

PURANA NARRATOLOGY AND THOMAS KING: REWRITING OF COLONIAL HISTORY IN *THE MEDICINE RIVER AND JOE THE PAINTER* *AND THE DEER ISLAND MASSACRE*

Aditi H. Vahia

Centre for Canadian Studies

Faculty of Arts

Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

Sayajigunj

Baroda, Gujarat

India

gvss@wilnetonline.net

Abstract / Résumé

Puranas are essentially Hindu storytelling versions of the holy Vedas. They interpret complex truths to the masses. The author suggests that Tom King does the same thing in his fiction. He writes about the complicated sociopolitical and historical realities of Canadian colonialism affecting Native people. He fictionalizes these events to interpret truths to a mass audience, both Native and non-Native, using a narrative style to remind readers of these ongoing problems.

Les Puranas sont essentiellement des contes fondés sur les Védas sacrés. Ils interprètent des vérités complexes pour les masses. Le présent article met de l'avant que l'écrivain Tom King fait la même chose dans ses oeuvres de fiction. Ce dernier traite des réalités socio-politiques et historiques complexes du colonialisme canadien à l'égard des peuples autochtones. Il romance les événements pour interpréter diverses vérités pour le grand public (Autochtones et non-Autochtones) en utilisant un style narratif afin de rappeler à ses lecteurs les problèmes courants du colonialisme.

The twentieth century saw many changes in the global scenario being overshadowed by European colonization in the preceding centuries. Apart from the obvious economic and political progress, there also came a distinct awakening in the literary field – an awakening which was then consciously spread by the experts of this field within their community. They took upon themselves the task of leading their people out of the aftermath of colonialism and thus celebrated the fall of the same by carving out their hard earned space in the human history.

Canada and her Native people were no exception as they share the same colonial story. European colonizers settled in Canada during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These settlers perpetrated aggression and oppression on the Native populations with distinct cultures, identities, customs and civilizations. Because of superior war technologies, deceitful trade practices, organized armed forces and police, they defeated and conquered the first nations of Canada. Those nations which could not be conquered were lured to sign treaties in the name of the Queen of England. As almost all such treaties were written in the English language, which the Natives did not know, the European settlers wrote them to their advantage. A very oppressive racist policy was practiced to annihilate the Native populations. Education was used as a means to colonize the minds of the young to teach them the superiority of the European civilization and culture. They were labeled savages and uncivilized without a history of their own. As almost all the Native cultures were oral, the colonizer denied the authenticity and historicity of these cultures. To assert the authenticity and historicity of their cultures, therefore, is the first job of the Native writers. A general awakening is possible only if the colonized acquires the ‘necessary’ authenticity for their history and culture to be rich and significant because, after all, history is an unending dialogue between past and present.

Juneja in *Post Colonial Novel: Narratives of Colonial Consciousness* suggests that there are three ways of dealing with history in fiction. “(a) Against history – mostly in realistic novels (b) Dismantling narrative in the novel using post modern techniques and (c) Re-writing a tradition in the novel with appropriate Indigenous narratological traditions” (106). Rewriting a tradition proves a very effective tool to rewrite a history, particularly when the writer, consciously or unconsciously, follows the narratological method of that tradition. This paper, then is an attempt to analyze two of Thomas King’s works of fiction in light of one of the most important narratological traditions of Hindu society of India i.e. The ‘Purana’ Narratology.

Rewriting history, thus, can also mean narrating a ‘Purana’. Literally, ‘Purana’ means ancient, which in turn automatically implies history. Here,

one comes across a simple but effective storytelling device to convey a highly serious message. The Puranas occupy a very important position in the Hindu cultural tradition and are considered a means to preserve the cultural heritage of India. Thus, literally speaking 'Puranas' are stories which talk about ancient historical traditions. They embody in their vast span, the social, religious and philosophical thought of ancient seers. 'Puranas' have inevitably based their deep thoughts on those of the 'Vedas'. The four 'Vedas' namely 'Rig Ved', 'Sam Ved', 'Atharv Ved' and 'Yajur Ved', are the four holy books in Hindu culture which embody in them important philosophical speculations and the principle religious doctrines. However, due to the difficulty of the language and subtlety of the views, the fundamental thoughts propounded by the Vedic seers become difficult to understand even for the learned few. In line with that, the 'Puranas' are said to be the very soul of the 'Vedas'. 'Vedas', according to Dange, are to be expounded with the help of history and the 'Puranas'. The 'Vedas' were a restricted class of scriptures while 'Puranas' were of a general approach. Persons who were not eligible for the Vedic studies could know the Vedic tradition through the 'Puranas'. While the 'Vedas' contain hymns of historical and religious importance, the 'Puranas', explain the teachings of the 'Vedas' and are meant for the masses. Upadhyaya, in the preface to *The Naradiya Purana (A Philosophical Study)* says that the 'Puranas', as a result of their simplicity of language and adoption of the storytelling device, stood as a means of the popularization of the obtruse and subtle religio-philosophical thoughts of the Vedic seers. Hence, the modern Hinduism looks for its main guidance and ultimate sources in the views propounded in these valuable works. Thus, these are a veritable encyclopedia of various types of knowledge required for the moral and social betterment of mankind. The Vedic religious and philosophical doctrines become more comprehensible and perceptible due to the narrative techniques and language of the 'Puranas'. While explaining the term further, Dange, in *The Bhagavata Purana: Mytho – Social Study* says,

The change of beliefs, manners and customs, rather the very change in social norms finds expression in the Puranas. They are not only a code of conduct for a particular society but also a record of moods of the society known for its flexibility. They cannot be valued so much for the philosophical import as for the various stages of the psychological structures of the society (IX).

Thus, a 'Purana' is a legend for all times. There are Eighteen Puranas in Hindu tradition which can be categorized according to their narratological approach, into two broad types namely 'itihasa Purana'

(iti = thus, ha=it, asa=was) glorifying a historical event or 'sthala Purana' = glorifying a geographical place or town and its tradition. *Medicine River* by Thomas King can doubtlessly be referred to as a 'sthala Purana', while his short story 'Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre' has strong elements of both kinds of 'Puranas'.

In *Medicine River*, the town of Medicine River and its people, where the protagonist lives, revives the bondage between the two. The town, its landscape and the welcome he receives from its people influence the hero to accept this place as his own and also transform his way of thinking. This 'Purana' can be called a 'Sthala Purana', where 'Sthala'—the geographical place—attracts attention throughout and in fact becomes the central figure. When the writer adopts the approach of rewriting history in his novel, he keeps the entire community at the focus in spite of having one character being a hero or a heroine. Since it is tradition and history that he wishes to propagate, the novel presents a particular view where one comes across a strong feeling of community. There is an absence of an individual voice and the voice of a few characters is the voice of the entire community. While talking about Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Juneja states that it "transcends the historical by blending observation, memory and imagination of the individual consciousness to merge into the mythical consciousness of a nation" (93). While in *Kanthapura* the story is told by the consciousness of an old woman narrator, Achakka, in *Medicine River* the story of the town and its community is narrated by the photographer Will Horseshoe with an indirect help of his gossipier friend Harlen Bigbear. While Will undergoes a self-realization process along with his narration, Harlen supplies other historical, geographical, economic, social and political data. Thus, the two together paint a vivid picture of this all important 'sthala' – place which is important to Will for personal reasons, to Harlen for both personal and general reasons, and to the entire Native community for it presents a microcosm of their world. The narration becomes, as Juneja observes "a mélange of memories, rumors, gossip, newspaper reporting, etc. mixed with folk-humour, folk wisdom and nostalgia – all located in a living village" (93).

Medicine River presents on its canvas, a picture of a small private Indian community. Thomas King (of Cherokee descent) weaves many personal and engaging stories with a deceptive appearance of lightness. With gentle persuasion and light tone, he slips his serious message into the reader's consciousness. The structure of the novel focuses on the return of photographer Will Horseshoe from Toronto to the town of Medicine River in Southern Alberta and his gradual immersion in the community. The novel opens with a letter which, Will remembers, was written by his father to his mother and is juxtaposed with his present

dwelling in Medicine River. In fact most of the chapters in the novel juxtapose episodes from Will's childhood or his life in Toronto with vignettes focusing on characters from the town or the nearby Reserve.

It is such juxtapositioning that helps to shift the emphasis from Will to the community thereby highlighting the 'history' in the 'story' and his relationship with the same. As commonly found in much Native Canadian writing, King also gives landscape a great emphasis and describes the location and physical surroundings of Medicine River conveying the strong attachment of Natives to Nature. Such descriptions by King also echo the elaborate descriptions of landscapes found in many Puranas. For instance, in the eighth section of *Shrimad Bhagwad*, while narrating the incident of 'Gajendra Moksh', one finds a detailed description of the pond in which a group of elephants are showering themselves. This is to say that both King and Puranas stress the elaborate description of a geographical place or a landscape in order to show the basic bondage between human beings and their physical surroundings.

Medicine River is located east of the Rocky Mountains in Canada. One almost feels that this community could be any small Native community of Canada. The opening description illustrates the universal nature of the community. Almost immediately, though very gradually, the writer moves on to introduce a very important character, Harlen Bigbear, by comparing him with the Prairie wind, connecting the individual and the landscape in the process, thus hinting at the basic bondage of people and environment.

While talking about the community of Medicine River, Garry William in his essay *Thomas King's Medicine River: A Review* observes, "There is an odd and unspoken polarization within the community...there is hardly any noteworthy interaction between the Native and non-Native people in Medicine River" (118). The basket ball team which Will joins is a Native team, the family group photograph which he is asked to take is that of an extended Native family, he goes for drinks with Native friends. Besides Harlen, the most personal involvement that he has is with Louise Heavyman, a Native woman. Such kind of separateness is maintained not just by Natives, but also by non-Natives. If there is a co-existence between the two communities, it is an imposed, reluctant one. Thus, Medicine River is a private Native community where everyone knows what everyone else does. It is a community which is fighting for survival, carrying certain stereotypical labels such as the character Clyde Whiteman who acquires the label of a criminal through no fault of his own.

A very important feature of the novel is that there are different levels of time in the story. Firstly, there are two different time senses of Will and

Harlen. Will has a European sense of time, always bothered about its passage, while for Harlen, time does not matter when it comes to any event in the community. There are two other levels of time that are quite significant. These levels are connected with the structures of many chapters forming separate parts; one dealing with an earlier time in Will's life and another in which time unfolds even as the narrator lives in it. This process is established by the author right in the beginning when he frequently mentions the letters from Will's childhood: the ones written by his father to his mother, thereby juxtaposing the past and the present.

A very interesting observation is made by Gerry William regarding the time element in the novel. He says,

the setting is ambiguous about the exact time of the story as a whole. We know only that it is contemporary to air-planes and cars. Again this ambiguity is as deliberate as the general nature of the town itself. This story is a story universal to the time and place of modern day prairie life and to Native communities in general (120).

This reminds one of an observation regarding the time element in Puranas made by Horace Wilson in *Analysis of the Puranas* which says,

Although they have no dates attached to them, yet circumstances are sometimes mentioned or alluded to, or references to authorities are made, or legends are narrated, or places are particularized of which the comparatively recent date is indisputable, and which enforce a corresponding reduction of the antiquity of the work in which they are discovered (vi).

Will remembers his first visit to Medicine River and the first time he met Harlen Bigbear. Will had joined his brother James at Medicine River to attend his mother's funeral and was going to leave on the same day with the conviction that it was the end of all his relations with the place. While he was sure he would never even think of settling down in that very place, Harlen Bigbear—a friend of James—seemed to be certain beyond any doubt that Will would be settling down in Medicine River, for he had started efforts to convince him on day one. Harlen knew that Will wanted to actually get away, but then he also knew that Will was an Indian and that Medicine River was his own. We slowly get a clear picture of Harlen Bigbear's character. Will says "Harlen Bigbear was my friend, and being Harlen's friend was hard" (11) and "Harlen Bigbear was like the prairie wind. You never knew when he was coming or when he was going to leave" (1). While discussing the character of Harlen, Herb Wylie in his essay *Trust Tonto: Thomas King's subversives Fiction and the Politics of cultural literacy* observes,

Harlen is at once a force of chaos meddling in Will's life and complicating the life of the community in general, is gossipy, verbally slippery, and contradictory but he is also a force for healing, attempting to smooth over disagreements, to ease the pain of others, and to encourage respect for tradition (112).

The credit for Will's finding a sense of community in Medicine River largely goes to Harlen Bigbear. The relationship of Will and Harlen with their almost similar environment is also different. For whatever reasons Will does not feel a part of any community. Toronto failed to offer him a satisfactory professional life, so he decided to settle down in Medicine River, despite the fact that the place brought him painful childhood memories. Whereas Harlen not only knows everyone, he has a deep sense of understanding of the place and its importance. He feels a strong emotional commitment to place where he lives. Harlen belongs to Medicine River and is an undetachable part of its setting and its people. One cannot think of Medicine River without thinking of Harlen Bigbear.

Right from his first meeting with Will, Harlen had been trying to convince the latter to come to Medicine River for permanent settlement. He showed the bondage between an Indian and the landscape when he tells Will, "You see over there...Ninastiko...Chief Mountain. That's how we know we're home" (93). He waves Will a goodbye with a confident smile on his face, which is how Will had found him the moment he returned to Medicine River after a period of unemployment in Toronto. Prior to that, he had collected all information about the possibilities of opening a studio in Medicine River. After making him aware of the problems with the existing studio in the town, like "too expensive," "not too friendly on the phone," "Eddie says the guy doesn't like Indians", Harlen promises Will that there was "no competition for an Indian photographer" (95). His promise was not just verbal. He helped Will setting up the studio in every possible way until by the end of the first year, Will was making money. And Harlen also kept the promise that he gave to himself and Will finally did settle down in Medicine River. Through his gossiping, interference in others' lives and his ever positive attitude, he kept both Will and the reader involved in the affairs of the community and thus kept their faith alive.

Thus, Harlen Bigbear, displays the typical ambivalence of a trickster. In fact, he is a character that one can come across in any given community. He is a person with many irritating habits, but is generally likable for most of the time he is as much concerned about individuals as he is about the community to which he belongs.

The opening scenes of the book, along with some of the letters of

Will's father to his mother, inform us of the fact that his father had left the two brothers and their mother on the Reserve and though he displayed a wish to return to his family, he never came back. Every time he mentioned in his letters of coming back, all he actually talked about was, "drop in" and "see you and the boys, may be take you out to dinner and a show" (2). The idea of settling down with her and the children, it seems, never even crossed his mind. That is why those letters brought nothing but pain and agony to her and she kept them concealed in a private trunk, away from her children's sight, and reacted strongly when Will read them.

Rose, Will's mother, was rejected as an outcast by her family the day she married the non-Native Bob and, along with her children, was never accepted in totality even after her husband left. When Will expresses a wish to go back to the Reserve, he is snubbed by his cousin Maxwell on the grounds that as his mother had married a White man they were no longer Indians. They finally settled in Medicine River, a town after all, because while it was an unspoken law for the Indians, it was a matter of pride for Rose to go back to the Reserve. Obviously, all Will felt for his father was hatred and resentment, as whatever he offered Rose was limited and meant suffering and pain.

Through juxtapositioning between Will's childhood incidents and his present experience in Medicine River, we get a reflection into Will's personality. Apart from his physical structure, Will was never an outstanding personality. As a child, he tried to explore his artistic talents as did his younger brother James who "could draw any animal you wanted" (12), but proved to be a failure. Giving him assurance that he should not have any regrets about it, his mother told him that he could be an athlete. However, even in basketball he failed. Thus, when Harlen insisted that he must play with the team irrespective of his 40 years of age, he agreed reluctantly for "it wasn't the flattery (by Harlen) as much as it was the memories and the guilt" (14). In spite of his consistent failures, Will is always at peace with himself; this is where his sensitivity matches his maturity. It is due to this match of sensitivity and maturity perhaps, that his perception of his surroundings and community appears to be absolutely clear.

In fact, even as far as his relationship with Louise Heavyman is concerned, Will was fully aware that she never wanted the restrictions of a married life and would never agree to marry him. Will was always a little more than a friend to her without even putting a claim on her, no matter how much he personally wished to do so. It is his sensitive self that makes him go out of the way to help Louise: to the extent that he saved her embarrassment in front of the hospital staff by not correcting them

when they took him to be the father of Louise's daughter. However, his wisdom helps him from feeling depressed when both his presence and absence at the hospital went unnoticed.

The author once again juxtaposes the incident of the death of Jake, the husband of Will's cousin, with that of the White woman Mrs. Oswald, who living in Will's neighbourhood, was always trying hard to hide the marks of her husband's physical abuse. When Will narrates Mrs. Oswald's words "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians" (44), one feels the issue of male dominance is as real with Whites as with Natives. With such juxtapositioning, King remarkably serves two purposes. For one thing, he gives a universal touch to the novel by questioning the very basic issues of human life such as male dominance. One can see this particularly when we find Elwood justifying such gender abuses by saying, "Fellow puts a woman in her place once in a while don't give her any call to shoot him. Hell, we'd all be dead" (50). There is no doubt that the issue of male dominance is a more serious and intense problem than that of racism. Secondly, as Wylie observes, "This juxtapositioning of vignettes helps to disperse the emphasis from Will to the community and his relationship to it" (112). Thus, it takes the narrative to a general level from a personal one.

Will's experience with the Friendship Centre gave him an insight into the pride in an Indian. There is a quarrel between Eddie Weasel and Big John – the Director of the Friendship Centre. The trouble began when Eddie threw a knife at Big John who called him 'a pretend Indian', while the latter was constantly criticized for dressing up and behaving like as a non-Native. After a long drawn quarrel which turned into a serious one, the two did get reconciled and conformed to Harlen's philosophy that "being related was more important than some small difference of opinion or a little name – calling" (71). This example of Indian pride is juxtaposed with the prideful Rose, Will's mother, who refused to accept the nylons as a gift from her best friend Erleen who was a non-Native. Giving more importance to human values, she explained to her sons that "friends don't need to get each other presents" (58). Immediately we come across a counter example when Erleen was caught shop lifting and made all sorts of excuses to save her face in front of a Indian woman like Rose.

The absence of a father in a family had created a sense of rejection in Will. He remembers his coming to terms with his hatred for his father, perhaps because of sheer want of having a father. He says, "I didn't miss him. I didn't even think about him. I had never known the man. So, I began to invent him" (80). So, at one occasion, he told his co-passenger on an airplane that his father was a senior engineer with Petro Canada

– and then sometimes, a pilot, a career diplomat, a photographer and so on. Interestingly, his list of professions for his father never included ‘a rodeo cowboy’. However, his bondage with the Indian community always kept him fearful of being caught and losing face among his people. Will’s imagination of his father becomes so real that he imagines his physical appearance and starts building stories around him, thereby, one feels, having a complete family. The absence of a father in childhood is now replaced by a very satisfying and ideal father, because, “Most of all, I liked to point out, he loved his family” (94). A very interesting feature can be observed here. His imaginary father is always helping some people, thereby most of the time belonging to the side of ‘haves’ and not ‘have nots’. Considering the former group to be the Whites, and the latter to be Indians, once again one can not help feeling that Will wants to be with the former group.

Disownment by the father, consequently followed by the out-casting by the mother’s community, left Will alienated and full of dejection. Thus, alienation followed by isolation became a part of life for Will and throughout the novel one finds him to be totally indifferent towards his Native surroundings. He has no passion to be identified with the Native community, nor with the non-Native community. Thus, Will is almost a non-entity for the community of Medicine River, though we get some glimpses of a hidden wish to be noticed in him. Just like Will, the Native community too had been consciously and unconsciously pushed back into non – existence. However, cultural tenacity keeps Will going until both he and the community accept each other. It should be noted that it is the Elders who take the first step in this process i.e. when Floyd’s grandmother invites Will to join the group in their family photograph.

While talking about the American Hotel which had an Indian bar, Will narrates that the place had a lot of character. The original owner had been something of a collector, and the walls were hung with Indian artifacts from the 1920s. Before he died, he told Harlen that he had been “offered almost a million for his Indian stuff by some big museum back east, but he had told the museum people to piss off, he was going to give it all back to the Indians” (81). Truly enough, Indian culture, the author seems to be conveying, is still very much alive, too much so to be put in an historical museum, and will continue to breathe with the next generation to come. The new owner, an indifferent businessman from Edmonton, who had not visited the premises even once, was not interested in bringing about any change. The American Hotel had been there since Will first came to Medicine River, and had been the same since then.

Through some minor characters we get glimpses of the injustices

done to the Indians as in case of Clyde Whiteman who was first arrested for speeding, and then because he was sleeping in the backseat of a car that was driven by robbers. The good athlete Clyde was thus turned into a regular 'jail goer' with a regular police record to identify him as a criminal. In fact, while trying to raise the spirit of Clyde, Will told him that there wasn't a man on the team who had not been in jail. For an Indian in Canada, being in jail is a matter of routine, the crime did not matter. The character of Clyde Whiteman gives us a glimpse on an average sensitive Indian who would have been a successful person without any complexes or reservations but for the fact that he always had bad luck, and as Harlen says, "Wrong place, wrong time" (119). Fully aware of the shame he brought to his own people, Clyde always wanted to do better and rise up to their expectations. But the stereotypical image of an Indian would not allow him to be anything different. Thus, there came a time when he accepted his fate which is why he appears to take it as a part of life.

Joe Bigbear, Harlen's brother, figures as a representation of Indians in the outside world. He had been to many places showing Indian ways to people and laughs at Will who "shakes hands like a damn Indian" (147). He made a fool of himself while showing his Australian friends how an Indian brought home his bacon, thereby indirectly conveying to them that Indians were not good even in their own profession. However, Harlen who is always out to promote Indians, had no reservations against his brother for "No matter who it was, Harlen would always be looking for the good in a person" (151) and that is what an average Indian, King seems to be conveying, is.

As against Joe, there is Lionel James. He is one of the Elders on the Reserve who visited Will to ask his help in getting a credit card for his regular visits all over. He told Will, "I go all over the world now and talk about Indian ways and how my grandparents lived and sometimes I sing a little. I used to dance, too.... Most of the time, I tell stories" (170). Through Lionel James we realize that the world is getting more and more curious about and interested in Indian culture. Although he found it difficult to understand the real reasons why anyone could be so interested in something which is his normal routine. "People want me to talk about what it's like to be an Indian. Crazy World. Lots of while people seem real interested in knowing about Indian. Crazy World" (170). The author seems to be presenting a personal belief that it is old people of the community who possess a true perception on their culture and they are also trying hard to cope with the modern world just as Lionel James wanted to have a credit card which would allow him to be at par with others in every respect. Lionel is a storyteller and tells the world the

stories of Coyote and Raven, thus making people aware of the mythological world of the Indians. He also told stories about today, about some of the people on the reserve. But, he says, "those people in Germany and Japan and France and Ottawa don't want to hear those stories. They want to hear stories about how Indians used to be" (173). In one of his storytelling sessions, Lionel told Will, people just got up and clapped which was repeated almost everywhere. In Japan, they gave him a plaque stating that he was in Japan, thereby acknowledging his presence but completely missing the ideas in his stories. However, he is satisfied to see that the art of storytelling, which was missing in the White world was getting its due recognition. However, Lionel says that he did not wish to continue his travels for he had another very important job to do i.e. to tell his grandchildren those stories, and teach them to understand those stories as their own and not as fairy tales. Here the author touches upon a very important and significant fact: the new Native generation needs to be reminded of its past as much as the rest of world.

Thus, throughout the novel, as Penny Petrone observes, "In fragmentary recollections that intersect the present, Will re-experiences painful childhood memories of family life without a father, as well as memories of a later on-again-off-again relationship with a white woman" (44). What is most appealing is the fact that in the process of talking about the protagonist's past and present life, the author very successfully presents a vivid picture of a common Native community which in spite of being full of chaos – with births, weddings, funerals as well as wife abuse, an RCMP arrest, jail sentences, drinking, suicides etc., – is looking to an optimistic future and is also hell bent with characters like Harlen Bigbear and Lionel James in keeping the Native tradition alive.

Medicine River thus can be called a 'sthala purana' – narrating the saga of the common Native community living in the town of Medicine River. King proves an equally good writer of 'itihasa purana' in his short story 'Joe the painter and the Deer Island Massacre' in his collection *One Good Story, That One*. In fact, this short story involves both kinds of writings. While it celebrates the story of the foundation of the town called Deer Island making it a 'sthala purana', it also presents facts regarding the massacre that took place on Deer Island, thus proving the 'itihasa purana' in it. Narrated by Joe's Indian friend, the story focuses on a pageant of the Deer Island Massacre, when on 31st March 1863, a number of Indians were killed by Whites. Joe is loud and overly friendly and has a habit of blowing his nose into the gutter, which are the factors keeping him away from others. But what is most undesirable about Joe is his honesty. The gossip that he is, Joe knows all the 'secrets' of the town and does not mind announcing them on the top of his lungs in the

form of friendly questions. King gives importance to the community right in the beginning of the story by saying, "Joe the painter knew almost everyone in town and everyone knew Joe" (97). In this manner, Joe mingles with the crowd. Representing an ideal human being, Joe is an honest man, full of civic spirit, "He'd even stand when they played the National Anthem" (100). Motivated by this civic spirit, Joe decides to stage a pageant in the competition that was to be a part of the centennial celebration of their town. Incidentally, the author does not reveal the name of the town and all we know is that it is a part of San Francisco. The name Deer Island is the former name of this town. Joe also asserts his bondage with the town by wanting to stage this pageant. "I live here. And its going to have a birthday, you know.... This is my town" (102) that is reason enough for him for wanting to stage the pageant. After a lot of running about which includes getting an approval from the Mayor, collecting historical data, writing a script, gathering a group of 30 to 40 Indians, etc., Joe finally stages the pageant in a realistic and highly appealing manner. After making his actors enact the bloody event boldly and truthfully, Joe even soliloquizes reflecting the hypocrisy of the Whiteman Larson. He says on behalf of Larson, "I abhor taking of a human life, but civilization needs a strong arm to open the frontier. Farewell, Redman" (116). Along with the Mayor, the audience is paralyzed by Joe's pageant. This was not what they had expected. It had mentioned something which was deemed unmentionable, (which was Joe's habit). Much to the agony of the narrator, the pageant does not win the coveted prize as Joe sees to it that the historical event presented does not lose its truthfulness which is definitely not accepted by the Mayor.

The author conveys some highly significant ideas through this short story and also through the character of Joe. Joe the painter is an honest Whiteman whose white skin does not stop him from acknowledging the true face of history. "You can't muck around with history. It ain't always the way we'd like it to be but there it is. Can't change it," (106) feels Joe. He is fully aware that it is a Native issue and decides to present it as the same. He does not care if his pageant very openly showed the treachery of Matthew Larson and his brothers who 'encroached' on the lands of the Natives living there. He also presented very clearly a scene where the Indian Redbird invites Larson to his camp, offered him gifts of skins and got iron kettles and a Bible in return from Larson. He did not hesitate in enacting when the latter started claiming the land from the former instead of sharing it. Very honestly, Joe makes the narrator say in his monologue to the audience. "The white man takes more than he needs. He is greedy like a bear in the spring" (113). Echoing a hypocritical justification of the Whites, Joe himself, playing the role of Larson, instructs

his brothers to forcibly win the island: "spread out and let none escape. It's God's work...there'll be no peace with Redbird and his people for there can be no peace between Christians and heathens. Steel your hearts to the cries of the Indians...who goes with me to bring the light of civilization to this dark land" (115)? With this Joe has his actors perform an enactment of the massacre.

Joe thus, in his own way, re-creates history and in the process, once again reminds his audience of the tradition of dancing, wearing long hair, etc. Another feature presented here, although very briefly, is the Indian appreciation of honesty, even if it concerned a White man. The story begins with an emphasis on the friendship between Joe – a White man and the narrator – an Indian. And it also ends with "all the people who knew Joe as well as I knew Joe didn't like him. I like Joe" (118). The real reason for liking Joe for the narrator is that Joe was an honest man. Just as Joe appreciates Indian culture and insists on calling the narrator 'Chief', so does the narrator like Joe's honesty. While commenting on the narrator's liking for Joe, Margaret Atwood in her essay "A Double-bladed Knife: Subversive Laughter in Two Stories by Thomas King", says that as far as Joe's presentation of history is concerned, he is not sentimental over this. He does not romanticize the slaughtered Indians, or weep crocodile tears over them now that they are no longer the main competition. He deals with it as simply as a matter of fact, just like blowing his nose. He does not feel any sanctimonious guilt, either. He lays the action out and lets them speak for themselves. However, for these very reasons, people do not like Joe as "most people can't manage honesty" (98).

Thus, King's novel and his story in their own individual manner attempt to revive and retell a tradition, with a hope to help the Native community to identify and reconnect with their roots, which in turn may lead them to demand a distinct future. Remembering history and re-evaluating the same is a cleansing process which will end in a better understanding among human beings whose dream has always been peace and harmony.

To conclude, one can say that in both *Medicine River* and 'Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre', King can be said to have followed the 'Purana' narratology or the narrative technique of storytelling. However the two have achieved the important status of a Purana or a legend as there are present certain universal truths concerning both Natives and general humanity.

References

- Akhtar, Jamna Das ed.
1972 "Introduction." *The Matsya Puranam*. New Delhi: Oriental Publishers.
- Atwood, Margaret
1990 "A Double – Bladed Knife: Subversive Laughter in Two Stories by Thomas King." *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*. ed. W.H. New. Vancouver : UBC Press.
- Carr, E.H.
1961 *What is History*. New York : Knof, 1961.
- Dange, Sindhu S.
1984 "Introduction". *The Bhagavata Purana: Mytho Social Study*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
"Preface". *The Bhagavata Purana: Mytho Social Study*.
1984 Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Juneja, O.P.
1995 *Post Colonial Novel: Narratives of Colonial Consciousness*. New Delhi: Creative Books.
- King, Thomas
1991 'Interview'. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authros*. ed. Hartmut Lutz. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.
- 1993 *One Good Story, That One* Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd.
- 1990 *Medicine River* Toronto : Penguin Books.
- Petrone, Penny
1990 *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, Raja
1938 *Kanthapura*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Shastri, Girijashankar M. (Tr.)
1961 *Shrimad Bhaagwat*, by Maharshi Ved Vyas. Ahmedabad: Sastu Sahitya Mudranalaya.
- Upadhyaya, C.S.
1983 "Preface" *The Naradiya Purana (A Philosophical Study)* Muzaffarpur: Jnananidhi Prakashan.

William, Gerry

1993

"Thomas King's Medicine River: A Review." *Looking At the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. ed. Jeanette Armstrong. Penticton B.C.: Theytus Books Ltd.

Wilson, Horace

1979

Analysis of the Puranas ed. Dr. Reinhold Rost. Delhi: Nag Publishers.

Wylie, Herb

1999

"Trust Tonto": Thomas King's subversive Fiction and Politics of Cultural Literacy" *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*. Summer/Autumn. 161-162.