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Subverting the Politics of Discourse in Gerald Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus*

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Abstract

Vizenor is an illustrious novelist whose works, especially The Heirs of Columbus, dwells upon some of the substantial and significant issues facing the modern-day Native American nationals of America and Canada as the majority of the Native American tribes straddle along the borders between the two countries. Victor believes in Saidian terms that the white Euro-American colonizers, after making inroads into the native people's land, established their stranglehold by maintaining and perpetuating the policy of the misrepresentation of the native people. Through a body of specialized writings about the colonized people, the Europeans in the first place and Americans afterward- after the center was shifted from Britain to America as a result of far-reaching political and economic changes in the world scenario- grossly misrepresented the indigenous people by portraying them as uncivilized, ignorant, brutes, inferior, born to be ruled over and, thus, by implication defined themselves as civilized, democratic, knowledgeable having the divine sanction to rule. They had this cultural/anthropological theory of their innate superiority over the non-white to ideologically support and legitimize their exploitative agenda.

Key Words: The Heirs of Columbus, Indigenous, Anthropological

Introduction

The first step towards colonization and exploitation is a misrepresentation because it provides grounds for loot. Edward Said dexterously exposed in his visionary masterpiece *Orientalism* the discursive strategies of the western world how they pave the way for overpowering a nation. It takes centuries of time span to construct a series of discourses mutually interconnected and interdependent that serves to establish binaries of cultured/ uncultured, knowledgeable/ignorant, modern/ primitive, good/evil, civil/uncivil, civilized/ wild, and so on and so forth. Generalization facilitates ruling. If they study the to-be-ruled nations with all their differences and cultural variations, management

becomes an unachievable task. Hence they are reduced to one or two traits: lazy Arab, sexless men of the orient, sex dolls of the orient, earth-loving Negro, etc.; this simple knowledge entails power over the subjects as well. Chinua Achebe says that when the white man says that he knows his subjects, he means that he is knowledgeable enough to understand and manage them. So was the case with Indians. They were many tribal communities with some shared beliefs and cultural rituals but with many differences as well, but Columbus summed them up in a single sweeping phrase Red Indian and unfortunately, the title stayed with them.

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Research Questions

- i. How does Gerald Vizenor subvert the politics of discourse in "Heirs of Columbus"?
- ii. How does Vizenor deconstruct the white myth of Columbus?
- iii. How does Vizenor represent the indigenes' version of Columbus myth in heirs of Columbus?

Aim and Objectives of Study

- i. The purpose of the study is to deconstruct the myth of Columbus constructed by the white people in order to suppress and colonize the indigenes' nature of America.
- ii. The study is significant in so far as it subverts the Columbus myth and foregrounds and indigenes view of Columbus's arrival among the native Indians and the impact of this event on the socio-political, cultural, mythic, and collective life of Indian nations.
- iii. The study highlights that reality is a discursive field. The philosophy of the dominant people becomes the acceptable reality as the ruling, or the dominant discourses construct realities in accordance with their interests. Columbus myth is a prime example of this constructed nature of reality which visionary has subverted and replaced with an indigence version. This native view of the historical event of the discovery of America and the native nation is contrary to the Euro American Columbus myth.

Significance of Study

Since the renaissance of Native American literature from the 1960s, there has been an enormous proliferation of Native Literature around the globe. After centuries of suppression and colonization, the contemporary generations of the colonized and displaced native Americans are dismantling the master's house with masters tools; that is, they are writing back to the American empire, presenting their culture, society, religious and mythic views from their owns indigenous in their perspective. Master is getting off the yoke of American Imperialism which had dispossessed them of their

history, culture, and ancestral religion; they are positively engaged in rehabilitating the lost nexus with their past traditions and native ways of life. The world had recognized the value and importance of the native people's views of the world around, and that has led to the massive growth of indigence literature. This study is an attempt to pinpoint how the native Americans view their history, culture, relationship with the land of their forefather, and the historical as well as mythic arrival of Columbus to their native land. There is a gulf of difference between Euro-American and the native people's conceptualization of history. Both have historicized the momentous event from their own perspective. This study is significant in so far as it makes it prominent that history and historical events are discursive realities which, when deconstructed and analyzed, give are renewed a ray of meaning, thus changing the ways and outlook of the people. Thus viewed, the historic events lose their monolithic historicity and become change entities.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research carried out within the framework of Native American literature and its

link with post-colonial theory, fiction, and history. It is premised upon an explanatory and interpretative analysis of the chosen text, Heirs of Columbus. It is an interpretation of the many-sided arguments made by Gerard Vizenor in his seminal novel Heirs of Columbus. The history, myth as well as colonial and post-colonial critical discussion of the ideas with regard to Native American people and their contemporary issues in a hybrid society is supported by textual evidence. As the research, by its very qualitative nature, required intensive study of the text to figure out and collect relevant evidence to support my argument, I have deeply and analytically studied the text and marked the relevant portions. After many close readings and intensive study of the text, the relevant textual evidence was located, marked, and extracted. After the extraction of the data, it was meticulously sorted out and carefully categorized. Edward Said and Homi K Bhaba's theories regarding representation, colonial and post-colonial identity, and ambivalence are applied to analyze the data to address my research questions.

Finally, detailed conclusions are drawn from the critical discussions.

Literature Review

Vizenor, the frontline Native American novelist, teacher, and theorist of the history and culture of the Native American people and their literature, is one of the prolific writers and has produced works of enduring reputation that have not only introduced the Native American world into the consciousness of the world people but also set right the misrepresented images of the Native people. His works, including *Heirs of Columbus*, have won him lasting fame and brought the Native people's views of themselves and the world into the limelight. These views, which had long been suppressed and invalidated by the white discourses, are, according to him, the source of comprehending the philosophy of one of the oldest and wisest people of the Earth whose conceptualization of the universe as well the understanding of the place and relation of the man to the universe, is the rich source of learning the anthropological dimensions of their lives. *Heirs of Columbus* is his masterpiece novel in which he has subverted the Columbus myth in order to counter the white discourses that constructed Columbus history in mythical ways that established on firm grounds false ideas about the native people and presented them in the world consciousness as the ignorant and uncivilized people who were in need of civilizing human agents from outside the native land. The account of Columbus's arrival among the natives and his treatment of them have all been presented with ironic implications. Columbus, instead of having to civilize the natives, finds himself in a situation in which he himself needs civilization, training in the domain of humanistic ways that the natives are gifted with. They are, in ways subversive to their popular representation in the historical discourses, far more civilized and resourceful, even innovative in the arts and civic manners that Columbus just cannot match them and needs learning at the hands of the natives.

Vizenor is all and all an anti-imperialist novelist, and he has registered a strong protest against the manipulators of historical facts in the form of subverting the Columbus myth in ways that have dismantled the false accounts of the native's history and beliefs and have reconstructed their glorious

history as well as the sets of beliefs which were based upon liberal outlook on life, that acknowledged the rights of every living thing to survive. His vision of the world, quite in line with their ancestor's conceptualizations of the world, incorporates natural objects, animals, and other components of the world in order that all the spirits of the world could live in harmony with one another. Columbus, a white European, on reaching the Native American soil, is treated so humanely and acculturated without any racial or parochialism that he feels absolutely delighted, and in no time, he becomes one like them. In the European myth, though, he had an exploitative bent of mind, wanted to colonize the natives, and had taken along with him many of them as slaves. He had done so because he was white and racially prejudiced, believed himself and his company far superior to the natives, and considered it his divine right to rule over them or enslave them as if they were created by God solely for the purpose of serving the white people. Vizenor subverts the ideology or the philosophy upon which the Europeans erected the edifice of exploitation of the natives by making Columbus one like them, rather inferior in some respects, as, for example, he is unable to match the Natives skill to talk with the hands.

Vizenor addresses the identity issues and dismantles the misrepresented images and stereotypical representations of the native people in order that the world could view the other side of the picture. One-sided views of the historical reality that the Europeans presented as monolithic, universal, and absolute realities are deconstructed by Vizenor in a post-structural paradigm that allowed him to address the issues of representation involved in the discursive construction of the history, anthropological origins, cultural life, asocial ways of living, communal sense and religious trends of the natives. Inspired by the postmodern and post-structural paradigms of the representing modalities, he embarked upon the journey of identifying where the native history had been distorted and misrepresented in the white discourses and to which effect. His purpose in rewriting the native history in the light of the authentic historical documents was definitely to bring on the surface truth of the native life, the truth that had been badly distorted to serve the colonial enterprise of the whites as part of the

colonial enterprise the white colonizers needed to prove to the world outside as well to the native themselves that they were created to serve the superior people, and hence they were in need of being taught the ways of the white people so that they could improve their lot. The creation of knowledge about these people was a significant thing that enabled the whites to colonize the people and perpetuate their hegemony over them. By creating discourses about the natives which described them as savages and uncivilized, they spread in the world distorted knowledge about them and constructed them, through the binarism system, as the people who were no better than the animals and who needed the light of civilization to enter the sphere of civilized, and this light was to flow from the white Christian white world.

The dominant European ways of expression are also challenged and subverted through the employment of the native people's unique ability to talk with hands: hand talkers are the instruments of potential threat to the European means of expression. The hand talkers, with their capricious method of discourse, are introduced so that they do not just represent an expected danger to the current request of the conventional method of articulation yet additionally undermine the prevailing Vizenor flips around the Columbus legend by relegating the questionable western traveler Native American personality, emphasizing that the much-celebrated voyager was without a doubt a Mayan. The case doesn't go unopposed, and another voice affirms that he was an Italian. The most determined voice, in any case, is of Stone Columbus, whose interesting case that he was a descendent of Christopher Columbus who had a place with Mayan human progress gives a U-go to the entire idea and presents another chronicled reality whose reality is all the while as much legitimate and invalid as that of the Euro-American case of Columbus. "The Maya carried civilization to the savages of the New World, back to the incredible stream. He conveyed our ancestral qualities back to the New World, back to the extraordinary stream, he was an incredible explorer in our blood, and he got back to his country" (p.9). Columbus' legend is given a totally new direction with a view to Indianize him as his job and character are considered in a non-conventional, non-western

viewpoint. His well-known picture as a torchbearer of western development worrying about the Whiteman's concern to the local individuals is totally flipped around as deprived of any cultivating mission, on arriving at the local store, he was "captivated by a brilliant hand talker on his first journey to the New World" (p. 19) and had his business as usual and actual strength restored subsequent to reviving gathering with Samana, the quiet healer. Samana's quietness is generously critical when differentiated against the Europeans' clamoring of carrying development to the locals for, Vizenor has exhibited that the Europeans had acquired the name of human progress desire for the land and infections and the genuine errand of recuperating the European injuries was performed by the native shrewd healers like Samana, the shaman, so the much-misshaped picture of the local as savage is a net crime of the authentic truth which he has looked into according to Native – American perspective.

Analysis of the Novel

Deconstruction of Myth of Columbus

The admiral of the Ocean Sea wrote in his journal on October 12, 1492, at Samana Cay: "No sooner have we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island than people began to come to the beach" (p. 3), suggesting that it was the first experience for the Indians to come to the beach. How stupid! They had been living there for centuries; their civilization there was at least seven centuries old. And then one suddenly announces that he/they got possession of the land and the people and suddenly they became familiar with the beach. Vizenor says that it was not a nameless part of the world to be captured by anybody. Its name Guanahani` had been obviously given to it by the inhabitants thereof.

From that very first day, the plan of snatching the people's identity was very clear in the minds of the invaders, Columbus and co. Columbus writes that he knew that he "knew a people to be converted and won to our holy faith by love and friendship rather than by fierce, I gave some of the red caps and glass beads which they hung around their necks" (p. 4). It is ridiculous that capturing limitless areas of the

Indians, they offered them caps and glass beads and then expected them to give up their faith as well.

Jacques Derrida is the center of modern philosophy. He traces the European preference of the written word to the spoken one because the written one becomes a part of the so-called record. But with the poststructuralist approach to life and existence, center, the logo - the idea, God, or any other key concept - around which everything else revolves was shunted out of possibility. The civilization became like someone standing in space with no reference point. Hence it was realized that the spoken word was as much rootless and absent and without signified as the written one. Lookup a word in the dictionary, and you get only another signifier. This is the process of delay or postponement, meaning which is the essence of language. This philosophy proved helpful in dethroning not only the concept of literature but also by comparison and the implication it laid the foundation for justification for respectable existence of torture: when the center is lost, the reference point is gone with the wind; there is no possibility of the dichotomy of center/margin. Every margin finds its rationale to be a center in its own right.

Vizenor, by introducing hand talkers, goes beyond phonocentrism as well as logocentrism. Samana and the other members of the community assert that not to use speech does not mean not to use language; the language they are definitely using in their way, and this is distinct and special in its own way: equation of speech with language comes from the euro-centric norm. This attitude is also rooted in the binary oppositions in which one term becomes superior and the other inferior. Here speech with spoken words becomes superior, and thereby, any other mode of communication becomes inferior. With the rejection of the so-called center, the inferiority becomes meaningless. This is what Vizenor has done. He has established the hand talkers as speakers better than and challenging to the traditional mode of expression.

The use of Radio in the age of T.V. is also significant. Rejection of T.V. is again the same vein and spirit. Baudelaire calls the modern mode of communication only televised reality, a kind of simulacra, a deception which one help believing. Vizenor not only questions and rejects it but also

offers an alternative mode of reality, Radio, which is again closer to tradition rather than the modern devices of communication. And then it is talk radio as opposed to the usual perception about Radio that it is for music and entertainment. Rather, it talks instead of making a bombardment of images, as does T.V.

He offers a new version of Columbus. Instead of accepting him as a member of the European community, he characterizes him as one belonging to the Anashnabe, the most important tribe of the Indians. He was impotent. When he comes in contact with Samana, the hand talker, the representative of the Earth, he is healed. He is the son of the Native ancestors and carries the stories in his bones and blood. This acceptance is in line with the Native mode of looking at life. Their way of honoring somebody is accepting him in the fold of the community and tribe, whereas the European way of honoring is celebrating Columbus Day, offering him medals, and raising his status. Vizenor has honored him by owning and by implication introducing the Indian mode of living itself.

Vizenor is ambivalent towards Columbus: he is simultaneously glorifying and demeaning him: on the one hand, he is the true representative of the Indians in that he is the great grandfather, the Adam of the community, and on the other hand, he is impotent, and it is only in contact with Samana that becomes potent and is able to further his progeny. Samana is a shaman and serves to bring him to normalcy. She is also superior to him in her capability to talk with her hands which he is unable to do. Satiric Contrast of motives that underlie the lifestyles of the two communities is very obvious. Columbus came to the new world for "gold and tribal women," and he got "Samana, the golden healer" (p.10). He is after greedy and lusty pursuits, and Samana, the shaman, is the solution, the cure of this 'disease.' The deceptive Euro-American attitude of presenting the falsehoods in all the possible air of factuality is laughed at in magically realistic presentation of the facts of time, place and a fantastic action fused in a historical action:

Samana is our hand talker, the golden woman of the ocean seas and sister to the fish, and she touched his soul and set the wounded adventurer free on

October 28, 1492, at Bahia and Bariay in Oriental Province, Cuba," he said and smiled over the dates and names (p. 10).

Vizenor, with an understanding of the truth's compulsive merger and fixity in the socio-economic scenario of capitalist America, says: "The truth at last, but first a commercial announcement from those wise companies that buy our time and make the truth possible in the dark," said Admiral White. So the truth is delayed for the companies who have the capital to buy the time of those who want to tell the truth. Telling the truth is subservient to and dependent upon the capitalist, and it is always a "good time for commercial" (p. 10).

The text reiterates the claim that Columbus was a Mayan. The other tradition is represented by the voice that laughs at this claim and asserts that he was an Italian. Stone Columbus says that he was a descendent of Christopher Columbus, who belonged to the Mayan civilization. "The Maya brought civilization to the savages of the New World, back to the great river. (He) carried our tribal genes back to the New World, back to the great river, he was a great adventurer in our blood, and he returned to his homeland" (p.9). This is how Vizenor renders topsy-turvy the whole colonial plan of history and representation. It is not the whites who sent Columbus to the Indians; it was the Indians who sent Columbus to them, and when he came back to them, he came not as an adventurer to the New World, it was his home: it was the end of an adventure.

The date of Columbus's arrival in the New World is changed into October 29, 1492, with the reason that "Columbus is ever on the move in our stories" (p. 11). Making him part of stories is a significant strategy. Tony Morrison says that stories are significant because storytelling requires at least two or more two persons: one to tell and other/s to listen. The story becomes an apt way of bringing close the individual and the community. Vizenor's repetitive reference and re-conception of the Columbus myth/story serves to bring the community close to one another and readjust the past according to the cultural and ideological needs of the colonized people.

Columbus, according to the new myth constructed here, was not someone who came here to

give civilization to the uncivilized. Rather he was "enchanted by a golden hand talker on his first voyage to the New World" (p. 19). He was physically impotent, and it was Samana who restored to his normalcy. The hand talker Samana becomes a savior for Columbus and not vice versa because she is a silent healer. He was tired and broken at his arrival. So much so that he was not even a body, not to speak of being an epitome of culture and civilization. During his journey, he lost most of the parts of his body. When he reached here, the shamans "heated some stones and put him back together again" (p. 19). This is the way the Indians created this great explorer from the stones of their tavern. So we get two versions of Christopher Columbus: one the great adventurer who left this New World and carried away the genes of the Indians to the whole world; the other is the broken, tired Columbus who came exhausted back to the New World and was healed by the Indian spiritual healer. Both forms of the character center on American Indians. Because, Vizenor's character Stone, says about Columbus with an undeniable air of authority and truth being one of his heirs: "Columbus has been seen, almost whole, at the stone tavern for five hundred years" (p.19). So he has been part of Indian life for half a millennium.

The function of the new myth of Columbus is a reversal of the ideological and cultural, historical, and racial plan of the whites. Elijah Muhammad, a black leader, also used this method for mental decolonization. He says that originally human beings were black living along the Nile. A scientist among them started performing experiments on their skin. After many generations, the color of the skin was turned white with loss of humanism in this generation. The scientist and this new generation devoid of humanity were expelled to the west. This is how he reverses the pride and shame between the whites and the blacks. This is what Vizenor has done by reconsidering and reinvention of the Columbus myth in a new mold. The new Columbus is for and from the Indians incapacitating the whites to use him as a taunt against the formers' being uncultured. When Vizenor says that "(t) he tribe lost the first and the second round of the game. One round remained, the last chance to save their children from the demon," he is actually telling his own purpose in writing this book. The whole lot of the Indian writers

who have emerged from the 70s onwards have been working on this plan of saving the children in the last round of the game of the battle of cultures and races, the game of misrepresentation countered by representation.

His color is also reinterpreted. His radiant color was understood to be a sexual heat. His reddish color was not because of a different race. It was because of a sexual abnormality since his birth. He had an internal penis, but it was more than a gender issue.

The tribe has secret knowledge of the numbers of the heirs of Columbus. But the major figures in the family include nine storytellers: Truman Columbus and Truman Columbus, husband, and wife of the same name; Stone and his mother Binn Columbus; Memphis, who is a black panther. Gracio Browne, Filipa Flowers, and Caliban are the panic hole historian, the gorgeous trickster poacher, and the great white mongrel, respectively. Samana, Miigis, and Admire are the shaman bear, the luminous child, and the healer who whistled with a blue tongue.

Samana is the creative feminine principle and origin of Indian progeny. The inheritance in and onwards from this family takes place from the mother and not from the father. It is in line with the claim that Samana was the one who brought Columbus back to life and normalcy. She was superior to him because of her ability to talk with hands and in her spiritual powers. Vizenor says that "women (are) the bearers of the genetic signatures" (p. 21). In the so-called historical vein of description and record-keeping with objectivity, he says that according to Notarial records in the municipal archives reveal that Susanna di Fontanarossa was the daughter of a weaver, a dancer, and a dreamer of wild seasons, who married Domenico Colombo. "Christopher was newborn and baptized in October 1451". These, on the surface, simple references to some person/s and their deeds and tastes are very challenging in their implications. If Christopher's mother was a weaver's daughter, it means that his seeing the Indians totally naked is an absurd and meaningless story as even his maternal grandfather knew how to weave cloth. It is equally stupid to claim that someone from the outside world came to the New World to teach them culture: Christopher's mother was a dancer, an embodiment of culture. She

was a visionary who cherished dreams about wild seasons. To further authenticate his claim, Vizenor relates him with the total situation of the then world: Muhammad II had conquered Constantinople, and the trade routes were not safe, therefore. Columbus had stories in his blood and bones, and he sailed on the oceans to buy wool and to sell cloth.

Conclusion

Vizenor deconstructs the western development of information and force established in binarism in which one classification is continually prevailing over the other, as on account of the expressed and composed word, the last advantaged over the previous in European history of information. This contention between phonocentrism and logocentrism is foregrounded and undermined by Vizenor with the fascinating presentation of hand talkers. What Vizenor has done in such manner is that he has taken out the film of secret and deception off the essence of the alleged Euro-American glorification of the civilizational mission by giving an option chronicled truth in which the local otherworldly healer becomes guardian angel; the rescuer of white fantasy is safeguarded by the locals. Vizenor's person Stone's words about Columbus total this new form of the re-appropriated Columbus fantasy: "Columbus has been seen, practically entire, at the stone bar for 500 years" (p.19). So the rambling truth of Columbus is appropriated for the total inversion of chronicled truth, and with this disruption of the Euro-American develop of Columbus fantasy, Vizenor has supplanted distortion with the decent portrayal of the Native Indian individuals' way of life, customs, and history.

Correspondence doesn't solely rely on the logocentric or phonocentric utilization of the language, and that arrangement and correspondence can viably occur in spaces other than absolutely semantic, as Samana and different individuals from the local area don't utilize discourse but convey successfully utilizing language in their uncommon manner, subsequently undermining Euro-driven suspicion of the unavoidable relationship of the discourse and language. Utilizing the deconstructive technique, Vizenor finds breaks inside European methods of articulation and sabotages any credulous division of humankind into unrivaled and

substandard dependent on shading, race, and identity, and consequently exposes unreasonable establishments of Euro-American prevalence. With the middle accordingly de-centered, the composed word in no levelheaded way advantaged over the spoken and both thus not being the main method for correspondence, the idea of mediocrity stands overruled, unexpectedly deprived of its saving rule, and the entire legend of western prevalence breakdowns.

Very dexterously, Vizenor mixes history with new adjustments. He chooses references from statements from various journals and letters by

Columbus. For example, he first wrote that he would bring six people with him to teach them his language, but then he took seven of them. The seventh one was the lady with blue hands and golden breasts who caused him an erection and then helped him get to release his stories. This is the magical realistic way of mixing historical factual truth with imagination. He has successfully abrogated and challenged the character of Columbus from racial, historical, gender, linguistic and personal perspectives to create an absolutely new figure that serves the American Indian purpose as well as exposes the epistemological violence of the west and establishes the Indian identity in respectable and acceptable shades.

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