



REIMAGINING TRICKSTER FIGURES IN NATIVE CANADIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Indigenous communities are the original inhabitants of a land, and their literature is an authentic reflection of their history, culture, and beliefs. Native literature, as an academic field, has reshaped perspectives on interdisciplinary studies. Among global indigenous literary traditions, Native Canadian literature stands out due to its diversity in languages, dialects, and storytelling forms, including oral traditions and sign languages. Central to Native Canadian culture is the concept of community living and environmental responsibility. Their oral narratives and songs personify nature as a nurturing entity, portraying animals as kin and the environment as a sacred mother. The spiritual essence of these tribes is deeply embedded in their literary traditions, serving as a link between ancestral wisdom, cosmological interpretations, and spiritual reverence.

A recurring motif in Native Canadian literature is the presence of trickster figures—supernatural entities that are prevalent across different cultural mythologies. Tricksters play a dual role as both cultural icons and humorous pranksters. Their tales serve multiple functions: entertaining the community, conveying moral values, and documenting societal transformation. Over time, the trickster figure has evolved, symbolizing the changing identity of indigenous people in response to Western influences.

Index Terms: Native Canadian literature, Myths, Tricksters

The Indigenous Peoples of Canada

Referred to as Aboriginal Canadians or First Peoples, the indigenous population of Canada includes the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. While the term "Indian" appears in historical and legal documents, it is now largely outdated and often considered offensive. The term "Aboriginal" has been used in legal contexts, such as the **Constitution Act, 1982**, but is also gradually falling out of favour.

As of the 2016 census, Canada's indigenous population numbered 1,673,785, making up 4.9% of the national demographic. This includes 977,230 First Nations people, 587,545 Métis, and 65,025 Inuit. Indigenous youth under the age of 14 represent 7.7% of Canada's population. More than 600 First Nations governments or bands exist across the country, each with distinct cultural traditions, languages, and artistic expressions. **National Indigenous Peoples Day** acknowledges their cultural contributions and significance to Canadian heritage.

Diversity Among Indigenous Peoples

First Nations

Comprising the majority of Indigenous Canadians, First Nations communities are spread across Canada, with significant populations in Ontario and British Columbia. They communicate in over 30 languages, including Anishinaabe and Cree.

Métis

Descendants of mixed First Nations and European ancestry, Métis communities primarily reside in Western Canada and Ontario. They speak languages such as Métis French and indigenous tongues like Mi'kmaq and Cree.

Inuit

The Inuit inhabit the Arctic regions of Canada and use languages like Inuinnaqtun and various forms of Inuktitut, which was first documented in written form in the 1700s.

Mythmakers and Their Stories

First Nations communities are deeply connected to oral storytelling traditions. Their mythology is categorized into four primary themes:

- **Creation tales** (both natural and supernatural origins)
- **Trickster narratives**
- **Transformation stories**
- **Culture hero legends**

Prominent figures in these myths include **Raven, Coyote, and other tricksters**, each embodying unique symbolic meanings.

The Trickster Archetype

Tricksters are an integral element of global mythology, manifesting in different forms across cultures. Due to their varied interpretations, defining the trickster is challenging. Carl Jung famously described the trickster as an “**archetype whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere**” (Jung, Combs, and Holland 121). Historically, tricksters have been depicted as mischievous characters, often taking the form of animals like the coyote, fox, spider, raven, and rabbit. Despite their playful nature, tricksters can also be ambiguous figures, oscillating between benevolence and chaos.

Scholars such as Paul Radin and Carl Kerenyi have explored trickster figures in Native American and Greek mythology, while Lewis Hyde’s **Trickster Makes This World** (1998) delves into their dual nature. Hyde notes that tricksters blur societal boundaries, challenging distinctions such as right and wrong, sacred and profane, and male and female.

Tricksters in Indigenous Canadian Stories

- **Wisakedjak (Cree tradition):** A rebellious yet wise figure, Wisakedjak was instructed by the Creator to maintain harmony among humans and animals. His failure led to a great flood, and while he aided in the world's recreation, he was stripped of his former powers, leaving him a trickster known for deception and flattery.
- **Nanabush (Ojibwe tradition):** A revered half-human, half-spirit entity known for shape-shifting and mischievous acts. He is immortalized in pictographs found at **Mazinaw Lake, Ontario**.
- **Chi-Jean (Métis tradition):** A trickster with ties to Wisakedjak and Nanabush, whose tales serve as cultural education tools for Métis youth.
- **Glooscap (Algonquian tradition):** A giant, culture hero who shaped the Canadian landscape, often battling his malevolent twin.
- **Raven (Northwest Coast traditions):** A guardian spirit central to the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian cultures. The Inuit also feature Raven alongside Kiviuq, a shamanic trickster.
- **Napi (Siksika tradition):** A powerful yet reckless figure responsible for creation myths. Sometimes accompanied by **Coyote**, who serves both as a thief and healer.

The Trickster's Role in Contemporary Literature

Tricksters have long served as a mirror of societal values, reflecting both humor and subversion. Babcock-Abrahams, in **A Tolerated Margin of Mess**, outlines common trickster traits: boundary-defying nature, comedic yet destructive tendencies, and a duality between life and death.

In modern Native Canadian literature, tricksters remain central. The 1980s and 1990s saw a surge of trickster-themed works, including:

- Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986)
- Daniel David Moses's *Coyote City* (1988)
- Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993)

This period also saw the formation of **The Committee to Re-establish the Trickster**, an initiative aimed at reclaiming indigenous representation in literature.

More recent works, such as Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* (2010) and Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster* (2017), continue the tradition. However, contemporary scholars warn against generic portrayals of tricksters that lack cultural specificity. **Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations** (2010), edited by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, urges a deeper appreciation of oral traditions unique to specific Indigenous nations.

Conclusion

Tricksters remain vital in Native Canadian storytelling, providing insights into historical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. These figures not only entertain but also challenge societal norms, reflect Indigenous resilience, and ensure that traditional knowledge continues to evolve in modern literary landscapes.

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