

# Conceptualizing Indigenous Literatures

Kul Bahadur Khadka

---

## Abstract

*This article makes a quest for various concepts of Indigenous literatures. It deals with how the settler colonizers mainly in the context of North America traumatized the indigenous peoples and how the stories associated with them influence their generation now. It aims to disseminate the truth and beauty of Indigenous literatures and point out their equal quality and significance compared to the mainstream or non-indigenous literatures. The main ethos of indigenous literatures is relationship that evokes forgiveness, compassion and hope. Indigenous literatures remind the past and teach the present generations to struggle and prove themselves as good ancestors for their posterity. They speak for the wellbeing of humans and other-than-human beings. Indigenous literatures condemn isolation and fragmentation. They focus on interdependencies and mutual trusts. They induce possibilities and trigger optimism. They bear some barriers from the Eurocentric perspective of modernity and the mainstream literatures. All literatures matter. They should equally blossom and flourish. Indigenous literature has become an emerging discipline that upholds and strives for coexistence, interconnectedness, mutual respect and kinship.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous literatures, trauma and healing, wonderworks, kinship, possibilities

## Introduction

Indigenous peoples, original and natural in a particular place, in old days were happy as they were away from others' intervention and domination. They embraced a sense of belonging and good rapport among them. New settlers later intervened and dominated them. Due to the settler colonizers' domination over them, their identity came to be fragile. Simply said, men were born equal and free. Nobody had a choice to be born and they had no choice for being indigenous or non-indigenous or whatsoever. The settler colonizers colonized, suppressed, controlled and marginalized the indigenous peoples. The world indigenous peoples' backgrounds, cultures, literatures and situations may resemble with and vary from one another. This article explores various concepts about the Indigenous literatures mainly in the context of North America. Indigenous peoples' voices, cultures, and intellectual productions were given less or no priority. They were suffering from dehumanization and frustration. Apparently their suffering is ongoing.

Indigenous people are the native people of a particular place or community. They are original and natural in that place. They may be minorities like the Metis in Canada and the Maori in New Zealand or may be in majority like the Aymara in South America. Indigenous people have stories connecting them with their painful past and inspiring them to make struggles to better the future.

Machaela Moura-Kocoglu cites the definition of indigenous peoples- “Indigenous peoples are generally defined as the descendants of the original inhabitants of a territory, who now occupy an encapsulated status as disempowered peoples within a larger national entity as a consequence of colonization” (ix).

In his book *Why INDIGENOUS LITERATURES Matter*, Daniel Heath Justice, an impressive indigenous scholar, uses the contexts especially of Canada and the US. He writes “i” capital in “Indigenous” and “p” in “People” to use these terms as proper nouns to refer to the first peoples of Canada and the US. The term “Indigenous” is worldwide recognized and has become a topic to draw attention of many people; however, it is very vague and complicated.

Indigenous literatures embrace the present happiness of the indigenous people compared to the past when they badly suffered from the settler colonization. The indigenous peoples share their healing stories with each other and exchange their happiness of their successful struggles. Their supposed deficiency is attributed to the colonialist misunderstandings. Settler colonialism traditionally signified the invasion, resource-taking and back home and the present concept is the beginning of a new social order and oppression. Justice asserts that “settler colonialism... an ongoing process of violent self-justification through the erasure of Indigenous peoples as anything but an empty symbol” (10). He is of the opinion that settler colonialism, as a structure not an event, has displaced the indigenous peoples who are bound to be alienated from their land and relatives. He also opines all the settlers or newcomers should not be swept into the same status.

Indigenous literatures focus on wisdom and compassion. The past gives the present generation lessons to learn. The past memories can be both auspicious and traumatic. The present is at hand and it offers possibilities to make struggles for betterment in the uncertain tomorrow. The ancestors’ deeds influence the people now, who will be some day ancestors. Indigenous literatures inspire today’s people to act wisely and farsightedly so that they can be good ancestors for their coming generations. There is connection between the dead and the living. Thus, literatures make continuity of the possibilities, connecting the present both with the past and the hidden.

### **The Indigenous trauma**

Colonized people are marginalized. They have no voices. They can’t speak. Even in the postcolonial situation, the subaltern or marginalized are epistemologically colonized. They suffer from epistemic violence. Regarding such opinions, Lila Gandhi’s comments on postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s essay go- “in her essay ‘Can the subaltern Speak?’, Spivak famously elaborates some other contexts wherein contesting representational systems violently displace/silence the figure of the ‘gendered subaltern’” (89). Indigenous peoples, after the vanishing of colonialism, today also inherit trauma. Their sufferings and grievances were suppressed and gradually they started to come out orally and later the stories were written or put in documents.

Some stories delight but some hurt. In the communities where the indigenous trauma might have been resolved or may be in the process of resolution, the indigenous stories are significant. The stories written, maybe in the Indigenous mother tongues or in other languages, associated with the loves of the indigenous people, are good medicines. They heal the sufferers but at times the stories of indigenous deficiency are very toxic and irritating. Such irritating stories point out the supposed lack in the behaviours, morals, cultures and lifestyles of indigenous people. They mistake the strengths of the indigenous people for their inadequacy. They hurt all the indigenous people. They become discourses in the society to represent indigenous peoples as inferiors. They have devastating impacts on indigenous peoples and, as a whole, on mankind. The stories of the supposed indigenous deficiency also interfere with the stories that evoke hopes and possibilities for a better future. Such anti-indigenous stories are harmful to the whole mankind. They help extend suffering. They widen the gap among people and consequently their disconnection from one another creates further cruelty from the settler colonizers to the sufferers.

Indigenous people's trauma wounds and instructs them. They are reminded of the trauma and view the possibilities they have had today. With wisdom, compassion and optimism, they struggle for something fruitful in the future. Justice asserts-

The past carries wisdom, tempered and sometimes shrouded by grief and great suffering;

the future offers us hope, but with no certainty of anything but struggle. Where we are today, in all the possibility *now*, is the delicate bridge between. We're the ancestors of future generations, just as the ordinary people of past times became the ancestors to whom we now look for good guidance and cautionary example. We hope that the work we do today makes life better for those in the future. (315)

Indigenous peoples, in spite of their differences in places, positions, cultures and such from one another, share similar values and grievances across the world. Their sufferings may have been caused by different factors. For example, the major cause is the settler colonialism in North America. In some other places, the principal cause may be migration or lack of education and awareness or the government's policies. Anyway, indigenous people have had a trauma of isolation, dehumanization and domination.

Today the world is globalized. Human rightists and organizations of indigenous and marginalized people have raised questions of inclusiveness, freedom, justice and parity. But still prejudices and misunderstandings advertently and inadvertently prevail in some forms across the world. Laws and provisions of a country might have advocated for respect and acknowledgement of all the people but the deep-rooted traditions and cultures may remind the supposed indigenous deficiency and degradation. Such reminders can scratch the recovering wounds.

## Concepts of Indigenous Literatures

Indigenous literatures convey the common values of the indigenous peoples across the world. They make a quest for the knowledge of the painful past; they teach to struggle now and encourage for better options and possibilities. Indigenous literary studies enable to judge ourselves whether we are human or not. Keeping others at bay, we can't be human. To be human, compassion for humans and other species is essential. Daniel Heath Justice opines "our biology is only a very small part of our humanity; the rest is a process of becoming" (33). That all sorts of stories or texts become the process to transform hate and cruelty into humanity is untrue.

Indigenous literatures establish and promote a sense of peace and harmony among all the people and communities. They also focus on the mutual connection between nature and culture. They address the dots of connections passed, passing and to pass. Indigenous texts are not reactive and revengeful. Justice puts- "... *relationship* is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers – relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our literal and ideological heirs..." (XIX).

Indigenous literature has today become a popular discipline. Many students, researchers and scholars, with lots of zest and zeal, have been making efforts to let this discipline exist and flourish. But it is also true that even educated people's attitudes towards the literary achievements of indigenous writers, to some extent, go different and negative. To illustrate this, Justice quotes an Australian student's conversation with him that "her faculty dean, a white man, in Canada once told her that Aboriginal people in Australia would never have a *real* literature until there was an Aboriginal Shakespeare" (19). All literatures are significant. Justice puts- "All literatures matter-it's why the term "literature" is so loaded, as it carries cultural capital, and all such capital is embedded in relationships of power" (20).

Justice agrees to Jace Weaver's opinion that literature should be considered as the total written output of a people. He further contends that literature serves the powerful and the powerless alike. The rebellious texts produced in one generation can inspire and guide next generations which take them as stories and struggles against them. These texts are very diverse and multifaceted, so Justice thinks that literature is more than singular and that he puts the plural "literatures" which include other kinds of texts also such as rock art and sand paintings serving cultural and spiritual purposes and communicating stories and ideas. The oral contexts of sharing stories are very impressive and they need to be preserved.

Indigenous literatures help to establish man's relationship with the other-than-human people. Including human people, there are many other peoples- animal people, plant people, rock people etc. Man's so-called superiority is based on his selfishness and vaunted pride. Man-man discriminations and differences have immensely created the questions of identity and self-

assertion. To be kind to others is to be human. Indigenous literatures focus on kinship that preserves mutual rapport and identity. The value of kinship removes ruthlessness and brutality in people. It promotes a sense of love and sympathy for others and, in a true sense, helps judge the level of civilization measured on the basis of truth, goodness and beauty in the human hearts. Indigenous writing makes interventions against situations and elements that hamper kinship. It explores the indigenous diminishment and condemns the supremacy of those who torture the sufferers.

Humans were human in the old days. They had good connections with the wild world. Humans and animals were in reciprocal support with each other. Humanness and kinship are processes learned or gained. More than a biological perception, kinship is a cultural, political and ceremonial process that establishes very good rapport among peoples. Indigenous literatures highlight relationship or kinship for mutual respect and understanding among all- humans and other-than-human beings. Boons of good kinship are innumerable. Indigenous literatures possessing the quality of good kinship remind peoples of their responsibilities and point out the crises that arise when relationships start to become fragile.

Differences are important. Everyone is special. That difference or specialty promotes one's new skills to survive and flourish. Unity in diversity can have strengths and opportunities for people to go together. Imagination is necessary for good kinship so literary works remind the charms of relationships among humans and between humans and non-humans. Indigenous literary studies also focus on humans' connection to animals and geography. They point to the need for the interconnectedness between geography and culture. It is kinship through which the world can be altruistic, ethical and balanced.

Affiliation and affinity are related not only to individuals but they have a collective recognition to connect the humans with other-than-human beings. Justice is of the opinion that indigenous peoples were inhumanly treated in North America in the time of colonization, and he means to say that animals should also be considered in broader consciousness or they are also interconnected with humans. Thus, the perspective of indigenous literatures is very broad and benevolent to all whose common habitat is the earth. Imagination and empathy can well connect the present with the past and give a vivid sense to the better days to come. Relationships are auspicious but at times some relationships become hostile as well.

Poetry, fiction, prose, play, non-fiction memoir, song, political commentary etc. play a significant role to make continuity of the ancestors' relationships in terms of culture, love, genes, blood, bones, rituals etc. Indigenous literatures focus on continuity, that is, the amalgam of the past with the present. Justice quotes the line-“Genes are the ancestors within us” (132) in *Baby No-Eyes* by Maori writer Patricia Grace. Indigenous literatures embrace the real and possible, and show a low priority to the fantastic and spiritual. They tend to go against the colonial imaginary. However, some indigenous and marginal writers are said to have produced works of fantasy in order to

challenge the realities full of oppression and domination. They fantasize their works to defend the real and possible but not the impossible. Indigenous writers claim as good ancestors and think that they should create wonderworks in place of fantasy and mysticism. Justice stipulates-

I want to suggest a different term in place of fantasy, speculative fiction, or even imaginative literature. ... “wonderworks” is a concept that offers Indigenous writers and storytellers something different and more in keeping with our own epistemologies, politics, and relationships. ... In short, I think wonderworks help us become better ancestors, as they allow us to imagine a future beyond settler colonial vanishings, a futurewhere we belong. (152 &153)

Justice thinks wonder lies in meaningful uncertainty, curiosity and humility. It looks into unsolvable mysteries. Moreover, things of wonder point to the existence of other worlds. Justice argues-“wonderworks, then, are those works of art- literary, filmic etc. – that centre this possibility within Indigenous values and toward Indigenous, decolonial purposes” (153). Wonderworks can’t be fantasy and realism or they may be both also or they may be totally something else. Anyway, they enhance possibilities.

Indigenous writing possesses a theme of apocalypse which has not ended. It still prevails as a process, but hopes or possibilities surpass the apocalypse. Humans should work for the shared future of all including the other-than-human. The imaginations of artists can enable people to enjoy the charms of collaboration and togetherness.

Indigenous literatures expose the stories indigenous people tell and the stories others tell about them. Thus, the stories heal or hurt. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes-“Stories constitute a powerful method for healing the emotional wounds that indigenous peoples have suffered”. These stories speak of the historical contexts. The histories of indigenous people are said to be full of ruptures and apparently these people inherit ruptures or obstacles, vicissitudes, violence, fragmentation and pain. These ruptures and silences don’t end at one point or one generation. These people’s lives are in the process of restoring and retelling. Their literatures deal with their sense of belonging and wonder; they communicate how the indigenous peoples are kept silent and broken and they further indicate possibilities for hopes. Indigenous writers opine that literary texts should not be confined in a bookshelf or electronic device. They should be disseminated and open among the people. Justice writes:

Our literatures are storied archives- embodied, inscribed, digitized, vocalized that articulate our sense of belonging and wonder, the ways of meaning-making in the world and in our time. Sometimes those literatures are the stories we tell around the kitchen table or the song shared at the ceremonial ground. Sometimes they are spoken at a microphone at the back of a crowded coffee house ... our literatures speak of our continuity and presence in the world today. (186 & 187) Machaela Moura-Kocoglu contends that dominant cultures tread the indigenous peoples as inferior ‘Others’. Moreover, they are called the Forth World peoples. The Fourth World comprises

encapsulated minorities. The postcolonial settler societies in a rapid way marginalized the original or native people. Since the colonial time, these minorities in most of the societies have been struggling for parity and justice. However, postcolonial indigenous identities don't have a binary structure such as colonizer/colonized and centre/ margin.

Modernity and globalization have brought remarkable changes in cultures. Postmodern thinkers opine that modernity has ended. But some critics still hold the view that modernity embraces an ongoing, incomplete project and they think that indigenous people are even today struggling with the consequences of modernity. Linda Tniwai Smith argues-“Our colonial experience traps us in the project of modernity. There can be no ‘postmodern’ for us until we have settled some business of the modern” (34).

To bring transformations in the societies and cultures, the Eurocentric perspective of modernity that the European powers are superior to pre-modern societies and cultures which were in a trap should be reviewed. The perspectives of modernity should be multiple, global and rational. The process to form multiple identities can establish transcultural mind-sets which can generate diverse elements from different traditions.

Cultural identity matters. It bridges the past and the future. It is a matter of being and also of becoming. It has a history, and it keeps up transforming. It is a reality. History helps understand the past and the present alike. History is always before and near people. Cultural narratives trigger socio-economic changes. Expressing conflicting ideas about globalization, Michaela Moura-Kocoglu asserts- “While the context of modern globalization seems, on the one hand, to allow for affirmations of the minority self, it can, on the other, be harnessed to manipulate, contain, or silence the very same struggles” (62 & 63). She puts- “Literature has become an important means of negotiating the socio-political and cultural dynamics that constitute fundamental catalysts in generating multiple affiliations and identifications” (257).

Indigenous studies highlight what it means to be human. Humans' existence is not in isolation. It has connections with the existence of all the world species. Humans should have feelings of compassion for all associated. But the problem is that even among humans, there are discriminations and dominations among one another. This is a very devastating aspect in the formation of relationship. Texts concerning the wellbeing of all the beings on the earth dig out the past and recommend the present challenges and envisage the eco-social hope for the future. Joni Adamson and Salma Monani write- *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies* invites its readers to radical hope, where we might better imagine our pasts, presents and future as ethically answerable to other “persons” in a locally situated, globally networked, and cosmologically complex world” (15).

Indigenous scholars claim that indigenous peoples are creative and visionary and that they possess the strong ability of relationship. They think that these people intend to struggle against

discriminations and disparities and know the fact that all the species are interconnected and intermingled. These people have sacred feelings of kindness and love for animals. Indigenous critics point out that colonialism marginalized indigenous people and non-human beings. Clint Carrol and Angelica Lawson argue-

Such indigenous perspectives assert that human beings are a vital component of, rather than artificially separated from, the rest of creation. To acknowledge the vitality of these co-existent relations is to push back against the histories of (neo) colonial –enforced marginalization of both Indigenous people and their other-than-human relatives. (123) Words are powerful. Voices matter. Language is to communicate; it does more, in fact. It helps make a quest for identity. It is only via words people can express their relationships with each other, or they can express their affinity with a place and culture. Many indigenous writers stress that language is both a means of communication and a creative element in the native world. There is a good connection of language with place and identity. Language and literature help redefine identity. Indigenous literatures mainly focus on identities and possibilities for a better future. Analyzing different indigenous writers' works, Hebebrand M. Christina argues, "The central goal of many of these works was to come to terms with the history and to redefine their identity" (19). Christina thinks that indigenous literatures bring awareness for transformations. They create healthy environments and possibilities for new paths for the future.

Indigenous literatures are found to have generally written in the main language of a country. Even in North America, most of the indigenous texts appear in English. Actually, English is not the writers' language of dependence. They might choose their own mother tongues, and moreover, English should also be their language since this language should not be the language of particular people or community. However, these days indigenous writers are endeavouring to write in their own mother tongues.

Stuart Christie emphasizes indigenous mother tongues. The tradition of writing the endogenous history in English in North America is very long, maybe over three hundred years old. English has become a prominent language. It is good to have respect and recognition to the languages of all. It is also good to see various languages emerge and flourish. Christie contends-

I expect that in the coming generations, "English-only" will no longer represent the sole conduit of sovereign written tradition. Rather, English will be one important language resource, alongside the indigenous mother-tongue, when conducting biliteracy projects and training students and writers stewarded by trained professional in sovereign classrooms through indigenous North America. (13)

Today many indigenous languages are in peril across the world. They might vanish some day in the absence of necessary explorations and endeavours. Languages inculcate identity. To save identity, it is needed to save languages. If humanity expands, there will be possibilities for the



continuity of the languages which are about to end, and they will be revitalized and enriched. Indigenous texts, let's say, poetry, fiction, essays etc. remind indigenous people of their past and present. Also, they offer visions and guidelines for their future. Indigenous poetry often with the dominant themes of love and war deeply focuses on humanity.

Indigenous literatures or not, they need cordial environment in the society to flourish. Indigenous writers and scholars remember and remind their pains and experiences. They seem to reject the use of Euro-centric theories and criticisms. On the other hand, non-indigenous critics and writers seem to express their lack of trust on the indigenous literatures. Such barriers obstruct indigenous texts. To stipulate this phenomenon, Katherine Durnin mentions that "Indigenous literary critics and scholars (who are often writers as well) are concerned that white critical standards and theories do violence to indigenous texts and constitute a continuation of colonial domination" (4). In course of her argument, she cites the assertion of Joanne R. DiNova that "...non-indigenous scholars believe that Indigenous literature and scholarship "aren't any good" (4). She further adds that DiNova finally opines, "An indigenist criticism, then does not abandon non-Native scholars; it simply abandons the intensely isolating and increasingly prevalent dance towards death into which colonialism urges all peoples of the earth" (4).

Indigenous texts help reduce or end colonization and dehumanization. They are the stories of struggles for transformation and humanity. They are political, socio-cultural, historical and literary in connection with the wellbeing of humans and of even non-humans. All the species are interconnected and interdependent. It's our duty to play a role for a sustainable balance among them. We humans are said to be the most superior animals. To maintain and justify our superiority, we should use our common sense to view other species as our near and dear relatives. That is what we should do. To say more, among humans we should respect and recognize each other. The more we hate and dominate others, the more we disconnect and fragment the world. To reconcile the whole world, our thinking should be broader and we should realize the fact of interdependencies among all the people and species.

## **Conclusion**

To be generous and compassionate is to be human. By virtue of humanity, people can befriend one another. They can be in good rapport and realization. Then, they can become good ancestors. These human qualities enable people to live together. Indigenous literatures, thus, focus on humanity, relationship, responsibility, continuity and collectiveness. Its main ethos is relationship which induces possibilities and opportunities. Due to the lack of relationship, the settler colonizers created traumatic situation in the lives of the indigenous people.

Literatures should be viewed on the grounds of literary parity and comparability. Indigenous and non-indigenous writers both should be viewed first as writers, not as indigenous peoples or not.

There are world views- the indigenous and the western. Some critics' concerns are now to bridge these views to create a common ground so that the hostility between these two worlds mitigates or ends. Summarizing Chameberlin's opinion, Katherin notes that "a truly ethical comparison of the two requires that neither be considered inherently superior... a way of thinking about stories – Indigenous or non-Indigenous-on the same plane, as ceremonies of belief rather than as opposed and antagonistic views of the world" (6 & 7).

Indigenous literatures impart the possibilities of humanity and relationship. They help change the lives of so many people both indigenous and non-indigenous. They create different worlds adaptable as people's need for transformations. Indigenous literatures share experiences, focus on presence and reveal possibility. They are literary plus political, historical and socio-cultural narratives. The special beauty of indigenous literatures is that they reveal the truths; they don't conceal the bitter past of the sufferers. They speak of the real pictures of the indigenous peoples. They expose the settler colonialists' supposed deficiency and diminishment of indigenous peoples. They make these people realize that they are the inheritors of the traumatic legacies, and that they, with responsibilities, embrace hope or possibility to transform the world in a better way. They inspire to struggle for the continuity of what was given; to pass on what is now for a better tomorrow. This is the fire indigenous peoples possess.

## Works Cited

- Adomson, Joni and Salma Monani. "Introduction". *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*. Edited by Salma Monani and Joni Adamson. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- <https://www.routledge.com/Ecocriticism-and-Indigenous-Studies-Conversations-from-Earth-to-Cosmos/Monani-Adamson/p/book/9780367668129> accessed 5 February 2022 Carrol, Clint and Angelica Lawson. "New Media, Activism, and Indigenous Environmental Governance". *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*. Edited by Salma Monani and Joni Adamson. New Work: Routledge, 2017.
- Christine, Stuart. "Introduction". *Plural Socereignities and Contemporary Indigenous Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Durnin, Katherine. "Indigenous Literature and Comparability". *Comparative Literature and Culture*. Vol. 13. Issue 2. Article 2. 2011. <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/>> accessed 2 February 2022.
- Episkenew, Jo-Ann. "Contemporary Indigenous Literatures in Canada: Healing from Historical Trauma". *Indigeneity, Culture and Interpretation*. Ed. G. N. Devy et al.. Delhi: OrientBlackswan, 2008. Pp. 75-86

Gandhi, Leela. "Postcolonialism and Feminism". *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Hebebrand, Christina. "Imagined Past, Imagined Future: Recreating History to Write the Future". *Native American and Chicano Literature of the American Southwest: Intersections of Indigenous Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why INDEGENOUS LITERATURES Matter*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018. [www.wlupress.wlu.ca](https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca)<https://www.amazon.com/Why-Indigenous-Literatures...> accessed 3 February 2022

Moura-Kocoglu, Michaela. *Narrating Indigenous Modernities: Transcultural Dimensions in Contemporary Maori Literature*. New York: Rodopi, 2011.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed, 2007.