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## Deciphering The Implication Of Storytelling In Native American Culture.

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### Abstract:

Orality is all about making knowledge memorable. This can include proverbs, tales, riddles, legends, myths, epic songs, poems etc., which pass on from one generation to another, thereby transmitting the cultural and social values of the communities. Before the advent of writing, the oral traditions are meant for keeping the cultures alive. The Native or Indigenous people who are said to be identified with this orality are considered as the Fourth world people, no matter in which country they are living; and they are known for their specific and intense relationship with nature and the land in which they are living. Through memorising and narrating of the stories they believe in their orality which is the rich source of every detail about their origin, survival and the formation of the culture, and also these people consider the stories as the source of their bonding with each other in the communities and hence they pay tribute to the early beginnings through their stories. The complex understandings behind the creation of mankind, universe, other living creatures were made easy by incorporating them into stories, and hence making nature as an inherent part of their lives. In view of Native Americans, not only the living things like humans, plants and animals but the winds, water, fire, stones etc., are living and sentient and they believe that all these things living and non-living in the nature, are interconnected and interdependent in an imaginary circle. All the elements of nature were finely interwoven by having their identity in the form of stories; and hence the oral cultures became the source for the transmission of knowledge from generations to generations.

In this context, this paper attempts to analyse the role and significance of storytelling/oral tradition in the lives of Native American people and their cultures, who are said to be the part of the Fourth world; and also, the application of the studies of orality in the contemporary scenario. The words Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native or Dalit gives the same meaning to address the people of Fourth world and hence, in this paper, the terms Indigenous and Native people are used interchangeably without any ambiguity.

**Key words:** Orality, Indigenous, Fourth world, Anthropocene, Folk tale, First people, storytelling.

Michael Dorris, a notable American novelist in his article, 'Native American Literature in Ethno Historical Context', refers to the oral literary tradition as a corner stone of every tribal society. It is the vehicle through which wisdom is passed from one generation to the next by which sense is made of a confusing world". Hence oral cultures are the rich sources of the creation stories which helps to understand the origin of man on the planet and also serves as the source of knowledge of the cosmos. As these oral traditions existed since the beginning of the mankind, the possession of these traditions can be attributed to the Native people who are considered as the first people of the lands on which they lived before the age of

exploration and colonisation. Indigenous people of America, Aboriginals of Australia, Maoris of New Zealand, First Nations of Canada, Dalits/tribes of India are considered as the peoples of Fourth World. George Manuel (1921-1989), the most significant, powerful and revered Indigenous leader of Canada advocated the political unification of indigenous people across the globe by the formation of the Fourth world movement and gave prominence to the concept of the Fourth world especially in terms of literature. The struggle of the Fourth world people to come out of the influence of the Euro Western definitions of their communities, which is the result of the impact of imperialism since ages, depicts their struggle to have and establish their identity as Indigenous people or Natives of their own lands. In this regard the critics like Fanon and Nandy have claimed that imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized people, by disconnecting them from their histories, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and also affecting their interaction with the world. Hence in order to understand the real sense of indigenous epistemologies, like what are they and what do they need in real, there is a need for the study of Indigenous research methodologies. Philosophers and writers stress on an exigency for the relationship-based model of research with Indigenous communities. This model is a sincere authentic investment of the community that helps in acknowledging the identity of Natives. Accordingly, in the subsequent paragraphs the orality of the Native American people is explored not in terms of only stories but by having the aid of befitting methodology, to understand the oral tradition.

There are hundreds of indigenous nations on this continent and hundreds of creation stories; especially the indigenous people of American continent are best known for their oral stories and narratives in different forms. These indigenous knowledge systems are interpreted through personal story and self-location. Many of the narratives share the same theme, some are shared in multiple regions, while others are unique to one particular place. Their oral stories are considered to be the map of their land, as they are deeply connected to their homelands. In fact, each story has its origin in the land from which it was produced and so it is considered as the map of how to be human in a particular place, and also, they serve as the key for survival in a specific environment. In contrast to the Western theory of capitalistic 'Manifest Destiny', these oral traditional narratives often contain critical acquired knowledge about how to subsist in an ecosystem, mapping the relationships between the plant, animal and human beings within indigenous homelands. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo author, in her essay, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective", advocates the deep ties between their land and the stories by saying:

"We have always been able to stay with the land. Our stories cannot be separated from their geographical locations from actual physical places on the land. Our stories are so much a part of these places that it is almost impossible for future generations to love them- there is a story connected every place, every object in the landscape... the story telling is our way of passing through or being with them, or being together again." (Silko 60)

Indigenous story telling has a very real grip on the human imagination. Whether one begins from an indigenous or non-indigenous perspective, there seems to be a widespread agreement that stories are central in constituting both communities and self. These oral stories also include communicating rudimentary models or myths that posit the formation of the world rather than being the simple legends. Moreover, the oral literary tradition is a corner stone of every tribal society and each story gets derived from oral teaching through the rationality of storytelling thus, making it alive with the nuances and wisdom of the story teller. Throughout history there have been multiple and varied definitions of what story and story teller mean but somehow all the definitions coincide at certain points. This makes the authors to believe that, oral stories are the base to shape the present society, and story tellers were our first teachers. Many of the present standards related to the care of nature, community, education, tradition and even health were once established through stories, because story tellers, had assumed the role of the custodians of old beliefs and systems in order to transmit them before they got lost on the way. That is the reason why they are really important part of many cultures, taken from Irish folklore, to German, Indian, African, Latin and Native American, Australian Aboriginal cultures etc. The story tellers are usually considered to be the elderly people like grandfathers and grandmothers, or particular persons with abilities to engage with and make people listen to them. In general, stories from the most literal point of view, can be considered as oral tales that people tell aloud so that others listen to and transmit them to their relatives, friends and others who surround them, and there by making them become part of their culture and traditions, and folklore is part

of this oral tradition. Most definitions in dictionaries refer to this word folklore as a narrative account of events that can be real or imagined, or a narrative that is intended to entertain, interest, instruct, or complete a structure with characters or a specific style.

As a matter of fact, Indigenous epistemology is fluid, nonlinear and relational. Knowledge is transmitted through stories that shape shift in relation to the wisdom of the story teller at the time of the narration. Hence it is not possible to engage in indigenous methodologies without having a foundational understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems. In turn this study needs a complete emancipation of native belief system from the influence of western thought and accepting First nations people as they are. Native American literature, is such form of Indigenous literature which exhibits its strong ties with the oral narratives. It is also termed as Native Indian literature, or American Indian literature, and can be identified with the traditional oral and written literatures of the indigenous peoples of Americas. As the Native people of America were not originally literate, their literature is considered as oral literature. It includes ancient hieroglyphic and pictographic writings of Middle America as well as an extensive set of folktales, myths, oral histories that were transmitted for centuries by storytellers and live on in the language works of many contemporary American Indian writers. Folktales have been a part of the social and cultural life of American Indian and Eskimo people regardless of whether they were sedentary agriculturists or nomadic hunters. The usual procedure of storytelling begins with the people gathering around a fire at night, and the story teller with his unusual talent of storytelling, make the audience to be transported to another world through their imagination. The effect was derived not only from the novelty of the tale itself but also from the imaginative skill of the narrator, who often adds gestures and songs and occasionally adapts a particular tale that is related a particular culture. The story tellers strongly believe that it is through their stories only people can understand American Indian heritage. For Native Americans, the telling of stories passed down from generation to generation and they retained their primary form of wisdom, communication, even after the written word had spread across the globe. Thus, the Native American story telling traditions allowed tribes to transmit their mythological, spiritual and historical understandings of themselves and the worlds they inhabited etc., to their children and their children's children and so on. This is to assure that members of each individual Indian nation would never forget their roots or lose sight of important knowledge that would allow them to continue to exist in harmony and cooperation with the natural world. In order to make this information memorable, Native Americas translated practical perceptions along with subtle and sophisticated ideas about the creation stories, great Mystery of life and existence, to allegories filled with heroes and villains, comedic twists and dramatic encounters and lessons learned through the hardships of suffering and eventual transcendence. These stories are always intended to explain or to teach 'how to act and why', and its storytelling focus on helping people to understand their place in the natural world. Native American tales even in today's scenario are considered as metaphorical, real, spiritual, mythological, instructional and transformational, being entertaining and memorable to the audiences who heard them. These stories would be remembered and passed down to the coming generations, who needed to understand who they are, where they had come from and why the world is the way it is, if they want to survive and prosper in challenging times that were always ahead. Stories do different things in Indigenous culture like – there are no pay off endings, and they sometimes don't really say anything. As we have happy endings or a solution to a problem at the end in Western stories, Indigenous oral tradition is quite different from these sorts of endings. Native story tellers usually leave the endings to the choice and wisdom of the listeners. Because the aim of each story is not to give a happy ending or not just for an entertainment but to teach something to the people. A notable work on Native American stories by Joseph Bruchac propagates that, "Stories were never a 'just story' in the sense of being merely an entertainment. They were and remain a powerful tool for teaching." (2003, 35) Hence it is not an exaggeration to say that, Native Americans made sense of their world through storytelling.

Events that seemed random, like natural disasters could be explained in terms of the Great Spirit an unknown God or power and how he was displeased with the actions of men. Though there are hundreds of American Indian nations, all with their own language and culture, one thing they share in common is a 'rich oral tradition'. For example, a famous story from the Iroquois tribe who once lived in what is today, New York, tells of how Owl got his wisdom and strange looks by angering the Everything-Maker as he worked to create all the animals. As a result of his serious argument with the Everything- Maker, Owl got his wish for wisdom, but the price was all of the beautiful physical features that he wanted. In addition, because the



Everything- Maker was angry at Owl, he his and only came out at night when the Everything-Maker was fall asleep. Hence every story consists of an aspect of creation that explains the reasons for the existence of all the living creatures. The story tellers follow a specific style while dealing with the stories and that the stories are the base for Indigenous knowledge systems which empowers the cultures and generations.

Most of the American Indian nations believe in the form of circularity of existence and they weave their stories basing on the image of a circle. Referring to the words of Black Elk, a medicine man and priest of the Oglala Lakota people, Joseph Bruchac explains that, “The power of the world always works in a circle and everything tries to be round”. Further he says that,

“The cycle of the seasons, the circling of sun and moon, even the round shape of the nests of birds are the evidence of this. Just as every point on a circle is equal to every other point no place being closer to the centre than any other, all created things are regarded as being of equal importance. All things, not only humans and animals and plants but even the winds, the waters, fire and the stories are living and sentient. Further just as the strands of a spider web are so interconnected that touching one makes all other tremble, in that circular universe everything is connected to everything else.” (Bruchac 2003, 16)

In the case of Native American contemporary authors, as well as in that of other ethnic minority writers in the United States, it is really difficult to separate what anthropologists and folklorists’ study to define story in a scientific way. It is quite difficult to differentiate between the historical perspectives, the cross-cultural approaches or to separate stories from social structures. It is indeed difficult to separate the texts from the authors and the oral background in which they grew up and which constitutes the base of their works; and also difficult to separate these texts from the contemporary society in which they live and from the mainstream education they have also received. In fact, it could even be true about the authors such as Scott Momaday, James Welsch, Louise Erdrich, Simon Ortiz, Gerald Vizenor, and Leslie Marmon Silko in Native American literature or Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chi, Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas Rivera and Zora Neale Hurston, in other minority groups, who use these oral stories and knowledge to refer to contemporary issues that affect them as individuals and their communities and to denounce them if necessary. In this regard, it is relevant to say that Native Indian stories and storytellers played, play and will continue to play a fundamental role not only in their tribal cultures, but also in the world outside of their communities. There are a greater number of stories present in contemporary times and are closely related to various movements, events, or situations that at first sight would be unimaginable for us. The traditional stories, have evolved as much old as traditions have emerged in the cultures and it is important to pay attention to both. The modern-day stories, which are vivid in the works of contemporary authors, acquire new hints from the traditional stories, and this needs to be studied in depth to realize the affinity of the writers to their own cultures.

How the stories are connected and linked to each and every aspect of life is clearly depicted in the work *Story*, by Harold Scheub, an American Africanist writer. In his words, - “Story is all we have, it is the only means that we have of recalling our past and deliberating on it. It is our avenue to history, to the meaning of existence, to our relationship with our fellows, our gods and nature.” (Scheub 1998, 22) In Native American oral stories, the setting situates the narrative in time and place giving them a concrete, live character. This can give stories a naturalistic feel, that seems to pattern individual’s own lives. It also means that stories cannot be reduced to a simple set of prepositions. They remain open to multiple interpretations, to ambiguity, to reception as a metaphor or allegory. They are unfinished always awaiting the retelling or the next response. At the same time, through selecting certain features in preference to other possibilities, stories affirm certain relations of cause and effect and tend to privilege some interpretations over others. Stories can be real or imaginary. The main aim of the listeners should be to enter the world of narrative, to be placed in a location where illustrative events should be to enter the world of the narrative, to be placed in a location where illustrative events unfold, to make the sense of what does and does not happen, to assess judge or participate. And they are frequently trans historical, drawing forms, and patterns, from past accounts, probing them for their insight and then retelling them for contemporary purposes. A part from having the great significance for orality, Native Americans, with the advent of Europeans came to know the mode of writing and they transmitted their knowledge of stories by using the language of Western people. But they never changed their themes and never showed any difference between the oral form and the written form. Writers like Gerald Vizenor and Thomas King for whom writing is also a form

of storytelling, used the forms of orality successfully in their works by keeping the metaphors and other literary devices alive. With their unique style of writing, Native American authors invented a body of literature, which is known as Native American literature. Besides the pyramidal growth of literacy and print culture the past Native Indian culture was often identified with orality and hence stressing and transcribing the disappearing American Indian oral culture. While the presentation of orality and oral story telling becomes a means for Native Indian writers to imagine an Indian literature, their characters rethinking of their past, also become a means for non-Indians to imagine the escape from modernity and combining Indians with Indian orality etc. In the work, *An Introduction to the Art of Traditional American Indian Narration*, Karl Kroeber writes: “A majority of Indian stories appeal to enough common features in human nature to allow us at least entrance to their pleasures- if only we can relax sufficiently to enjoy them” (Kroeber 9). Some of the oral literatures have the historical depth of thousands of years. They dramatize the cognitive models of the universe and appropriate behaviours and relationships within it.

Later these oral narratives that are filled with the knowledge of cosmos, creation, behaviours etc., started being represented in the form of writing, when nineteenth century Native American literature became a literature of transition; the bridge between an oral tradition that flourished for centuries before the arrival of Europeans and the emergence of contemporary fiction in the 1960s, thus giving the birth of Native American Renaissance. Early Native American writing represented the experiences these early authors lived and the struggle they went through in order to find their voices within American culture. It was after the so-called American Renaissance only, writers started to express their feelings which are treated as inferior even to human beings. They wanted to change the idea that mainstream society had of them and discovered that the medium of writing can be caused as a powerful tool which could help them change the attitudes and stereotypes. Leslie Marmon Silko is one of such writers who fought for the recognition of Native American literature and oral traditions. In her novels, she is able to deal with traditional story telling without ignoring contemporary issues and masters the inclusion of oral stories into her works while anticipating events that are current affairs, such as terrorism, immigration, environment, illegal drug and organ dealing, feminism and Ecofeminism among others. Even her other novels *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead* and a short story *Yellow Woman*, consists of both oral and other new elements and Silko presents them in a natural way that lets readers learn about the circumstances surrounding Native American people. Another writer Scott Momady, a Kiowa writer who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his notable work *House Made of Dawn*, is also known for the celebration of Native art and oral tradition in his writings. According to Laura Coltelli, an American Literature educator, Momady considers story telling as an essential element of “self-definition as a grand literary form that should be represented in the American canon”. (Coltelli 95). That is some of the most important contemporary Native American writers emphasize the relevance of storytelling has in their works and in their inspiration. Hence it is considered that one of the characteristics of Indigenous writing around the world may be the use of oral features as deliberate techniques in literary production. Even in the medium of writing Native Americans wrote about their histories, stories and their lives by incorporating the elements of orality. Unlike the preceding oral tradition, nineteenth century Native American literature was increasingly text-based and composed in English, as a result of the missionary schools, that taught Indians the skills which are believed as necessary to assimilate into white society. Nineteenth-century Native American authors employed Euro-American literary genres like autobiography and the novel, often combining them with traditional narratives like the trickster tale, or certain myth to create hybrid forms. Although the early texts exhibit the struggle of Indian authors to find a voice within American culture, they foreshadowed the elements of later Native American literature such as the refutation of stereotypical depictions of Native Indians that is too common in American literature. Like their successors, nineteenth century Native Indian authors were aware of the power of literature as a tool in changing the political and social status of their people.

Indigenous oral traditions have often been treated as textual artefacts, representation of a culture past, an 'other' to the written world. This extensive body of oral literature has played and continues to play a vital role in the adaptation and survival of Native nations even as the stories that change to incorporate new insights and ideas. Indeed, in the contemporary scenario, understanding the earth from the perspective of Indigenous people, is gaining attention throughout the world. As Indigenous people are bio centric, making nature as the centre, their stories also mainly centred around the nature and its protection. Through stories they worship the life in the nature by taking all the measures to protect the mother earth. But the

Western philosophy is Anthropocentric in which man is centre and he can use and exploit nature for his personal purposes. Hence it is essential to everyone to have the perception of Indigenous knowledge and possess indigenous thinking in order to survive and cope with the catastrophic changes of Anthropocene. However, stories make connections between ordinary and exceptional norms. A story is much more than a description of events in a real or imagined world. It is a modelling of how to understand the stories and what to make of them. The power of the story as a form lies both in its particularity and its generalizability. Its particularity allows to imagine ourselves into a concrete world that is different from our own to imagine ourselves into the psyche, the body, the feelings and emotions of someone else. It also enables the structure of a story to act as a template for organising and understanding experience. The narrative is a way of imagining human self and the world, which helps to account for the sense of wonder and this pervades the most significant element of stories in Native American culture. All stories are narrated and told from someone's perspective, and also told to and for someone. Story telling fills multiple functions in all communities. They may serve to teach, entertain, capture the memory etc. In stories, the aesthetic and teaching aspects are often tightly bound together. The focus of storyteller usually lies on the plot and this reduces the importance of language in which the story is told. Leslie Marmon Silko, asserts that for many indigenous people their language itself is a story and that the words themselves have their own stories, American Indians have a long history of telling stories and they take aesthetic pleasure in the language of their own. As a matter of fact, the stories of Native American culture, rich in wisdom and knowledge are gaining attention throughout the world, but in general, the native stories from different cultures and tribes are always bio centric and they are the sources for lessons of human life. The transition of storytelling signifies the preservation of culture and also the mother earth; and especially native writers advocate the celebration of life through their stories.

On the whole, most of the Indigenous writers carries a notion in their works that, the stories which are considered to be an extension of their language, express and even shape the physical world and they are the powerful tools to be handled with care.

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