

**Discourse of Native-American Oral Narratives in Gerald  
Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart***

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyse how Gerald Vizenor unveils in his *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* the rich, complex, and contradictory experiences inherent in the Native-American oral literatures. In this novel, Proud Cedar air, the trickster shaman along with his circus caravan engages in the act of ritual quest and journeys from Wisconsin to New Mexico when there is a cultural loss in the area where they lived due to the depletion of energy resources. His journey begins in the third world which evil spirits have powered with disrespect for the living and the fear of death. He successfully reaches the fourth world by outwitting the evil spirits by moving backward in time and using the languages of animals and birds. The dilemma experienced by Native-American writer Vizenor stemming from the conflict between the myth of an invented Indian and a reality related to peripherality, cultural denigration, displacement and suppression has led them to seek meaning in their own traditional oral

narratives.

**Keywords:** Oral Narrative, Native-American, Trickster, Displacement, Traditional

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Gerald Vizenor is one of the most influential Native-American novelists. is described as an innovative and articulate novelist. He has a very significant contribution to Native-American literature. He has made the Native-American traditional trickster the central figure of his writing. He has adopted the trickster topos from other literary traditions besides his own and explicated the cross cultural differences inherent among tricksters of the world traditions. His mixedblood tricksters reflect a primordial culture and act as mediating characters in the human world of contradictions. His tricksters perform the function of complex mediation between and among conflicting value systems.

Vizenor's debut novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), dismisses all representational standards and makes a presence formed on a reality implanted in Native-American oral narratives. This novel is entrusted to *Ojibwa* legacy and bears the message that endurance for 'postindians' is feasible only through a rejuvenation of oral traditions and artistry. This novel shatters the balance of restricted structures and manages the primordial dynamism entailed in the traditional Native-American narratives. It defends a comic viewpoint and confronts the entirety of closure. In *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor*, Alan Velie provides the compact summary of the novel:

A futuristic fantasy, *Bearheart* takes place in the United States after the country ... where the protagonist Proude Cedarfair lives. Realizing the futility of fighting the government Proude and his wife Rosina set out on a cross-country ... his rival for the favors of a bronze statue, Belladonna Darwin Winter Catcher, the daughter of a white reporter and *Lakota* holyman who met at the occupation of Wounded Knee and Lilith Mae Farrier, a white woman who ... the tribal elders raped her and their wives ran her off in disgust. (73)

The tricksters in the novel speak for a cultural reality that works as a positive means of conferring multiple cultural structures. Their liminality empowers them with the power to parody languages and perspectives and makes them negotiator of clashing systems of values. They are “tribal mixedbloods with good stories and memories” (186). The “foolish gestures and mindless conversations” of the pilgrims bring in “more clearness and meaning” (160) in the novel. It shatters all beliefs of finality and proclaims that “there are no last words to this world” (188).

The narrative structure of the novel examines the episodic tale-within-a-tale method of Native-American mythology. It is a raw fusion of the mystical, the symbolic, and the exotic with a crude and extreme naturalism. The novel disrupts the belief of the world as an integrated unity and opens-up the potentiality to envision human sensibility and social existence as unfinalizable. “Non-facts” relay reality in the novel and the world is delineated in connection to myths and language. This novel is a conventional narrative and events take place without interpretation as they carry out in the American-Indian trickster-cycle. The novel depicts a people who authorise themselves through traditions, rituals and challenge the peril of annihilation with bravery and courage. The pilgrims’ adventures of truth occur on the

high-roads, in the antagonistic metropolis of hunters, among the mob of cancer patients, in prison and traditional seductive orgies. In the inimical space of their direct survival, they endure because of their shamanistic capability to change and reconstruct hurdles.

The novel begins with a detail of the violence and injustice done to Proude Cedarfair's family; the patrons of Cedar Circus, by the federal governments who want to axe the trees to make paper. To escape and survive, the characters move backwards in time "for harmony with nature," travel to a destructive third-world crowded with disrespect for the living and panic of death and look for a fourth world where the evil-spirits can be outfoxed by animal languages. In the novel, tradition is fixed in a modernised context and tribal sensibility is presented to be defied to the recognition of citified industrial traditions and cultures. The novel depicts the rift between two systems - one based on wholeness and the other on fragmentation. Despite the reality politics has played a prominent part in determining the destiny of the characters, the intramural rules of order in the novel derives from the interaction of dreams rituals, traditions, and cultures. The accentuation is on both the animal and human parts of the trickster and his capability to make power even through his defect and weakness. The incidents in the novel substantiate the factor that imagination can recover the world's most violated spaces. Proude's journey is a renunciation of the European ideology that wilderness will become discernible only when it cultivates beneficial ethics and values. Proude asserts through his pilgrimage that new worlds are reachable through the vitalities of the performative language of the tricksters.

In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Vizenor assimilates the revered cosmological myth of the creation of the universe by *Naanabozho*, the earth-diver. The traditional trickster of Native-Americans, *Naanabozho* appears here under diverse changes and transformations. In this novel, the *anishinabe* migration tale acts as a background for the search for insight and

knowledge. In the novel, one can find a mythically mediated form where language creates reality. The trickster is a sign in the semiotic sense, a sign in a language game, a comic holotrope, a product of language that should be perceived in a linguistic context.

Like the traditional trickster stories, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* is self-referring and auto-representational. The novel mostly moves to the level of surrealism. The Brechtian technique of defamiliarization adopted in the novel topples all opportunities of closure through a single determinate connotation. The formal and thematic self-consciousness of the novel makes it a narcissistic narrative where the process linked in the creative construction is accentuated. In “Gerald Vizenor: Negotiations of Difference and Value,” Hartwig Isernhagen points out, “self-definition, creativity, the creation of reality is here always a differentiation from what is already known, and Vizenor clearly thinks of the construction of self and reality in terms of acts of defamiliarization” (124).

All the stories told by the pilgrims in the novel are dynamic, generative and open-ended. They illuminate and enrich the epistemological frameworks of both Native-American and western cultural traditions. They all nurture survival and psychic renewal. The interactive quality of the stories in novel is illustrative of Michael Holquist’s definition of Bakhtin’s dialogism as a condition in which “everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole - there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* 426).

In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Vizenor makes use of the ‘dog husband story’ of the traditional Native-American oral narratives through the story of Lilith Mae and her boxer lovers. Stith Thomson refers to ‘dog husband story’ as a story originating in the North Pacific coast and Alaska and spreading to the western plains and down to California. It is

when Proude Cedarfair tells the story at the last dinner of the starving priests of the sacred order of Gay Minikins that it is first introduced in the novel. Proude's stories liberate the arbitrary signs of language from fixed hierarchies and ground them in nature. Before Proude leaves the priests, he narrates to them the story of a shaman crow, a child girl, a mongrel and four puppies that lived in a tribal village near the river on the prairie. Proude, through this story counteracts the priests' passive desire to starve to death by pointing out "the wisdom of the shaman crows" (62) that refuse to accept any terminal creed.

As the tales are told, the listeners tend to question the culturally determined assumptions about identity, meaning and reality. They move back and forth through the texts of the stories and their interpretations and adopt a perspective that initiates in them a dynamic process of self-correction. Vizenor considers telling a story as dangerous as hunting, hazardous because man's life relies on watching and catching something. It is precarious because it is a challenge with the unidentified, something commonly perceived, but particularly unknown that may come together, alive or present in the narrating or hunting. To hunt, to narrate tales, to write is strange. It's also survivance. In these stories where myths and rituals are dominant, the past and the future exist linguistically in the present. These stories are an epistemological structuring of those experiences which upset and redirect our notions of reality. In these stories, the 'tellers' link what they see in the present to what they remember of the past. The trickster tales in the novel have the healing power of the cultural conversations of the ancient times.

*Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* presents a world where "the animal people" and "the human people" coexist harmoniously and continue the process of cultural regeneration initiated by the traditional trickster. The characters invent strategies through their trickster

energy to develop an epistemological perspective that would evoke a cultural healing at both personal and communal levels. Trickster energy is used as the principle of human rebellion and resistance. Rituals act as the 'real' on which human life is reconstructed. The trickster discourses liberate and provide space for acts of resistance. The marginalized pilgrims attain visibility through the power of words and survive by resisting the hegemonic systems that seek to contain them. Like other novels of Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* points to the artificiality of culture and the struggle of the natives of America to survive. Their existence outside the confines of rigid social structures gives them the power to challenge manifest manners and manifest destiny.

The mixedblood characters in the novel cross all static boundaries and define new limits to their activities through their self authorizing rituals in order to discover meaningful areas of signification. They exercise the traditional trickster's cunning and his power to create when exigencies of survival arise. In the novel such a situation arises when they are persecuted by the dominant whites. The pilgrims draw survival strategies from the resources of their own rich traditions and refuse to be absorbed into the dominant colonizing culture. They retain their indigenous identity and create pathways to survival. Bigfoot's action of popping "his wide violet umbrella" to resist "the hostile audience" suggests that survival on the interstate has become "more verbal than spiritual ... more open than closed, less secret, little political" (157).

The novel is about the travels of the pilgrims through "terminal creeds and social deeds escaping from evil into the fourth world where bears speak the secret languages of saints" (xiv) and it reflects James Ruppert's concept that "terminal creeds lock the true believer into a moral system that lacks imaginative freedom" (Mediation in Contemporary

Native-American Fiction 94). Unfortunately some of the pilgrims become victims of terminal creeds and generate new signs which deny referents and which consider absence as the presence and the imaginary as the real. They retain their faith in simulations and as a result lose their balance which takes them to their destruction and death. The novel foregrounds the struggle against the terminal creeds that impede imaginative and cultural survival emphasizing the fact that “beliefs and traditions are not greater than the love of living” (11).

There is a wild play of trickster humor, ironies, cultural myths, and social metaphors in the novel. The conversations in the novel overturn colonial surveillance, monologues, and racial separations. As the pilgrims travel through the interstate highways of knowledge monologues, terminal creeds, and privileged representations are deconstructed. Mythic version becomes the only criterion of accuracy. Ultimately Vizenor’s tricksters outwit evil but never kill it because humans must learn to live imaginatively with contradictions. This novel conveys the fact that negation is the only possibility available within a monologic worldview. When Proude, the Shaman healer advocates positive affirmation, Sir Cecil Staples, the Evil Gambler in the text negates life and courts the secrets and surprises on the road to death.

*Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* seeks to promote growth and balance through memory and imagination. The reality evoked in the novel is related to the traditional tribal narratives. The interstate highways deconstruct the familiar structure of families and oral traditions become once again central to man’s experience in this world. All the norms regarding social roles and society are perforated and disintegrated in the novel. The discourses in the novel function as a criticism of all authoritarian, repressive ideologies. The evil gambler in the novel learns even as a child those biological families are not the centre of meaning and identities. The characters deconstruct their social roles too. Proude, the leader and defender of

the cedar sovereign nation abandons his social role and turns to “the cleverness of crows and the visions and ceremonial powers of the bears” (16). Lilith Mae gives up her profession as a teacher and joins the caravan “to confess her sexual sins, hoping to recover passion in her passionless emotions” (78). In the novel all societies remain fragmented. Through the perforations, Vizenor satirizes native and non-native social stances and definitions of identity.

Every utterance of the tricksters in *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* is a move in a language game. The narrative voices that are heard in the novel sufficiently express the polyphonies of life. Proudé’s words that carry the speaking voice of *naanabozho* in his encounter with the evil gambler possess a choral vitality. There is, in the novel, a plurality of freedom and unblended voices and consciousness, a natural polyphony of wholly genuine voices. What is special about the stories in the novel is that the insight that is inherent in these stories is the motivating force behind the actions of both the speaker and the listener. The pilgrims in the novel are the post-Indian warriors who are new indications of narrative creating, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance. They move beyond systems of oppression into purity, myth, and liberation. Their tales survive all critical closures, representations and preconceived conditions of culture and perform the dynamic trickster function of regeneration and new emergence.

Vizenor’s fictional tribal communities define their lives in terms of Native-American oral narratives. *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* contains a worldview which is at odds with European vision of life with its linear thinking of time and reality. Just like in the oral tradition, new stories continually come into being and old stories are altered to incorporate new circumstances in his fiction. He recounts through his tales what has been lost to the natives of America, what remains and how they can survive in a hostile consumerist society.

An examination of his novels reveals the fact that it is often the wild voice of the imaginative trickster that has sustained the Native-Americans to outlast the process of assimilation by the whites. Vizenor's mythical characters live out their lives and engage in trickeries in the modern world.

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