Chapter - I

Native Canadian Literary Discourse

The wealth of canonical voices shows the tradition of poetic definitions. It ranges from Plato to Aristotle, from the Greek to the commonwealth and from the British to the American. It varied from Black poetry to Jewish poetry, from Feminist poetry to Native poetry, and from African poetry to Afro-American. It has also circumscribed and reached the far end by its inclusion of Native/ Aboriginal and Dalit poetry.

One of the earliest definitions of art originated from the ancient Greek. Aristotle’s definition of poetry is transcendental. He was a philosopher, politician, moralist and a theoretician and never a poet. He disagreed with Plato’s view that art is an imitation of an imitation, twice removed from the reality or truth. To Aristotle poetry is near to truth. Their definition of poetry is didactic and the poetic excellence is determined by its elements. It should teach people and civilize them. To them poet is a teacher or a prophet. Poetry is unified on the unique factor of harmonious wisdom. Aristotelian Mimesis or imitation of poetry was the essential definition in the Greek time. He chose the elements of rhythm, harmony and melody as the medium for composing poetry.

Renaissance poetry of the Elizabethan period reflected the bourgeois medieval romance. Edmund Spencer’s The Fairy Queen (1590) was an
influential work and borrowed myths from classical literature. Spencer was well-versed in classical writers like Plato, Homer, Ovid, Virgil and Aristotle. The allegorical and supernatural elements of Renaissance poetry brought luster to the life of knights and Queens.

However, poetry in the Puritan Age that reflected the allegorical characters was created by John Milton and John Bunyan. The Metaphysical poetic concerns were much wider. C.S. Lewis says that Metaphysical poetry is the fruit of the Renaissance tree becoming overripe and approaching putrescence. It was John Dryden who used to term “Metaphysics” which means “beyond physical nature”. Many Metaphysical poets used remote and far-fetched sources. The excessive use of similes and metaphors are from unfamiliar sources.

The Restoration poetry is the revival of classical poetry. John Dryden and Alexander Pope composed satirical poetry to lampoon their opponents. Romantic poetic definitions and theoretical concerns differed from poet to poet. To Walter Pater it is the addition of strangeness to beauty. In many ways Romantic poets revolutionized in liberating the traditional poetic themes. The themes of Rurality and Urbanity were handled by William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelly and Lord Byron. ‘Return to nature’ was their poetic slogan. Victorian Poetry was dominated by Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning and Mathew Arnold.
The period of Transition or the period of Decadence saw the transition of Victorian poetry to The Aesthetic Movement, associated with Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Their movement “art for art’s sake” revived the beauty of Victorian poetry. Simultaneously, the symbolist movement of France influenced Gerard Hopkins, Francis Thompson, Coventry Patmore and W.B. Yeats. This genre avoided direct expression by means of imagery, fancy and symbols to convey the hidden philosophical, spiritual and intellectual significance.

The twentieth century poetry began with Georgian poetry. Many poets turned away from Decadent Romantic tradition to realistic poetry. The First World War made a tremendous influence on literature in forming separate genre War poetry. The emergence of Imagist school under T.E. Hulme reacted against Georgian poetry.

The 20th century modern poetic discourse began with the publication of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). His poetry is a mixture of tradition and individual talent. He is a erudite scholar whose knowledge varied to such as metaphysical tradition, the French Symbolist movement, the poetry of Dante, philosophy of Existentialism, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian theology along with Greek and Roman mythical tradition. He called himself a “Classicist in literature”. As a corollary to T.S. Eliot’s modern poetic ideas, the “Pink Poetic” theme of socialist ideas began with W.H.
Auden who himself advocated for social reforms. The deplorable conditions of the downtrodden section were reflected in Auden’s poetry.

Contrarily, Dylan Thomas’s poetry at the initial stage was associated with the revival of religious elements. His revolt against using over intelligence in poetry is to revive the Romantic poetic tradition of the 18th century. He is considered to be the father of neo-romantic poetry in the 20th century. The process of decolonization has ushered in Commonwealth literature that has circumscribed the literary diversity of Africa, Australia, Canada, Bangladesh, Caribbean, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, South-East Nations, Native/ Aboriginal and Dalit Literatures. The poetry of these countries reflects the cultural diversity and strikes a different connotation from the established poetic tradition. The possibilities of post coloniality enforce us to concern the issue of diasporic identities. The traditional poetic definitions stand out to be futile in defining the post colonial poetry. When we consider Canadian Literature in general and poetry in particular the diasporic nature becomes pertinent in every dimension.

Canada is a multicultural country. But still is it appropriate to compartmentalize Diasporic literature to minority discourse? Or do Native Canadian literature comes under minority genre? Stuart Hall describes that Diaspora is related to scattered tribes whose identity is being scattered. This makes us to think that there should be inter-discursive connection
rather than the process of going for creating an isolated discourse in Canada. Victor J Ramaraj in his essay ‘Diaspora and Multiculturalism’ points out the characteristics of Diasporic writing.

Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individuals or community’s attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode. Caught psychically between two worlds, diasporians are, to use Victor Turner’s term, ‘transitional beings[s]’ or ‘luminal persona[e], that is, they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. In this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their dual, often antithetical, cultures or societies. Some attempt to assimilate and integrate. (King, 216-217)

His poetry of ‘hyphenated’ individuals who are immigrants to Canada reflects the cultural elements of ‘assimilation’ and ‘dissimilation’. The reminiscences of their culture, religious values, centralities, and the state of “hybridity” and “cultural liminality”, terms coined by Homi K Bhaba for his theoretical study of a state of experience by any immigrant who lives in a state of nation “within the nation”. “SAC Litt”, a term coined by Uma Paramesuran, includes South Asian Canadian Literature. Apart from this canon, Jewish-Canadian, Black-Canadian, Afro-Canadian are some of the hyphenated literatures in Canada.
So, the literature of any country is in a flexible condition. This is perhaps due to many reasons of Colonialism and Immigration. The disintegration of nation states is also one of the reasons. Thus the ‘imagination property’ of West on any country is disputable. Teresa Hubel in *Whose India: The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History* (1996) analyses this dialectics. Similarly, the question of ‘Other’ is also matter great consideration in literature. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Post colonialism* (1998) says:

Perhaps the connection between postcolonial writing and the nation can be better comprehended by understanding that the ‘nation’ itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests. If so many so-called as an expression of, ‘Other’ concerns those of gender, ethnicity race, religion, caste, language, tribe, class, region, imperialism and so on.”(207)

This shows that the fixed norms of literary nature or the concept of literariness have changed to include more elements of fragmentations. This makes to categories literature into Marxian, Feminist, Diasporic, Resistance, Revolutionary, Subaltern, Native/Aboriginal and Dalit Literature. This makes us to seriously observe the presence of Resistance in literature and Resistance discourse in every sphere. The postcolonial
literature foregrounds the problems of textual resistance and political resistance. Stephen Slemon in his essay, ‘Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World’ brings out:

Both terms thus find themselves at the centre of a quarrel over the kinds of critical taxonomies that will be seen to perform legitimate work in articulating the relation between literary texts and the political world; and to say this is to recognize that critical taxonomies, like literary canons, issue forth from cultural institutions which continue to police what voices will be heard, which kinds of (textual)intervention will be made recognizable and/or classifiable, and what authentic forms of post-colonial textual resistance are going to look like. (Mangia, 73)

The resistance could be the resistance of a writer or character in a text. It could use discursive strategies to deconstruct “The Eurocentric” power. Resistance literature could be called ideological literature which is influenced by the social circumstances. Resistance literature is concerned with the theme of violence of the oppressors.

This proposition is theorized by Barbara Harlow in Resistance Literature (1984). She analyses literature of Latin America, Palestine,
South Africa, Prison Notebooks and left oriented ideological literature. Harlow says:

Resistance literature calls attention to itself and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself further more as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against Ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production […] Resistance organizations and national liberation movement represent a collective and concerted struggle against hegemonic domination and oppression. They are not, however, without their own internal contradictions and debates, as Rodison points out in signaling the dangers of too monolithic or uncritical an image of such movement and struggles […] The dynamics of debate in which the cultural politics of resistance are engaged to challenge both the monolithic historiographical practices of domination and the unidimensional responses of dogma to them […] the theory of resistance literature is in its politics” (28-30).

The unique element of Native Canadian poetry possesses the theme of resistance of ‘domination’ in every form. Native poetry/Literature in Gamschian term is “Counter hegemonic ideological production”. The
process of unmasking the strategies of power structures is transparent in their poetic canon. The divisions of hierarchical power structures affect and influence literary productions. The politics lies in the fact that privileged classes are able to publish their literary texts while the Natives face difficulty in this “cultural production”. In spite of all these difficulties, Natives including women writers raise their voice to form their own centrality in creating their canonical structures and strategies.

In the oral narratives the voices of women are heard. The folklore depicts the rich heritage of native way of life. To Western perspective oral tradition is ‘primitive’ and is derogatory. The disregard of the Europeans to historical, sociological and cultural perspectives is evident in every sphere. A comparative study of European Fairly tales and Native folklore gives an understanding that the former consists the elements of ‘supernatural’ and the later consists down to earth reality.

This treatment of cultural diversity is obvious in the poetry of Native Canadians. It is also a foundation to present their lost values and foreground the Native political issues. Helen Tiffin in her essay ‘Transformative Images’ clarifies this point:

The problem of European textual containment is of course a Pervasive one in all post-colonial societies, whether in those white Settler societies where indigenes were, and are
annihilated or marginalized [...] As writers from white-settler societies came and come increasingly to identify not with their European origins but with the land they had invaded, and more recently with the peoples they had decimated and marginalized, their own status in terms of the European with whom they shared a colonial status in the eyes of Europe- has become problematic.” (Rutherford, 430)

“Five hundred years have almost passed since Columbus came and discovered people who live here. Now, everything is gone, our land is gone, our water is polluted, all of those kinds of things, and the only thing that we have left that is still pretty intact is our voice. And we can’t afford to let that go because if we let that go, we don’t have anything left. As long as our voice is there, then we will survive” says Maria Campbell. (67)

Native or Indigenous peoples who prefer to call themselves First Nations peoples are primeval civilizations who practiced a holistic approach to life in relation to nature and the spiritual realm. These ancient cultures had a vibrant and abundant oral tradition which was consigned to memory and ritually passed on to successive generations through a subtle creative blend of storytelling, song and dance. Their homocentric literatures of the First Nations peoples of Canada were repositories of autochthonous systems of knowledge based on practicality, aesthetic
experience, sensory and extrasensory perceptions. Their orators comprising tales, songs and myths are memory manuals or mental records of their experiences derived from the collective conscious ranging from the mundane to the mystic.

Their multifarious purpose is to instruct, guide, equip, and ensure generations for the survival, preservation and continuation of the tribe or community. As Alexander Wolf specifies “The oral tradition, in which history is embedded, requires the use of memory. The teachings that instruct a person in their identity, their purpose in life, their responsibility and contribution to the well-being of others are put in the memory for safe keeping. In later times… the stories would be passed on to the next generation, ensuring the survival of their history and way of life.” (Earth Elder Stories. 11-12) T.V. Prakash in his essay “Native Songs of Canada” confines “The entire stock and potential of knowledge, wisdom and intellectual attainment of any tribal group is deposited in myths, legends, oral folk tradition, songs, music and the lyrics of chants that make up the tribe’s literature. It is here that the essence of tribal, ideas, insights, values, beliefs, theories, sentiments and the accounts of their institutions, rituals and ceremonies can be found.” (Beyond Resistance. 82). They had their Shamans, medicine men or witchdoctors who functioned as a medium between the spirits and invoke favors and blessings upon the community.
through their magic spells and chants articulated through song, music and dance. The spoken word was revered which when sung, they believed had the power to bring them into perfect harmony with life in all its diverse forms, animate, inanimate and spirit. Most of their traditional poetry is in the form of song. Every experience from the earthly to the spiritual was recorded in song, preserved in memory. Oral history was served to enlighten the following generations about the uniqueness of the community.

The First Nations of Canada i.e. the Indians, the Inuit and Métis like their counterparts who inhabited North America i.e. the Beothuks the Sioux, the Mohicans, the Cherokee, the Comanche, Apache, the Mohawk etc., lived in the bounty of the land, hunting, trapping and fishing. There were wars among the tribes all of which were recorded in song. The adventures and exploits of their hunters and warriors constitute their myths and tales. They composed songs hailing the seasons and commemorating significant events in their lives such as birth, marriage, death etc. They were a simple people who freely expressed their emotions through song. Their communities were tightly knit and the elders commanded great respect for their wisdom and age. Each tribe had its own culture and tradition, its own language, oral history, myths, tales and songs. They held the land sacred, worshipping it as mother. They believed that the animals
were their brothers who willingly offered themselves as food. They had their Trickster spirits like the Coyote and Nanabush who reflect their philosophy, spirituality and understanding of the vagaries and cycles of life, both earthly and the universal. Tomson Highway brings sagacity to the Native cultures with his perception “This is the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle, a self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering and then the apocalypse…Human existence isn’t a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It’s fun, a joyous celebration.” (Native Son. 18-20).

The incursions of the Norsemen into Canada in 1000 A.D marked the beginning of the oppression of the First Nations in Canada. The Norsemen labeled them as an inferior race calling them “skaraelingers” and “trolls”.

They were followed by the Basques and other European sailors who exploited them for their fishing and hunting skills. But it was the arrival of the white colonizer in the form of the French, the British and later the Americans that sounded the death knell of the native Indian communities in Canada and North America at large. The colonizer, with his oppressive tools of institutional racism began the process of systematic annihilation of the natives i.e. through trade, war and forceful occupation, entrenchment of the native population in reserves, forced residential school education for
native children, derecognition of Native languages, cultures and traditions. They exploited the Mètis population for cheap labor, confiscation of their lands through laws and treatise, promoting Eurocentric stereotype caricatures of the Native Indian as primitive, uncivilized, prehistoric relic, brute and savage. Robbed of their land, livelihood, denied of their right to live their ancestral way of life, deprived of their children, raped, molested and deeply humiliated, scorned and ridiculed, forced to adapt a foreign culture which was in binary opposition to their own, lost in the coercive devious process of assimilation and the chaos of cultural syncretism, the Native Indian gradually succumbed to a debilitating sense of impotence and an overpowering attitude of subversive, subservient resignation leading to psychometric, self destructive patterns of behavior, alcoholism, substance abuse and violence. Abhorring the cultural contradictory situation, Janice Acoose writes:

For me disorientation, grief, fear and internalized rage grew because I was heavily indoctrinated by the power of white European Christian patriarchal institution: For me... those colonial institutions have long been a source of ideological confusion, economic oppression, social disparity, and political confusion within my family, community, and nations. One generation after another, my family, was exposed to cruelty, manipulative controls, segregation through the reserve
system...dehumanization, despiritualization through the
Christian residential schools and other less overt but just as
genocidal assimilative programs. (*Neither Indian Princesses
Nor Easy Squaws. 10-12*)

The Native Indian learned to internalize the ‘white ideal’. Howard
Adam writes, “We were socialized to the image that we were inferior,
stupid, lazy… We became statistics represented as the social problems of
Native people” (*Prison of Grass: Canada from A Native point of view, 7*)
Armstrong articulates:

Hidden in the shadow of those statistics however are the
nightmarish years in which my family for generations, were
seized from our communities and homes and placed in
indoctrination camps until our languages, our religions, our
customs, our values, and our societal structures almost
disappeared. Hidden in shadow of those statistics are the
generations of my family who returned to communities and
families as adults, without the necessary skills for parenting,
for Native life style, or self sufficiency on their land base,
deteriorated into despair. With the loss of cohesive cultural
relevance with their own peoples and a distorted view of the
non-native culture from the clergy who ran the residential
schools, an almost total disintegration of family and community was inevitable, originating with the individuals internalized pain (and consequently) the increasing death statistics from suicide, violence, alcohol and drug abuse and other poverty-centered diseases. (*An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, (239-240)).

In response to Jeannette Armstrong’s observation Emma La Rocque writes: “The third tidal wave which continues to affect my generation, took place soon after World War II. This wave was the modernization movement, in which various white agencies seemed driven to whip Indian and Métis in white disorientation, grief, fear and internalized rage grew among us.” (*Tides, Towns and Trains: In Living the change*. 80) Highlighting the colonizers nefarious politics of personal and communal destruction, Lee Maracle writes:

The busting up of communities, families and the loss of the sense of nationhood and the spirit of co-operation among the colonized are the aims of the colonizer. A sense of powerlessness is the legacy handed over down to the colonized people for achievement of the aim of the colonizer. Loss of power the negation of choice, legal and cultural victimization, is the hoped for result. (*I Am Woman* 120).
Until very recently the cultural history of the native was written exclusively from a Eurocentric perspective of the white colonizer’s egoistical claims of civilizing the ‘savage’. The stereotypes of the native Indian i.e. the carnivalesque identity of the Indian or the colonizer’s caricatural portrayal of the Indian, as native, Red Indian, Savage, Half-breed, Métis etc have been appropriated and propagated by the dominant white culture and literature. Kateri Damm echoes a similar sense: “…the ways in which Indigenous peoples have been characterized as “bloodthirsty”, “savage”, “cannibals”, or “noble”, simple “children of nature” throughout contact and into the present day have been informed by stereotypes and misrepresentation. Stereotypes such as the Drunken/ lazy/ Promiscuous Indian, or the Noble Savage or the 19th century Plains Indian as Prototype, continue to pervade the consciousness of those, both Native and non-native, who have been “educated” through Western institutions”. (Says Who?: Looking At The Words Of Our People.10). Kalidas Mishra in his article “The Path on the Rainbow: Rediscovering the Native North American Cultural Tradition” observes: “A white perspective of a native Indian meant, feathered warriors on pinto ponies, laconic chiefs in full regalia, dusky raven haired maidens, demonic shamans, with eagle-claw rattles and scalping knives”. (Beyond Resistance. 69). American novelists like James Fennimore Cooper’s novels like The Last of The Mohicans promoted the popular misconceptions of native identity. Critic Gary Aswill
elucidates on its two-fold implications, “Cooper’s novels emphasize the radical otherness of Native Americans, consolidating savagism by freezing its tenets into myth and freezing Native Americans white Americans were assuring themselves of the correctness of their own historical path, as well as vanquishing the savage that (they suspected) still lurked inside every ‘civilized’ white.” (Savagism and its Discontents: James Fennimore Cooper and his Native American Contemporaries. 211). Margaret Harry comments: “… the public versions of these (traditional) tales are the versions created by white writers who have a tendency to restructure the stories to conform to white Canadian narrative techniques.” (Literature in English by Native Canadians. 148).

The post-colonial era has witnessed the emergence of First Nations Literature as a counter discourse against colonial subversive interpretation of Native peoples and cultures i.e. the colonial strategy of misrepresentation of the Native peoples of the Native, the writing of colonial histories, the colonization, mariginazation and dehumanization on Native peoples, the imperial design to annihilate Native communities and cultures through insidious projects of forced assimilation. The agenda of white subversive misrepresentations or savage like the remains of Native mythopoeia orators i.e. oral historically and culture are set about the task of reconstructing all that is Native for the survival and development of
Native cultures in a multi-culturalistic world. In a broader context post-colonial Native literature is protest literature. Like the African Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, Native Canadian writers have appropriated the colonizers language. ‘English’ subverting it to suit their creative and artistic needs. They need to locate and glean material in their Native history, personal experience and orators. They record their protest and anger. They have evolved a new genre by transforming truth-based experience i.e. “life writing” and “self writing” modes of expressions.

A unique development in post-colonial Native Literary scene is the emergence of Native Canadian Women’s writing. The form of the semi-autobiographical novel has been their forte which subverts the Eurocentric novel like the African slave narratives. Maria Campbell’s *Half breed* (1973) Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search Of April Raintree* (1984), Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1988). Lee Maracle’s *I Am Woman* (1988), Bobbi Lee and Indian Rebel (1990), Sundogs (1992) and *Raven song* (1993) just to mention a few, make resonant in the din of Eurocentric and Euro American literatures as the voice of the doubly and triply marginalized Native Women of Canada.

For Contemporary Native poets like Armand Garnet Ruffo reworking oral historical narratives is assuming the mantle of the keeper of the sacred dream wheel of the art and its music: “The poet, as shaman, is a
spirit-maker; the singer, the drawer of breath, believes in the power of words to transform attitudes, of not realities.” (Colombo as quoted in Myth Makers: Early Literatures). To a native poet, a song in poetic form gives him the opportunity to be more whole, more real. Native poetry illustrates how the spoken word breathes life into physical objects transferring the mundane world into the spiritual. Native poets celebrate even the simple things of everyday life and world, its colours, shapes, sounds, textures, dreams and reason, with the intention of conveying the essence of their specific experiences through acute observation, even to the miniscule detail. The work of Daniel David Moses, a writer of Native Delaware heritage, combines a deftness of craft and texture with microscopic awareness of the natural world. Moses collaborated with Terry Goldie to publish An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English (1992, revised 1997). Another popular Native Canadian writer is the Cherookee, Thomas King. His novels Medicine River, Green Grass, Running Water and Truth & Bright Water are a series of gripping stories on the lives of Native in Canada. He has a well known story collection, One Good Story, that One, a children’s book, A Coyote Columbus and several radio and TV dramas to his credit.

Native Canadian Writers apart from creating Poetry and Fiction have also succeeded in writing Plays. It is pertinent to observe that the
transformation of Natives in every social and cultural sphere went in parallel with the evolution of First Nations of Literature. Canadian theater as an independent entity developed significantly during the 1940’s and 1950’s. The annual Dominion Drama Festival, a conglomeration of theater companies from all over Canada was established in 1933. It encouraged the opening of small theatres, the established of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1932 and the development of radio dramas by the 1940’s. A popular radio playwright Mavor Moore’s mother Dora Mavor Moore established the New Play society in 1947 while several regional theatre companies and revues formed. One of the new dramatists who became popular during this period was James Reaney. His play development workshops on Wacousta, *The Canadian Brothers* and *The Donnellys* attracted Cree Native Tomson Highway a trained classical pianist working for the upliftment and rehabilitation of Native communities in London and Toronto. Reaney’s use of myth, folklore, music and poetry and his evocation of a community, appealed to the creative artist in Highway, who later incorporated these elements into his own dramaturgy. As early as the 1940’s Reaney had established himself as a cultural iconographer through his efforts to make people aware of their cultural assumptions. A series of inventive plays includes a triology about the infamous Donneelly family of Lucan, Ontario which was murdered as a result of an age old feud. Reaney encouraged local audiences to be co-creators of the work with him by
looking at their own history and surroundings and, in the process, rediscovering the mythological in the familiar and reinventing the past.

Tomson Highway is a Cree from Brochet, a reserve in the extreme northwest corner of Manitoba. His father was a trapper and a fisherman. Until the age of six, Highway lived the native way, trapping in winter and fishing in summer. Recollecting his early childhood, Highway stated that “the first six years of my life were magic. I had the trap line, dogsleds, and the caribou.” (Literary Encyclopedia.2001) At the age six he was sent to a Roman Catholic school in The Pas, Manitoba. Highway suffered the fate of many in the 1950’s; forced assimilation into the Canadian mainstream. The next nine years of his life was spent at The Guy Hill Residential School where he was subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. He was forbidden to speak in his native language Cree. He was taught English and educated according to English educational system. However at school he also discovered the piano. He pursued his passion for music studying classical music and English literature in Canada at the University Of Manitoba Faculty Of Music, a year in London training as a concert pianist, receiving a Bachelor of Music Honours Degree at the University of Western Ontario and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English. Highway then worked for the next seven years for Native support organizations i.e. cultural programs, for inmates in prison, and recreational programmes for
children. At thirty, he began his writing career, writing plays about Indian communities living on reservations or what he calls “the rez”. Highway started writing plays in the early 1980’s for himself and his brother Rene Highway a professional ballet dancer. He attempted to combine Native life and spirituality with theatrical elements of Postmodernist super realism. Highway is perhaps the first Canadian member of the international traditions of accomplished writers who work in their second language. Another unique feature of Highway’s work is the use of his mother tongue Cree along with English. The specifics of his theatrical imagery have been partly inspired by French Quebecois playwright Michel Trembley and James Reaney and mostly by his own explorations of his Native Cree mythological heritage. The French theatre of Michel Trembley and other francophone Quebec playwrights with its improvisational drama partly inspired the development of the English-Canadian theatre from the 1960’s to the 1980’s. The theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto which was to later produce Highway’s plays encouraged the likes of George Ryga. An Ukranina-Canadian and a socially committed artist belongs to a group of writers who Eli Mandel says:

Concern themselves with the Indian as the marginal figure, one of a dying culture, a dispossessed culture, a besieged culture. [They] take a position sympathetic to the Native, critical of white cultural and its history of exploitation and
cruelty, or indifference … attempting in its own way, to enter into the alien culture to the point of fusing with it.” (The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives. 44)

George Ryga’s acclaimed play The Ecstasy of Rita Joe gathered playwright to use Vancouver Playhouse to confront its largely middle class audiences with the reality of Skid Row (the infamous Native slum) blocks away. In response to his “high art” training, Highway joined Native Earth Performing Arts, an aboriginal theatre company. Writing, directing and acting in a series of collective shows for the company, he studied mask and clown techniques for theatrical application of the traditional trickster figure. Meanwhile he had begun working on a new company, De-ba-jeh-mug-jig on Manitoulin Island. In November 1986 his first play The Rez Sisters produced in collaboration with Act IV Theatre Company and Native Earth Performing Arts, directed by Larry Lewis was staged at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto. The Rez Sisters, a runaway hit that celebrated Native life on a reserve marked a new era in Canadian theatre, catapulting Highway into fame. It won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for the best new play performed in Toronto in 1986-87 and was nominated for Floyd Chalmers Award for outstanding play of 1986. Highway continued working with Native Earth Performing Arts, developing his theatrical
concepts and techniques. In 1987 he composed and played piano for “Aria” featuring Greenland Inuit actress Makka Kleist. In 1988 he collaborated with his dancer brother Rene to stage New Song… New Dance playing the role of the Cree Trickster Weesageechik. He narrates the traumas suffered by Natives displaced from their families, communities and culture. 1989 saw the production of The Sage, The Dancer and the Fool, a joint creative venture of Highway, his brother Rene and Bill Merasty. Like Saul Bellow’s novel, seize the Day the play looks at a day in the life of a Native man in the city. Highway’s second runaway hit Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing staged in the same year is a flip side sequel to The Rez Sisters about the lives of Native men on a reserve. The play confirmed Highway’s mainstream success. It won the Dora as well as the Chalmers Award for outstanding new play and best production. Highway was honored with the Wang Festival Prize for his contribution to the literary Canadian community. The play was restaged in 1991 as the most extravagant production to date on any Canadian stage.

The next to come in Highway’s planned series of seven Rez plays was Rose which was staged in 2000 as a student production at the University of Toronto. A musical, Rose describes violence against Native Women. Highway turned to writing fiction and his first semi-autobiographical novel The Kiss of The Fur Queen was an instant success.
Highway tells the story of two Cree brothers displaced, physically, sexually and emotionally abused and subjected to forced assimilation at a Catholic residential school. The two brothers survive their ordeal and grow up to find salvation in music, dance and theatre. *The Kiss of the Fur Queen* became a national bestseller and received rare international reviews. The novel was short listed for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Canadian Bookseller’s Association’s Fiction Book of the Year Award. His plays *The Fool and A Ridiculous Spectacle In One Act* followed. His latest play is *Ernestive Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. From 1986-92 Highways was Artistic Director of Native Theatre School. Since then he has served as writer –in-residence at universities across the country. Tomson Highway holds three honorary degrees and is a member of The Order of Canada. He is writing a screenplay, children’s book in Cree and English and a book on aboriginal mythology. Macleann’s magazine has named him one of the 100 most important people in Canadian history.

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