

Lying with Truth: A Postmodernist Representation of History in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*

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Abstract *This study traces the representation of deconstructed history in Gerald Vizenor's fictional work The Heirs of Columbus. The study highlights the metanarrative techniques through which the officialized history is subverted and decentralized. The study is grounded in postmodern*

Key Words

Deconstruction of History,
Historiographic
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Pastiche

Historiographic Metafiction theory of Linda Hutcheon for investigation of the data. Historiographic metafiction dismantles the overriding official version of history and presents many mini versions of truths. The study exhibits the dismantled version of overriding history of American Indians. It gives an insight into the American Indian approach of United States history.

Introduction

The present study aims to explore the history of marginalized community postcolonial American Indian territory through the art of fiction. Fiction records untold histories of the subjugated silenced subalterns through the postmodern historiographic metafiction hence deconstruct the metanarrative of dominant official history. The art of fiction uncovers the untold past, provides a new perspective of historical events through a different lens thus generates mini narratives and subverts the hegemonic domination of power. *The Heirs of Columbus* challenges the authority of governing history and rewrites Native American histories to highlight American Indian rich culture and language. Vizenor redefines the role of Native Americans in postmodern culture through postmodern historiographic narrative technique. He revises the colonial history in *The Heirs of Columbus* and resists the myths constructed by the colonizers. The main story of novel revolves around Christopher Columbus who is shown a descendent of Mayans and his ancestral memories (stories in blood) call him to his homelands in Americas. During his visit to Americas he gets healed by an Indian American healer Samana who takes him to bed and falls pregnant by him. The heirs mentioned in the title are offspring of Columbus and Samana who create a wonderful tribal nation. The heirs attempt to bring home the remains of Pocahontas and Columbus to rebury and verify their genetic relation to Columbus. Vizenor narrates the history of colonialism in the trickster mode and deconstructs the received Eurocentric ideas and myths. *The Heirs of Columbus* highlights the Eurocentric strategies of subjugation of the native subjects in self-reflexive metanarrative technique.

Research Method

The study is grounded in postmodern Historiographic Metafiction theory of Linda Hutcheon for investigation of the data. Historiographic metafiction dismantles the overriding official version of history and presents many mini versions of truths (Hutcheon,2005: 40).

Frame Breaking Technique in *The Heirs of Columbus*

Vizenor mingles the historical facts with fiction in a subversive way to redefine American Indian identity. Naanabozho the Anishinaabe trickster is shown as a fictional character who narrates the

history of the creation of earth. Naanabozho's narration breaks the frame of fiction and poses question to the state of historical facts as a construct too. The metanarrative of the creation of earth is subverted by the American Indians as Naanabozho claims to be the first human on the earth (Vizenor,1991).

The Heirs of Columbus subverts the official documented history through the trickster discourse in a witty language game. The contents in these lines are the mini narratives which bring different version of reality thus deconstruct the metanarrative of the creation of earth. Vizenor challenges the Eurocentric notions and claims Indians are the first habitants of earth as he says "Naanabozho was the first human born in the world, and the second born, his brother, was a stone". The words first **human born** highlights the status of the Indian identity and cultural values in contrast to the Eurocentric notions and myths. The subjects present in Naanabozho's trickster story are the American Indians on one hand and colonizers on the other hand who are absently present. Vizenor represents Naanabozho a real Indian character in a fictional light thus breaks the frame of fiction and fact and leaves readers confused about the status of reality as a construct too.

Stories within Stories in *The Heirs of Columbus*

Vizenor foregrounds the suppressed and marginal discourses of American Indian oral tradition in *The Heirs of Columbus*. He brings together opposing characters and stories from various civilizations, historical ages and social levels and fights for survivance of American Indians with the pen. The main story of *The Heirs of Columbus* is set in the backdrop of postmodernism as it revolves between history and myth, struggles against the essentialism of historical accounts and celebrates the dreams, stories and imagination. Vizenor challenges the conventional thematic patterns and narrative styles as he brings a new structural frame and comes up with an epilogue which sites a number of historical readings, science, religion and a passage from Jean Paul Sartre. Vizenor shows an ideal human community in *The Heirs of Columbus* where men and animal celebrate harmony with the environment. One of the main focuses of the novel is on the healing power of stories as a source of liberation as Vizenor states in one of his interviews "I see fiction as having the healing power of stories, or liberation. At least that's the way I want to write and the way I feel about literature" (Breinigand Klaus,1995: 162). The curative art of storytelling highlights the rich culture of American Indians and liberates them from the shackles of colonization. Native American writers value the oral tradition of narration thus the importance is given to the events more than the text and stories become the sign of change and transformation. Vizenor(1999)strengthens the argument and states in his *Manifest Manners* "In that generation, the tribes had been decimated by diseases; the cruelties of civilization had dispossessed the tribes of their land, but not their stories" (163). Stories thus become the sign of survivance in the native population as these can't be killed neither stolen.Vizenor narrates stories within stories to preserve the American Indian glorious past and deconstruct the Eurocentric notion of us and them. The heirs in the novel narrate sacred stories, hum ritualistic songs, speak in animal language, mimic the spirits and escape the evil gamblers through hallucinatory plans .The American Indians resist the imposed historical suppressed identity and get rid of the dominant culture's history through the power of stories. Vizenor's stories within stories bring multiple versions of reality as Stone Columbus narrates a story and then within that story narrates another story thus self reflexively draws attention to narration's own structure as a work of fiction. Vizenor (1991) narrates the resurrection story of Stone Columbus and within that story he introduces more stories.

Vizenor's technique of nested narratives connects the past to the present in an ironical way and sheds light on the unjust colonial exercise of power. Vizenor introduces trickster figures in his novel who possess postmodern qualities and prove dangerous to the institutional powers. His characters are capable of creating **new worlds** which provide them a sense of place in the tension of discovery and pain. The lines "The heirs of Christopher Columbus created one more new world in their stories" elucidate the power of stories in the Native American culture. The stories keep the native culture alive as it is stated "the heirs warm the stones at the tavern with their stories in the blood". They break the shackles of western culture through narration of these, liberate the society with the power of imagination and deconstruct the logic of rigid determinism. Vizenor narrates stories in cyclic movements as in the following lines Stone Columbus is shown resurrected from the school furnace. The story of first resurrection is connected to another story of resurrection by the ice woman as he says, "he came back a second time in the arms of the notorious ice women". Vizenor (1991) further talks about another resurrection story of Stone Columbus by the hand lady Samana as he says, "Samana touched his head and the bear pushed him back from death with a blue radiance" (12).

Intertextuality in *The Heirs of Columbus*

Vizenor displays multiple polyvocal voices in *The Heirs of Columbus* about different aspects of subjugation and suppression. He assembles various version of historical reality from the subaltern perspective that is colonial historical subjugation, economic subjugation, environmental subjugation, religious subjugation, feminist

subjugation and physical subjugation. In the wide framework of fiction he brings the adventurer Columbus, religious political games of 15th Century Americas and Spain, different tribal characters like Pocahontas, and the life of native in the reservations. Vizenor disarms the metanarratives through different “intertexts” and writes back to the dominant discourse. He articulates that five hundred years is enough to stay victim of colonizer’s oppression, culture and civilization thus imagines Columbus in his own American Indian way. Heirs of Christopher Columbus end colonialism through the creation of new nation which they dedicate to healing. Vizenor criticizes the devastating strategies of colonialism, the restitution of the Native American human remains and objects, U.S education policies through the technique of postmodern intertextuality .The historical intertext is used to cure the destruction of colonialism and subvert the domination of western culture.

Manifestation of Historical Discourse /Colonial Subjugation

In *The Heirs of Columbus* Vizenor criticizes the white Europeanized history and rewrites and another version of history from marginalized perspective. Vizenor records his responses to the colonial victimization through the medium of fiction. He doesn’t bemoan his position as historical victim rather challenges and undermines the historical chronicles of the dominant culture. History’s function according to *The Heirs of Columbus* is to liberate instead of enslaving, Vizenor liberates the American Indians from the staid shackles of Eurocentric narratives of history and rewrites history to release it from the so called western (colonial) gaze. Vizenor doesn’t capture past in a nostalgic tone in *The Heirs of Columbus* rather denaturalizes and decenters the main events of past. as he(1991) says:

“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 de Bariay... “October 29, 1492, at Rio de la Luna”

“You changed the date”

“Columbus is ever on the move in our stories,” said stone. (10-11)

The Heirs of Columbus is based on the story of the tribal community who claim to be the genetic heirs of the adventurer Christopher Columbus. The heirs in the novel live a communal life according to the Native American tradition which defines society as a whole and narrates their reality through the traditional sacred stories and rituals. The communal way of life generates a collective representation in the American Indians as they possess a collective identity based on stories in blood, myths, visions and dreams. Vizenor destabilizes the realm of official history in the following text by introducing different marginal characters. The marginal characters like Samana (Indian decedents of Columbus) are given the central position in contrast to the historical euro American hero Christopher Columbus. “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 de Bariay in orient province, Cuba”(10).

Environmental Subjugation

The contemporary Native American writers attach central importance to place and integrate the individual with the community. The sense of community is taken in broad sense in Native American tradition as it includes humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects of nature. Native Americans had a harmony with nature and respected and valued nature as a sacred being. The arrival of white man destroyed the harmony and subjugated both nature and the original inhabitants of land. Vizenor discusses the trauma of displacement and destruction of the ecological environment in *The Heirs of Columbus* as he(1991) says:

The colonists brought wilderness with them and planted their fears in the woodland, and once here their tragic virtues were unloaded with shame, the unnatural consequences of the loss of personal visions on a landscape of primal realities. Cruelties of individualism in the church, and the loneliness of civilization . . . in a very dangerous natural world. (80-81)

Arrival of white in the Native American land profoundly disturbed their life style and their relation to land and natural resources. Euro-American devastating strategies of occupation and colonization exploited the natural resources and changed the physical environment of the Indians.

Religious Subjugation

The colonizers constructed the identities of native and their belongings as other, immature, primitive, uncivilized and undeveloped. Everything that belonged to native was considered “uncivilized” thus open to be amended and civilized. Religion was a tool through which the colonizers legitimized the process of colonialism in the name of God and service of humanity. Vizenor illustrates the same characteristic of religious discourse in European colonialism of Americas in his *The Heirs of Columbus*. He unveils the history and narrates it from the marginal

perspective to show the wounds of Native to the world. Vizenor rewrites history of Columbian voyages to Americas and sheds light on some excerpts from the journal of the Admiral of Ocean Sea Christopher Columbus. He illustrates the discursive strategies of colonizers through which they portrayed a self-positive image and other negative image and used religious discourse for this purpose. The native subjects were treated as "religious other" thus subject to be transformed as Vizenor (1991) illustrates in the excerpts from Columbus's journal:

Your highnesses, as catholic Christians and princes devoted to the holy Christian faith and to the spreading of it, and as enemies of the Muslim sect and of all idolatries and heresies, ordered that I should go to the east" Columbus wrote in his journal . . . other historical reasons prevailed, honor, wealth, a shorter route to the land of seductive aromas . . . "I saw this as a sign from God, and it was very helpful to me. Such a sign has not appeared since Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, and they dared not lay violent hands on him because of the miracle that God had wrought. As with Moses when he led his people out of captivity, my people were humbled by this act of Almighty" . . . That night he wrote "I thought I saw a light to the west . . . I now believe that the light I saw earlier was a sign from God and that it was truly the first positive identification of land. (35-37)

Vizenor uncovers the hidden ideologies of the colonizers as this text of Columbus shows the purpose of his "voyage" to the new worlds. Columbus was appointed the Admiral of Ocean sea on April 17, 1492 by the mutual consent of both King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to "discover" new worlds and he "shall take and keep a tenth of all gold, silver, pearls, gems, spices and other merchandise" (Vizenor 1991, 34). The voyage to the new world was given a religious purpose apparently and in the same way the native subjects were subjugated through the use of religious discourse .

Manifestation of Feminist Discourse

Vizenor shifts the historical perspective, turns the tables of traditional historical accounts, unveils the stereotypes, and challenges the status of traditional historical heroes in a narrative which seems more accurate and truer than the traditional accounts of history. Through his metafictional strategy of narration he poses questions to the status of history that what if the traditional historical heroes and events were not the real ones as they were shown in the historical text books. Vizenor thus writes in reversal about the tribal origins of Native American cultural heritage. He dis-arms history, rewrites the story of Pocahontas and fights for the tribal identity. Pocahontas was constructed as a typical stereotype "other" in the American popular Literature. In *The Heirs of Columbus* Vizenor exposes the stereotype and the strategies behind its construction thus recovers not only the tribal identity of Pocahontas but of the larger tribal cultural structure. He unmasks the assumed cultural superiority and double standard of the colonizer's definition of "civilization" as on one hand they claim to civilize the native and on the other hand they disturb the peace of native's life through bloodshed and forceful suppression. Vizenor subverts the meta narratives of European discourse with his intertextuality and polyphony. He brings multiple voices, decenters the center and deconstructs the traditional history as he narrates the history of the tribal character Pocahontas and her suffering in white society:

Pocahontas . . . was a curiosity in the company of the sycophants, bound in court costumes of the seventeenth century. The garments alone would have burdened the health of a tribal woman; the bad air and winter weather silenced a tender breath . . . The ship sailed on the river Thames twenty five miles to Gravesend . . . There, "in painful simplicity" . . . as spring came to England, Princess Pocahontas was begged to be taken ashore. She was deathly ill . . . Pocahontas touched me as a child, she was beautiful, courageous, so persecuted by manners and she died so young, lonesome for her homeland, "said Traves. (Vizenor , 1991: 98-106-108).

The above quoted passage is relevant in the situational contexts as the larger scale structures are visible in the text. Pocahontas's story is narrated through the marginal perspective thus brings another version of history. Vizenor calls the white colonizers *sycophants* for whom Pocahontas a representative of tribal culture was a curiosity. He criticizes the colonial strategies of the colonizers which suppressed the identity of native subject to such an extent that they reach the state of "annihilation".

Physical Subjugation

The process of colonialism had disastrous effects on the colonized subjects politically, psychologically, physically and socially. Colonizers maintained their supremacy through different torturous strategies and deprived the native from their basic rights. Vizenor writes back to the colonial discourses thus unveils the sufferings and miseries the colonizers experienced in the colonial era. He sheds light on different kind of suppression and subjugation the

native subject experienced and introduces multiple perspectives of the colonial history. *The Heirs of Columbus* exhibits the pangs of western civilization which subjugated the native physically and destroyed their health as he narrates about the victims of civilization on point Assinika:

Teets was disheartened by the suspicion of sexual abuse by the scientists; she understood from personal experiences that the horrors of survival in some tribal families, but who could be so cruel to abuse wounded children, those burned by the poison and chemical pleasures of civilization; abused even more by the man who were trusted to heal them. She cried over the memories of the cruelties the children had endured. (Vizenor, 1991:156).

In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor reaffirms a narration which values both the marginal and official discourses. In the quoted text, Vizenor highlights the subject relations of the social actors in the social setup. **Chemical pleasure of civilization** are the words which are used ironically by the writer to unveil the strategies through which the colonizers subjugated the native subjects physically which is very much shown in the condition of the kids at point Assinika.

Economic Subjugation

One of the main purposes of colonialism was economic expansion along with imperial expansion. The colonizers extracted everything from the colony which was of their benefit and subjugated the colony and the inhabitants in each and every regard. The unequal relation between the colonizer and colony was built through different strategies of subjugation. The native land which was considered sacred in the native tradition was snatched away by the power structures. Land for native was the source of food and strong economy as all the natural resources were dependent on land. This act subjugated the natives economically thus made them weak and down in the hierarchy of power relations. Vizenor narrates the history of so called conquest which was merely for lust of power and riches wrapped in the sweet slogans of civilization as he (1991) says:

Columbus possessed a delusion of grandeur, the tribes with “no iron”, the hardwoods, the beaches, the land in sight; he renamed the islands, and continued his mission. He learned from the people that on another island to the south he could” find a king who possesses a lot of gold and has great container of it. Not only gold, he was told, but precious stones. “God has not failed to provide one perfect day after the other” (37).

Vizenor rewrites the history and shows the real motive behind Columbus’s voyages. Vizenor ironically comments about Columbus’s **delusion of grandeur** which led him cause suffering to many people. This excerpt sheds light on the *activity* and *Purpose* with in the situation context of colonialism.

Parodic Rewriting in *The Heirs of Columbus*

The Heirs of Columbus inverts the official history through a parodic twist by reimagining Christopher Columbus’s arrival in America and shows him a descendent of Sephardic Jews and Mayans. Vizenor deconstructs the Euro-American history through the trickster discourse and highlights different versions of the colonial history. Columbus’s character is decentered in *The Heirs of Columbus* on his five hundredth anniversary of discovery of American continent. Furthermore; the narration with the trickster discourse subverts the colonial discourse for the survival of the Native Americans in the contemporary America. The history of Christopher Columbus’s invasion is narrated in the first three chapters of “Blue Moccasins”. The fourth chapters turns the focus of the history from Christopher Columbus to his heirs that is from the colonizer to the colonized. The main focus is devoted to the Native heirs of Christopher Columbus than Columbus himself and he is shown an ancestor whose strategies push American Indians to fight for their basic rights in the Euro American society. History as a process chooses incidents and constructs narratives of them by focalizing one specific event while repressing others. Vizenor’s narration recreates the history and values the power, knowledge, culture, traditions and potential of the Native Americans. Vizenor provides a hybrid history of contemporary stories, tribal myths, colonialist histories and his own fictive narrations; which constructs a parody by placing both fiction and history in simulacrum. In his interview with Coltelli, Vizenor comments about his historical sources:

I do work into everything I write so-called historical events, and I say so-called because some of the historical events would be obtained from either Indian writers or from Indian storytellers and other events are from non-Indian historians, so that they would be either, in the worst example, colonial, and probably the best example would be the methodological histories (*Winged Words*, 1990 :156).

While using the words “so called historical” Vizenor denounces the accurate portrayal of historical even as a myth thus believes in multiple versions of reality. Vizenor follows Derridean theory in deconstruction of historical Columbian narratives in *The Heirs of Columbus* and the main two are trace and difference:

Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be "present," appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already let itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present (Derrida, 1973 :142-43).

The Columbus depicted in *The Heirs of Columbus* is not the historically constructed Columbus but a different one as Vizenor provides different constructions of him by heirs in this one narration. Columbus is the signifier of colonial ideologies. Vizenor's Columbus gives sights to the deconstruction of history through Derridean difference and trace. In *Manifest Manners* Vizenor (1999) describes the role of trace as a strategy to survive:

The post Indian turns in literature, the later indication of new narratives, are an invitation to the closure of dominance in the ruins. The invitation uncovers traces of tribal survivance, trickster hermeneutics, and the remanence of intransitive shadows. The traces are shadows, shadows, shadows, and the natural reach of shadows, memories, and visions in heard stories. (63)

By tracing the colonial history from direct resources Vizenor gives an opportunity to the reader to know the official history but at the same time with their own critique remove the victimizing elements of the oppression from the history. Hence he doesn't remove the events in the process of rewriting but provides the elements of survivance to the Native populations. The presentation of the Colonial history with a trickster discourse enables the reader to perceive the trace itself in the creation of Columbus. Vizenor deconstructs the meaning of Christopher Columbus's arrival to American Continent. According to the account of official history Columbus discovered the American land which is ironically subverted by Vizenor (1991) as according to him Columbus was not a foreigner but had affiliation with the land:

Columbus was a bad shadow, tired and broken, because he lost most of his body parts on the way, so the old shamans heated some stones and put him back together again," crocked Truman. "Harm the water shaman, said he dreamed a new belly for the explorer, and shin, the bone shaman, called in a new leg from the underworld , and he got an eye from the sparrow woman, so you might say that we created this great explorer from our own stone at the tavern". (19)

Vizenor deconstructs the image of European Columbus and makes him one who is healed by the natives through trickster discourse. Hyde(1998) supports the boundary position of the heirs in his *Trickster Makes this World* that boundary is where the trickster is found (7).

Conclusion

This study shows that fiction reveals another perspective of history which is mostly different from that written by the pen of power. It exhibits that truth has different dimensions and cannot be governed by one specific meta narrative. History in the same vein has different perspectives and mini narratives are equally important as meta narratives. Vizenor in *The Heirs of Columbus* rewrites colonial history of American Indians and highlights the significance of native language and culture. He subverts the grand narrative of Columbus's discovery by narrating multiple versions of Columbus's history in a humorous way. Vizenor resists the colonial myth of Columbus by constructing Indian American fictional Columbus and his heirs.

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