

Nature and Narrative: Understanding the Nuances of Nature through Native American Literature

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Abstract

The Native American or the American Indians are the indigenous people of the continent and their literature reflects the traditional oral and written literature with extensive set of folktales, myths and oral histories that were transmitted by storytellers through centuries. Although they differ from mainstream literatures in themes, concerns and ideas; what is inherently significant in them is their approach to 'Nature'. While Euro- American literatures are in a race, rather a competition with nature, Native Americans are seen living in harmony with it. Unlike mainstream literature, Native realise their dreams of culture and society in nature. Even Wordsworth the representative poet of nature has only utilised it in his ideology of Pantheism. In Hemingway, nature is predominant but only a facilitator for realisation of sublime self of the protagonist and characters. So is it in Eugene O' Neil, Emerson and Whitman. But, Native American canon has seen Nature as an animate being, as sacred as life itself. Their reverence for land, faith in cardinal directions, importance of word, echoes of silence and spiritual beliefs in purpose of life finds unsurpassable semblance in their written

literature through myths and folktales. These folktales not only carry the identity of race with them, but the underlying messages in such tales often convey the idea of conserving nature. Native American literature hence draws attention to nature in different lights and elicits why it is important to go back to them, in order to conserve what is left. This paper aims to delve into American Indian notions of nature and substantiate the idea further by tracing a few analogies from both oral and written forms such as the works of Renaissance writers like Scott Momoday and Leslie Marmon Silko with the theory of eco criticism

Keywords: Native American Literature, Euro- American Literatures, Nature, Eco Criticism, Scott Momoday, Leslie Marmon Silko.

Once in his life, a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth.... He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (Momoday 83)

For Native Americans, to concentrate, to experience, to surrender and to remember earth are, ways for recuperating to culture and history through nature. Nature and Native American culture are interconnected. The association between them is well known. A plethora of people from environmentalists to academics to history lovers elicits love for Mother Earth, reverence for land and kinship with all living beings as defining principles of Native American psyche.

The Native Americans are indigenous people of the continent and their literatures reflect the tradition oral and written forms with extensive set of folktales, myths and oral histories. They are said to have arrived on the continent in successful waves of several

millennia. They were not one, but many people of whose blood consist the Mongolian, Asian, African and that of Mediterranean. (Mac Shane 77) A theory known as the Bering Strait theory is one of the many theories which suggest that the Native Americans, otherwise known as the American Indians crossed the Bering Strait to reach the untouched lands of America from Asia. However, they came behind the animals in search of food, probably as their ancestors were mainly hunters. They not only brought with them weapons, kinsmen and family but also, a metaphysical understanding from dreams and visions articulated in the form of myth and song that complemented the historical knowledge about animals and men. (Mac Shane 15)

American Indians drew themselves on the island about 30,000 years ago. As they spread over in ceaseless quest for food, they drew mainly in groups. Eventhough they belonged to different geographies and cultures; they remained together as itinerant group of hunters. As they settled on the land, some turned farmers with the cultivation of vegetables like corn and squash, others remained hunters. Hence Native Americans always maintained a sense of loyalty towards their group. What distinguished them from the rest of the world was their belief system and ideologies. They pondered on their place in the universe, emphasised on the harmony of physical and spiritual world, reverence for land, the power of memory and imagination, silence, circularity and directionality of life. (Chapman 75) These ideologies find a faithful reflection in their literatures, an attempt to immortalise these age old traditions, which otherwise thrived under the pangs of colonisation. Native American Literature differs from mainstream literatures in theme, concerns and ideas, but what remains inherently significant in them is their approach to nature.

The western (European American) and American Indian have distinct perceptions about nature. Although a generalisation often limits our view point, it is somewhat true to say

in general that European Americans see themselves as separate, perhaps superior to nature whereas the Natives place themselves as a part of this interconnected web of natural world.

While European Americans view Nature as a resource to be used and a force to be controlled, it is an element of reverence for the Native Americans. The former is seen in a race; rather a competition with Nature, and the latter living in harmony with it. They realise their dreams of culture and society in Nature, unlike mainstream literatures. Even Wordsworth, the representative poet of Nature has only utilised nature in his ideology of pantheism. In Hemingway, nature is predominant but only a facilitator of realisation of sublime self of protagonist and characters. So it is in Eugene O' Neil, Emerson and Whitman.

Also, it is quite interesting to note that the American Indians give prominence to egalitarianism, (all are equal) unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition. Laguna Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen is of the view, "Native people, acknowledge the essential harmony of all things and see all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things" (5). "Even a rock has spirit or being, although we may not understand it", explains Leslie Marmon Silko (84).

.The idea of what precisely is meant by the word 'nature' and its intentionally broad approach under the umbrella 'Eco criticism' came to the forefront only the late 1980s. However, the indigenous people (before Columbus) in America lived in harmony with nature and respectfully co existed with plant and animal life; what we call ecological awareness today. But the natives wouldn't consider themselves as environmentalists, as the term itself segregates human beings from the rest of the nature, which they do not approve of. It is important to note that what we understand as indigenous environmentalism today is not a result of fear caused by human destruction of the natural world rather a pragmatic approach to living in harmony with nature. Survival meant coexistence with plant and animal life, which in itself is sacred. Environmentalists today have often looked into Native American cultures in order to propound models for living incognito with nature. Chief Seattle's speech

is a perfect example of how the non- Natives have even revised the words of Native speakers to suit their purpose. Chief Seattle's words are so popular in Europe and United States with the fourth version of the speech displayed at the 1974 world's fair in Spokane, Washington.

In addition to this, Native scholars and writers have contributed in expanding the culture- bound perspective by critiquing and correcting certain terminology. Alfonso Ortiz, an anthropology professor, has critiqued the term "frontier," for instance, because "one culture's frontier may be another culture's backwater or backyard" (3). Similarly, "wilderness," a term dear to seventeenth-century colonists, nineteenth-century historians, and twentieth-century environmentalists and one associated historically with Indians, reflects a colonist's point of view. In the early days, wilderness and Indians were both depicted by Europeans as "wild." But "Only to the white man was nature a wilderness," says Luther Standing Bear in *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (26). The wilderness may have been unknown and frightening for newcomers, but it was home to those who lived there.

Although "frontier" and "wilderness" take on entirely new meanings when considered from the "other" side of the frontier or from a home situated within the "wilderness," less obviously colonizing terminology is being challenged as well. Silko has suggested a reconsideration of the word "landscape," for instance, because "scape" insists on a perceiver who is separate from, outside the world being viewed. Landscape, then, with its linguistic split between human observer/nature observed cannot convey a "human consciousness [that] remains within the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds and sky" (84). Similarly, in *Place and Vision*, literary scholar Robert M. Nelson criticizes the term "sense of place" because it "privileges the process of human identification" and, in so doing, diminishes the importance of nature as it is. These terms imply that the natural world has value "only as it enhances and serves our human lives" (8) rather than affirming, as Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan thinks they should, that all parts of the natural world are "invaluable not just to us, but

in themselves" (16). Such interrogations of the very categories and perspectives imposed by language make it clear that language is not a neutral medium for, but rather a partisan constructor of, the world - and, more significantly, that the recovery and maintenance of Native languages are important contributions to envisioning human relationships with the rest of the natural world.

For better comprehension of nature in Native American culture, a look into their literature is cardinal. Native American literatures can be delineated as oral literatures, including myth, ritual dramas (such as ceremonies, songs, and rituals), narratives (myths, tales, and histories, for instance), and oratory. Life histories, often recorded and translated by a non-Native editor; and written literatures that began in the eighteenth century also form a part. These three divisions invoke the historical span and diversity of Native American literatures. Oral literatures continue to be rendered, repeated and performed today like pre-Columbian times. European historians, ethnographers recorded, translated and edited life histories. Even though the indigenous lives has been documented since initial contact in literatures, a much more systematic recording of narratives began only in the nineteenth century and continues to some extent in late twenties. As these works are translated or canned by the colonizers, the authenticity of works are often at question. If the scholars are to be believed, in any such collaborative texts, the voice of the Natives are often suppressed. It is the voice of the colonizer that stands out. Others are of the view that such texts which tell the story of Natives, told by a non-Native leads to a third space, where the voice of Native American and pen of a non-Native can be apprehended by the reader. These studies led to scholars theorizing about such collaborations as the as the "textual equivalent[s] of the frontier" (Arnold Krupat), "literary boundary cultures" (Hertha Wong), or "contact zones" (Mary Louise Pratt); all ways to talk about a bicultural site of literary and cultural interaction.

Today both written literatures (such as poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama) and oral literatures (such as stories, songs, and spoken life histories) are flourishing. However, it is interesting to note that some like Rex Lee write in Native languages or, like Luci Tapahonso and Ray A. Young Bear, compose bilingual texts in an era where majority of Native Americans prefer to write in English, the coloniser's language. Perhaps, this comes out of a Post colonial idea that their truths are distorted and subverted by the colonisers; hence to depict their stories faithfully to the world, the Native must retort to English.

Literatures are primarily stories, stories about life and living. Often, what we witness in life is poured into literature faithfully. Native American literature stands no less different. The writers, past and present have tried to incorporate their stories and way of living into it. Therefore, folktales, myths and legends which form a conspicuous part of their living find its way down into literature. However, these oral devices contain multitudes of value embedded stories about the Native American living and its reciprocity with nature. Quite interestingly, this can be found best in origin myths. Origin myths (stories about human origin) bring clarity to the close association between Native land and its people. The Earth Diver myth, Emergence myths and Earth created myths form three basic type which delineates precisely man's specific relationship with the natural world. What is common to all three of them is the existence of a portion of creation prior to the creation of humans. It is only then, the human beings and animals shaped the rest of the world. This fosters a sense of responsibility, a sense that everything is interrelated and sacred, which further creates a space for respectful interaction.

Common to the Northeast part of America is the Earth Diver myths which talks about a spirit being, often a Sky Woman, who descends from the sky to an earth covered with water. Animals dive into the unfathomable depths in order to retrieve some soil upon which the Sky Woman may rest. A tiny fragment of soil is brought up with great efforts, often after

four attempts which is why four is considered a sacred number associated with four cardinal directions, four seasons, four ages of human beings and four elements. Moreover, in the North east, Turtle offers her strong back as a support to the soil, leading to earth often being referred to as Turtle Island. However in the Emergence myths, the crux of which is common to the Southwest, pre humans move from one world to another, change form and consciousness, until they emerge into this fifth world as in many cultures. The Navajo elicits plethora of emergences, whereas the Kiowa came into the world through a hollow log, as per popular myth. The Navajo story is as follows. They came into the First World as insect, Air-spirit people, and then moved into the Second World of Swallow People, the Third World portrayed them as Yellow Grasshopper People and in the Fourth World, where they lived in upright houses. It is in this Fourth World, that First Man and First Woman were created from two ears of corn, where people learned agriculture. Lastly, they emerged into the Fifth World of Earth Surface, where we live today.

Apart from the Earth Diver and Emergence origin tales, there are some other creation myths that depict how human beings are created from the clay on earth's surface. A tale from the northern Plains brings into a picture a Trickster's experiments with making and baking humans from clays. After various unsuccessful attempts, he creates people in different hues.

According to Young Bear, whether humans emerge from, dive for, or are created from it, Earth is at the center of indigenous self-definition. (95) Thinking of origin myths may help explain why Allen says that for a Native person to say "I am the earth" is not a metaphor. As these myths are often considered ideals, and not always realities, the Native Americans have found a way to connect these ideals to the language of reality, by inculcating it through ceremonies. The myth and its enactment in rituals express an inclination to the natural world. Not only this, such ceremonies reinstate harmony between humans and natural world, staying true to the American Indian beliefs of not being separate from, rather in a relation to the

earth, its cycles, and its creatures. It often envisions reciprocity between the living beings, rather than hierarchal barriers, which otherwise places humans over animals and plant life. Ceremonies, therefore, are a means to reconnect to one's self, community, nature and the cosmos. It is amusing to note that the patterns of these ceremonies are not chosen at random, but holds significance from specific landscape. Water is central to most ceremonies through the arid Southwest. Even if a ceremony is performed to heal an individual, it is considered that it will restore harmony and bring back balance to the community and the entire natural world, as every single being is interconnected to every other in the cosmos. For instance, in the Night Chant, a nine-day Navajo healing ceremony, the singer calls forth "dark clouds," "abundant showers," male rain, female rain, and the fecund results of rain, such as "abundant vegetation," "abundant pollen," "abundant dew", all central to survival in a dry land (Bierhorst, 295). By the end of the ceremony, described by John Bierhorst, through the power of ritual language and action, harmony, beauty, order has been restored for individual, community, and cosmos.(216) Therefore, oral traditions reflect how an intimate relationship with the natural world is central to a Native American sense of identity

Coming to written literatures, it is only after the advent of Europeans and reservations, rewriting their history and distorting truths, the Native Americans realized the importance of writing down their own tales. They came into terms with the fact that waiting for their stories to be told to the world by others, would only bring in half truths. They understood the Native Americans would stand in half naked, half concealed manner, if they didn't retort to writing for themselves. In 1969, a Pulitzer Prize was awarded to Scott Momoday, a Native American for the first time. It is only then the world, or even the larger continent, America turned to acknowledge this genre called Native American literature. This paved way to the Native American Renaissance, where writers not only portrayed their stories, but also employed oral devices (myths, folktales, legends) in order to preserve the

tradition of oral literatures as well. Talking about themes dealt in this genre, a sense of place continues to be a fundamental theme in the twentieth century. "The story of my people and the story of this land are one single story," a Taos Pueblo man reports (Ortiz 11). However land, here is associated with home and homecoming on one front, but also the loss of land, life and culture on the other, under the pangs of colonization. More often so, the protagonist of prominent Native American writers such as Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko are seen coming back to their lands, in order to revitalize their connections to histories and cultures.

Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) tells the story of return of a World War II veteran. The novel talks about Abel, the protagonist's return to Walatowa, the ancient name of Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico. In his drunken state, Abel is in search of a voice to define him, he even finds himself inarticulate to acknowledge his own existence. Furthermore, he cannot even identify his grandfather once he is back in his homeland, after serving in prison on account of killing a man, which again signifies his spiritual blindness. By the end of the novel, as he joins the ceremonial runners, he begins to see the land and himself with clarity, and finds a voice in ceremonial song. Similarly, Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) also centers on the experiences of a World War II veteran, a mixed-blood Pueblo Indian, who returns to his homeland. Tayo begins the novel as, invisible and voiceless. War is not the only reason for his uneasiness but also his separation from self, community, and earth, which began before the war. Throughout the novel, Tayo's story is connected to Laguna Pueblo myth, and both are connected to the earth. Silko narrates a multilayered story as his illness is reflected in the drought, so is Tayo's healing parallels the healing of the earth.

Again, it is stirring to note that, Momaday in all his works, calls in the power of place and the memories it invokes. This can be seen most explicitly in his autobiography *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), published seven years after *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Here he

describes his visit to Tsoai, better known today as Devils Tower · the monolith dominating the plains of northeastern Wyoming. The excursion to this specific place and the stories it carries, helps him reconnect with his Kiowa ancestors. If *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) talks about Momaday's odyssey to his grandmother's house, to Oklahoma, and to Kiowa history, here Momaday recites his promenade to the site of Kiowa origin, a place both geographic and imagined that ties the writer to a historical and cultural precedent envisaged in the present. A specific place, like Devils Tower, may initiate personal memories, but, more important, as Charles Woodward notes, such a place embodies and evokes profound cultural memories (211).

Through oral and written literatures, in the voices and words of many Native American writers past and present, the land itself is storied. Hunting stories may have been amusing, but they have also educated listeners and readers about animal migration paths, water holes, and geographic landmarks. As Silko explains in her essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," such tales mapped a terrain and the relationships upon and within it. These stories literally aided survival. A landmark noted in the narrative might serve as a map to help the listener to find his or her way home. Perhaps, stories of place carry the entire history of a nation. When the origin of a mountain or formation of a rock is rendered through a narrative, people get connected to a land, a culture, and a history. But, most importantly, these stories carry an underlying message, which everyone seeks to ignore. These stories in the form of narratives, folktales or myths for that matter not only does the task of giving out traditional ways of living to posterity, but also carries with it a crucial message about land and its importance, an inevitable need to conserve the natural world. These value embedded tales does the work of different theories of eco criticism today. The American Indian stories of life and harmony with nature can be discerned as what we call ecological awareness today.

These are not just stories about certain events or legends, but incessant attempts towards keeping the community intact, by propagating the hidden ideas about nature and its importance. Once they got the taste of colonialism, the Natives understood the conflicting notions on nature in general and land in particular amongst the two cultures. While Euro Americans adhered to the idea of nature as commodity, the Natives viewed this commodity as community, a part of their living. And when they wrote, land and men are indivisible, they literally meant it. But, it is a tormenting sight to view evergreen trees cut, virgin waters polluted, since the advent of Europeans into this Garden of Eden in the name of progress and development. The Crandon mine (Wisconsin, near Mole Lake Ojibwe reservation) debate is a significant analogy for the exploitation of land and nature, irrespective of the importance given to those lands in plethora of tales and myths. The endless twenty-five-year battle by the Sokaogon Chippewa to stop the proposed Crandon mine was rooted in protecting the purity of the water, wild rice, and biodiversity of the Wolf River watershed. The history and culture of the Ojibwe, commonly referred to as Chippewa, are inextricably connected with the rich water resources of northern Wisconsin. In Ojibwe cultural traditions, water is taken as a spiritual component that gives it a prominent role in stories, ceremonies, religious practices, and daily life. (Hughes 81) The water spirit can be seen in the shimmering light of sunrise and can speak in the stillness of winter in a voice a European settler would have called cracking ice. Water was also imbued with feminine roles and symbolism. While men would typically hunt for game, women were expected to gather water and conduct ceremonies to preserve this vital resource. Protecting the purity of springs is deep spiritual responsibilities felt by Sokaogon people till date, who believe that water in any form represent the lifeblood of Earth.(Vecsey 81-90) Such prolific mention of water and its importance in their stories and myths assisted the Natives to their advantage in their battle against invaders of nature. Even though some damage was done, such value embedded tales and legends helped them in

formulating water ethic, a Native American ethic to prioritise and conserve what is left. This shift in attitude from exploitation to conservation owes much to the Native style of living and their reverence to land and waters.

Unfortunately, the number of lands or resources manoeuvred by the colonial powers for a fast and better life is relatively soaring, irrespective of their importance inscribed in myths and folktales. Resources of the natural world as well as traditional knowledge are moving towards oblivion in a world moving towards everything that is new. Hence, it becomes important to go back to folktales to understand nature and prevent such exploitation. Folktale studies or literatures that deal with traditional knowledge should be taken into consideration for sustainable management of nature and natural resources. Such texts would accentuate an awareness of what is left and alarm us of an otherwise depleting nature. If the water spirit myth in the Crandon mine debate didn't exist in the first place, or if they were oblivious to such legends, there would never be a high regard or a sense of sanctity towards that piece of nature, over which they fought for twenty five years relentlessly

Therefore, a thorough learning of our folktales by leaders, managements and common men would add to more knowledge, thereby making a practical paradigm shift towards conservation of nature, perhaps of what little is left. But, the first step towards this should be a reassessment of our pre conceived notions, to erase the elements of superiority and to embrace nature as a part of oneself.

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