

Orality in *The Seven Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Milman

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Abstract: *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (2001), employs storytelling as a bridge to link the past with the present and celebrate the cultural heritage and oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples. It conveys the playwrights' aims to represent and demonstrate stories of grief and loss by addressing not only Aboriginal audience but also non-Aboriginal society. I read the play as a medium to share histories and emphasis on orality as a means of dispelling suffering in a society marked by strong oral culture. Drawing on the dynamic aspect of oral utterances and discourse according to Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (2002) and Helen Tiffin's *Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse*, I contend that the play illustrates orality in Aboriginal text through an oral performance. Also I argue that by using oral performance, the play can be read as a discourse of resistance. The stories of different characters related by *The Woman* represent stories of her family members and people directly addressed to the audience.

Keywords: Post-Colonial Literature, *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, cultural heritage, Aboriginal peoples, non-Aboriginal society, oral culture

1. Introduction

Through storytelling the storyteller expresses his/her feelings, experiences, observations or thoughts using language. Many artists chose theatre in order to make their stories heard since stories "carry meaning" (Bogart, 2018). Aboriginal peoples adopted storytelling technique to pass on creation stories, sacred beliefs and recently playwrights tend to use storytelling to highlight their culture, heritage, and struggle to educate both non-Aboriginal Australians and Aboriginal peoples about Aboriginal history.

Aboriginal peoples recuperate to oral traditions to refute the authoritative reports of the European invasion and settlement. Critic Anne Brewster, in her book *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism* (1995), proposes that Aboriginal memory is the "living experience of the past, regenerated through stories" (15) and "as long as the conditions of the past are the conditions of the present. . . the past is not past" (17). In order to thrive in the present, Aboriginal peoples must take active interest in their past.

The 7 Stages of Grieving (2001), employs storytelling as a bridge to link the past with the present and celebrate the cultural heritage and oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples. It conveys the playwrights' aims to represent and demonstrate stories of grief and loss by addressing not only Aboriginal audience but also non-Aboriginal society. The play is a monodrama where one performer experiences dramatic transformations through a sequence of scenes using different styles from storytelling to reportage, to miming symbolic acts, dance and speaking both English and Aboriginal languages. Traditionally, dance, mime and songs are all crucial features of Aboriginal performance culture.

The 7 Stages of Grieving is a perpetuation of Aboriginal peoples' oral discourse. The play, as stated by Helen Gilbert, conveys the important role of orality by saying that "[. . .] orality is a practice and a knowledge, a strategic device potentially present in recuperating

indigenous voices, potentially effective in de-scribing empire" (1996, p.110). By using theatre, Enoch and Mailman managed to create the effect of utilizing storytelling through direct address that is when the performer address the speech directly to the audience as the case in scene 22 (Plea), when *The Woman* places the suitcase with the word 'reconciliation' and the stories inside at the feet of the audience. This pushes the 'reality' of the performance experience and brings the audience out of their self-satisfaction and this is extremely important because, unlike history, it puts one in a direct contact with the issue of reconciliation and demands a reaction.

Walter J. Ong in his quest to specify the fundamentals of oral and written discourses, *Orality and Literacy* (2002), asserts that although literacy served cultures, basically it came from orality which is more basic to humanity (p.69–73). The first communication between humans was made through speech and much later by writing. Oral cultures such as Aboriginal culture treat the words and their oral traditions with a passionate respect which later literate cultures neglect or could not capture, oral discourse lives in the souls of the people with oral cultural heritage by memorizing and repeating as Ong explains "In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost" (2002, p.24). In other words, people with oral cultures depend greatly upon their memories and repetition in order to pass on their stories and preserve their traditions. According to Ong (2002) there are two kinds of orality, the first one is primary orality which is the orality of any culture that is "untouched" by printing or writing, while the second one is secondary orality which is the present day culture in which orality is conserved through radio, electronic devices, telephone and television which depends mainly on writing and print (p.8–10).

Ong affirms that oral mind is usually "aggregative", traditional and "unable to detach itself from its context". Ong further continues that "syllogistic reasoning" is unidentified to a society without writing (Botler, 2001, p.191–193). Aboriginal knowledge is actually transmitted

through their oral traditions in which storytelling plays a major role in building Aboriginal heritage. The interconnected groups Aboriginal peoples lived in, observe and learn from different experiences helped to build Aboriginal knowledge over years. McGregor claims that teachings of Aboriginal peoples were inspired from their land, moon, water, stars and the wind which leads to perceive knowledge in different fields: health, philosophy, and education (2004, p.107).

Aboriginal peoples consider oral language or oral traditions their vital vehicle to transfer their knowledge. Ramsay (2005) explains that the responsibility of transferring knowledge and stories lies on the elder people to deliver their oral traditions to next generation. The process of passing on Aboriginal knowledge faced a challenge with the colonisers' arrival who promoted writing and written word over oral discourse. According to Ong's (2002) perspective of the "imperialist" and "pre-emptive" activity of writing which indicates the assimilation of different oral performances to itself, oral tradition has a "belief system" that should be shared orally (p.12). As the language of the colonisers gradually penetrated the various aspects of life in a society with an oral based tradition like Aboriginal peoples of Australia, when their oral traditions is submitted in written forms, the actual meaning of the cultural context is lost. Written forms fail to capture the true meaning of oral traditions. Also many non-Aboriginal writers or translators exploit and distort the oral meaning in the shift from oral to written text. Ong points this out by saying that "literacy, [though it] consumes its own oral antecedents [and,] unless it is carefully monitored" (2002, p.14).

Enoch and Mailman cleverly celebrate their oral tradition by using storytelling and overtly dramatise the difference between the written text and the oral form. Ample instance from the play is scene 13 'Magshot' which contains a text report written by the white police. The variance between the two contexts is dramatized on stage through the change in the style and the expressions of the performer. This scene conveys a message generally to the audience and particularly to the authorities reminding them of what they have committed against Aboriginal peoples in terms of forcing the language of the colonisers and confiscating the heritage of Aboriginal population.

Beth Cuthand writes in her essay *Transmitting our Identity as Indian Writers* (1985):

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. What we're doing as Indian writers is taking that tradition and putting it physically onto paper and getting a broader distribution of those stories, because it's really important for us, in terms of our continuing existence, that we transmit our identity and strength from one generation to another (p.54)

In post-colonial theatre, by combining storytelling with performance, theatre provides sufficient space and opportunity to represent the language of Aboriginal people, which is more understandable when performed than if it was a written text, as Ong explains that the literate minds' "sense of control over language is closely tied to the visual transformations of language" (p.14). Also, theater allows the use of a variety of resources to enhance the enactment of voice and construct a suitable atmosphere and mood for telling stories. Ong points out that the words that the reader sees on the pages are "not real words" while a spoken word "manifests" humans to each other (2002, p.73) and presents a physical creation. Subsequently the physical creation is achieved through orality and written forms. Ong comments that a "written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word" (p.78) and that the real speech is essentially produced between real persons in a "context of give-and-take" (p.74).

The scenes in the play are clear examples that illustrate the conflict between the white settlers' text represented by "English" letters displayed on the stage or on the Woman's body and clothing or as specific date and the oral performance of Aboriginal peoples and its dynamic aspect represented in dancing, singing, poetry and storytelling that ensures effective communication between the performer and the audience.

In "Mugshot" scene, the playwrights aim to prove that history and documents that are often relied upon as explicit source of information are in fact insufficient. The information in the written report of the court contradicts the emotional speech of a young Aboriginal teenager dying at the hands of the policemen. The Woman speaks about a real story of an eighteen years old dancer called Daniel Yocke who was kicked and beaten to death as ("Amnesty International, " 1997, p.559) document explained. In a documentary style the Woman recounts the death of a young teenager in custody. The Woman reads the report in a routine passive manner pointing out that on 7th November 1993, the police followed Daniel Yocke and a group of his friends, he was arrested, handcuffed and placed on the ground without any charge or warrant. Later he was transferred to the Brisbane city watch house where Daniel was pronounced dead in the evening at 7: 13.

Yocke ran but was intercepted and arrested by Symes. In the course of the arrest Yocke went to the ground. Bishop and Harris then pursued members of the group towards the hostel leaving Symes and Domrow with Yocke. Shortly after the arrest of Yocke another Dutton Park vehicle containing Sargent Crowley and Constable Crozier arrived at the scene. Crowley handcuffed Yocke's hands behind his back. Crowley and Symes then left Domrow and Crozier with Yocke and drove down to the Oxford Street Hostel. After remaining on the ground for some time with Domrow and Crozier, Yocke was then driven to the hostel (p.288).

Emotionless tone blows into the scene, the horrific nature of killing Daniel was clearly shocking. In narrating events in the written text of the report it focuses on names,

numbers, cars and places which usually do not touch the recipient's feelings however the scene becomes more emotional by depicting events after the court report:

When they looked closer they saw that he wasn't breathing, he didn't have any pulse. The people at the Watch house didn't know what to do so they called the ambulance. The ambulance got there and they had to pump needles into him, whilst the others stood back and watched. They took him to the Royal Brisbane Hospital, pounding and pushing his limp body (p.289)

The Woman decides to abandon the monotonous narration of the report and narrates the text in her own way in an attempt to restore communication between her and the audience as she refers to the moments when paramedics attempt to revive Daniel in the ambulance. In the court report, Daniel is treated as nothing but another name "People called him Boonie!" (p.288), who has people and family that loves him. This scene I propose provides a more sympathetic and honest report although it is unofficial compared with the cold documentation of the court report text.

2. Conclusion

Enoch and Mailman in *The 7 Stages of Grieving* employ storytelling technique to share Aboriginal culture history and Aboriginal people's experiences with others, as well as a discourse of resistance against colonial practices from racism, social discrimination, Stolen Generations and financial problems. The play opens a space for communication and interaction between the performer and the audience. The play undermines the dominance of White culture by reading the white policeman's text by an Aboriginal performer. The performer shows the importance of the dynamic aspect of the oral performance in order to convey a message from the stage to the audience, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. The stories of Aboriginal grief recounted in the play draw attention to the time factor to accommodate this pain and the possibility of reconciliation and forgetting the past between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

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