

Reclaiming The Narrative: Indigenous Literature And The Construction Of American And Native American Identity

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Abstract: This paper delineates the cultural, political, and historical facets woven into Native American writing, also termed indigenous American literature. The genesis of a Native American renaissance during the 1960s reflected a pivotal transformation in American society that demanded recognition of Native culture and history, which had been persistently erased from the national consciousness. Before this movement, Native American contributions were largely ignored. When Native writers took up the pen, there was a resurgence of the rich oral traditions and culture, ravaged by centuries of oppression and cultural assault. Their stories countered the pervasive stereotypes that dominated mainstream American fiction and movies, which shaped public perception. These narratives challenged the Euro-centric assumptions that had permeated the land since the European conquest of the land. Native American writings offer resistance, strive for cultural recognition, identity formation, and a sense of belonging for the surviving members of diverse tribes. It grapples with the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for political rights, the social injustices experienced on reservations, and the ever-present questions of identity. For American society to authentically embody the democratic tenets upon which it purports to stand, its discourse must integrate the perspectives and exigencies of its primordial inhabitants. Through active engagements with Indigenous American literary expressions ample opportunities are opened up to American society to actualize its avowed democratic principles on both political and cultural fronts.

Key Words: Native American writing, assimilation, oppression, historical amnesia, cultural erasure, political rights, colonialism, democracy, identity

Stereotypes about native Americans in mainstream American writing and visual media have often revolved around oft-repeated themes. The stereotypes of the Noble savage, the savage warrior, the wise elder, the Indian princess, the vanishing Indian etc. were some of them. Native Americans were represented as an invisible presence in the forests, uncivilized savages that need be civilized and corrected, or noble red men, etc. Realistic representations of the Native American people had to wait until Native Americans took the pen to write. The new image of the Native American, in which the Native Americans themselves portrayed their selves for the knowledge of others that countered the popular myths about them in artistic representations contributed a lot in changing historical perceptions and acted as cultural correctives that contributed to the political cause upheld by the native Americans for more rights and fair treatment of them in the American society. With the strong assertion of postmodern tendencies in art and culture, historical realities that the Americans were unaware of because they were suppressed for centuries, got a new lease of life in cultural imagination and contributed to redefining the democratic discourses in America. With Native American assertion, the diversity of American culture and the source of the distinctness of American culture which had long been ascribed to European roots got reinterpreted. The new writers beginning with Scott M Momaday contributed to the process of challenging Native American representations typecast in the mind of public imagination. Native American novelists dared to face up to the odds by digging deep into their own culture and offered themselves as voices of their past. The revolution that the postmodern Native American writers brought about is there to see for all of us. American literature, or for that matter, world literature became richer by these writings. The heterogeneous society of America with all its many voices clamoring for representation and ascendancy Native American society became the most deserving, being the descendants of the original inhabitants of the land before the Europeans came and ravished the land. Certain assumptions, or lack of it, about the past that the Americans held for centuries that rested on some sort of collective historical amnesia about native American oppression of the worst kind were challenged by the new crop of writers.

Historically, American Culture overlooked its links with Native American culture and most Americans are not aware of the markings of the latter in their day-to-day life, be it in their writings, language they use every day or the food habits. American culture functions in a historical amnesia and prefer to function as if the continent was a cultural vacuum before the European migration and later colonization. Many narratives of the early Europeans represent the land as “virgin land” and conveniently ignores the contributions of native American cultures in the distinct formation of American culture. The myth of ‘virgin land’ had influenced narratives and policies after America emerged as an independent nation and the myth worked to marginalize Native American cultures. This cultural erasure from during and after the formation of the nation has impacted the cultural identity of both Native Americans and the non-native Americans. The American identity was also flawed in a sense that it is built on an absence of the essential historical component of native American cultures. The mainstream American identity formation thus has often been predicated upon defining itself against the native American ‘other’ and that dynamic continues to shape cultural identities today. Roy Harvey Pearce assess that the cultural history of America was an outcome of viewing the world from the perspective of the conqueror and represents the history as a contest between “civilization” and “savagism”.(3) The return of the repressed is what native American writing is all about and the impact it had could not be set aside as the emergence of silenced history necessitated deconstructing many narratives and stereotypes.

The landmark year in Native American fiction is 1968, when Scott M Momaday, novelist, memoirist and poet who works in the broad field of American history and cultural narrative, published his novel *House Made of Dawn* won Pulitzer Prize and wide recognition. Momaday became the voice of Native Americans, the champion of the Native American cause. To say that Native American writing kickstarted only in 1968 would not be historically accurate. There were novels, memoirs, poems and life writings written by Native Americans that highlighted the politics and cultural lot of the Indians before 1968. Notable among them is John Rolling Ridge who in 1854 published *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*. Probably the first novel published by an Indian women writer is Alice Callgan’s *Wyenema*. A few more novels with the theme of Native American culture and identity were published during this period. Authentic Native American voices were rare and intermittent. That native Americans who took to novel writing were rare is not a surprising thing given the fact that the cultural nature of native Americans prohibits such kind of an expression in which the cultural memory of a tribe is offered for the perception and evaluation of foreigners. Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist writes, “Myths, rituals, prayers, songs, oratory, folklore, legends, Trickster tales or other native creations aren’t easily accommodated into traditional Western or Euro-American categories of fiction, drama and poetry.” (2) These Native American productions are not literature in the European sense, they are not for the consumption of others, but operate as cultural narratives that have no particular author and serve the purpose of holding the tribe together offering solutions to all their metaphysical problems.

We find in contemporary Native American writing aspects gleaned from the historical encounter with European culture and civilization. This had been the tendency one would find in Native American oral expressions. Upon each retelling new things are added so much so that the community, the audience of the performance by the storyteller, would renew itself and realign its relationship with the metaphysical forces that the community imagine as controlling its destiny. Continuation of this tendency one would find in early twentieth-century Native American authors, they drew on European and American literary models. Even among the Native Americans who became Christians through conversion and training the Indian sensibility is evidently visible in the way they practiced Christianity, and the authors among them blended both Christian values and Native American values. Arnold Krupat in his landmark book *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* discusses in detail how native American sensibility incorporates aspects of both the world and refines the practice of Christianity by infusing elements of native American oral literature and culture. Krupat established the inevitable contribution of Native American culture in the formation of mainstream American culture and that American owes a lot to native America than Europe and the neglect of that tradition would only result in inaccurate understanding of the nation. Arnold Kurpat writes:

most commentators on American culture generally have managed to proceed as though there were no relation between the two, white and red, Euroamerican and Native American, as if absence rather than avoidance defined the New World: as if America was indeed "virgin land," empty, uninhabited, silent, dumb until the Europeans brought the plow and the pen to cultivate its wilderness. From the first days of settlement, Americans sought to establish their own sense of American "civilization" in opposition to some centrally significant Other, most particularly to the Indian "savage"...But there is always a return of the repressed in one form or another: and now it is no longer possible to pretend the Other is simply silent or absent because the formerly conquered write—as they fight—back. Today, the

commentator on American culture who ignores or resists this fact does so at the risk of guaranteeing his or her own irrelevance to any attempt both to understand the world or to change it. (p3-4)

Native American writing is all about “the return of the repressed” that would rewrite the general sensibility that Americans has about their identity and history or the basic premises upon which an average American constructed and maintains his/her self. The empty space upon which it was thought the nation is supposed to stand ceases to become empty and rich with the past as native American writers breaks their silence and write invoking the oral past and fusing the experiences of the historical encounter with the past.

The general tendency among Native Americans as a result of the practical pressure of wider socio-economic concerns is to assimilate and accommodate themselves to the mainstream rather than lean towards preserving Native American identity and culture. The reality of the tendencies of the postmodern nation is too much to dream for pristine preservation and re-actualization of the mythical past. This realization did not prevent writers from not orienting their attention toward the mythical past. At least via imagination the lost past could be ritualized and inscribed in public memory. Oral literature becomes the path through which the lost world can be summoned up and etched into the imagination of the nation. The result is for everyone to see how after the 1960s Native American renaissance the American sensibility started changing with the rediscovery of the repressed past and the realization that America owes a lot culturally to Native American past.

The roots of Native American writing lie deep in the land and in its colonial experience and the responses framed by several tribes in their constant struggle against domination since Columbus set foot on the land. The ancient memory and colonial experience constitute the political memory that is at the root of Native American expression. Native American literature is thus centuries old and its root lies deep in the land, its oral tradition and cultural memory. Leslie Mormon Silko talks about the connection of Native American literature with the land in her work *Essays on Native American Life Today*: ‘Human Identity, the imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the Spider’s web.’ (19) According to her ‘It begins with the land’, the word comes from the visual memory inscribed in the land to which the native sensibility has access. Land thus becomes part of the mind of the society and the individual; the individual mind is not something apart from the land, it is inevitably fused with the memory inscriptions coded into the land. During the colonial experience, massive displacements of tribes from their ancient lands resulted in irreparable harm to the self of the natives. Native American writing imaginatively reconstructs the lost land, where the memories of the ancestors are coded and where the tribe gains its identity and metaphysical solace. The land, the mind and the word are bound as if in a spider’s web. Silko’s *Ceremony* emphasizes the storytelling of the land, indicating the inextricable link between the power of the word and the sense of place. This feature is a predominant one of Native American writing. The fundamental worldview of the Native American mind is based on spatial relationships as opposed to the European sensibility grounded on history and linear time.

Myth and ceremony are fundamental to the culture of Native Americans. They form the expressions of these people’s metaphysical realizations and encompass their beliefs, values and aspects that construct their identity in connection with the world around which is inhabited by animate and inanimate entities, including the spirit of the ancestors. Ceremony enacts the specialized perception of the tribe concerning cosmic forces. Myth functions as the purpose of history in which the past of the tribe is encoded for the consumption of the present and future generations. Ceremony integrates the individual into the community; the isolated individual finds his belonging and self-moorings after passing through the rites of passage enabled by the ceremony. The community’s correlation with the natural world and realigning the rhythm of life in association with the rhythm of nature and place is facilitated by the ceremonies.

The Native American self follows the pace of Indian time which is circular as opposed to the European sensibility of time which is linear. Ritual songs restore harmony to individual lives ravaged by personal loss and other unexpected tragedies of life. The greater purpose of life and an individual’s association with the ultimate powers that govern life, temporarily displaced by personal tragedies, are renewed and reestablished through ritual ceremonies. The troubled individual is taken to the past from which he or she would get powers essential for surviving the personal trauma. These rituals both renew the individual and community, for both are not different entities but part and parcel of the same phenomenon. Renewal and rebirth revitalize life after sickness and death and reestablishes harmony. The inner vision of order and stability to negotiate the vagaries of life communicates with the sacred and is passed on to the coming generations through oral poetry. It’s the myths that enable the perception: Ernst Cassirer writes:

The world of myth is a dramatical world—a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers. In every phenomenon of nature it sees the collision of these powers. Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities (75)

The coming of Europeans changed everything. The harmony and order of native tribes got destroyed as Europeans tried to subjugate the natives through cultural imperialism using chiefly religion as the tool, as Europeans were chiefly driven by the Christian perception of the world and its 'noble mission' of converting the savages, as they perceived the natives to be. The Europeans believed what they were doing was the right thing, carrying out 'the white man's burden' bringing civilization and government to the savages and liberating them through religion. The invaders meant to transform the vast land into the shape and cultural form of Europe. The consequences of the European mission were tragic, to say the least, as the complex web of native life broken into smithereens, never to be recovered in its pristine essence. With sustained assault on the cultural practices of the tribes by displacing them from the place of their existence and gradually neutralizing their resistance over the years by establishing governments, gaining control over their lands and ruling over the tribes via policies and laws gradually demilitarized them. With the last resistance, over and over native Americans ceased to be a military threat the process of acculturation began, a process that ultimately blended the Indians with the American identity, erasing the elements of native identity, by keeping the Indian cultural elements as 'fetishes', devoid of their cultural context and functioning. Native American writing of the postmodern era is a sort of resistance literature that aims at the political existence of the lost tribes asserting the distinctness of their identity and past and the contribution of native cultures to the formation of a larger American identity which is a widely unrecognized one. Native American writing of the present grapples with mixed identities, imaginary border crossing of the self—being at two places at the same time resulting in a double consciousness of the self, political rights of the Indians, etc. Arnold Krupat's rhetorical question, "is it possible for to be both Indian and an American" succinctly sums up the dilemma faced by Indians. Historical realities are re-engaged and reinterpreted in the writings with the attempt to negotiate the being without asserting any stable sense of self. In Sherman Alexie's works the native identity becomes ambiguous and ironical which is conveyed through humour, where there is some sort of understanding of the historical reality of the self and resists nostalgia and conflict. Victor's impatience with Thomas's storytelling in Native American movie *Smoke Signals* indicates a self that had grown out of the past and firmly rooted in the fluidity of the present.

Native American tribes are distinct communities with rich histories and cultures that have deeply influenced the development of the United States. While they have faced assimilation pressures, many tribes continue to maintain their unique identities and political structures. At the same time, there were political boundaries the nation set against them as a result of centuries of oppression. The people never possessed ownership of printing presses, newspapers, bookstores, radio stations, etc. It's only until recently that such economic and political possessions took place. These people never had a homogenous identity and unity among themselves and after the colonial experience, their identity was shattered with massive displacements from the land to which they have aligned their self and identity. These people also never controlled a territory governed by statutory laws. They never developed a commercial mechanism to do business and thereby gain economic clout in the new nation. The interference of colonialism was such that the free development of Native Americans was not possible after their culture and normal existence were disrupted by the imposition of colonial laws and governing systems. Religious imposition too played a big part in disrupting their power and scope of free existence. During the colonial period, subjugation of the native Americans thus happened on multiple levels and the creative impulses of each tribe which rested on their oral performances and renewal of memory associated with the memory of ancestors with its inscription on the land got disrupted a few generations later became only distant memories of the past. The cultural renewal that the Native American writer undertakes is all about regaining memory with the power of imagination and inscribing the history of the past in the political imagination of the nation. Colonialism disrupted the constant renewal of tribal history in oral retellings where the past and present interact and the metaphysical notions upon which the culture runs evolved further. Colonialism interrupted this evolution through cultural invasion and severing the connection of the tribe with the land, where the memory of the past had been inscribed. Colonialism had impacted hard on Native American's traditional literature, its oral tales and folk stories and subjected their existence to the political unconscious of the Native American imagination, a kind of cultural proscription when alien cultural elements came and decimated the native cultural elements. Colonialism and its economic functioning account for the relatively insignificant presence of Native American expressions during the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. Colonialism also declined the quality of life of the conquered tribes, again accounting for the lack

of literary production during the above-mentioned periods. A scattered and impoverished set of people cut off from the well-springs of their identity and subjected to colonial exploitation and cultural insignificance accounts for the lack of literary production. Only very little of the heritage of the native tribes was recuperated in literary imagination by the writers after 1960. Native American writing thus deals with the bits and pieces of the past; the rich heritage of the tribes is lost forever. The themes of Native American writers mostly deal with problems of the cultural encounter and the tragic consequences of it, which still continue. The agenda of the writers is not to recuperate the past but to politicize the past and discuss the issues of race mixture, alienation, alcoholism and the wider consequences of cultural change keeping in mind the postmodern realities. Representative authors like Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich give voice to these struggles. They highlight the importance of cultural activism and the need for political solutions to ensure the survival of Native American communities within the broader American context.

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