Chapter- III

Conflicting Transformative Identities
(Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing)

My uncle savages the streets
Skates figure eights
Around the meters
Drums the cars
He gimmes change from laughing people
Wrapped in tight, white skins and
And sheepy coats,
Round dances round the block
In red-face
Clown –crows out the words he carries
On his cuffs.

Until the cops come by
And chauffeur him away
With marvin and the rest
To Burger King.
A break.
Union rules.
Tough job, he says to Marvin
Over fries
But, hey,
We got to hold the middle class
In line,
And keep them from the woods.

*The City On The Hill*, Thomas King.

Thomas Highway’s second major play, *Dry Lips Oughta move to Kapuskasing* was first performed in 1989 at the Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. It won the Chalmers and the Dora Mavor Moore awards for outstanding new play and best production. The play was remounted in 1991 in a major commercial production at Toronto’s Royal Alex and was hailed as the most extravagant native production to date on any Canadian stage making Highway one of a select group of avant garde play wrights. These conceptually new plays are estimated as significant cultural events by Canadian critics, scholars and audiences both native and white. The play has the distinction of being nominated for the Governor General’s Award, Canada’s highest literary honor.

The cast consists of seven native men of the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve: Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik, Big Joey, Creature Nataways, Dickie Bird Halked, Pierre St. Pierre, Spooky Lacroix, Simon Starblanket and their response to the assertion of solidarity and
empowerment of the Wasaychigan native womenfolk in the form of their ice-hockey team, the Waspy Wailerettes. The main plot is interwoven with their past and their individual responses to the radial response of their womenfolk. The play is in the form of a “dream” that Zachary the Baker on the reserve dreams. Zachary, and enterprising businessman is obsessed with upgrading his kitchen as he intends to establish the reserve’s first pie-making business. He has a strong competitor in Big Joey who wants to establish the reserve’s first local Radio station. Big Joey accuses Zachary of putting his proposal on the back burner and getting his own sanctioned in the Wasaychingan council. When he catches Zachary in a compromising position (that he had a one night stand with his girlfriend Gazelle Nataways) in his home, he takes advantage of the situation by threatening to spoil his business venture by informing his wife Hera of his affair with Gazelle Nataways. However the news that the women of the reserve had formed a hockey team is a stunning blow to his male egoistical identity of ‘the Rez stud and bully’. Behind his much despised identity as one who had fought the Indian war against the white usurper at Wounded Knee at South Dakota, is concealed, a spiritually castrated and powerless individual, who blames the women for his situation. He tries to compensate his impotence by displaying a rough, intimidating and self-destructive attitude. His desperation is echoed in his outburst after the war Joey works as a bouncer in a bar where he becomes intimate with Black
Lady Halked who is a strip tease dancer. The relationship ends with the birth of his mentally handicapped son Dickie Bird Halked. Born in a bar, to an alcoholic mother, Dickie Bird suffers the mentally debilitating effects of fetal alcohol syndrome. He cannot speak and has no language with which to articulate his pain and frustration, or to communicate with others. The agony of not knowing his father further intensifies his agony. Big Joey does not acknowledge him as his son. Like Big Joey the other men are all casualties of the collision with white society-disempowered, irresponsible and self-destructive. St. Pierre the self-styled clown of the reserve is recruited by the women to be the referee for the oncoming match. He is delighted with his new found position but being an ineffectual alcoholic, his good intentions become confused and misdirected, according to Graham Greene. Spooky Lacroix lives at the other extreme. Grandson of a legendary medicine extreme religiosity to the level of insanity, using his religion to intimidate the more psychologically and emotionally vulnerable position. Quite in contrast is Simon Star blanket, whose native spirituality drives him on a quest for the spiritual beliefs of his ancestors. He desires to travel to South Dakota, the site of native suppression a haloed and historical place to the native Indian, with his pregnant girlfriend Patsy Pegahmagahbow and marry her the Indian way dancing and chanting with the Sioux. Denied of elders, he tries to dance and chant the Indian way waving his “luminescent powwow dancing bustle”. Intimidated by the
distorted religious views of Spooky Lacroix on the one hand and the stirrings of native spirituality on the other, Dickie Bird Halked brutally rapes Simon’s sweetheart with Spooky Lacroix’s crucifix. Enraged by the heinous act, Simon in a drunken rage tries to take revenge by shooting Dickie Bird but accidentally shoots himself to death. Shocked by the death of Simon, Zachary, in a moment of anguish and despair directs his ire against God whether Christian or native for allowing such suffering and loss. The play ends with Zachary awakening from his dream, to find himself lying in his own bed. His wife Hera hands him his baby which gives him an assurance of a new, beginning and a better world for his people on reserve.

The play originally titled The Rez Brothers is a “flip-side” or reverse sequel to his first play The Rez Sisters. In contrast to The Rez Sisters an earthy musical dark comedy celebrating the ‘funky’ life of contemporary native women on a ‘cool’ Canadian Indian reserve, “Dry Lips” is a “radical mélange of styles that combine broad comedy and brute tragedy” (Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays vol.II. 185). Denis W. Johnston calls it: “a flip-side in another way. In contrast to the life-affirming impulse of The Rez Sisters we find in Dry Lips, a litany of disturbing and violent events, set within a framework of hopefulness which is ultimately unconvincing.” (Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 260) Jerry
Wassesman elaborates: “They (Highway’s plays) tell of oppression but also of hope, of tragedies but also of the ordinary daily pleasures and absurdities of life experienced from inside the skin of native women and men”. (*Modern Canadian plays Vol.II. 183*)

Highway though considered an ‘insider’, is markedly a new voice, appropriating both the traditional, formal and spiritual aspects of native art and life and the dominant mainstream cultural forms and styles, producing a masterly ‘theatrical synthesis’ that overflows with exuberance and addresses both native and non-native audience. Canadian critic Lucy Bashford substantiates: “you feel as if you’ve been somewhere after one of these plays, as if you’re still alive under the armor of twentieth century life.” (*Modern Canadian Plays Vol. II.183*)

Highway’s lifespan experiences two radically different worlds, one native the other white. Growing up in foster homes, attending a Indian residential school, pursuing a globetrotting career as a classical pianist and immersing himself in European culture and civilization, he was confronted by the debilitating poverty and alcoholism of native men in Canadian cities where he performed. He gave up his musical career to work for the welfare of the native peoples and the revival of native cultures and spirituality among native peoples of Canada. The theatre has been his medium, where he combines myth, music and contemporary forms and styles and nostalgic
evocation of his native Cree community. In the preface to George York’s summary of the events at Oka in *The Dispossessed* he wrote: “my parents are strong, beautiful people, as are my numerous brothers and sisters. And they all speak nothing but Cree… And, in the case of parents Chipeweyan. The white people whom I happened to meet and associate with along the way were almost without exception, tremendously supportive and encouraging. With their help, I am now, like many Indians of my generation, able to go back to help my people… equipped, this time, with the wisdom of Homer and Faulkner and Shakespeare and Bach and Beethoven and Rembrandt and McLuhan and many other thinkers, artists and philosophers of the white world. But equipped, as well, with the wisdom and the vision of Big Bear and Black Elk and Chief Seattle and Tom Fiddler and Joe Highway and the medicine people, the visionaries of my ancestry- and the Cree language in all its power and beauty. At all times I have had the trickster sitting beside me. In Cree we call him/her first meeting, seven lifetimes ago, with the central hero figure from that other mythology Christian mythology was so shocking and resulted in so many unpleasant occurrences.” (*The Dispossessed: Looking at the Words of Our people*). Highway is upbeat about native resurgence when he reminds the white society with his saying: “Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven
lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation.” (*Nanabush in the city*. 9).

But first as a contemporary native leader Lyle Longclaws (as quoted by Highway in the epitaph) says: “before the healing can take place the poison must first be exposed …” (*Dry Lips*. 6) As a related response Jerry Wassesman points out: “the eclipses suggest an ongoing incomplete process, and in Dry Lips the process of exposure is painful and ugly”. (*Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays*. 185). The dramatization of the ‘ongoing process’ is more Eliotian and is in variance with the ‘Fourth World’ native relativist writers whose autobiographically structured writings adhere to the neo-classic principle of decorum. Highway integrating all his experiences started writing plays: “I put together my knowledge of Indian reality in this country (Canada) with classical structure and artistic language. It amounted to applying the sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of street drunk, say at the corner of Queen and Bathurst.” (*Nanabush in the city*. 8). Covering the play for the ‘Globe and Mail’ critic Rey Conlogue wrote:

These many stands of the play bloody, comic, classical, contemporary, native and European-are not satisfactorily drawn together. But there is so much power in the various strands that the play transcends its confusion and creates
moments that are among the most emotionally riveting that I have seen. *(The Globe and Mail 1989).*

Highway’s philosophy of ‘life’ differs from the Native relativist discourse in as much that he goes ‘beyond’ the native colonial experience to grapple with contemporary issues relevant to both native and non-native in Canadian white multiethnic society. Retrospectively Highway has claimed that instead of being bitter his time at the Guy Hill Indian residential school where he and his brother Rene were subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse, he says he “emerged learning peace”. He goes on to say. “We can only think of ourselves as victims for so long...you know we faced the fact that we have been victims, we close that chapter; we deal with it; we air out that chamber of horrors and its water under the bridge. We move on.” *(The Literary Encyclopedia.2001).* This is the philosophy on which he works. Inspired by his experiences he crafts his work with ‘larger themes’.

Highway himself forcefully displaced from his heritage theatrically uses Cree cosmology to make sense of his characters confusing, painful situations and profound losses. He makes full and free use of the trickster Nanabush in his plays and novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In *The Rez Sisters* and *The Kiss of the Fur Queen* the characters come to understand their own and the collective self hatred and alienation as a form of oppression.
Through their art, music and native spirituality, they reassert what it means to be native, refusing to be defined solely by the abuses inflicted upon them by the Weetigo like manifestation of the white man. The root cause of their sufferings is not reductively seen as colonization alone but as a collision of cosmologies. Native and Christian and their redemption depends upon respecting and claiming the power of their culture. The Rez Sisters and the brothers Jeremiah and Gabriel in The Kiss are victimized by the white racist systems but they refuse the status of victims. But Dry Lips becomes more complex as the plays cast of the seven Rez men seem resigned to the white stereotype identity as victims. This is starkly evident in their “acting out their anger and frustration, the consequences of their disempowerment, in violent self-negating acts or through denial and escape into alcoholism.” (Cultural Collision & Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 2). The ‘poison’ of internalizing their rage and frustration as ‘victims and their varied individual responses to the women’s assertion of their sexual identity leads to conflict. Highway, as Anne Nothof points out: “examining the possibility of spiritual renewal and healing in terms of a transformation which comes as a consequences of living through the beginning” (Cultural Collision & Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 2) makes the play problematic and controversial. However in the painful and ugly process of exploring the problems which are eroding native tradition, culture and
values. Highway envisions the preclusion of self-destruction and the ensuing transformation. Highway elucidates: “I think that every society is constantly in a state of change, of transformation of metamorphoses. I think it is very important that it continue to be so to prevent the stagnation of our imagination, our spirits, our soul… what I really find fascinating about the future of my life, the life of my people, the life of my fellow Canadians is the searching for this new voice, this new identity, this new tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds… combining them and coming up with something new”. (Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions. 354) As Denis W. Johnston remarks: “the tragedy of Dry Lips is of the men keeping on their straight lines, absurdly reiterating their preoccupations instead of responding to the events around themselves. They women in The Rez Sisters do … In … Dry Lips, linear elements show characters becoming lost by stubbornly following a straight line, while circular elements signal regeneration.” (Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 263).

The preoccupation of the men is easily identifiable. Except Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik and Simon Star blanket and Dickie Bird Halked, the men prefer to live out their existentialistic lives on the reserve. The pseudo culture on the reserve is strikingly concised by the ‘elder’ Rez
Sister Pelajia Pachnose in her remark, “Everyone here’s crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other’s wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush.” (The Rez Sisters. 6) It is therefore important to study the social base for the reserve’s culture Dry Lips and the cultural perspectives reserve dwellers have towards their lives. One might suggest that natives living on the reserve have little choice but to act more or less the way they do. However as Highway indicates in his notes to “The Rez Sisters” the reserve’s name “Wasaychigan” means “window” in Ojibway. Situated on the outskirts of the city, the reserve then functions as a “metonym for native communities across the country… looking out on the conspicuous indicators of an economically powerful white society, and looking in at its own signs of self-destruction and self-preservation.”(Cultural Collision & Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 1) But if toying with an economic approach to the reserve’s malaise in the play (as seen in Zachary’s entrepreneurial project of opening the reserve’s first bakery or Big Joey’s local radio station) as a counter to the poverty and powerlessness of the natives on the reserve, then it depends on the place assigned for the ‘marginalized’ reserve dwellers in the framework of Canadian society. The general tendency for natives to see the way of life of the white Canadian majority as an ideal and when resources are made available to discard reserve lifestyle, seeking employment and settling down in the cities and living the mainstream
culture does not solve the issue of the native indigenous identity problem or the white supremacist and racist attitude towards it. As Native Canadian writer Marilyn Dumont points out, “But what is the experience of the urban native? Indians who grew up in urban centers, one or more generations removed from the subsistence economy that characterizes predominant images of “Native”. The urban native who participates in all the trappings of a wage economy as best he/she is able to. The urban native who is increasingly becoming the majority. Why do popular images of us lag behind our reality? Images that portray us as well as rural, living a subsistence economy, traditional, when more and more natives are living the experience of an urban wage economy? What force drives this perception, this tenacious image of us as traditional, rural, living subsistence economy?” (Popular Images of Nativeness: Looking at the Words of our People. 48) If this is the case then in an awareness of two cultures one mainstream and the other native the appropriation of the latter by the contemporary native is of utmost importance for it is there where his true identity lies. In “Dry Lips” the young Simon Star blanket substantiates the above argument. As Wassesman points out, “Simon seeks nothing less than the return of native spirituality: the resurrection of old dance and dream rituals, and the recuperation of Nanabush.” (Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays. 185) which Highway eagerly anticipates. In continuation of the above argument Marilyn Dumont
elaborates, “I would argue that the (white) representation of me makes me doubt my experience, devaluate my reality, and tempts me to collide in an image which in the end disempowers me… and if I as a native person, engage in the denial of my own image, then I am participating in just another variety of internalized colonialism which blinds me and fosters my disempowerment.” (Popular Images of Native ness: Looking at the Words of our People. 49) The insidious white imperial design to deny mainstream cultural identity to the native and the native’s rejection and loss of indigenous identity results in the Rez men appropriating white caricature Eurocentric stereotype images.

Highway also seems to attribute the reserve’s malaise as self perpetuating and not necessarily directly related to external conditions. The cultural collusive images of abject poverty, dilapidated surroundings, family breakup, unbridled promiscuity, alcoholism and substance abuse, sexual abuse, masochistic behavior and misogynistic feelings are a case in point. Subject to a low esteem of themselves and displaced in a Eurocentric white patriarchal society’s system of social ranking and gendered hierarchy, the Rez men respond realistically by adhering to alternative avenues of male expression already modeled for them by other ‘Rez men’ who have faced the same situation. For instance Pierre St. Pierre, a beer swilling bootlegger, plays the harmless fool and is identified
as the Rez clown with his childish enthusiasm and excitement as the reference of the Rez women’s ice hockey team, the Waspy Waierettes and his comic search for his missing ice skates. Then there is Creature Nataways the garrulous simpleton and Big Joey’s adoring side kick parroting Big Joey’s words. Later we learn that his admiration for Big Joey has a homosexual basis which however is downplayed in the wake of the apocalyptic events of the play. Spooky Lacroix is the reformed alcoholic and self styled evangelist who substitutes an addiction to alcohol with an addiction to the white man’s religion, intimidating the more emotionally and psychologically vulnerable among the Rez men and is preoccupied with knitting little garments for the baby his wife is expecting any moment. The entrepreneurial and sexual rivalry between Zachary and Big Joey and Zachary’s hilarious search for his missing under shorts and the characterization of Big Joey as the Resident stud and macho man adhere to the white Eurocentric representations of the native on the one hand and the models of male expression in the reserve culture on the other. Internalization of the rage and frustration due to the loss of gendered hierarchy and sexual identity prompts the men to direct their misogynic ire at the Rez women along with “violent self-negating acts, or through denial and escape into alcoholism.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 2) The Rez sister Emily Dictionary’s ten year physical abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband,
Black Lady Halked’s hopeless addiction to alcohol, Veronique’s husband Pierre St. Pierre’s abandoning of familial responsibilities due to his alcoholism and incriminating activities like bootlegging and Creature Nataways (homosexual) adoration of Big Joey and estrangement from his wife Gazelle Nataways who ends up as Big Joey’s mistress the mute Dickkie Bird’s horrific rape of Patsy Pragamabhow Simon’s sweetheart and his father Big Joey’s monstrous passivity in relation to the rape are all a case in point.

However the broad comedy as witnessed in the antics of the men and their bilingual verbal banter does not mitigate the horrible and brutal events in the play. The tragedy of Dry Lips is then at its core a conflict of sexual identities which is alien to Native tradition, culture and spirituality. The ‘transliminal’ surfacing of the repressed feelings of misogynic rage and frustration begins with the Rez sisters ice hockey team enterprise “as a form of assertion of solidarity and empowerment.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 4)

The play’s two central iconic events the first as a series of flashbacks being the nightmarish birth of the mentally retarded Dickie Bird to a hopeless alcoholic strip tease dancer Black Lady Halked in a bar and 17 years later the second anticlimactic apocalyptic event at the end of the play i.e. the vicious rape of Simon’s woman Patsy Pegamagabhow by
Dickie Bird are linked by the men’s frantic responses to the women’s hockey team reflecting Big Joey’s morbid fear of women’s power. His fear and misogynic hatredness of the Rez women’s assertion of their sexual identity, originates from his debacle at Wounded Knee resulting in spiritual castration and powerlessness which is further escalated by the internalization of his cowardly desertion of his alcoholic mistress Black Lady Halked at the time of her conceiving their son Dickie Bird in a bar. Wounded Knee, South Dakota was the site of two native uprisings against the United States government. In the late 1880’s the Sioux began practicing a religion founded by Wovoka a Pauite prophet, who prophesied that performing the ritual Ghost Dance would result in the return of their white occupied lands and the depleted animal population, the resurrection of their dead ancestors, the disappearance of the white man and a future of peace and prosperity. Suspecting a Sioux up ring the U.S. Federal Law Enforcement Officers (FBI) moved in resulting in a gun battle killing a number of Sioux, many of them unarmed by standers. The second altercation (in which Big Joey participated) between the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the FBI took place on 27th February 1973. The aim seized and held Wounded Knee demanding a U.S. Senate investigation of Native American problems. An exchange of gunfire between the warring groups ended in grievous injuries and deaths on both sides. The siege ended 71 days later, when the natives were promised negotiations to settle
their grievances which never saw a settlement. Wounded Knee was the last official battle in the American Indian wars ending in a fiasco. After the debacle at Wounded Knee, Big Joey works as a bouncer in a bar and becomes sexually intimate with Black Lady Halked, a strip tease dancer and a hopeless alcoholic. Their clandestine affair ends in the first iconic event, nightmarish birth of their mentally retarded son Dickie Bird in the bar. The entanglement of these two traumas drives him into a paroxysm of fear and he flees from the scene deserting his mistress and their illegitimate son. As Pierre recollects the incident, “… she Black Lady Halked ‘drunk almost senseless’ kind of oozed down right then and there, right down to the floor of the Queen of Hearts Tavern. And Big Joey, may he rot in hell, he was the bouncer there that night, when he saw the blood, he ran away and puked over on the other side of the bar, the sight of all that woman’s blood just scared the shift right out of him.” (Dry Lips. 93)

Big Joey himself reveals his traumatic agony when he bursts out, “This is the end of suffering of a great nation. That was me. Wounded Knee, South Dakota, spring of 73. The FBI. They beat us to the ground. Again and again. Ever since that spring. I’ve had these dreams where blood is spill in out from my groin, nothin’, there blood and emptiness. Its’ like… I lost myself. So when I saw this baby comin’ out Caroline, Black Lady… all this blood.. and I knew it was gonna come… I … I tried to stop
it. I freaked out. I don’t know what I did… I know it was mine…”. (Dry Lips. 119,120)

When confronted by the others demanding an explanation for allowing his son to perpetrate the brutal rape Big Joey replies, “Because I hate them… I hate them fuckin’ bitches… Because they… our own women took the fuckin power away from us faster than the FBI ever did.” (Dry Lips. 120) Big Joey’s mindset suggests pathological social masochism filled with guilt and self hatred needing to suffer and fail.

Dickie Bird Halked is the chief protagonist of the play, in whose highly symbolic person, one can read the culmination of the ravages of white supremacy and racism and cultural collision in its totality. Talking to Susannah Schmidt in 1998 Highway explained that the character of Dickie Bird was conceived in a traumatic dream he had in his father’s bed when his father, a cancer patient, was hospitalized.“But these dreams I had in his bed : it was a hockey game with this young man who was about 17 years old, and the women were playing, Something happened on the ice and the man had an epileptic fit, started speaking in tongues. You know, freaking out. It was a desperate thing. So that’s where the play started, that was [the character] Dickie Bird…” (Interview with Susannah Schmidt. 1998). Dickie Bird represents the hapless Native trapped in the imbroglio of two collusive cultures represented in the play by their respective cosmologies.
For instance the ‘mute’ Dickie Bird is intimidated by the distorted Christian religious views of his uncle Spooky Lacroix on the one hand and Simon and his girlfriend Patsy’s passionate strivings to revive native spirituality which is the core of nativeness. As Denis W. Johnston elaborates “[Dickie Bird] begins to confuse Spooky’s theological ramblings and Christ’s agony on the cross with his mother’s sordid labour, his own sense of abandonment, and Simon and Patsy’s rejection of Christian dogma in favour of Native spiritual values.” (*Tomson Highway: Native Writers Canadian Writings*, 261). In the production notes, “Simon ‘Pat-see! Has now built up into a free chant, his feet providing on the floor so that it sounds like a powwow drum, his dancing bustle held aloft like a shield. Spooky finally grabs the crucifix away from Dickie Bird, caught between Simon’s chanting and Spooky’s praying, blocks his ears with his hands…” (*Dry Lips*, 73) After the final flashback at the end of Act one of a fully pregnant Blady Lady halked astride the lurid jukebox drinking herself to oblivion and a high string Dicki Bird’s hysterical response to the vision the “final tableau is one of Dickie Bird collapsed on the floor between Simon, who is holding aloft his bustle, and Spooky, who is holding aloft his crucifix…” (*Dry Lips*, 73). This leads to the anticlimactic iconic event of the play where Patsy in her attempts to calm the disoriented Dickie Bird with, as Wassesman interprets, “a symbolically loaded crucifix-the phallic weapon he’s been carrying.” (*Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays*.
The horrific rape results in an imbalance of the fragile equilibrium in the relationships of the men. Simon Starblanket who hitherto had asked Dickie Bird to be the best man at his wedding with Patsy now in a drunken rage seeks revenge but accidentally shoots himself to death. Highway’s universalism is reflected in Zachary’s rage against a ‘higher deity be it Christian or Native for allowing such senseless tragedies, such suffering and loss. “God! God of the Indian! God of the Whiteman! God-AI-fucking-mighty! Whatever the fuck your name is. Why are you doing this to us? Are you up there at all? Or are you some stupid, drunkard shit, out-of-your-mind-passed out under some great beer table up there in your stupid fuckin clouds?... I dare you come to down from your high-falutin’ fuckin’ shit throne up there, come down and show us you got the guts to stop this stupid, stupid, stupid way of living. It’s got to stop. It’s got to stop… (Dry Lips. 116) As Coomie. S. Vevania points out, “in both of his plays Highway affirms the values taught by Indian mythology by indicating the destructive effects of appropriating the white world view… to turn their backs on the fierce individualism, and materialistic attitudes of the whites which have been bred by their Self-versus- Other Consciousness.” (Beyond Resistance . 379) But Highway’s goes even further by holding the natives equally responsible for their condition. The tragic final events of the play are followed up by the denouement, the women’s ice hockey match between the Rez Sisters Waspy Wairettes and
the lake Canoe Bravettes. The hilarious scene is in juxtaposition with the preceding apocalyptic events. Big Joey gives the commentary in a mixture of English and Cree. Dickie Bird is caught up in the excitement. Spooky Lacroix is a proud father displaying his new born baby, Pierre the referee frenetically waving in between the hollering players, the other in the stands and Zachary sleepwalking through the scene back to the couch in his own home. Highway based this scene on a hilarious incident he happened to overhear in a bar during his father’s hospitalization due to cancer. Talking to Susannah Schmidt he recalls: “Dad got transferred to Thompson Hospital… and while I was there I went into town… There were ten tables put together [in the bar there] and people were having a riot; laughing and telling stories around these tables. But this day all these man were crowded into the bar and there was a story about women playing baseball, and someone did a fly-ball and the ball was struck down a woman’s cleavage, and she was so embarrassed that she walked right off the field. And this [story] was all in Cree, and it’s a hilarious language and everybody was laughing hard.” (Interview with Susannah Schmidt. 3) The reenactment of this story involves the trickster Nanabush as Gazelle Nataways in the play.

The play ends where it begins as the play is structured as a dream. In another program note Highway explains that dreams and the dream-like have traditionally been considered by native society to be the greatest tool
of instruction. The dream ‘play’ adheres to the axiomatic understanding of dreams by prehistoric indigenous races. As Sigmund Freud’s analysis goes,” for the [native] dreamer, dreams had an important purpose, which was as a rule to foretell the future… The ancients regarded dreams not as a product of the dreaming mind but as something introduced by a divine agency… The view of dreams adopted by the peoples of antiquity was certainly in complete harmony with their view of their universe [cosmology] in general, which led them to project into the external world as though they were realities, things which in fact enjoyed reality only within their own minds. Moreover, their view of dreams took into account the principal impression produced upon the walking mind in the morning by what is left of a dream in the memory; an impression of something alien, arising from another world and contrasting with the remaining content of the mind.” (Interpretation of Dreams. 36–39) In an interview Highway explained that the dream of “Dry Lips” was the product of the powerful dreams that he had dreamt in his father’s bed [his father’s dreams] during his father’s ordeal with cancer in 1987. “When I got to my parents house I was there for night and I was sleeping in his bed… and I had the most powerful dreams. My mind tells me I was dreaming his dream …” (Interview with Susannah Schmidt. 1) Highway’s intention is to conceive a transformation and he affects it through the dream process as the play is structured to be. It is the native psyche which has to undergo
transformation if the native peoples were to regain their true identity which would facilitate the predicted native resurgence. As Anne Nothof elucidates: “the transformation is effected through a framing of the play as dream, and a waking into the possibility of a brighter future”. (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 5)

The dream frame of the play also serves to facilitate the incorporation of native cosmology in the person of the Trickster God Nanabush who as Highway has indicated, is fundamental to the dream-life of native culture. For native spirituality which is at the core of native culture draws its life and continuity from native cosmology. The magical transformative properties of Nanabush and the transformative possibilities for spiritual renewal for the Rez men are juxtaposed in the play, leaving the reader to exercise his/her own judgment and appropriate. Like native Canadian writer Thomas King, Highway employs two parallel narrative threads, one contemporary and realistic, the other cosmological and surrealistic, connecting them by the native trickster god Nanabush. Like King, Highway makes full and free use of the Trickster, the central persona of native culture.

According to anthropologist Paul Radin: “Trickster Gods, in the western view, are androgynous, amoral beings who represent the irrational, violent and anarchic aspects of life.” (American Folklore. 194) Trickster is
the most paradoxical of all characters in native orators according to the Eurocentric view: “at one and the same time, creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes and who is always duped himself”. (American Folklore. 194) As Roger D. Abraham adds: “he [the trickster] is at various times a clown, fool, jokester, initiate, culture hero, even ogre. His striking characteristic feature if his lack of morals”. (American Folklore. 194) As Rodin elaborates, “He wills nothing consciously”. At all the times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control… He possesses no values, moral or social, [and] is at the mercy of his passions and appetites.” (American Folklore. 194). However though he reflects amorality he does so in a moral context. His actions evoke mixed feelings of condemnation on the one hand and laughter and admiration on the other. Unbridled and unconstrained he seems to personify the lawless anarchistic aspects of human nature. As the classicist Karl Kerenyi defines him he is “the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries.” (American Folklore. 194) As Roger D. Abraham further elucidates, “he [trickster] represents the principal of unbridled energy, directed into human shape and impelled by primal human needs.” (American Folklore. 194) But just as he directs his actions against the others like the “nighthawk” and the Bingo master in the ‘Rez sisters’ he also dupes and even severely maims himself in the likes of Patsy Pegamagabhow where she/he is subjected to the most horrifying rape. Further the trickster is fascinated with the own
body and its erogenous zones clearly evident in the exaggerated sexuality of his incarnations as the three women in Dry Lips i.e. oversized prosthetic devices like huge rubberized breasts for Gazelle Nataways, a full term belly for Black Lady Halked and big buttocks for Patsy. As Roger D. Abraham points out, “In social terms, his actions are extremely aggressive, destructive and forbidden. Therefore, his acts must be countenanced because of some aspects of our dream world… all of the antisocial desires repressed by the men who tell and listen to his stories.” (American Folklore. 195) For instance in “Dry Lips” the trickster Nanabush as the seductive temptress Gazelle Nataways exposes the repressed sexual fantasies of the Rez men, which endorse the Eurocentric image of the native women as exotic objects of sexual pleasure which Edward Said talks about in his Orientalism. “ The strip[tease] of seventeen years ago (that of Black Lady Halked) is fully recreated, the memory becoming so heated that Nanabush/Gazelle magically appears dancing right on top of Spooky’s kitchen table. The (Rez) men are going wild, applauding, laughing, and drinking, all in slow motion and mine. In the heat of the moment Nanabush/Gazelle strips down to silk tassels and G-string, they begin tearing their clothes off. Suddenly Simon Star blanket appears at Spooky’s door: Nanabush/Gazelle disappears…and Spooky, Pierre and Zachary are caught with their pants down…embarrassed in a panic they
begin putting their clothes back on and reclaim the position they had before the strop.” (*Dry Lips. 87*).

Highway claims to have envisioned the scene a fusion of both the dream world and the realistic world, in a bar in 1987 when his father was hospitalized due to cancer. Highway describes the experience, “Dad got transferred to Thompson Hospital … and while I was there I went into town… there were ten tables put together [in the bar there] and people were having a riot: laughing and telling stories around these tables… Then a light went on, and there was a mini stage and I turned around and the stripper right above me, just twirling her tits. And the perspective I had from that angle was seeing fifteen to twenty men staring at the stage, like they were seeing God… God as a woman, God as a stripper, which is some of what I am looking at in the play.” (*Interview with Susannah Schmidt. 3*)

But only native writers can best describe the Trickster for what he is, for instance, “the natives’ trickster, however is rather more mischievous and irresponsible even playful, and decidedly moral.” (*Lamont-Stewart. Mosaic. 1997*) As of one the two of Highway’s protagonists in, “The Kiss of the Fur Queen” Gabriel explains, “weesageechak... [Is] the clown who bridges humanity and God –a God who laughs, a God who’s here, not for guilt; not for suffering; but for a good time.” (*Kiss of the Fur Queen. 298*) The Cree Trickster in fact reflects the way 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… The Trickster is as important to Cree as Christ is to western culture.” *(Native Son. 18, 20)*. An embodiment of the qualities of Native language and values, the trickster Nanabush is funny, visceral and genderless. He can change form and sex even to ridiculous exaggeration. Because he is impish and fallible unlike Christ in the Eurocentric world’ the native listener is left to exercise his own judgment and to learn from the Trickster’s adventures, contrary to Christ’s followers who are exhorted to obey precepts and examples. As Highway explains in his prefatory note to the play, like the native languages of Cree and Ojibway, the trickster is not limited by gender and so she/he has a tendency to take on exaggerated or contradictory gendered characteristics. She/he is neither solemn nor distant like the central figure in Judeo-Christian theology but is more given to buffoonery and chicanery, earthy and in close proximity. Native playwright and poet Daniel David Moses says: “The trickster is the embodiment of our sense of humour about the way we live our lives. It’s a very central part of our attitude that things are funny even though horrible things happen.” *(Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays.185,186)*. For instance even in the intensely tragic moments of the play for instance when Dickie Bird tries to end his life, Nanabush makes the poster of
Marilyn Monroe fart and as Zachary agonizes over the incomprehensible wastefulness of Simon’s death, Nanabush appears as “the old man upstairs” but dressed in drag i.e. “in an old man’s white beard and wig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women’s high-heeled pumps. Surrounded by white, puffy clouds she/he sits with her legs crossed on a toilet having a good shit, nonchalantly filing him/her fingernails. (Dry Lips. 117). Like the trickster’s incarnation as a woman in his novel. “The Kiss of the Fur Queen” in “Dry Lips” as Denis W. Johnston points out, Nanabush, “is corporeality personified, appearing as grotesque versions of the women in these [Rez men’s] daily lives: Gazelle Nataways, the temptress who compromises Zachary’s happy marriage, Black Lady Halked, Big Joey’s alcoholic mistress and Dickie Bird’s slattern mother; and Patsy, the hope of new life and new spiritual awareness for Simon, whose rape unbalances the fragile equilibrium of the men’s interrelationships.” (Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 262)

However Highway’s trickster’s manifestations as women in Dry Lips are transformative, and an embodiment hope and expectancy for the survival even resurgence of native cultures in the twenty first century. As Highway indicates, “until we conceive of God as female, women will not have that power to be treated with respect. And that’s why... [In Dry Lips] you see the birth of the goddess (Hera and Zachary’s child) as a little girl!”
In contrast to the three women who are casualities of the cultural collision Nanabush at the end of play assumes the form of Hera, Zachary’s wife, whose name symbolically alludes to the Greek goddess of Heaven. She is the life partner of the only Rez man whose chief interests like on the reserve by opening the reserve’s first full fledge bakery, in which he will bake cookies called Nanabush, more of a highly symbolic significance; Nanabush/Hera is the mother of generation, seven life times after Columbus which the shamans predicted. Thus Anne Nothof sums up the role of the trickster in the play as “a manifestation of the contradictions and complexities of life... a way of visualizing them in order to understand them, not as a first cause.”

is to downplay any attempt by the Rez men to blame any higher deity be it Native or Christian suggestively responsible for their own debacles. Nanabush as Black Lasy Halked with a full term belly “drunk almost senseless” astride a jukebox abandoned by the Rez man Big Joey and the others at the time of her giving birth to Dickie Bird, as Patsy Pegamagabhow abandoned by Big Joey and Creature Nataways during her brutal rape by a disoriented Dickie Bird seems to subject the ‘Rez Men’ to introspection with regard to their self inflicted degradations due to the appropriation of the dominant mainstream culture bred from the “self-versus- other consciousness”. Zachary awakens from the dream to discover
this truth. But if native spirituality interprets the dream and dream life as essentially a medium of instruction then what lesson does the palliative dream of Dry Lips with its gratuitous ending with its superfluous and unreal events impart but this truth? As Wassesman remarks, “Zachary awakens to lesson in his native the dream and dream life as essentially a medium of instruction then what lesson does the palliative dream of Dry Lips with its gratuitous ending with its superfluous and unreal events impart but this truth? As Wassesman remarks, “Zachary awakens to a lesson in his native language from his wife with the goddess’ name and the “magical silvery Nanabush laugh”, to his beautiful laughing baby girl (the envisioned God as woman) and to the Smurfs [an allusion to the cartoon characters magical transformative abilities to deal with evil and create a better world on television.” (Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays Vol. II. 186)

As Arnold Krupat elucidates: “the figure of the trickster, whose shape changing, limit-transgressing antics provide the best guide- it is inherent in the nature of the trickster not to provide a model- it is inherent in the nature of the trickster not to provide a model-to who and what we are” (Ethno Criticism. 183-184) Anishinabe (Chippewa) poet, novelist Gerald Vizenor states: “The trickster, a semiotic sign in a third-person narrative, is never tragic or hypo tragic, never the whole truth or even part
truth… What is valorized here is the comic and communal rather than [the] tragic and sacrificial; [for] comedies and trickster signatures are liberations *(Ethno Criticism. 187)*

Perhaps the basic philosophy of the trickster behind Highway’s “Dry Lips” finds an echo in Soyinka’s play “A Dance of the Forests” where ‘Forest Head’ explains, “The fooleries of human beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden; to pierce the encrustations of soul deadening habit and bare the mirror of original nakedness knowing full well it is all futility. Yet I must do this alone and no more since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction and yet to remain altogether ineffectual is to make my long rumored ineffectuality complete’ hoping that when I have for tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, in new beginning…” *(Dance of the Forests. 71)*

*****