleven years old, little Métis boy called Chuck enters one day accidentally. “Play with me” is the second story by Jordan Wheeler and the fourth one by *Achimoona*. It is the tale about a six year’s old little Indian boy called Tod whose only wish is to have a bicycle as according to him, only bicycle can make other kids to play with him. The fifth story, “The Hockey Game” by Wes Fineday, is about the experience of an unnamed young native boy with its non-native neighbor family in Moose Jaw when he just finishes his grade eight at boarding school and sends there to live. This story exposes that prejudice which a native person faces in the midst of a non-native society.

“On the Road” is a small poem of thirty-five lines by Bernalda Wheeler. On the whole, the poem is an interrogation on the saga of a road and its true owner. This road is not an ordinary one on the contrary it assembles a long history of Canadian native people. Its title suggests a long journey including a painful past, suffering, struggle, native consciousness and sensibility of indigenous people of Canada. The next story, “Phoebe’s Trip to Mexico” is centered on a story of a native girl’s long desire to visit Mexico City. “A Feather Story: The Legend of the Laser Queen,” by Darlene R. Frenette, is a story about a desert warrior woman who became known as the ‘Laser Queen.’ It is a story of a bird who sacrifices her life for the survival of a brilliant blue planet existing in a faraway galaxy with white, wispy mists encircling it, called Sirius. It is believed that the laser bird’s feather, on which the title of this story is based, still exists, encircled by emerald guards in the star palace at Sirius.

The second last story entitled, “A Mountain Legend” is written by Jordan Wheeler. The story revolves around an

incident of a three-day school camping trip by an Indian boy, among other school boys and girls between ages of eight and twelve, called Jason to a towering mountain. As the title suggests, the story is also concerned with an old mountain myth about a twelve years old Indian boy known as Muskawashie, who in order to prove him a warrior, disobeys his father and tries to climb up the mountain to an eagle's nest placed somewhere among the cliffs. But he fails to climb up the rock cliffs and accidentally dies with a horrific death. So, it is believed that his ghost still wanders there and people can hear his scream as well. "Naska" is the last story of *Achimoona* by John Cuthand where Naska is a huge fish whose domain lies under the deep water pools of the South Saskatchewan River. The history of the Saskatchewan River is most prominent among native people and is also reasonably related with the continued existence of Naska.

Maria Campbell's *Achimoona* is a remarkable work for Children literature as it is based on animal stories, myths, legends, world of fantasies, adventures, and so on. These narratives have their own thoughtful system where many stories interpret how the world began and thus can be called origin stories of Aboriginal peoples. They are rich in creative and deluge myths but different than Western mind-set. In the chapter entitled "Origins of Cultural Diversity – Precontact Indian Culture" of his work *Knots in a String: An Introduction to Native Studies in Canada*, Peggy Brizinski clearly states about the construction of myths:

Myths are collective (held by a group) cultural interpretations of the world, and how it came to be as it is. They are believed to be true by their bearers, and they use story forms, narrations laden with meaningful symbols, to provide interpretation. They help individuals understand the past as part of their culture heritage; this includes an understanding of their identity and place in the world ... myths tell how the world functions; myths help people resolve contradictions in their lives; myths reflect the psychology of mythmakers. (Brizinski 19)

The *Achimoona* tales reminds us with many popular ancient evergreen tales of India such as the stories of the *Panchatantra*. Different folktales display the attributes of the culture, folklore and customs of the people from which they come from. Thus, Maria Campbell and other native authors have presented their philosophical and spiritual perspectives on the world through these tales. And therefore, they have enlightened a different path towards the younger generation with the help of their vision and wisdom.

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