

In Conflict with the Self: A Study of Ruby Slipperjack's Novel, *Weesquachak and the Lost Ones*

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Abstract: Written by Ruby Slipperjack Ferral, an Ojibway writer and educator, *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* tells the story of a nineteen years old girl who feels trapped in her life, her loneliness and her struggle to realize her Self. The experiences are natural and autobiographical. In fact, Ruby is palpably present in her works. In *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* she becomes Janine (full of hopes and uncertainties, ready to run into city life that seems to promise her liberation and good life, yet unable to cut herself off the roots), in *Honour The Sun 'the Owl'* (a young girl growing up in an isolated Annishnawbe community in North western Ontario), and in *Silent Words* Danny Lynx (a boy on a long journey moving through various Native communities). This way Ms Slipperjack assumes the role of that native trickster character 'Whee-skay-chak' who is supposed to have the power of transformation. The article discusses inner conflict and crisis that arises from one's environment. The crisis become worse when we start liking the ways of living that are other than our own. Exactly this happens to Charlie making her otherwise simple choices extremely difficult – and the collateral damage is emotional isolation.

Keywords: Loneliness, Inner-conflict, Crisis, Culture, Tradition, Self, Maturation

Loneliness is a conduct that is highly communicable in nature. Lonely people come in all shapes and sizes; even age has little to do with it. Erich Fromm sees freedom as the basic human condition that throws up a psychological problem. According to his theory of psychoanalyses humans have gained freedom through their relative mastery of nature; however, the price of this freedom is a pervasive sense of separation and loneliness. To be human, according to Dr. Fromm, is to be lonely because we are separated from other people and from nature. And we have basic temptation to try to escape these feelings of loneliness, not by creating a society that might better fulfill our needs, but by creating new forms of dependency and domination. Fromm posited three mechanisms which he saw people try as ways to escape the demands of freedom – *automaton conformity, authoritarianism, and destructiveness*. By 'automaton conformity' Fromm means 'changing our ideal self into what we perceive to be the preferred personality type in our society or social reference group, it leads to losing our true self. The person who uses this escape mechanism can be described as 'social chameleon' who adopts the prevailing personality pattern as a kind of protective layer to avoid

standing out from the crowd. The second mechanism, authoritarianism refers to allowing ourselves to be controlled by another. The third mechanism, destructiveness refers to any process that attempts to eliminate other people or the world as a whole in order to escape freedom.

According to a recent issue of *The Economist* reports, John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago and his colleagues concluded that loneliness travels in clusters. As quoted in the magazine, their report says that normally if one person in any given network or group of people articulated feelings of loneliness, sooner or later that feeling would find resonance in others. Those who were in immediate contact with the agent of loneliness were around fifty per cent more likely than average to feel lonely themselves. Living an independent life free from inner conflicts and crises is everybody's dream. But its realization is not as simple as it sometimes seems. Merely possessing material comforts can no way assure that elusive peace and harmony. Apart from the genetic information there are elements of environment and, of course, our self esteem. The major responsible factor, I believe, for our crises is 'conflict'. Conflict occurs when a person feels pulled toward or drawn to two or more desires or goals but only one of which may be attained. And the crisis is further compounded by the situation when a person feels drawn to a culture other than his own. The problem is particularly worse for the people who belong to colonized groups and want to identify with the colonizers, and face racial discrimination which aggravate the crisis further. Caught in such turmoil, they are bound to respond in a certain way so as to defend their 'ego'.

Janine (Charlie) is the lost one in the novel under consideration – *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones*. Charlie has glimpses of Ruby Slipperjack Ferral – “It was 1972. I was nineteen years old and I felt trapped in my life. I was suffocating! But I was on my way to find out what I could do for myself.” (Slipperjack, 2000:5) – It is interesting to note that Dr Slipperjack was born in 1952 and was nineteen years in 1972. The story is located in times and places as Ruby experienced herself. Writing in first person, as a stylistic devise, provides the writer a space in the narrative to become the character he/she has created. Especially in the case of Ruby Slipperjack, an Ojibway writer and educator, the experiences are very natural and autobiographical in nature – In *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* she becomes Janine (full of hopes and uncertainties, ready to run into city life that seems to promise her liberation and good life, yet unable to cut herself off the roots), in *Honour The Sun* 'the Owl' (a young girl growing up in an isolated Annishnawbe community in North western Ontario), and in *Silent Words* Danny Lynx (a boy on a long journey moving through various Native communities). This way Ms Slipperjack assumes the role of that native trickster character 'Whee-skay-chak' who is supposed to have the power of transformation. As a literary character 'the trickster' is capable of taking on any shape needed for the narration –

a human male, a human female, a rabbit, a tree, a bird, a frog, and anything that the narrator could think of. In contemporary literature, the trickster of aboriginal oral stories is made to consider becoming a Bingo Master, a Rock Artist, a beautiful lady, or anything that suits the writer's purpose. That is why for Ruby Slipperjack becoming Danny Lynx of *Silent Words* was as easy as it was to become 'the Owl' of *Honour The Sun* and Janine of *Weesquachak*.

In the stillness of the dawning light, I folded my wings closed to my body and welcomed the pungent odour of my wolf scent. It is the sense of smell that first invades my present form in the process of transformation. It is the smell of man that I find most abhorrent when I move from the wolf into the shape of a man... brrrr! The fur on the back of my neck literally stands on end! Only my stealth and senses shift when I move from dog to wolf. My mind changes the most from any form to that of the raven. I am anything I want to me. I am he. I am she. I am it. I am.... (Slipperjack, 2000:202)

This transforming character has several other names used by the First Nations authors – Weesquachak (Whee-skay-chak), Nanabush, Gluscaba, Coyote, Raven. Those who have read Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* will recognize him as the Whiskey Jack character. Notwithstanding the onslaught of several cute and fascinating western characters, this trickster tricked itself into survival, for example in novel *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* by Ruby Slipperjack – even the novel has been named after it. Probably Ms Slipperjack has paid tribute to this character who has been present in the oral tradition for “at last fifty thousand complete seasons of winter, spring, fall and summer” (Kenny, 1992:130).

Set in northern Ontario, *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* (a contemporary story) explores the conflict between traditional and contemporary. Narrated in first person the story starts with graphic details of the physical surroundings which correspond with the inner feelings of Janine (also Channine and Channie) a nineteen years old girl who is feeling trapped in her life. As for names and naming is concerned, Ms Slipperjack speaks with the ease of the educator in her:

‘Charlie’ ... well. When we were kids, my family just called me ‘Channie’ but to the others, I was known as ‘Channine’ because there is no ‘J’ sound in the Ojibway language for ‘Janine’. It becomes ‘Ch’ and it soon became shortened to ‘Channie’ which sounds exactly the same as the Chanii they use for the name ‘Charlie’. Chanii is the Ojibway translation of Charlie since there are no ‘r’ or ‘l’ sounds in the ojibway language, they become ‘n’ sounds in Ojibway. So, I therefore, am Charlie. (Slipperjack, 2000:24)

As far as name and naming is concerned, it is an important element in a person's being. In this regard Anthony Giddens says that a person's name is a primary element in his biography; practices of social naming, how far names express kin relations, whether or not names are changed at certain stages of life – all these things differ between cultures. Similarly, in *Silent Words* Ms Slipperjack further instructs her readers about names, local

code-system of naming, and socio-personal aspects of names:

"Jim. They call me Ol' Jim. There is a young man back there who is called Jim. That is why I am Ol' Jim."

Ol' Jim. That fits! What other name he possibly have had? So how would Henry's father, Jim, explained this particular name? Because, if memory serves me, he had said that "the human being is shaped by the name he is given because personality and appearance is attached to a given name and that is how he or she will be treated and expected to behave." (Slipperjack, 1992:95)

Weesquachak enters the narrative of *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* on the very first page teasing and playing tricks with the protagonist, participating in her life (as he/she is an essential and natural part of Annishnawbe community). The southward flight of sea-gulls, the sky heavy with low gray clouds, and flies fluttering over the dead flowers and bushes are the Mother Nature's external equivalent of Charlie's hope for good (English) city life along with her confidence and apprehension – "I was going to find a job! I had said that with such a confidence but in all truth, all I had was a high school diploma. I wasn't proud of that though, because I knew that I couldn't even do grade eleven math. They had just passed me along and no one cared if I could actually do things at that grade level. Oh, I hated high school!" (Slipperjack, 2000:5)

As a sensitive writer, Ms Slipperjack, through Weesquachak's soliloquy, reveals how Annishnawbe people are moving away from the oral tradition of storytelling due to the increasing influence of English. The traditional characters like the trickster or Weesquachak of Annishnawbe folk culture are struggling for survival leaving the present literate (educated and English speaking) generation in the state of transition (read confused). This twilight consciousness creates a state of power equation between native ways and English (read city/good) living, between Ojibway and English language, and between aboriginals and settlers.

They forgot about me. Their children have never even heard of me. The adults don't remember me anymore. The old have no one to listen but I...I will not be forgotten! I will make them know that I still exist. I will make them get to know me again. I exist. I am here, always have been – right among them. Now, I've been watching this girl. She comes and goes and does not seem to know what she is supposed to do. She seems lost. I saw her coming out of the cabin this morning. Good looking girl. Interesting...but I don't think she likes me. Maybe she doesn't like ravens. Hmmm, perhaps she likes me better soft and quiet. (2000:7)

In fact, Weesquachak and his tricks apart, Charlie's problems lie largely in inner conflicts and cultural crisis. Sigmund Freud postulated the existence, within the human psyche, of an irrational, craving 'id' and a perceptually and socially aware 'ego'. A part of the psyche called the 'superego' develops in response to the need for moral behavior independent of immediate behavioural consequences. The process of superego formation is put in motion by the restraints, rules, and

regulations conveyed by the child's caretakers (parents and guardians). Superego is a person's moral guard. Charlie is a girl with weak or almost absent superego, who, according to the famous psychoanalyst, Dr Heinz Kohut's theory, seems to be suffering from narcissistic character disorder. (According to the ancient Greek myth, Narcissus is a handsome youth who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Waiting for the reflection to respond to him, he pines away and eventually dies. In line with this myth, a narcissistic personality is characterized by total self involvement, lack of empathy, no concern for others, and feelings of grandiosity.)

According to Sigmund Freud, narcissists have invested all their libidinal energy in themselves, never reaching the genital stage of development in which libidinal energy is invested in attachments to others. But Heinz Kohut sees narcissistic disorder as evidence of changes in society, which has produced changes in the nature of the problem for which people seek professional help. It is interesting to see that where Freud's patients suffered from too strong superego, Kohut found his patients suffering from the consequences of a weak or absent superego.

If a child's parents are too weak to fear or negligent and distant to idealize, or even missing altogether, the child has no psychic material for the formation of a superego. People lacking an adequate superego have no understanding of rules, of social justice, or of the finer points of interpersonal communication. They feel rather empty. They experience an emotional void, are unable to connect to their immediate environment and (the worst) may seek high level of artificial stimulation in a useless pursuit of filling the inner vacuum.

Charlie never experienced the love of a doting father, and the loving hug of a caring mother. Her father died when she was quite young. Her mother was in a sanatorium for tuberculosis treatment for five years, and her one lung had to be removed for it. She went away (in sanatorium) when Charlie was about six, and when she came back Charlie hardly knew her. So she never knew a mother's love when she was a child. Charlie reveals her inner conflict to her counselor friend Linda. She feels utterly alienated and rootless because of psychological, environmental and cultural reasons. She wants to be free, independent and away from the 'stifling' environment of Ojibwa community. Quite sensitive and aware of her predicament, she writes her diary "... I had said goodbye to my community yesterday, knowing that I may not be coming back and had not told them about it. The hurt is more intense on leaving Mom, but then I always felt that I had lost Mom when my step-father moved in. What actually hurt more? Losing Mom or leaving Mom? ..." (2000: 18) This pull and push, in fact, tears her apart. *Weesquachak And The Lost Ones* is a contemporary fiction about the contemporary problems with a mythical touch and a traditional trickster character (Weesquachak) imposed upon it. The distance between her life at 'community' and in 'city' is the space where her problems lie. The city, which seems to

promise her safety, is her refuge from the suffocation that she perceives living in her community. Charlie experiences identity crisis – both as an Ojibwa as well as Charlie. “... I really didn't know how long I could do this ... this playhouse game he (Fred) was playing. He insisted on this in the way he talked and did the things, that this was how he wanted things to be. This was how and what he wanted me to be. The problem was that the role I was playing was not really me!” (2000: 68) She does not want to live life of a traditional housewife like her own mother (and this is something what she experiences later in chapter 11 of the novel).

What was I going to do? What now? Is this what he (Fredrick) will do every time he wanted to go to town and party with the women? Is this what it will be like for the rest of my life? I will have one baby after another while my husband just takes off any time he likes without explanation, and expect to find me exactly where he left me? I felt used. I felt trapped. I felt very angry. Then, I felt helpless and victimized. (2000: 88)

She wants to run away from the anticipation of marrying Fred (an authoritative man) and becoming his wife (shy, quite, and obedient) – And the collateral damage is emotional isolation. She opens her heart to Linda:

I don't have a home anymore. I have nowhere to go to, I mean I don't belong anywhere. I feel like I am trapped when I am at Mom's and I need to escape. I am terrified that one day I may never be able to leave there. So when I come to the city, I feel such a relief that I can disappear and they can't find me. Because, I like who I am when I am here. I am independent and I want to be on my own. I need to know that I can make it here in the city all by myself. I need to know that I can take care of myself.... When I am at home it happens night after night – the black cloud, I mean. Or sometimes, I dream that I am at the train station and the train is coming but I can't find my ticket anywhere or I dream that I have absolutely no money at all to get away. I get this horrible cornered feeling, like a caged animal, and I can't get away, and that is when this oppressive black cloud comes down and tries to choke me to death and I get so darned scared that I may not wake up again. At times, I actually struggle with both hands at my throat trying to pull or push the black cloud off my neck and face... (2000: 27)

Fred is the direct victim of Charlie's inner conflict and emotional crisis. In his desperation of making her comfortable and allowing her sufficient space in order to adjust to the community ways, Fred at times runs out of patience. His otherwise simple and natural life is made complicated by her mannerism, Kleenex, toilet paper, tissues, steak knives, butter knives forks and spoons. And “Then there was her English. She spoke perfect English; the proper school marm English! He often wondered if he would ever get used to speaking English all the time! He had tried many times to speak to her in Ojibway only to have her answer in her no-accent proper English.” (2000: 73) For Charlie, all these are not just things and patterns of behaviour, these are artifacts of civilized life – cultural artifacts that mark her apart. On the contrary, when located in her

community she appears totally out of place and artificial – her feelings and expressions do not match.

He just wanted to relax and be himself but he was stuck with this monster he had created. He wondered if she was like that all the time or how long she would stay like this? Never once did she let her guard down. It was like he was watching her performing. She was so out of place! It was like he had plucked her out of her daily business as if nothing has changed! (2000:74)

Actually, it is more because of lack of communication than anything else. Charlie, with her exposure on the colonial manners and English language, is unable to communicate her love to him. She could not show how much she loved him – she fails to reciprocate his love in the manner that he could feel its warmth. Fred is all for body. She is far less physical and is unable to hug him with the passion like he always does. Love can't be always communicated through spoken words. She always tried to be her preferred self in order to escape her community and local ways of life, all at the cost of her real self. She was torn by the conflict between her love for Fred, and the idea of being a native's wife.

I began to stroke his head. I bent and kissed the top of his head. I told him that I loved him very much. That I would tell him how much I loved him, every day. Yes, I would try to be a better wife to him. Suddenly, I felt very nauseous. I hated this. (2000: 80)

Amidst this chaos, Ruby Slipperjack takes up the role of a worldly wise counselor: Sometime Linda (a city woman) who would help her "...set my(her) sights straight and help me (her) find a balanced perspective, "an even-keeled point of view". (2000: 120) And the other time aunt Gook (representing traditional wisdom) counsels Charlie about the importance of inner harmony and acceptance of one's real self. She cautions her against artificial show of love and spirit – it should come from deep within. "If you do not find it inside you, it will rot and fester deep inside and eventually, it will kill the spirit within you. If that happens, you will be nothing, you will care about nothing; your spirit will be broken, your will cease to exist." (2000: 96) Even Fred reasons with her about the gaps between languages, and about the difference in perception and vocabulary.

You know, that is the first time since I have known you, that you actually said 'I'm sorry.' But you should not need to be sorry about anything. The rule is to think before you speak or act, that way there is no need to say you're sorry. Has it ever occurred to you why we don't have the words 'I'm sorry' in our language? There are no such words in Ojibway. (2000: 158)

Dr. Slipperjack's personal experience and understanding of 'traditional' and 'contemporary' makes it possible for her to write simply, honestly and effortlessly. Like her other novels, *Wéesquachak* and *The Lost Ones* too communicates an experience of gradual growth of character/s. In the end of the novel *Wéesquachak* and *The Lost Ones* 'Goodbye' of *Wéesquachak* symbolizes the clearing of all doubts and conflicts. 'The trickster'

declares that the 'lost ones' 'are now found'. The closing chapter of *Wéesquachak And The Lost Ones* brings in the much needed peace and harmony. The earlier inner turmoil is gone, thanks to maturation that Charlie acquires through her experiences. The total network of loneliness, heart breaks, betrayals, supports, insights and, of course, individual soul searching makes it possible for the troubled souls of Charlie and Fred to resolve their inner conflicts and crises, gain mutual harmony and attain self realization. Loneliness and depression are the result of one's consciousness (delusional) that they lack something to which they are entitled. In fact, one doesn't have to be alone to be lonely. Being lonely is just an idea, a state of mind. Sometimes people are alone yet they feel well connected, cared about, and well received. Having shed their ego, they turn to the sweet nothings, small comforts and the loving details of mutual care. They realize that they have got everything they can possibly want. Charlie is no longer lonely, simply because she has stopped wanting. The tradition has accepted the new ways of understanding and knowledge – Fred has taken to reading books, and Charlie is 'Welcome home' (203) in trap line.

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