



A CONTEMPLATION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF 'NATIVE' IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract:

“Men and Women do not live by culture alone; the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it all and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labour of those who do not. Any cultural or critical theory which does not begin from this single most important fact and hold it steadily in mind in its activities, is, Unlikely to be worthy very much”. (Eagleton 187)

These are the lines extracted from the most influential work *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, written by Terry Eagleton, an English literary theorist and critic, in which he deliberately defines literature and a literary theory which evolves from the suppressed lives of people who struggled for their redemption from the dominant cultures. Most of the literary works that sprang from these redeemed lives in many cultures were often termed as the ‘resistance literature’, and in general terms it can be considered as a political activity, fighting through the literary works. Furthermore, it is a struggle against the dominant forces of ideological and cultural production. To be comprehensible, this kind of literature reflects the voices raised from the oppressed and repressed communities against the grotesque treatment of dominant forces. Native American literature aptly observes all these factors and exhibits the experiences of distorts and disfigures of Native peoples in the continent of America. To be precise, Native literatures strives to free the ‘Native’ in terms of both literary description and from the historical dominance of the settlers. Based upon this context, political and literary critics traversed the relationship of literature to society and examined the power dynamics and domination, poverty and racism, resistance and liberty issues which became inherent to the lives of Native Americans since the contact to the present. Hence, this paper focus on the representation of the ‘Native’ in their literary works and their struggle for the emancipation from the White constructions of the Native images.

Key Words: Native American Literature, Emancipation, Mediation, Assimilation, Tribal Sovereignty, Western Hegemony, Indigenous people.

Analysis:

Indigenous' writings are such writings which represent the cultures and the lives of Native people and also thrive to give voice for them who are struggling to regain their identities since the period of the European contact. As the literatures of the Native people may not be considered equivalent on par with the literatures of the mainstream American society and as they were being neglected because of the dominance of Western literary works, the situation necessitated the Native writers to strive relentlessly, for the recognition of their culture and people through their works. Hence, one can experience a variety of entities in Native American writings which comprises the rich sources of traditional oral literature of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. These include hieroglyphs and the pictographic writings of Middle America as well as an extensive set of folktales, myths and oral histories that were transmitted for centuries by storytellers. All these forms of Native literature live on in the language works of many contemporary Native American writers with the preoccupation of native history. The consciousness of Native historical elements naturally reflects in the voice of native writers and they can be traced in the form and methods of their literary expression. This incessant contribution of Native writers has enriched the contemporary Native Indian literature with different themes and styles through which they presented the Native Indian life and its rich cultural history. Much of this literature is represented against the events of Indian- White contact, and its past there by giving an account of the events which influenced the lives of the Native people. Hence, the core of the literary representation of Native history in the Americas finds its centre in the notion of possession, not merely physical possession of land and its resources but its ideological possession because, the arrival of Europeans and their contact with the Natives clearly depict the fact that those who control the land, have controlled the story of land and its people. This aspect is very much evident in the trenches of Native American literary movement, which is synthesized with the responses of representations and misrepresentations of Native history. These representations may find their place in the Native writings with description of different historical incidents like, Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee as narrated by Black Elk, Oglala Sioux leader, in the work *Black Elk Speaks*, written by Neihardt, and also in *Mean Spirit*, a novel by Linda Hogan, the writer dramatizes the issue of Oklahoma oil. Another prominent Native American writer Simon Ortiz explores the history and implications of mining in the Grants Uranium Belt, in the narrative of *Fight Back; For the Sake of the People – For the Sake of the Land*. Vine Deloria Jr, a historian and an activist of Native American rights, deliberately challenges the base and tenets of Western history that have undermined the existence of Native on their own lands, since the beginning of the contact. Hence the literary representation of various historical elements by Native American writers, combined with the element of their humour, work to unmask and disarm white man's view of Native history, in order to expose the hidden agendas of historiography and return to the realm of the story. Eventually, through their intellectual depiction of Native elements in their works, the writers force a reconsideration of the process and powers of historical reckoning so that they can liberate the reader from the preconceived notions and this can incite an imaginative re-evaluation of Native history. In this process, most of the Native Indian novels deal with the interaction of whites and Indians, associated with the political questions that revolve around whether to make war or peace, whether to live separately to preserve the tribal culture or whether to integrate into main stream American society dominated by the European culture and so

on. In reality, the subjugation of Indians and their forced assimilation into American life is a great loss to the Indians, and it is a form of spiritual extinction as people. More specifically, since the early nineteenth century, the historical fate of Native Americans has been shaped by ‘vanishing American’ ideology that is based on a colonial belief that indigenous Americans were a ‘dying race’. But here the fact to be noted that, though blacks in contact with whites would always remain blacks, Indians mingling with whites cease to be truly Indian because, Indians who coexisted with whites are considered to be either degenerated or in rare instances assimilated with the dominant culture. Thus, for most non- Indians, Native Americans in their midst could no longer be considered as real Indians, but merely degenerate as remnants of past, just living out the last days of their race. Hence most of the Native American writings are deeply rooted in the past and as well as in contemporary social realities thus, reflecting the plight of these people. They portray characters in quest for a modern identity and shows the strife and wonder of their search and discoveries.

In this aspect, Gerald Vizenor an American scholar and writer, and also many other Native writers insist on the element of ‘tribal sovereignty’ as the most important aspect of fighting back for Indian rights. Moreover, Deloria calls for a return to traditional tribal religions as a means of asserting tribal sovereignty and gaining autonomy over their belief systems in the form of storytelling which can be considered as the vital feature of Native orality. According to Deloria, indigenous knowledge systems, far from their portrayal as superstition or myth, contained vast stories of wisdom regarding ecology and sustainability, human history and anthropology, political and economic equality etc. Hence, most of the Native writers incorporated the method of storytelling in their works, which are based on indigenous epistemology. This art of telling stories of their own by Indian novelists and poets occupied a special place in the world literature. As a part of this orality, they combine their memory, language and storytelling tradition in their works; and this makes them to convey their personal, historical recollections with distinctive identities, through a powerful language with a distinct vocabulary. For them, word is a means of knowledge and experience and it stands at the core of community life, thereby reflecting the ultimate act of sharing. Referring to this significance of oral tradition and writing, Simon Ortiz, in the work *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*, written by Laura Coltelli asserts that “writing is the utilization of language and the utilization of language means referring to the oral traditions.” (Coltelli 105) Because, stories are the way and the source through which cultures come to terms with existence, and how they make sense of the world around them. But stories are not simply produced consciously or unconsciously by societies, they belong to the realm of nature as much as culture. Hence, Native American writers consider that the enduring vitality of the oral tradition has been central to every form of expression and in this context, Simon Ortiz again asserts that, “in that sense the literature has always been there; it just hasn’t been written, with its more contemporary qualities and motives.” (Coltelli 9) The very origin of Native American literature lies in the landscape of America and it is considered as multi-ethnic literature because of its diverse tribal backgrounds. What an Indian knows from his/ her tribe may not apply to other tribes. In terms of their histories, cultures and languages Indian people are different, sometimes radically different from tribe to tribe. This diversity paved the way for blending of two cultures and especially, the contemporary Native American writers can be understood as the participants of two rich cultural traditions; and to be more specific, ‘mediation’ is considered as the main characteristic feature of Native American works.

James Ruppert, professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, in his influential work, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Writing*, defines this mediation as using the epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other in their literary works. Hence the Native works are very much concerned with both tribal and urban life. Though they use western narrative plotting they are essentially ritualistic in approach and structure, theme, symbol and significance. These contemporary mediational Native texts are said to be relying on native rather than non- Indian forms, themes and symbols by expressing both traditional goals and a new literary tradition. By combining oral tradition with written tradition of European, these Native American writers strive to bring Native American vision into Western thinking, spirit into modern identity, community into society and myth into modern imagination. Much of the contemporary Native writers incorporate an overriding meta narrative and mythic structure through which the narrative, the characters and the readers find meaning on their own. The writers insist on their freedom to use the forms and expressions of both Native and Western cultural codes. Hence the element of mediation is expressed through their artistic choices and it is considered as very crucial to the continuance of their identities. In the form of mediational text, the implied Native reader sees through the non-Native and the implied non-Native sees through the Native. This mediational world of the text may supply a place to assimilate the 'Other', where the physical world may not allow this assimilation. In order to provide different Native ways and forms, as a part of mediation, the Native writers who are considered as traditional story tellers consider narratives as explorations of particular ways of knowing and learning, rather than as a static construct of knowledge. In his work *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, Louis Owens contends that, Native writers present "a way of looking at the world that is new to Western culture. It is a holistic, ecological perspective, one that places essential value upon the totality of existence, making humanity equal to all elements but superior to none and giving humankind crucial responsibility for the care of the world we inhabit." (Owens 29) Hence, contemporary Native American story tellers often choose novel as the form for their writings because, the novel is best suited for their examining of the traditional ways of knowledge and also how they function in a multi-cultural world. Notable Native American writers, Scott Momady, Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas King and others mediated in their works by juxtaposing cultural traditions on conscious and unconscious levels, as they represent a mixed heritage either by blood or experience. Through their writings they emphasize on healing, survival and continuance and aim to produce cross cultural understanding rather than divisiveness.

Conclusion:

Native American writing whether in English or in any Indigenous language, is a testimony to the conjunction of Euro- American and Native American cultural practices. In this aspect of practicing of two cultures, the most important and central element to the contemporary Native American works are the mixed blood Indians. In the works of such writers even the characters of mixed bloods melts into the contemporary white background. In mainstream American literature, the real problems posed by the mixed-bloods have been ignored. But in Native American contemporary writing, mixed bloods are reborn to dig out their roots, by trying to come out of the stereotype ambiguous cultural symbols. In this process, some novels presented them

as capable enough to re-establish relationships with the land, i.e. their reservations and this appropriation of the North American continent through their writings is the first and most important step toward the acquisition of new identity. Thus, whether a mixed- blood or a Native writer, both of them strive to emancipate their cultures and identities from the Western hegemonic constructions, by presenting their oral traditions in the written form through their evocative writings, thereby creating a place of their own (Native American Literature) on the main stream literary platforms.

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