CHAPTER VI

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Silent Words is the second novel written by Ruby Slipperjack where the indigenous language and community become the medium for re-establishing identity of the protagonist, Danny, a small Ojibway boy.

Ruby Slipperjack, a member of the Eabametoong First Nation, is an Ojibway. She has attracted critical attention through her two novels Honour the Sun (1987) and Silent Words (1992). In both the novels she recreates Native life and experience as told by child narrators. She explains her choice of child narrators and her mission as a novelist thus:

"I write to offer my children an insight into life as it was in my childhood. I was born and raised in the lands of my ancestors and grew up in a traditional and cultural upbringing with its teachings and discipline as had been passed down for generations past, I cannot teach my children these things in the city... The traditional story telling sessions were very much a part of my life and I have attempted to extend this knowledge and the wisdom of the teachings into the content of my novels."

Silent Words is a novel set in north-western Ontario, a home-like region to Ruby Slipperjack. She claims that she represents a different culture and is not going to "try to pound a circle into a square" as a novelist. The novel depicts the journey of Danny Lynx, an eleven year old Ojibway boy, in search of his mother, through several native communities along the C.N. mainline. The journey undertaken in search of his mother finally turns into a symbolic journey from alienation to self-affirmation. This cultural exile has been many a times described by native writers in terms of orphanhood or urchinhood underscoring "the loss of communal moorings, the destruction of an essential umbilical cord with history."

In the course of journey, oppositions of past and future merge. In the novel of Slipperjack the protagonist's dream like voyage into the world of nature turns into a ritual of spiritual reconciliation. Danny runs away from his motherless home in Nakina to escape the violent and abusive treatment inflicted on him by Sarah, his father's girlfriend whom he calls a 'witch'. On his own, he finds his way through a series of Native communities. He stays with various people for sometime, and through his interactions with them and on his
responsiveness to the environment, he learns about himself and the world he lives in. When he first sets out on his journey, Danny has no knowledge of his native background. As the journey progresses, he gathers more and more knowledge. The people with whom he stays are, in fact, his initiators. Thus, Danny’s journey in search of his mother eventually becomes a journey towards self-realisation.

He acquires much of his knowledge from the non-verbal communication which characterises the natives with whom he stays during his journey. In other words, it is “silent words” which give him his native awareness. In an interview Ruby Slipperjack refers to herself as “a non-verbal communication person.” She explains that in Native culture use of words is very rare. She says –

“......we were raised in a non-verbal culture. You only used words when they were necessary or in direct conversations. Most of the time, nobody said anything at all, because you didn’t need to. I understand what you are thinking and what you are going to do next, or I just caught your comment right there.”

Danny remembers the wonderful people whom he meets during his journey in life. Many of them taught him the lesson to speak only when it was necessary. He describes his brief stay with the old man and the old lady in their small cabin while the old man most of the time sat deep in thought, the lady kept him company. The old lady told Danny “use your eyes and feel inside you wat da udder is feelin. Dat way, dare is no need for words.”

Danny’s journey in search of his mother eventually turns out to be a quest for self-knowledge. In quest-narratives, the seeker passes through a series of threatening situations which to be overcome, demands of his courage, heroism and unflinching determination. The quest invariably ends in the reunion. Danny also at the end of his quest, gets reunited with his father and attains native consciousness, quite in the manner a pilgrim attains salvation.

Unlike non-Native quest narratives Silent Words does not end in mere personal gain for the central character. Danny’s attainment of native consciousness results in his imbibing awareness of the totality of native life and experience. Michael Melody observes that there is a basic different between the western-liberal philosophy and traditional native philosophy of life. The western-liberal philosophy defines man in terms of individualism while the
traditional Indian philosophy defines man in terms of spiritual unity and self-denial.

The plot of Silent Words has been structured as a Native ‘bildungsroman’ showing the spiritual growth and maturity of the protagonist. The characteristics that distinguish it from the ‘bildungsroman’ written in the western literary tradition lie in the consciousness which it exposes. In the western tradition the self of the protagonist is the primary focus of the narrative, where the protagonist is seen to at odds with his community. Sabiha Al-Issa (2003) makes an observation that the reverse is true for the native tradition. She says, “the self in the typical Native ‘bildungsroman’ is perceived as an integral part of the community” where the “community has a more responsible attitude towards the individual compared to that of the Western community.”

As shown through the experiences of Danny, the relationship between the Native self and the community is a reciprocal one in which each individual has value. It is significant to note here that the several native communities that he meets during his journey are not aliens threatening to devour him, but warm unquestioning, non-judgmental, open and accepting. Moreover, they also seem to be his mother-substitutes, for in their company he ceases to brood over the absence of his mother. The thought of his mother does not make him vulnerable anymore. The existence of his own people around him fills his mind with strength to fight back the tears. He says to himself “Mama ...... no ! I must not think about Mama.” All these natives become in one way or the other, his initiators, who encourage him to continue with his quest. Menno Boldt and Long (1996) explain the significant features of Tribal philosophies, especially the North Americans. Society in the North American Indian philosophy is conceived of cosmocentric rather than homocentric. An individual is a part of the whole of the cosmic order. This conception is derived from the Indians’ experience of the interrelatedness of all life (human, animal, plants and things), and the need for harmony amongst all parts. This feature has been reflected in the novel when Old Jim shows reverence towards the Christmas tree. The Indians of Canada in general have several basic tenets that are consistently present in much of their rhetoric. These principles are that the universe is one connected circle. Though everything comes under change, yet remains interrelated. The Native principle believes that everything is alive with its own
spirit. That Old Jim is in proper tune with the holistic nature of Native values is reflected in his concern for the Christmas tree. He painfully recollects the sad looks the trees bear in the towns and cities the day after Christmas. He wonders at the casual treatment of the symbolic tree immediately after the ceremony is over. He teaches Henry and Danny to not violate the laws of the creator by being insensitive towards the other living beings. He says, "It is not garbage, it is a tree! It was a living thing! It ought to be treated with more respect."

Another symbolic voice of communal memory has been represented by Mr. old man who talks about the Native’s universal bond with the universe, almost in the same vein as Old Jim does. He talks in a different accent and his jaws become stubborn as he realises that the present human society is acting against the law of the creator by being indifferent to the other living creatures. He argues – "Jesus, da Son of God, knows abou’ dese tings. ’e was born outside in da open air wit animals around im ...... as’t should be wit ebry animal born on Eart."

The old man challenges the thoughtless projects taken up in the name of development which has a devastating effect on the environment. His voice breaks the silence of the stormy night –

"who are you? Da people who poison da air! Who are you dat poison da ribers an lakes! You people who dig deep into da guts of our Mudder an slash an rip into ’er flesh an keep on poisonin’ the air she breathes for ebry day you lib. You lice who feed on da scalp of da libin Eart!"

Danny shows a visible sign of transformation in his expression as he listens to Mr. Old man’s voice. He is engrossed in the words said by the old man. Danny finally realises – "There was something happening." The sudden flash of the lightning at that time symbolises Danny’s awakening to a new Native conscious-self. The Native’s close bonding with all forms of nature and its creatures is confirmed later in the novel when Danny asks Old Jim how to face an animal if he meets one on his way to the forest. Old Jim answered slowly – "Once they (animals) know you know them, they will always be there to help and guide you."

Peter Laslett (1963) provides an analogy to illustrate the mythical quality of individuality in traditional Indian society. To apprehend the individual in tribal society, he says, one has to peel off a succession of group-oriented and
derived attributes as layers of an onion skin. The individual turns out to be a succession of metaphorical layers of group attributes which ends up with nothing remaining.\textsuperscript{15} Laslett asserts that a face to face society is a cohabitation of a number of people whose whole experience is derived from immediate contact with one another. Slipperjack in this novel, makes an attempt to illustrate how contact with his own people plays an important role in developing cultural knowledge for the protagonist that ultimately helps him to construct a sense of identity.

The story in the novel is told in retrospect. It begins in the summer of 1969 and closes in the summer of 1979 which is also indicative of its circular structure, suggestive of its structural similarity to the cyclic nature of the seasons. The Epilogue reveals the fact that Native writers and their protagonists remember the past and carry it with them. It also means that the quester does not forget the details of his quest even long after it has been completed.

The novel opens with the descriptions of the circumstances leading to Danny's leaving his motherless home to escape torture and disgrace in the hands of Sarah. His life in the house in Nakina has been a daily struggle for survival. In chapter I of the novel there is a description of an incident that reveals, how apart from being tortured at home, Danny faces the hostility of racial prejudice when a "blond"\textsuperscript{16} boy spits on his face.

Slipperjack, however, maintains a subtle strategy of examining the crisis of consciousness prevailing in the neo-colonial structure of Canadian society. This has been illustrated by an incident that takes place in Chapter I between Danny and his blue eyed friend, Tom. Both the young boys turn hostile to each other while Tom angrily announces - I don't need a stupid Injun telling me to shut up.\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, Danny has to return to this Tom to seek help for getting him the train tickets at night. After watching the hungry, troubled face of Danny, Tom repeats the comment by saying - You look like a wild Injun!\textsuperscript{18} The implication of Tom's statements is that, while there is an indication of friendship between the two boys, there is also on the other hand, a sociologically-imposed distance between them. Infact Tom is portrayed as one person who extends a hand of support to Danny in his distress. But the compassion is bestowed from a position of power. Colonialism is all set to enter into a complex situation of being "historically past but psychologically present" in human relationships. The essential thematic of the novel focuses on
the psychological and ideological complexities of neo-colonialism and its adverse effect on identity. “Injun” is a derogatory term for Indian, has been used by Tom that explains the basic indignation of the dominant discourse towards the Aboriginals. However, being a native boy, Danny is hardy and therefore he refuses to be defeated.

Danny boards a train and arrives at Armstrong where he spends the day time with the family of five children and the grandmother where he speaks broken Ojibway and learns that Ojibway people are kind and hospitable. Chased by teenagers, Danny finds shelter in a stationery freight train. Alone and in the middle of nowhere, he muses tearfully:

“I wish I was back home! No, Not the house where Dad was, I mean home when Mama, Dad and I lived at our Trappers Shak ... every thing would have been alright if we just stayed at our cabin. Mama! Please let me find you please. I love you Mama ... I am scared, Mama where are you?”

Such yearnings as these lie interspersed throughout the novel and they occur on occasions when Danny finds himself alone in other miserable circumstances and landscapes which evoke in him memories of the environs that surrounded the cabin when he lived with his father and mother. The home motif has been used in the novel to signify Danny’s quest for self-determination because life in the town symbolises cultural exile for him. Danny gives an account of this paradox as he tells Old Jim:

“......I remembered how gentle and happy my father was when we were in the bush. Then when we moved to the reserve, he was never home. When he did not come home, he was always irritable and angry, and then when Mama left, he started hitting me. Then we moved to town. Things got worse.”

The child protagonist holds the family’s moving to town to be responsible for all the disaster. The boy helplessly observes how the life in the town has brought a change in his father’s character who failed to safeguard the sanctity of his marriage. The association between marriage and the building of home in the novel is culturally derived. A home symbolises love and support system. But Danny’s father’s total indifference to saving his relationship with his wife leads him to get seduced by Sarah, a woman with no morality. While the father is away to the sawmill, Sarah is in charge of the house. She tortures Danny for
no fault of his. Danny notices painfully - *She loves it and just laughs when I cry.* Danny cries helplessly and wishes his mother was there to save him from his distress. *Mama! Please come and get me!* He can not call the place his home because it has failed to supply a positive message to his young mind. The bonding with the closest people in his life has been ruptured leading to an utter confusion regarding his own self-worth. His father's infidelity overpowers Danny's mind and he realises - .... *I don't even think of him as "Dad" any more. I just say "my father" now.*

There are two types of characters in the novel representing two contrasting socio-cultural environments. Sarah and Danny's father represent the alien culture while Charlie and the old lady whom Danny meets on his journey, symbolise the traditional Indian culture. Slipperjack focuses on what is morally wrong in contemporary society by creating a sense of hatred in the mind of Danny as she describes the illicit relationship of both Danny's father and Sarah. These incidents have been highlighted as common phenomenon in lives of the city-dwellers. On the other hand the communal harmony has been associated with the portrayal of the characters of the old lady and Charlie. There is a vivid description of the incident when Danny goes to an unknown Ojibwa family and meets an old lady in the cabin. She hands over bowls of stew to her grandchildren and offers one to Danny with a warm smile. Danny wonders, *How had she known there would be an extra kid?*- Danny feels a strong emotion overpowering his mind when the old lady smiles at him & tries to ease Danny's discomfort by saying "*No matter, every child is my grandchild.*" Danny now realises that as an Indian he can easily identify himself with this family which, unfortunately, he can not do with his own family. The mutual bond of sharing among the members of the family is overwhelming. Danny thinks that "*they must be the happiest people in the whole world.*"

Later in the novel, the spirit of Native communal co-operation is symbolised through the portrayal of the character of Charlie who helps Danny unexpectedly by putting a twenty-dollar bill in his hand. Danny realises that in the Native community relationships are reciprocal and not hierarchical. The meeting with Charlie and his family leave a permanent mark in Danny's mind as he expresses - *Suddenly I wanted to cry. I wanted to go back to Charlie. I didn't know people could be so kind.* Danny’s feelings can be examined in the light of the analysis made by George and Lola Romanucci (1995) -
“Ethnic relationships are often expected to supply care, help and comfort in times of need. For some, ethnic membership provides a field for expressing benevolence. Many find within themselves a need to care for others – to care for the more helpless of one’s own kind.”

In urban contemporary society the identities of people are closely intertwined with the local identity of the towns they live in. The quintessential environment of modernity, in the cities is changing rapidly under intense economic and technological pressures. People have to shape up their identities according to the changing conditions of the city. Beyond the physical structure of the city, the social structure of the cities also changes under pressures such as new patterns of immigration, new economic developments and new technologies. Urbanisation stands as a threat to the traditional indigenous population because of its trend towards setting a cultural homogeneity. The old man in the novel explains to Danny how this culture clash has a devastating effect on men’s lives. He says, “Today, man is bery much use’ to da manmade tings dat dey know nutting else. Dey are born in a manmade place, and dey die in a manmade place.”

De Vos and Lola Romancei (1995) hold that: 

“......ethnic identity is in essence a past-oriented form of identity, embedded in the presumed cultural heritage of the individual or group. This form of social self-identity contrasts with a sense of belonging linked with citizenship within a political state, or present-oriented affiliations to specific groups demanding professional, occupational or class loyalties. It also contrasts with those identities that reject both past and present in favour of a future-oriented ideological commitment to a realisable future social goal.”

The author also emphasises that to know one’s origin is to have not only a sense of provenience, but importantly “a sense of continuity” in which one finds the personal and social meanings of human existence. “It is to know why one behaves and acts in accordance with custom. To be without a sense of continuity is to be faced with one’s own death.”

Living in the town causes a temporary discontinuity, causing cultural alienation in Danny’s life. However, the metaphoric journey in search of his mother proves to be a fulfilling one in the end. The process of self-
determination begins from the moment he steps down from the moving train in an unknown place.

Slipperjack gives a vivid description of the small boy's fearful experience of the night. As Danny jumps off the train, he is not able to see anything around because it is dark and lonely. He cries helplessly, but dries his face soon on the blanket he is carrying as he walks aimlessly until he reaches a lake. Finally exhausted, he sits there covering his body with the blanket till morning. Slowly he walks into the cool water of the lake as if to drown his sorrows. But when he gets out of water he discovers that his money bag and his socks have been washed away in the water, leaving him hungry and helpless in that strange place. But Danny does not cry this time, rather he shows a more composed part of his character as he says, "I must not lose anything. I have to be responsible now. I have to look after myself." This development in Danny's character is in proper tune with the lessons in his native identity he has received from the native elders whom he meets during his journey. This feature of responsibility has been explained by De Vos and Lola Romancei (1995) as moral codes of particular ethnic group. "Individuals who identify ethnically with a group also identify ethnically with it." Abiding by the norms of the group has an internalised moral dimension.

In case of Danny, each and every association with different people of his community helps him develop a sense of commitment and responsibility towards his community. Silent Words maps literally and figuratively the process of Danny's becoming a cultural insider. Due to a displacement from the trapper's shack, Danny never had the opportunity to learn Ojibway well, and hence had to find different ways of being inside their culture, a culture which is being continuously re-articulated.

De Vos and Lola Romancei (1995) explains the importance of such inclusiveness and exclusiveness in defining one's status in the group tradition. "Most often a person's expected behaviour tells one who one is, that is, it defines the reference group of primary belonging. Others who behave differently are not part of our group, and we come to know who we are by knowing who we are not." A culture specific connection with the land is recognised as a signifier of the identity of the Aboriginal people. It creates a generic difference overriding a plurality of differences. Jeannette Armstrong explains that "Social constructs
which promote a certain way of dialogue and a certain specific way of
perceiving the interaction with not only people but the rest of creation.” 36
Paramount in terms of a fundamental difference. Danny is not capable of
carving a specific cultural context in life due to his dissociation from his
community in the town. He has never been taught at home the values and
beliefs of his own people. That he lacks in proper orientation is illustrated
through the incident that takes place in Charlie’s house when Danny passes a
casual comment. The situation becomes little tense but Charlie’s genuine
advice to Danny comforts the boy’s troubled mind. Charlie reaches and ruffles
Danny’s hair with his hand and says “My grandfather used to tell me always
listen, watch, and learn. Can you remember that?” 37

Basil Johnson, the Ojibway scholar holds that cultural inside knowledge
depends on one’s linguistic competency. To understand Nanabush or
Weesaqachak, one has to learn the language. Johnson argues further that
Native people will not “think Indian or feel Indian” 38 if they do not know the
language of their Native ancestors. Here Johnson creates a definition of
“insider” and “outsider” of who lives and understands the meanings of Native
cultures and who does not. There are situations in which a division between
insiders and outsiders in relation to language used can be maintained, inspite of
the threat of extinction for many indigenous languages. Jeannette Armstrong
explains in the beginning of the article she titled “Racism, Racial Exclusivity and
Cultural Supremacy” –

“It is often assumed that if one speaks the same language, words have
the same meaning. As I am a crafter of words, this is where my talk shall
find its focus. For albeit, I speak English to you, rather than my own
language, I might as well speak my language because the meanings of
the English words I use arise out of my Okanagan understanding of the
world.” 39

These two explanations of Johnson and Armstrong illustrate how
linguistic competence helps one to develop familiarity with cultural codes and
contexts.

Slipperjack illustrates in the novel how lack of knowledge in one’s own
language leads to utter confusion. Danny meets five kids on the way who speak
in Ojibwa. But Danny answers them in English. When he is asked by the oldest
girl whether he speaks Indian or not, Danny argues – “......I just haven’t had
much practice talking it, but I can understand pretty good!" Danny grows an instant liking for the kids as he says - "It felt alright to go with them." But there is an indication of little discomfort in communication because the kids laugh at Danny when he tries to speak in Ojibwa and make mistakes. The author suggests in the novel that to return to the roots and take the challenge of maintaining links with the community one has to have a linguistic break with one's coloniser's language. Her protagonist's initial affiliation, however, has been defined in terms of his western education which separates him from the rest of the people of his community.

Retention of mother-tongue or home language acts as a stronger connector to the ethnic community as compared to those who do not retain the language. Because, respondents with higher levels of linguistic assimilation tend to exhibit lower levels of ethnic consciousness and are therefore more likely to identify themselves with the dominant discourse, compared to those who are less assimilated in terms of language. Danny's lack of knowledge in his own culture is further reflected in the novel when he visits Bobby's house. He observes the effort with which Bobby is carving a spoon. Danny asks in English, 'why don't you just go and buy a spoon and not have to go through such pain to make one.' There is a deep silence in the room. Bobby just glances at him, shrugged and resumed his careful work. This scene is characteristic of Slipperjack's use of non-verbal language and, thereby, for the silences in the novel which challenge the outsider's lack of familiarity with the cultural codes. Danny's question is inappropriate. The fact that Danny says it in English after he has learned that the family speaks Ojibwa, emphasises the fact that he is still an outsider.

Slipperjack refers to her own non-verbal culture in an interview with Hartmut Lutz where the words are used only when they are necessary or in direct conversations. She says - "Most of the time, nobody said anything at all, because you didn't need to." But the situation became reverse with the arrival of the white people from the city, when they entered into the local stores where everybody was quiet, the ladies "giggling" and "burst out laughing". "In the meantime, comments are coming back and forth" - all these stood as a complete contrast to the silent mode of communication of the Native culture.

Danny moves to the Savant Lake. It is here that he is initiated into an awareness of native concept of earth as mother. He has lost track of time and
only knows that he left Nakina on a Wednesday. A seeker is not bound by time and space. Danny's freedom from space and time all through his journey is evidence that he is worthy of initiation. Mr. Old Indian speaks at length about the sacredness of Mother Earth and Father Sun. He tells Danny about the havoc played by the Europeans. He refers to Christ's Nativity thus: We are da chil'en of da Eart. Da Lord was also a chile of da Eart.45

This sermon by Mr. Indian startles Danny. He realises that the old man still has his Native identity intact. Furthermore his version of Christianity runs counter to the European concept of Christ and Christianity. Christ may be the Son of God, but still he is the child of the Earth. The native reverence for the Earth, the 'Mother', comes to the fore in the Old Man's words. Danny for the first time in his journey, realises that no Native who is innately aware of his or her kinship to the Earth and its inhabitants, - both flora and fauna, can ever disregard the 'aliveness' of the environment. Thus he gets a spiritual vision of life and the native worldview. All Danny's travels and encounters enrich his mind, giving him a true understanding of his own culture. He has become aware of the cultural elements that bind people together into a coherent whole. He has a proper insight into his native culture that in the words of Rien Segers, "denotes the accumulated shared learning of a given group, covering behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements of the group's members' total psychological functioning."46

Hofstede (1994) attaches two meanings to the word culture. There is culture one, which refers to civilisation, a refinement of the mind which can be found in education, art and literature. But the description of culture that can be referred to the case of development of Danny's being a cultural insider is Hofstede's definition of culture two. It deals with much more fundamental human processes than culture one. Hofstede's culture two is a collective phenomenon because it is -

"......Shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."47

Hofstede argues further that culture is learned and not inherited. It derives from one's social environment and not from one's genes. This argument of Hofstede justifies the reason as to why Old Jim's narration of myths
and legends and the landscape have been so important in shaping up Danny's identity as an Indian boy.

Danny's meeting with Old Jim has an enriching effect in his life. Danny is amused to discover that Old Jim has two voices, "talking-to-himself voice and talking-to-me voice."* In his talking-to-me voice Old Jim meditates on the glorious past of the Natives. When he talks to himself he seems to reflect on the damages caused to the Canadian ecological system by the Whites to satisfy their greed for material possession.

During journey across several lakes with Old Jim, Danny learns the values of the Indian ways. He learns how to treat elders, and how to treat the spirits of the dead with reverence. More importantly he learns how to be humble before the all-pervading spirit of the Mother Earth and Father Sun. Old Jim assumes the role of the traditional Native story-teller. These story-teller impart wisdom and knowledge to the younger generation. Danny is surprised to find that he has developed an amazing bond with this old man that can be explained as a "kinship tie".* Danny feels happy and relieved after a very long time after narrating his story to the old man. He says, "... it felt so good to tell a grandfather my problems." Danny realises that gradually he is becoming a part of the land and the community. He listens happily to "the gentle crackling of the wood in the fire, the seagulls having a big argument, the laughing mallard ducks having a party in the bay and the occasional fish taking a breath of air above the water." Knowledge of the place and community is thus closely linked to knowledge of the self in Danny's case as he celebrates "the new feeling of being alive, well and happy."* Danny can truly identify with the native Indians now, who, for self-determination "sought homes, belonging, a place to call their own, a spiritual possession or repossesson of the landscapes
Aboriginal people identify themselves through their culture-specific environment. Their identification with particular places where commonly held sets of symbolic meanings have been developed, is essential for the cultivation of an awareness of their Aboriginal selves.

There are several instances of people like Old Jim’s lead role in inspiring a sense of communal ethos in Danny in the novel. Describing the deceptiveness of the alien ideology, the voices of the elders teach Danny the path of spiritual values, which calls for action to propagate those values. The values these old people lived by, are no longer revered. Hence Slipperjack’s portrayal of the elders in the novel has been used to present as defiant affirmation of the Native values in the face of the mindless mechanised human civilisation. The transference of traditional wisdom and spiritual values function as eye-opener for Danny. He acknowledges his life in the city as the remnant of something that he prefers to forget. He makes several comments like – *I didn’t want to know anything about my father.* Danny’s new found Native consciousness has made a strong man out of him and he knows that he is not going to experience the injustices any more as he did earlier. His association with Old Jim opens his mind’s eyes – that have been blinded by the false realities of life in the past. He is guided by the meaningful words of the old man – “*Tell me what you see, Danny Lynx? Look around you.*”

Slipperjack’s portrayal of these elder men helps the young protagonist to feel a strong urge to regain an insight into his own Indigenous culture. He therefore, becomes the medium through whom the tradition of the Native way of living life can be transmitted to the future generation. The lessons Danny was to get at home, is, however learned by him through the traditional outdooring function with the elders of his community. He is now trusted with the responsibility of keeping his culture alive. This feature has been illustrated in the significant warning of Old Jim as he says – “*You should take time to look around and remember how things are, Son! Would you remember how we got here if you had to do the trip all over again without me?*” These words of Old Jim suggest that Danny is gradually transformed into being the custodian of the heritage of his community.

Old Jim’s sudden death in the snow covered bush comes as a shock to Danny. The death of the person whom Danny considers as his grandfather leaves him frightened and helpless. His father’s arrival at this juncture relieves
him. However, Danny is still sceptical about his father's intentions. He feels helpless at the very thought of his father's arrival. “This place is good, it's peaceful, and he is going to bring all the ugliness to it.” But the long separation with Danny has already had a deep impact on the father. Life has come a full circle for him too. He says to Danny:

I was so busy trying to control things that the more I tried, the more things got out of control. Out here, I am myself. This is my world and I belong here, and I know that as hard as I try, I will never be happy anywhere else.

Meanwhile Danny comes to know that his father has been always keeping track on his whereabouts. He says to Danny: “You have noticed that Native people are generally like one big family?”

On their arrival at White Lake, Danny is shocked to find a ‘witch’ in their cabin. To scare her away he fires a shot that accidentally injures his father leaving him incapacitated for ever. But the father, however, faces it boldly as a true Native man and never makes any complaint about it. The father and the son are thus reunited in a tragic situation. But their dealing with it is indication enough of their spiritual emancipation that leaves them finally as good and balanced human beings. The final home-coming for Danny is deeply influenced by his continuous interaction with the lessons he has learnt in life. He remembers Old Jim’s words as he said once “it is important to remember exactly what is said so that you in turn, when you are an old man, can’t tell it to a little person like you.” Danny feels an overwhelming pressure of tears rolling down his cheeks. He realises that:

“You can’t escape the silent words of your memory. They grow on you, layer after layers, year after year, documenting you from beginning to end, from the core to the surface. I built my cabin with silent word.” The pain Danny felt at the betrayal of trust is a matter of past now, which has been replaced by hope for a better tomorrow.

Elleke Boehmer (1995) holds that “in the case of the Indigenous peoples of countries like Canada and Australia, any attempt to uncover the past meant dealing not only with the noise of conflicting memories, but with silence.”

While engaged in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz, Ruby Slipperjack says that she addresses Silent Words to the children of her community. That is why she has chosen a boy to be the protagonist. She makes the journey a ritual for
her child protagonist. It is the awareness that underscores Danny's self-discovery which enables him to recover his identity as a Native boy. There is a constant and intense questioning throughout the novel. The interrogative mode is used by Ruby Slipperjack to question the patterns of social and cultural decay, modes of behaviour and shifting values. This can be regarded as a narrative strategy of the novelist to focus on the protagonist's inner conflicts of mind while preparing for rediscovering his own self. The quest for identity in Danny can be summed up through the symbolic question he asks Old Jim while journeying – “when are we going to get to where we're going?” The questioning of Danny symbolises his agency as an active participant in the process of his quest for an identity at both social and personal level.

Notes and References


18. Ibid, p. 16.

19. Ibid, p. 35.

20. Ibid, p. 95.


27. Ibid, p. 45.


32. Ibid, p. 357.
41. Ibid, p. 31.
42. Ibid, p. 32.
43. Lutz, Hartmut: *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*, Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1991, p. 213.
51. Ibid, p. 112.
52. Ibid, p. 141.

53. Ibid, p. 137.


56. Ibid, p. 123.

57. Ibid, p. 129.


60. Ibid, p. 244.

61. Ibid, Pp. 143-144.

