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## **Writing Back to the Empire: A Study of the Use of Aboriginal Myths and Legends in Noel Tovey's Production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

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Oh he [Shakespeare] would have loved it because as one of the critics said and this was really the best review it had I'm sure Shakespeare wrote it for these people [Aborigines] (Noel Tovey in an interview to Karen Dorante)

Noel Tovey's production of Shakespeare's of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deserves special mention because of a simple reason i.e. that it was the first all-Indigenous production of a European classic in Australia. When Tovey justified his all-Aboriginal choice of cast (though not crew) for his production, it immediately became evident that he was trying to achieve a greater purpose- he was actually throwing a challenge to the Eurocentric notion that only the White Europeans or their theatrical clones are fit to play Shakespearean comedy. By attempting this target Tovey becomes one whom Fanon calls a 'native intellectual' defending the existence of his national culture (168).

Tovey was, however, nowhere explicit about the above-mentioned motive behind this particular endeavour; but his general view about politics in theatre can be stated to support the reason:

...I think I long for the day when we have really strong indigenous politicians out there who can actually speak up for Indigenous Australians as a whole...I



see the performing arts coming in to play because...early Indigenous plays...were also political and *one can use the stage as a political voice.* (my emphasis)

It is exactly what Tovey was doing while attempting an all-Aboriginal production – he was indeed using the stage as a political voice, to speak up for Indigenous Australians against a government under which ‘a lot of Indigenous issues have gone backward’ definitely referring here to the former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard (1996-2007) who notoriously refused to make a formal apology to Aboriginal Australians for the atrocities that accompanied colonization. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 Mar. 2008). Tovey’s production may be considered to be an answer to the racist Australian policies that are still widely acceptable in Australia and his chosen way is to revert to an indigenous culture and to posit the same to counter the colonial grand narrative.

Tovey’s strategy is one widely accepted by postcolonial thinkers and critics.

According to Fanon:

...passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people (168-69)



This is exactly what Tovey was attempting. By trying to restore contact with the Aboriginal roots he was definitely assaying to regenerate the almost lost indigenous culture in an era when the assimilation of Western and Aboriginal culture had already taken place much to the disadvantage of the latter. Hence Tobey attempted a fusion too, but with a difference. His was a blend of the Western and the Saidian 'other' represented by the Aboriginal culture configured in a way that the colonial grand narrative of the inferiority of the 'Other' is challenged. Tovey's involvement with the Indigenous Rights Movement further strengthened the claim.

What could have been a fitter occasion to voice Indigenous issues than the one where Tovey's production was showcased? This Sydney Theatre Company production performed at Sydney's Wharf Theatre was a part of the Festival of Dreaming. The Festival of the Dreaming was the first of four arts festivals that were held as prior celebration of 2000 Olympic Games. Directed by Rhoda Roberts, it was a landmark event that brought to light the work of indigenous artists from around the world, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal Australia. This was, thus, a very good opportunity to assert before global population the truth of Aboriginal life and culture after a long denial of existence in the White Australian world. In the White Australian colonial set up Indigenous Australians have always been viewed as minorities at best and non-existent at worst. They have been brutally depopulated and dispossessed at the early days of White settlement as the White men declared the land as *terra nulla* and White Australia's complacent ignorance is unfortunately still prevalent. This in turn influences White Australians belief systems. As a result the Indigenous population is still the *Other* in a system that is dictated by Western model of State



administration. So when instead of an Aboriginal play Tovey opted for an Aboriginal rendition of a European play it obviously became a political endeavor to show the competence of the Aborigines even when judged from White world standards.

Restricting the political function of such a performance to merely the straight-jacketed binary formulation of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is, however, doing injustice to the purpose of the performance. The production acquires greater significance because it not only negotiates the process in which such a binary has been put into practice, but simultaneously acknowledges that there is no way an indigenous can deny the direct effect of colonialism unto himself and that he must live with this assimilated culture forever. This is, therefore, apparently in conformity with the ‘adapt’ phase in which the subject matter is adapted from the standard, European form to fit into the subject’s culture. But in my opinion Tovey is not stuck in the ‘adapt’ phase but he had progressed to the ‘adept’ stage where Tovey is in a stage of declaring cultural independence and he reshapes the form to their own cultural standards.

The present paper desires to explore how Tovey has used the Aboriginal myths and legends to make the people aware of an Aboriginal civilization globally and to counter the grand narrative of colonial supremacy. With particular reference to the theatrical production in discussion an attempt has been made to demonstrate the same.

Interestingly, the ‘clever director’ used his props strategically in order to achieve his mission. If we take a look at the costumes worn by different characters in the play we can see that as well. All the mortal characters in the play wore uniformly white Elizabethan style robes which presumably can be interpreted as a sign for the white skin. However these white robes also indicated Tovey’s effort to make the Fairy world appear more vibrant and





animated in contrast to the monotony of the Athenian world. This is one area where Tovey had taken a fruitful recourse to Aboriginal myths.

Kevin Smith playing Bottom wore a costume made of twigs which looked like he wore a dress made of mangrove shoots, Titania and Oberon- played by Tessa Leahy and Glenn Shea respectively- wore glittering costumes that resembled the Rainbow Serpent. Now the Rainbow Serpent being the most important mythical creature in the Aboriginal stories of Creation and Dreamtime, it is explicit that Tovey was using the costume not without any specific purpose in mind. If one makes a closer scrutiny of the play-text and the myth of the Rainbow Serpent, then Tovey's strategy becomes somewhat legible.

The word that connects both Oberon- Titania and the Rainbow Serpent is 'Dream'. Oberon and Titania are the undisputed King and Queen of the Dream world. Rainbow Serpent, on the other hand, is the most important creator deity of the Dreamtime who had created rivers, seas and mountains in the otherwise flat earth. While it is a little difficult to connect the Shakespearean 'Dream' and the Aboriginal one, it is not entirely impossible. But it is this connection that might have served as the logic behind Tovey's use of the costumes mentioned above.

The Aboriginals believed that the foundation of life on earth was rooted in Dreams. That is why they called the time of Creation the Dreamtime. So for them the root of reality lay in a 'dream'. By believing in that, they had hierarchically placed 'dream' over 'reality'. Thus they had conceptualized two worlds- the world of dreams where human beings and other forms of life had naturally originated and the real world where they are subjects to





various manufactured malice. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also Shakespeare talked about two worlds- the mortal Athenian world where tender human emotions like love and caring are brutally curbed, and the Fairy/ Dream world where natural human tendencies are nurtured and caressed. Thus one can say that the Aboriginals were closer in spirit to the notion of superiority of the imagined world that Shakespeare had displayed in his comedy. Although Tovey's opinion about this is not available, this can be a possible interpretation why Tovey intended to equate the Fairy world with the Aboriginal world of the Dreamtime. Once the equation is established, there remains no hindrance to dress Oberon and Titania in costumes that matched the skin of a Rainbow Serpent.

I further argue that this choice of costumes adds up to the political motive of the performance. The contrast between the all-White costumes of the entire cast of Athenian characters and the vibrant colours of the costumes worn by the characters of the fairy land can be seen as an attempt to shatter the forcibly conferred homogeneity<sup>2</sup> on the so-called *Other* population by the White world. In fact it is a counter-attack on such long-prevailing thoughts deeply rooted in colonialism. Moreover the colourful costumes of the Fairy characters connect them to the Aboriginal myths. So when Tovey is showing the fairy world to be more vivacious in comparison to the monochromatic Athenian world he is actually subverting the notion of an apparently superior civilized world of the Whites.

Apart from costumes Tovey made a few other Indigenous inclusions too. For example, Titania's bed was designed as an enormous waratah bough. The name waratah comes from the Eora Aboriginal people, the original inhabitants of the Sydney area and it means 'red flowering tree'. Again, the *abc.net.au* mentions that:



Recognised by most as the crimson coloured floral emblem of New South Wales, the waratah is an Aboriginal word meaning beautiful. The botanical name, *Telopea*, is derived from the Greek 'telopos' meaning 'seen from a distance,' a reference to the fact that the flowers stand out like a beacon in the bush. (n.pag)

Indigenous people used the flower in a number of ways, including as a medicinal tonic for children and by infusing water with the flavour of the blooms to create a sweet drink. Apart from this, the flower has featured prominently in the Aboriginal legends symbolizing love. If we take into consideration all the facts about the crimson flower we understand why waratah bower was preferred by Tovey over a conventional royal bed. The flower is unique and it holds a special place in Aboriginal mythology as a flower of 'love' and vitality. Therefore, it is a more befitting choice as the bed of a lovelorn queen than a stone-studded metal bed.

In addition to the waratah, Tovey had also used symbols from the fauna world as well. Alongside the usual Shakespearean fairies Titania was served by a big sized kangaroo and a feather-clad lyre bird too. Both the bird and the animal are found in abundance in the Dreamtime stories as well. In one of the Dreaming stories<sup>3</sup> the lyrebird is found to be the peacemaker in the first great dispute between all the creatures. As a reward, the Spirits gave Lyrebird the ability to be the only animal able to communicate to all the other animals. In Tovey's production he had, therefore, aptly chosen lyrebird as the buffer between Titania and Oberon in their moments of marital crisis.

In a similar manner the use of kangaroo is also replete with symbolic significance. In the Aboriginal belief system the kangaroo represents a blend of both male and female energy



creating a balance between nurturing softness of a mother and a ruthless warrior.<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to the gendered rhetoric of colonialism that always cast the colonized in the position of the feminine in order to legitimize their negation on charge of inferiority. If we take a look at the early White accounts of the settlement period we can find how the colonial settlers equated anything undesirable with femininity

Moreover, in popular Australian culture the kangaroo is a symbol of continuous forward movement as it cannot move backward. Thus using the kangaroo on stage in a strategy-driven production Tovey had actually intended to showcase not only the uniqueness of aboriginal culture but also the greatness of it.

Again, by using flora and fauna which are very important in the Aborigines' lives Tovey had also pointed to the close relationship that the Aborigines shared with nature. At a time when the need for conservation of nature had begun to be felt more than ever, Tovey's attempt to show the Aborigines' oneness with nature as the much necessary way of life is credible indeed. Moreover, by doing so he actually did write back to the empire which, with its tendency of equating progress with industrial progress, had actually put to threat the very existence of human beings on earth. This is without any doubt a counter-narrative to the lofty imperial tale of progress and by doing so Tovey had fulfilled his purpose of showing the humane superiority of the Aborigines against the widely circulated idea of their inferiority.

Inclusions of Indigenous mythical elements have always been instrumental in intensifying the political purpose of a theatrical production. We have ample examples from all over the world where indigenous elements have been incorporated in plays to emphasize the ethnic roots of Aboriginal communities against the promoted concept that Aboriginals did



not have any tradition. For example, in Canada the Aborigines are frequently performing the plays of Shakespeare for a long time. Theatre groups like Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) and Canadian Adaptation of Shakespeare Project (CASP) maintain presenting the ways in which Shakespeare has been practiced, interpreted, and redeveloped as part of an enormous arrangement of theatrical activities associated with Aboriginal communities across the country. In India too it is not difficult to spot productions of Shakespearean plays that had native interpolations to suit the purpose of the native audience. As Sarvani Putatunda notes, as early as in 1893 Girish Ghosh translated *Macbeth* in Bengali. Though his translation was meticulous and it tried to keep the Shakespearean essence intact and:

...poetic discourses, which rely on indigenous myths and metaphors, are deliberately employed by Ghosh in the entire translation, in order to make viewers feel that they are responding not to an alien but to an in-culture text.  
(n.pag)

Tovey can also be seen as maintaining this trend. Thus a big red waratah flower, the beautiful lyre bird or a kangaroo not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the spectacle, but they also served as making a political move towards assertion of Indigenous tradition not as an something inferior to but as something at par or even better than their White counterpart.

Not only in costume but the Rainbow Serpent recurred in the spectacle too. As far as spectacle is concerned Tovey also made significant use of 3D graphics on stage offering a cinematic distillation of the play's Athenian and Dreamtime cultural worlds. A computer-generated image of the Rainbow Serpent moved in the background of the Fairy world set. A special projector was brought from London to facilitate the purpose. Thus Tovey achieved a



fusion of the Aboriginal culture with that of the West. Since one of the central concerns of colonial discourse was to create an advanced image of Europe in the sphere of science and technology a question may arise as whether the ‘special projector’ signify the ironic position of a postcolonial nation that cannot complete anything without the help of the European technology? While addressing the question it becomes almost inevitable to make mention of the dilemma of a resistant postcolonial subject who reinstalls the supremacy of British technology that once categorized them as ‘backward’ by bringing the projector from London. But I argue against the proposition by stating two reasons. Firstly, technology is no more a Western monopoly. Even when equipments are imported from Europe, it is not necessarily an all-Europe product but technological collaborations are very common in the present era. Hence the idea of accepting the supremacy of the colonizer seems challenged there. Secondly, the production took place in 2000 and by the time Australia has already secured her position as a global leader in the field of science and technology. Thus I argue that Tovey’s stance can be more accurately defined as the empire writing back to the centre (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffins, 1989.) for two reasons. On one hand this adequately contested the widespread concept that the Aboriginals are miles away from technological advancement. On the other hand this also subsequently aided to project the Aboriginals as capable of mingling aesthetics and technology- so long thought to be the territory of the professed advanced races.

This tendency to challenge existing White Authority’s views of the Aboriginals was also conspicuous in the little alterations that Tovey made in the dialogues. Lysander’s “Away you Ethiopel!” (3.2.258), and “Out, tawny Tartar” (3.2.264), were replaced by a scornful,



“Out, you gubba”. When we consider the fact that ‘gubba’ in Aboriginal language is an abusive term for a White Australian it becomes clear how Tovey has tried to create an alternate world where, unlike in reality, the marginalized Aboriginals would acquire central position. Perhaps employing this particular term ‘gubba’ might have stemmed from his intention to coin a term corresponding to the appellative used with his own name- ‘little black bastard.’

In the end we can say that Tovey clearly wanted to rewrite a long-lost history of the Aborigines starting from a place where the process of loss began, and starting before them whose ancestors were responsible for such loss. By intending to present a European play in an Indigenous mode before an audience guided by Eurocentric thoughts Tovey was definitely performing a very important function. His objective to promote Aboriginalism before the entire world achieved success. Needless to say his adherence to Aboriginal myths, legends and songlines facilitated this.





### Endnote

1. Noel Tovey is an Aboriginal theatre director, playwright and choreographer of international fame. He was the artistic director for the indigenous welcoming ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics.
2. The notion of forcibly imposed homogeneity upon the colonized population can be detected in the practice of grouping all the colonized nations as Commonwealth. The concept of a Commonwealth seeks to overlook the differences between the various colonized nations, as well as the diversities inside individual nation.
3. Collected from H. Rule & S. Goodman compiled *Gulpilil's Stories of the Dreamtime*.
4. Refer to the website. <https://thriveonnews.com/kangaroo-totem/>



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