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## Analysis of Symbols and Images in Ray Young Bear's poem "GRANDMOTHER"

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### Abstract

This paper explores the symbols and images in Ray Young Bear's poem "GRANDMOTHER." He enjoys using the lowercase in his poems. They are symbolically presented, though he seems to violate the grammar rules. He claims that the Mesquaki tribe in North America is misrepresented. The study focuses on the central theme of this poem, "GRANDMOTHER," as the contemporary American Indian's search for identity in America. The poet seems to demand that they must be addressed by mainstream Americans practically as the Americans, not only theoretically. Indeed, Americans have not internalized many other Negroes in America as Americans. Neither have they internalized the Red Indians in North America as the Americans. The condition of North Americans is similar to the state of Black people; as Martin Luther King Jr. has pointed out, even after one hundred years of emancipation and proclamation, there is no acceptance of so-called non-Americans in America practically. The Indian grandmother symbolizes the oldest part of the earth, a rock'. This poem has not been analyzed from a symbolic perspective. The lowercase represents the lost identity of North Americans in America. The study focuses on why the

Mesquaki tribe has been discriminated against in America. The study employs the semiotic theory of Chandler to analyze the poems.

**Keywords:** discriminate, identity, lowercase, North American, symbols.

This paper explores the symbols and images in Ray Young Bear's poem "GRANDMOTHER." Except in the title, he entirely uses the lowercase in his poems. There are two meanings: symbolic and idiosyncratic. They are all symbolically presented, though he seems to violate the grammar rules. He claims that the Mesquaki tribe in North America is misrepresented, or they are like the lower before mainstream Americans. The ruling class, Americans, have not accepted the Black people and Red Indians as American citizens from their core hearts. King Martin Luther Jr. points out that the Negroes in America have not been taken as Americans even after one hundred years of emancipation and proclamation. This is the condition of the Mesquaki tribe in North America. Sundquist forwards what Martin

Luther said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (15-16).

The study focuses on the central theme of this poem, "GRANDMOTHER," as the contemporary American Indian's search for identity in America. The poet seems to demand that they must be addressed by mainstream Americans practically as the Americans, not only theoretically. As Americans have not internalized many other Nigros in America as the Americans, they have not internalized the Red Indians in North America as the Americans.

"There will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America until the Negro is granted citizenship rights" (n.p.). The condition of North Americans is similar to the state of Black people; as Martin Luther King Jr. has pointed out, even after one hundred years of emancipation and proclamation, there is no acceptance of so-called non-Americans in America practically. The Indian grandmother symbolizes the oldest part of the earth, a rock'. This poem has not been analyzed from a symbolic perspective. The lowercase represents the lost identity of North Americans in America. The study focuses on why the Mesquaki tribe has been discriminated against in America. The study employs the semiotic theory of Chandler to analyze the poems.

This paper explores the symbols and images in the poem "GRANDMOTHER" by Ray Young Bear. He enjoys using lowercase in the lyrics as

it is a new style or new taste to the readers on the one hand. On the other hand, there is politics in doing so. They symbolically presented that North Americans are lowercases for ruling-class Americans in America. The poet seems to have violated the grammar rules, but it is his intention. He claims that the Mesquaki tribe in North America is misrepresented. The study focuses on the central theme of this poem, "GRANDMOTHER," as the contemporary American Indian's search for identity in America. The Indian grandmother symbolizes the oldest part of the earth, a rock'. This poem has not been analyzed from a symbolic perspective. The lowercase denotes the lost identity of North Americans in America. The study focuses on why the Mesquaki tribe has been discriminated against in America. This reality is depicted in the poem. The Red Indians are the Native Americans, and their sociopolitical condition is like the lower. Bear's grandmother wears a purple scarf and carries a plastic shopping bag, as the stereotypical Indian grandmother. Bear's poem is like Martin Luther's speech as "His speech "I Have a Dream" became the defining moment in the struggle for civil rights" (King Jr. & Nelson n. p.). Similarly, he wants equal rights between North Americans and mainstream Americans.

Comparatively, Martin Luther's speech is compassionate, whereas Bear's poem is not like that, but their intention is the same, and their issues are the same. The only difference we find is that King Jr.'s speech is a threat, whereas Bear's poem is tricky for gaining the identity. His

poem is not like this, "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights" (King Jr. & Nelson n. p.). This is King Jr.'s threatening speech, as he and his community have been too irritated by Americans' behaviors. Bear does not seem to have threatened, but his dream is not different from the dream of Martin Luther. The main thrust of the study is to analyze the symbolic meanings of the poem. There are several poems composed by Bear, and the following lines are from his poem "DOORS":

The door never opened  
to which he died and was taken  
elsewhere. (Lines 11-13).

These lines indicate that someone is willing to enter the room or a house, but the door is not opened, and the person willing to enter is dead. This is the marginalized person like Negro or Red Indian who wanted to enter the center. The door never opened for them. The entry is the gate symbol for non-Americans living in America for a long time. Perhaps their history might be much longer than that of so-called mainstream Americans. The door also symbolizes the hindrance to the marginalized people in America. The dead body was disposed of somewhere like that of animals or so. This is the condition of marginalized communities in America.

Images like a purple scarf, plastic shopping bag, rock, warm and damp hands, roots, sleeping fire, and ash symbolize different meanings. The rock symbolizes the oldest part of the earth or the Red Indians in North America. They are as old as the rock. The plastic bag and

purple scarf suggest poverty, whereas warm, damp hands and roots indicate farm life. The Native Americans are not office workers. They do not have access to it because of qualifications and marginalization. Many of them do not have access to university education. They are primarily manual workers, and their income level is limited. The poet would easily recognize his grandmother even from a long distance. He would recognize her because her get-up was distinct as she was used to wearing a purple scarf and carrying plastic shopping. Because of this stereotypical appearance, she would be recognized. The title is in uppercase, but the poem's body is lowercase. This shows that the poet's inner desire is to be capitalistic. The capital letter symbolizes the Central Americans, and the small letters North Americans.

On the other hand, this poem has tried to draw the readers' attention differently. The readers perceive the meanings of this poem through sense organs: nose, eyes, skin, and ear. Except for the tongue, four sense organs have been activated in the poem. Peirce pinpoints, "Some writers insist that all experience consists in sense-perception; and I think it is probably true that every element of experience is in the first instance applied to an external object" (74). The rock and sleeping fire are the external objects through which different people perceive different messages and meanings. According to his/her sense perception, these external objects, 'rock' and 'sleeping fire,' have different denotative and connotative meanings.

What element of experience is in the first instance of a person applied? It depends on. If a person's first instance of the rock were for a stone-hearted person, he would not think of this as the oldest part of the earth.

Ray Young Bear would recognize his grandmother even from a mile away because of her purple scarf and plastic shopping bag, is the sight (eyes); he would quickly know her when she put her warm, damp hands on his head from the back side the feeling (skin); he would know her, for her hands were full of the smell of roots is the sense of smell (nose); and he would readily recognize her voice even if it came from the rock is the sense of hearing (ear). In this way, Bear has activated the sense organs like eyes—sight, skin—feel, nose—smell, and ear—voice. About eyes, Roizen et al. argue that "humans have their eyes set closer together than many other animals, which gives us wonderful depth perception." This is when the poet sees his grandmother from a long distance and recognizes her without fail. What he sees is his grandmother, and what images he denotes are her purple scarf and the plastic shopping bag she always carries. In addition to this, "They allow us a detailed view of the world's beauty. That's what your eyes—and all of your senses—do. They gather information from the outside world so that your brain can process it and decide what it wants to do with that information" (Roizen et al.). Bear sees his grandmother from a mile away and easily recognizes her because of her get-up. She always wears the same purple scarf and plastic shopping bag. She does not have

sufficient money to purchase the dresses occasionally. This symbolizes that the purchasing capacity of the Mesquaki tribe people is not good. The American is responsible for such a pathetic condition of these people.

Most poets or scholars do not care about using lowercase in poems. Still, this technique allows the readers or audience to perceive the insight from the literary piece of writing like poetry, essay, or story. It is not only the mind that perceives the messages from the text; it is sense organs that help perceive. Human perception is through both the mind and sense organs. The poet regards his grandmother as all-loving and inspiring, symbolizing history and a source of his knowledge or everything for Bear. The grandparents are always loving and inspiring for all humans. Most people take knowledge about history and other necessary information from their elders, like grandfathers or grandmothers. So, this poem reflects the trend of transferring knowledge from one generation to another. This is the universal implication of the poem. He recites:

and her words  
would flow inside me  
like the light  
of someone  
stirring ashes  
from a sleeping fire  
at night. (Lines 19-25)

The poet's grandmother would be every source of inspiration for him. Whatever didactic things she spoke, all her words would flow inside him like the light of someone. The light is the image of

insight. His grandmother's words would enlighten him. The fire would not have slept while stirring ashes from a sleeping fire. This image has deep meant that the North Americans, the Masquaki tribe, are like the sleeping fire. Their desire to acquire equal rights is like sleeping fire, the inner current. When one sees from the outside, there is just the ash; there is no fire. But once the ash is stirred, the glowing fire is there. Similarly, the desire of North Americans to have an identity is like the sleeping fire. They are not what others see them. This applies to every human he is, not what one sees him from his perspective. Similarly, the poet has a different image of hearing the voice coming from a rock. Rock is a bad conductor of sound, but the poet would hear his grandmother's voice even if it came from a rock. This is symbolic that the rock is the image of disturbance as well as strength and longevity. However, the poet claims that nothing can be a hindrance between the members of North America. The unity of the Masquaki tribe is so strong that it is beyond someone's imagination.

if i heard  
a voice  
coming from  
a rock  
I'd know  
and her words (lines 14-19)

In the lines, the voice symbolizes the claim of equality. This poem is about the voice and the quest for identity. Likewise, the rock symbolizes the permanency and eternity that the North Americans have been living there from time immemorial.

But the ruling class people with decision-making power never grant equal rights. On the other hand, this poem inspires and influences the readers to be loyal to the elders. Respecting the elders in the family is a well-established culture that has developed since human civilization began. In this regard, this poem also disseminates the messages of becoming disciplined and accultured. Uncultured activities need to be entertained. Therefore, this poem is the source of good culture.

### **Research Methods and Materials**

The research is qualitative. The study methods are based on libraries and websites as secondary data and empirical. The study does not incorporate primary data. The study adopts the semiotic theory to explore the symbolic meanings of the poems. The study interprets the symbols and images of the poems. This paper concerns the images and symbols of the poem, but it also interprets some contextual signs. The poet has used different images to reflect different meanings as "images cannot 'resemble' the referents of abstract ideas. However, images can be used symbolically to represent objects associated with abstract concepts" (Chandler 46). Bear uses the image of a 'rock.' What he means to represent by this object has multiple meanings. The general interpretation of rock means the oldest part of the earth. It symbolizes the long history of Red Indians living in North America, but the Central Americans still do not address their identities practically. Though intended ideas might differ, these are abstract ideas and abstract concepts. The images like the

sleeping fire and the rock symbolize the firm belief in the poet that change is possible and their identity is granted. This also suggests that if one's willpower is strong and he is in winter, his spring and success are near. After all, the poet's main intention concerns the identity of the Mesquaki tribe. The purple color scarf is a sign of the beauty of North America. Danesi says, "[a] sign is anything-a- a color, a gesture, a wink, an object, a mathematical equation, that stands for something other than itself. As we saw, the word red qualifies as a sign because it does not stand for the sounds *r-e-d* that comprise it, but rather for a certain kind of color and other things" (4). Likewise, the purple color in the poem does mean the beauty of North Americans. The purple scarf is the stereotypical Indian grandmother, as most Indians and Tarai people wear the red scarf on their neck, and it is their indication to general people in Nepal.

Similarly, Danesi presents the ideas as "[w]ords, gestures, and symbols are examples of conventional signs. In modern-day semiotic theory, these are divided into verbal and nonverbal words and other linguistic structures (expressions, phrases, etc.) are examples of verbal signs; drawings and gestures are examples of nonverbal signs" (7). In the poem of Bear, the purple scarf, plastic shopping bag, roots, rock, and sleeping fire are the non-verbal signs. They signify different things that cannot be predicted. The meanings are beyond the general interpretation.

### **Discussions and Results**

The study explores and examines the symbols and images in Ray Young Bear's poem "GRANDMOTHER. "The poem's main body is all in lowercase, whereas the title is in uppercase. This symbolizes that the poet has the intention of being capitalistic. Being capital might be equal to other Americans. The poet uses the lowercase in the poem's body, but he uses the uppercase in the title. And he uses short sentences through which he makes a pile that stands as a tree. What do they symbolize? They symbolize that Bear wants equal rights, identity, and recognition simultaneously. All the titles are in uppercase, symbolizing that his ultimate goal is to be in capital letters, not small ones. The structures of "THE GRANDMOTHER" look like the image of a tree that grows upward. This is what the wish of Native Americans is. The speaker in the poem, THE GRANDMOTHER, claims that his grandmother is easily recognized even from a mile away because of her purple scarf and plastic shopping bag, as they were stereotypical identities of Indians living in North America. They were the Native Americans, but the American constitution had not recognized them as citizens of America.

The socioeconomic and political condition of the Mesquaki tribe, the Red Indians, is pathetic, alarming, and appalling, though they are in America. Burrell states, "Indeed, ethnic and racial minorities remain far more likely to be undereducated, unemployed, and incarcerated than their counterparts who identify as White" (n. p.). It is Red Indians who are ethnic and racial minorities. They

are not well educated and qualified because of the state's unequal, discriminatory treatment of them. They seem to have been deprived of several opportunities. White people discriminate, instrumentalize others, and dominate them. So, there is a kind of prose of otherness, as we find in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. The poet's grandmother is not well educated and employed. She is the representative figure. Several Red Indians have been living in pathetic conditions for ages. She goes to her field, where she works as a manual worker, so her hands often smell roots. She belongs to racial minority in North America, and her financial condition is not sound. This is indicated by her purple scarf and plastic shopping bag. She does not have sufficient money to change her clothes and bags repeatedly.

Although the issue of Bear is otherwise, it is about the discrimination against Native Americans, the Mesquaki tribe, "a belief fueled by the color-blind assumption that racial discrimination was a thing of the past and that everyone working hard had an equal chance to become successful" (d'Appollonia 74). The poet's grandmother is still working hard and has an equal chance of succeeding in her target. It means all the members of that tribe have the opportunity to have their identities. Discrimination is a problem deeply rooted in the minds of the oppressed groups that they cannot avoid. To settle the issue, Apollonia came up with an idea. This is about how to fix the problem. Apollonia suggests, "[t]he ultimate challenge is therefore to envisage

and implement a more modest but effective deradicalization strategy. American society has been historically structured in such a way that it is almost impossible to escape from the labyrinth of racial categorizations" (202). The deradicalization strategy might be the ultimate weapon of the solution to wash the polluted mentality from the labyrinth of racial categorizations.

Moreover, Bear has presented different images and symbols that connote different meanings. There is a difference between interpretive meaning and intended meaning. What is the intended meaning of the image, 'the rock'? Does it symbolize the oldest part of the earth or something more? The interpretative meaning is close to the truth, not the exact meaning. Peirce argues, "What we see is an image; what we say is a judgment, and is as utterly disparate to any image as can be. But we have a sense that it is the perceptual image that determines the judgment somewhat as the real object determines the percept" (47). There are several images in Bear's poem: a purple scarf, a plastic shopping bag, a rock, a root, a sleeping fire, and ash. All these objects indicate the poverty and farm life of Native Americans. If things like a purple scarf and plastic shopping bags are images, poverty is a judgment. Bear's grandmother's plastic shopping bag was stereotypical to recognize her. Who wears the purple scarf, and who carries the plastic shopping bag? The answer would be that it is an Indian grandmother in North America. The images of the purple scarf and plastic shopping bags were the tags of Native Americans, the Mesquaki

tribe. These objects determine the perceptions of other people.

### Conclusion

The study was carried out to explore the images and symbols of Ray Young Bear's poem "GRANDMOTHER." These images and symbols were interpreted to investigate the intended meanings of the poet. There were several images like the purple scarf and plastic shopping bag that symbolize poverty; rock, the oldest part of the earth as well as the Masquaki tribe who have been living in North America for a long time; sleeping fire the inner current of North Americans, the desire to be equal to the other Americans and to be free from the oppression; the smell of roots the farm life; and the ash the permanency respectively. The ash color never fades. Similarly, the firm belief and willpower of Red Indians cannot fade out until or unless they acquire their rights.

Thus, this poem deals with the symbolic meanings and the usual trend of transferring pieces of knowledge from one generation to another as it is the universal implication. There are two main images: rock and sleeping fire. They represent the firm decision to acquire equal rights. As the rock is still and static and robust, the sleeping fire is another image of the North American's firm decision. This interpretation shows they will never be satisfied until they get an equal existence in America. This research paper focused on merely symbolic meanings, but other scholars and researchers can go with the historical and social aspects of the Mesquaki tribe in North America. There is

no description of how social, economic, and cultural elements matter in life. This issue will be another exciting topic of research work.

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