

SIXTIES SCOOP AND FIRST NATIONS WOMEN: A STUDY OF DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR'S *SOMEDAY*

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Abstract: The history and realities of the First Nations families are retold and recreated on stage as they crave to subvert the dominant ideology and assert their true entity. Drew Hayden Taylor's play, *Someday*, portrays the distressing experience and psychological trauma of the people of the reserve. It stages "the scoop of 1960s," which traumatized the First Nations families by the abduction of babies from their biological mothers. Hayden emphasizes on the psychological agony of Anne Wabung, a mother, who eagerly waits for her long lost daughter. Wabung gets disillusioned at the end, after realizing the fact that her daughter cannot adapt with neither their community nor their family. The paper unravels the helplessness of the First Nations women as they are made voiceless by the white colonizers.

Keyword: Sixties scoop, First Nations women, psychic trauma, retelling historical realities.

The Native Canadian people experience emotional and psychological trauma in the post-colonial era on account of the different policies implemented by the colonizers. The First Nations playwrights who represent the voice of the Native, expose the negative effects of such vicious policies that have traumatized the lives of First Nations people. One such scheme that ripped the lives of Natives is known as "sixties scoop."

The 60s Scoop refers to the adoption of First Nation/Metis children in Canada between the years of 1960 and the mid 1980's. This period is unique in the annals of adoption. The phenomenon, called the "60's Scoop," is so named because the highest numbers of adoptions took place in the decade of the 1960s and because, in many instances, children were literally scooped from their homes and communities without the knowledge or consent of families and bands. Many First Nations charged that in many cases where consent was not given, that government authorities and social workers acted under the racist assumption that Aboriginal people were culturally inferior and unable to adequately provide for the needs of the children. This situation was due to the wide held belief among those of European descent that their beliefs and values were right and therefore superior to those of Aboriginal peoples. Many First Nations people believe that the forced removal of the children was a deliberate act of genocide. (Kimelman, 1985, p. 1)

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The scooping of the children has caused mental wounds in those Native mothers, who failed to save their children, when they were taken forcibly to white-owned foster homes.

Drew Hayden Taylor's *Someday* stages the ill-effects of such scooping, which was intended to destroy Native identity and culture. *Someday* revolves around the Wabung family, which suffers the loss of a child, on account of the sixties scoop. The play depicts how the forced adoption of a child by the Aid workers disrupts the life of a Native mother. Anne Wabung undergoes psychological agony after her daughter, Janice (originally named Grace), is taken away forcibly by the Children's Aid workers. The play also portrays Janice's yearning to get back to her original home and her disillusionment as she comes to know about the reason behind her being ripped away from her home.

The playwright brings to the limelight, the atrocities that the white have done against the First Nations people, and thus causes purgation in the minds of the audience/readers who have undergone such traumatic experiences in their lives. In an online interview, "An Afternoon with Drew Hayden Taylor, Playwright," edited by Mike Gismondi, Taylor talks about the theme of the play, *Someday*: "It's about friends of the daughter they lost 25 years ago who is coming home. It deals with the family and their reaction" (2005, para. 25).

The play is set against the backdrop of the Otter Lake Reserve (a fictional Ojibway community). The action of the play takes place a week before Christmas when every Christian family is supposed to prepare for a joyful moment. On the other hand, it is "a time of great happiness and sadness" (Taylor, 1993, p.1) for the Wabungs. Rodney, who sounds as a commentator and a family friend of the Wabungs in the play, shares with Anne the impact of old memories: "'People die, but never memories.' And this place is full of memories. Every family has their skeletons. The Wabungs are no different" (Taylor, 1993, p. 3). These lines suggest that every First Nations family has mental wounds inflicted upon them by the colonizers, and that the Wabungs is not the only family to have suffered such a loss. Anne Wabung is projected as a representative of all Native mothers who have lost their children in the sixties scoop. Janice represents the adoptees who seek their roots and kin. The play also showcases how the adoptees get acculturated to the white culture and thus become aliens to the Native culture.

In the article, "The 'Look of Recognition': Transcultural Circulation of Trauma in Indigenous Text," Renate Eigenbrod remarks that "traumatic histories happen in certain places, at certain sites, in certain times, and to certain groups of people" (2012, p.6). In the play, traumatic histories refer to the memories of the "sixties scoop." The adoptees are traumatized by the loss of original identity and culture.

The distressful Wabungs feel elated as they come to know about their winning a lottery worth five million dollars. Barb, the younger daughter to Anne, fantasizes

what to buy and how to use the lottery money. As for Anne, the winning of the lottery opens the prospect of intensifying the search for her daughter who has been taken away by the aid workers. She recounts her helplessness and her endeavours to get her daughter back to their family. The indifference of her husband towards her attempts to get back the child, remains afresh in her mind.

ANNE. [...] Twelve years ago when Frank was a councillor and still alive I begged him to talk to the chief about getting our peoples' kids back from the Children's Aid Society, but Frank just got mad. "Let sleeping dogs lie" was all he said, rest his soul, and I said my Grace wasn't a dog, she was my baby. "She's somebody else's now. She's dead to us, Anne. Let her rest." Dead to us. I went behind his back and spoke to the chief myself. Wouldn't do nothing, not a blessed thing. People on this reserve are still afraid of them. (Taylor, 1993, p. 13)

Anne expresses her anxiety and her wrath towards the white. The incapacity of Frank to protect his family is also highlighted in the play. Anne is portrayed as a strong and powerful Native woman who never gives up her verve in her search for her lost child. The helplessness of Native mothers in the face of white superiority and the atrocities of the white are portrayed honestly in the play. Native mothers undergo psychic trauma which disturbs their mental equilibrium.

In the book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Lewis Herman describes how a traumatic event can disturb the relationship between an individual and the community to which he/she belongs: "Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (1997, p.5). She further says that "traumatized people suffer a sense of alienation, of disconnection that pervades relationships from the most intimate familial bonds to affiliations with community and religion" (Herman, 1997, p.7). The play, *Someday*, portrays the traumatic events in the life of Anne that are caused due to the loss of her daughter, son, and husband. Anne suffers a sense of disconnection as she alienates herself from Barb's presence in the house, and tends to live in the memories of Grace, her daughter; James, her son, who dies in an accident; and Frank, her husband, who embraces death by his overconsumption of alcohol as he fails in his fatherly responsibility to protect his daughter. *Someday* is partly a memory play, as Anne spends her days by recollecting the past events. The title of the play suggests that Anne will overcome her trauma someday in future.

Psychological trauma that the Wabungs family experiences reflect the detrimental effect of the sixties scoop which has devastated many a Native family. Rose M. Kim in her thesis entitled *Violence and Trauma as Constitutive Elements in Racial Identity Formation* observes that a traumatic event can unsettle the life of a victim: "The traumatic event is fundamentally terrifying because it threatens

one's basic sense of survival.... It unsettles one's basic sense of trust toward another human being, and even more significantly, toward the society at large" (2007, p. 57). *Someday* dramatizes Anne's anguish and suffering at the loss of her loved ones. She recalls how her husband loses his hope to live which threatens his "sense of survival."

Rodney, a character in the play, tries to console Anne, and helps her to be optimistic. He shares with Anne, the story of an adoptee, who has been brought back to her community after many years:

RODNEY. Uh, Anne, my aunt once told me about this Cree girl that was taken out of her community when she was four years old and raised by white parents.

ANNE. Thieves!

RODNEY. And after 10 years in court, her reserve got her.

ANNE. See, I told you it could be done. (Taylor, 1993, p. 14)

Anne believes that Grace can be brought back to the family and asks Rodney to spend the lottery to arrange detectives to find out her daughter.

ANNE. Time to come to my senses, too. I know I'm stubborn but it shouldn't take two dozen detectives to drill into my skull. Court records are classified. Adoption records are sealed. There's no way of finding out. That was my last hope.

RODNEY. We put you on adoption registry.

ANNE. I know what the chances are of anything happening with that. She probably doesn't even know it exists. I din't. I wonder if she has a happy life. (Taylor, 1993, p.16)

Rodney throws light into the possibilities before Anne to start off her search for her daughter, whom she lost thirty five years ago.

The need for self-discovery and healing is one of the important features in *Someday*. In the article, "The 60's Scoop," Raven Sinclair asserts that "there are many adult adoptees searching for families, and families searching for adoptees" (2013, para. 4). *Someday* depicts explicitly the mental trauma of the people affected by sixties scoop and the efforts they put in for a reunion. The disillusionment that pervades in the play evades as the Wabungs receives a telephone call from Janice. She comes across the address of the Wabungs when the news about their winning the lottery gets published in the newspaper.

The play, on the other hand, portrays the experiences of an ignored child as Anne is preoccupied by the thoughts of her lost child. In the book entitled *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* Nancy K. Miller, and Jason Daniel Tougaw define trauma: "The term "trauma" describes the experience of both victims- those

who have suffered directly- and those who suffer with them” (2002, p. 2). Barb, who is an indirect victim to the sixties scoop who is destined to be alienated in her own family. Anne and Janice are the direct victims of the white’s scheme of destroying Native culture and identity.

Raven Sinclair in the article entitled “The 60’s Scoop” observes the present situation and mindset of the adoptees:

Many of the adoptees, who are now adults, are seeking to reunite with birth families and communities. A substantial portion of these adoptees face cultural and identity confusion issues as the result of having been socialized and acculturated into a euro-Canadian middle-class society. For transracial adoptees, identity issues may be worsened by other problems arising during the search and reunion experience. (2003, para.3)

Janice acculturates into white community and becomes a successful lawyer in Toronto. Though she is well-settled in life, she longs to reunite with her family. Her professional links facilitate her to access the registry records of adoptees, and thus she traces her familial roots.

Janice represents the adoptees, who are traumatized by their histories, from which they are ripped off. The hidden identity and the socio-cultural discrimination that the adoptees experience in the white society catalyze their longing to reunite with their family. Janice’s effort to find her biological mother becomes successful when she comes across the news of Wabungs’ winning the lottery. In a conversation with Anne, Janice inquires about the historical background of her family in order to mitigate her anger.

JANICE. I’ve been angry for almost 35 years. This might stop the anger.

ANNE. My poor child.

JANICE. My mother used to say that. I need to know, Anne. I need – somewhere inside-I really need to know why I was put up for adoption. I’m an adult. Please give me the truth.

ANNE. Cuz we were Indians. Things were different way back then. A lot different. (Taylor, 1993, p.71)

Though Janice has been frantically searching to identify the family to which she belongs, she does not exhibit any warmth as she talks to her biological mother. She does not even care to address her as mother, instead she calls her by name. On the contrary, she refers to her foster mother as “mother” (Taylor, 1993, p.71). She comes to her family to find out the reason that has led to her adoption and not to live with them.

Anne reveals how helpless she was when the Aid workers forcibly took the child from her arms.

ANNE. ...Frank made me promise on the Bible not to, no matter what. He said it might get us in trouble. We got in trouble anyway. They took my little Grace right out of my arms and I never saw her again after that terrible day. God help me. They wouldn't even tell me where they took you. And poor Frank when he got back, and found out what happened went drinking for four days. He'd never done that before. I almost lost it then but one of us had to be strong, so I was strong for the both of us. (Taylor, 1993, p. 73)

She discloses the truth and tells Janice how cruel the white are in their behaviour towards the First Nations people. In the article, "Aboriginal Alcohol Addiction in Ontario Canada: A Look at the History and Current Healing Methods that are Working in Breaking the Cycle of Abuse," Christine Smillie-Adjarkwa observes that "many Aboriginal people who are part of the 60's scoop have turned to alcohol to help ease the pain of these issues" (2009, p. 3). In the play, Frank turns to alcohol to help ease the pain and suffering when he comes to know that Grace is taken by the people from Children's Aid. By staging the realities, Taylor reiterates the fact that the Native people are at the mercy of the colonizers and that their lives are designed and decided by them. The much awaited reunion turns out to be a disaster, as Janice gets disillusioned, when she comes to know about the story behind her adoption.

Janice is completely shattered and lost after she finds out the reason which has led to her adoption. She decides to move from the Wabungs as she feels alienated in her own home.

JANICE. All of this, my life, because of some stupid woman's misunderstanding and a promise you made.

JANICE. I have to go. I've got to go out of here.

[...]

Anne. Grace, please...

JANICE. You don't understand. I can't stay. I just can't.

BARB. Grace, Mom kinda expected you to stay for dinner. She's been working real hard on everything and ...

JANICE. No, please. It isn't my place, my time. I don't belong here, Anne. I belong to Toronto now. I just had to meet you, put a face on my dream. I should go now. (Taylor, 1993, p. 74-75).

Janice is not moved by her mother's sentiments and thus Anne realizes the fact that her daughter can never fit into her family.

In the article, "Ties That Bind: Remembering, Mourning, and Healing Historical Trauma," Mary Beth Faimon remarks that psychic trauma is characterized by

detachment from other people. “Psychological trauma is an infliction upon the powerless and oppressed society. The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of survival” (2004, p.242). This “disempowerment and disconnection” that Faimon refers to is relevant to Janice who has undergone psychic trauma all through her life.

In the article, “Political Psychology in Canada,” Paul Nesbitt-Larking observes on the importance of healing psychic wound which helps not only the individual but the community as a whole: “The impulse to heal societal wounds and to move communities toward greater understanding is widespread among social psychologists everywhere, and there is a notable concentration of such social psychologist in Canada” (2014, p.104). The playwright indirectly plays the role of a psychologist as he dramatizes the realities which can purge the Native audience who suffer from similar psychic wounds. Taylor also takes the role “as an honest broker and peacemaker” by sincerely staging the play about the psychic wounds of Natives, and further portrays the inaction on the side of the authorities to bring a better understanding between Natives and non-Natives. Native mothers who experience psychic trauma like Anne is prepared to face the realities as they witness the actions in the play.

Someday, therefore stages the historical realities and the present realities of those who are victimized by the sixties scoop. The Wabungs family represent such victims of the sixties scoop who are voiceless and powerless. The playwright dramatizes these issues by articulating directly on stage, the brutalities and atrocities of the white, which in turn should open the eyes of the white. The reunion of the family which is to be a joyful moment turns out to be disastrous, on account of the influence and differences of Native and non-Native culture. The plight of the Wabungs proves that the adoptees can neither adapt to their community nor family, and thus reunion does not bring any additional contentment. Therefore, the audience are emboldened to accept the fact that the adoptees cannot fit into Native Indian lifestyle, and hence it is useless to dream of a happy reunion with their lost children.

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