

# Indigenous Existentialism in Marie Clements's *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story* (2010)

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**Abstract-** This research paper focuses on the various features of indigenous existentialism presented in Clements's avant-garde play *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story*. Angeline, a Dene/Russian is the protagonist of the play who is in an intense dilemma about the purpose of her existence on earth. Indigenous people in general are identified, categorized, defined, and redefined by the White settlers. This paper gives the readers a psychoanalytical approach by carefully exposing the postcolonial trauma experienced by indigenous people. Indigenous existentialism paves way for a critical understanding of the loss of indigenous individuality and freedom as they were forced to play their victim roles in their land. This research paper sheds light on the terrible psychological trauma of the indigenous people as portrayed in the play.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Existentialism, Psychoanalytical, Postcolonial Trauma, Victim Roles.

Marie Clements is an eminent indigenous playwright, performer, and director. She has an unrelenting and immense passion for drama. Belonging to Metis community, Clements's primary aim is to focus on the various aboriginal people's issues in Canada. Being a compulsive storyteller, She artistically merges history along with her dramatic verses to create a surreal world and transports the audience or readers into a dramatic world. Her plays are highly fascinating and poetical. She incorporates varieties of stage settings like sound effects, light effects, slide shows, and theatrical properties to enhance the quality of the plays. She highlights the issues of racism and power relations in almost all her plays, especially in *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, and *Burning Vision*. She inherits a potential of balancing form and content by improvising the plot through innovative and creative theatrical diction and techniques.

*The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story* presents the mindscape of Angeline, an indigenous photojournalist. The play initially opens up with a little bit of an intense real-life story which makes Angeline break down mentally. She finds out three aboriginal children were found frozen and dead due to the negligence of the drunken father. Angeline is the journalist who brought this news to the rest of the world and was awarded as a sign of recognition in society. Angeline belongs to a Dene/Russian-Canadian Family which celebrates her success as a photojournalist, but she is tormented by the image of frozen bodies that constantly occurs in her mind. "I can hear them...you know? I can hear them...sometimes when I put my hand out I can touch them." (Clements 45)

Marie Clements does not follow any conventions of time, place and action like Shakespeare. Clements can be closely associated with the Nigerian Writer Ben Okri whose mythical fantasy world is inhabited by spirits, fauns, fairies, gentle and kind spirits, ancestral spirits that are integral to African cultural traditions and that undermine conventional notions of time, place, and identity. The selected play also has a lot of interconnectivity from the past as one can witness historical characters from the past come in contact with contemporary characters. Edward Curtis, Princess Angeline, Clara, and Alexander Upshaw are long dead, but they come alive on stage to interact with the characters in this real-world namely Angeline, Dr. Clara, and Yiska. Clements creates a fantasy world for the audience where the spirit world intersects with the real world. The emergence of the spirit world raises many questions for self-introspection in Angeline; it further creates an indigenous identity crisis in her. Despite being a successful journalist, she is ignorant of her life's purpose and path. The main characters of the play are mixed race people subjected to innumerable

mental assaults as the outcome of colonization. The lives of these indigenous people are rifted from their ancestral culture and are caught between a rock and a hard place.

The Collins dictionary defines the word 'Indigenous' as "Indigenous people or things belonging to the country in which they are found, rather than coming there or being brought there from another country" ("Collins Dictionary"). All through this research paper, the word Indigenous refers to the native people of America and Canada. The native people of these two great countries are known as Red Indians. There are a lot of tribal groups among these indigenous people. These people were collectively called First Nations by the Canadian government. The arrival of white settlers from several European countries shattered the lifestyle of these indigenous people. They lost their tradition, culture, language, and sense of belonging to their land as a result of colonial invasion. European Invaders later set forth a few devastating laws that would disrupt the natives' way of living such as Residential schools, Forced sterilization, and banning of their traditional ceremonies.

It is during this time that a professional photographer named Edward Curtis started recording information regarding the native people in the form of photographs, sound recordings, motion-picture, and volumes of ethnological research. Curtis spent three decades documenting the traditions and culture of this vanishing race. He took more than 40,000 photographs, made numerous sound recordings, filmed a movie with all native cast, and published 20 volumes of ethnological research in which he and his team documented many Native languages, and transcribed hundreds of chants and songs. In some cases, he recorded the last living speakers of a tribal language. Clements's multi-disciplinary work *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story* explores how historical photography and documentation continue to influence the contemporary indigenous community. It also proves that indigenous people have not vanished, but flourished to abundance and prosperity.

The sole purpose of this research paper is to examine the core elements of indigenous existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical trend that primarily focuses on the survival of the human race. It wholly deals with their efforts taken up for mere existence in this world. The term Existentialism is coined by the

French philosopher Gabriel Marcel and adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre. Etymologically, the word existence is derived from the Latin word existence which means to stand out. Existentialism refers to an attempt to reach the innermost core of human existence concretely and individually. It highlights the subjective reality of individual existence, individual freedom, and individual choice. The basic root of Existentialism is found in the Socratic dictum "know thyself". Alienation, fear, and death are considered some of the major features of Existentialism. It allows them to ponder upon the nature of their human existence. It also gives them a chance to understand things from a different perspective.

Alienation emerges as a natural consequence of existential predicament. It is the result of rootlessness and loss of identity. A dictionary of literary terms is defined as: "Alienation is the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind" (Wodaj). Clements's *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story* has indigenous characters who suffer from alienation and disillusionment towards their life. The most depressed character is Angeline is devastated about her powerlessness as a mixed-blood journalist. On the one hand, she is utterly traumatized by the haunting memories of the dead frozen bodies of the indigenous children. On the other hand, she feels inferior as she could not publish the real news. It is because her employer is the nation's biggest and richest newspaper agency.

Angeline's sister Dr. Clara who is a psychiatrist makes her understand that she is just a foreign correspondent and not a writer in reality. Angeline does not have the real freedom of expressing the bitter truth about the vanishing race. White people have the power and authority of deciding what is to be portrayed to the public. The most famous lines of America's *Declaration of Independence* states "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ("Declaration of Independence: A Transcription | National Archives"). These words of Thomas Jefferson stay inactive till the present day. The words of the constitution in any country remain lifeless; they don't magically gain power and make reform in the society. Indians all over the country united 75 years back to fight against the white men and they

successfully revolted against him dreaming of a better India and each one of us know the real growth of our India in the present scenario. Once Britishers ruled Indians, now we are all ruled by our Indian politicians. There is no end for the inferior and superior roles as power play remains for eternity. The pathetic state of the Indian media is well known to all Indians. The powerful politicians control the fourth pillar of democracy to spread their whims and fancies all around in order to safeguard their political roles. China and Korea also does the same by selecting or creating the news and its storyline that have to be broadcasted and published globally. Dr. Clara makes her unhappy sister understand the harsh reality of any native Indian through the following lines.

DR. CLARA

Have you been able to write?

ANGELINE shakes her head.

DR. CLARA

It must be hard...You're not just any writer, are you? You're a foreign correspondent...an Aboriginal foreign correspondent...in your own country...hired by the biggest national newspaper to cover Aboriginal issues...in your own country... (Clements 44).

Princess Angeline is the daughter of Chief Seattle, after whom Washington State's largest city, Seattle is named. She is considered to be a woman of high calibre in her community. After the distortion in the indigenous lifestyle, Princess Angeline abandoned her land and people just to survive. Circumstances made her starve and she started to work in a white man's family to get some food. Whenever she entered the city limits, children used to pelt stones at her. This is in itself a sign of oppression and alienation.

The most frustrating part of being alienated is the superior white people do not physically isolate the natives, but they do it emotionally and economically. They are always dependent on powerful white people socially. They are alienated from their community, culture, tradition, language, and everything which was once passed down by their ancestors. This is the reason they feel lost and kind of disillusioned about their life path. White men once stripped off their indigeneity from their ancestors which continues to linger around them to date. As a result of this, the indigenous race suffers from intergenerational trauma.

Fear is the second major feature of Existentialism. Fear in an individual destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust within families, between

neighbors, and among friends. Fear splits up communities through suspicion and apprehension not only of strangers but of each other. Fear has moved into the indigenous social memory and social practices. Indigenous people are destined to always live in a state of fear. Dr. Clara is in constant fear of losing her family due to her interracial marriage. She always thinks about her children being taken over by her husband. She also fears her sister's mental health as she is deeply traumatized by the recurring images of the frozen bodies. So she arranges an appointment with Dr. Wilson, a colleague of hers who can save Angeline becoming insane.

Yiska who is a supporting boyfriend tries his level best to save Angeline from her delusions. Power shifting causes fear as one can witness the emotional and psychological distress found in the Hunger Chief. He is the one character who represents all people and nations. He constantly repeats "I am Afraid" (Clements 62) as the collective voice of his people. He also highlights the sweet and bitter life experiences of the indigenous people in binary terms. "I just got sick. I am very poor. I am very rich, weak, strong, short, tall, fat, skinny, alive, blind, dead..." (Clements 63). The Indigenous people are regular smokers and alcohol addicts, which they indulge to cope up their stress and fear. One can witness Angeline constantly smoking and consuming alcohol to erase her trauma and fear of survival. Yiska is the one soul who is very much concerned about Angeline and tries to pull her out of her dark clutches. Clement's central character Norval Morriseau from the play *Copper Thunderbird* is also a terrible alcoholic. Indigenous people being unique and creative have intergenerational connectivity to alcohol and drugs as it tries to numb their cynicism towards life. It is quite common to spot out stereotyped indigenous alcoholic characters in Canadian fiction. Indigenous people are on the verge of extinction due to factors like colonization and globalization. Statistics reveal that currently there is only 3% of the native population on this earth and also their life span is minimal when it's compared with the non-indigenous people. As it is recorded on the official website of The World Bank:

There are between 370 and 500 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide, in over 90 countries. Although they make up just 5 percent of the global population, they account for about 15 percent of the extreme poor.

Indigenous Peoples' life expectancy is up to 20 years lower than the life expectancy of non-indigenous people worldwide ("Indigenous Peoples Overview").

They are prone to disease very easily and frequently, this is due to their poor immunity power. On the other hand, they are mistreated by the settlers in numerous ways possible which affects them mentally.

"Death can be divided into three types clinical death, psychic death, and social death. Clinical death occurs when a person's heart stops beating and their breathing has stopped. Psychic death occurs when someone loses their sense of self and they can't feel any emotions anymore. Social death occurs when someone feels rejected by society or rejected by people whom they love or care about them" (Williams).

In Clements's *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story* one witness psychic death in Angeline. She spoils her health by smoking, drinking, and pondering over her pathetic past. She ruins her mental health due to depressed thoughts and repressed feelings. Dr. Clara, being the sister of Angeline says "You're a mess" (Clements 25) directly to her. Angeline once questions her Boyfriend Yiska "Are you scared I will die?" (Clements 46) and she even asserts that "I am afraid to live" (Clements 46). The horror of the frozen dead bodies has plunged Angeline's psyche into deep despair. Angeline says to Edward "I'm having a bad day...or maybe it's a bad night. A bad year maybe? One day. One night. One year. All the Same, really"( Clements 18). She even takes pills to bring her back to normal at least for hours if not permanently. She says "Pills do what they are supposed to do...they take the edge off reality, putting me in control of my numbness" (Clements 18). Angeline like any other native in the residential school was forced to believe that her outward appearance was not so good as a white man or woman. She feels somewhat jealous of her sister's "flawless porcelain skin" (Clements 13) and says to Dr.Clara "Always worried about appearances" (Clements 43). She even argues to her sister that "survival depends on the chance of your skin being white or brown?"(Clements 49).

Princess Angeline's case proves that she has faced social death before clinical death. She was a social outcast according to the whites as she was pelted

stones by the children of the whites. Princess Angeline who is the daughter of the Chief of Seattle is living a very poor life amidst the white people. She is digging clams and doing household chores in a white man's house for her survival. As their community life is distorted, people of the clan were left wandering in their land as people of no value. They were not possessing the basic needs of any human on Earth as they didn't get enough food to survive, no homes as shelter, and old and rugged clothes to cover them up which did not help them in winter. Princess Angeline says "Diggin'...diggin'...diggin'...for food that used to be a feast and now is nothing more than leftovers...you have made me hungry"(Clements 59).

Indians get sick without ample intake of nutrition-rich food, this is how their immunity powers gets lowered, and are very easily prone to disease and illness. Hunger Chief is a leading figure who represents his own culture and repeatedly says, "I am and remain thin. I want to eat. We want to eat. I don't want to be sick. I want to get well"(Clements 60)."I want to drink clean water. I want to be warm. I want to love. I want to live" (Clements 62). The collective voice of the hunger chief reflects the internalized hurt and frustrated life of his people. It also suggests that they were periodically manipulated by the settlers. Mostly every indigenous people of Edward Curtis's time must have undergone social death way before their actual death. At last, the vanishing race becomes a symbol of shame, stigma, and silencing.

The beauty of Clements's plays lies in the comforting and hopeful ending despite its miserable and pessimistic aspects. The photographer Rita Leistner in her artistic statement states that the vanishing race did not vanish, but had been deeply traumatized by the political games of the white settlers. She proudly says that they have stood the test of time as they are giving life to their lost culture and heritage. As Angeline finally says in the play, "We have survived across time, across the place, to love each other towards a new day"( Clements 67). This line closely resembles a very famous poetic line by Maya Angelou:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise (Angelou).

Each of us can change the community, and all of us can change the world.

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