

## NATIVE AMERICANS ASSERTING SPACE AND PLACE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Beginning in the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, a new generation of American Indian writers surprised the mainstream literary establishment by publishing an unprecedented range of innovative poetry, autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, journalism, and mixed-genre works of undeniably high quality. Neither American literature nor American Indian literature would ever mean quite what they had in the past, and the assumed distinctions between these categories – written vs. oral or transcribed, sophisticated vs. primitive, familiar vs. exotic – were increasingly questioned by gifted and diverse American Indian writers who not only published in all genres but, importantly, began to produce their own body of relevant scholarship.*

*While I approach this subject from a broadly literary perspective, I also consider spiritual, philosophical, historical, and cultural aspects. While consulting a wide range of writers, scholars, and critics who are interested in exploring and preserving Native American culture, I narrow the subject by focusing on the efforts of Native Americans to regain their place and space and their traditions leading to a comparison of the three decades of Native American writings starting from the Native American Renaissance in 1960s. The writers of all the three phases adopt modes to preserve and maintain native identity and thus their cultural survival.*

**Keywords:** *Euro-Americans, Frontier, Manifest Destiny, Western Civilization, Wilderness*

Americans didn't invent the novel. Negroes didn't invent poetry. Too much has been written about racial identity instead of what kind of literature is produced. Literature is color-blind, and it should be read and judged in a larger framework. (Mitgang qtd. Ellison 378)

The above statement by a black writer addresses the very problem with which Indian and other minority writers are confronted. The purpose of my paper is to study the efforts of Native Americans for regaining their place and their traditions leading to a comparison of the three decades of Native American writings starting from the Native American Literary Renaissance in 1960's. I would compare these three stages by bringing out their differences and similarities.

Literature tells truths about the past that history cannot articulate. This is true with particular resonance in the Native American literature. Before we look in detail about the Native American literature; it becomes necessary to know that how it came into being. The literature originated with the native people who migrated to North America over twenty-eight thousand years ago, not with the Western Europeans who began to immigrate in the last sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. When Western Europeans arrived, 18 million people inhabited North America and 5 million lived in what is now the United States. After contact, the population of the native people of North America greatly diminished – primarily as a result of diseases brought by Whites. According to

the United States Census Bureau, there were only 210,000 left in this country by 1910. In this twentieth century, however, the Indian population in the United States has greatly increased. The 1980 census, which Indians feel gives a very low count, indicated that the native population of the United States (including Alaska) was 1,448,195. The Native people of North America were divided into more than 300 cultural groups and spoke two hundred different languages, plus many dialects, derived from seven basic language families. By 1940, 149 of these languages were still in use. Divided into numerous cultural and language groups. Native North Americans practiced many different religions and customs.

The history of American Indian literature reflects not only tribal cultures and the experience and imagination of its authors but Indian-White relations as well. The history of the Native people of America is one of endurance despite adversity. Through the diversity of their cultures, significant achievements as tribes and individuals, and the richness of their literatures, American Indians remind us of their important contributions to the mosaic of American Culture.

The land was ours before we were the land's she was our land more than a hundred years before we were her people. She was ours in Massachusetts, in Virginia, but we were England's, still colonials, possessing what we still were possessed by, possessed by what we now no more possessed.

This thought provoking view of Robert Frost clearly states the need and survival of the Native American novelists living in United States of America and also throughout the world. In Frost's poem, America is depicted as a gift given by God to the European colonizers. The promised/virgin land myth, which is created by the European colonizers on the frontier, is manipulated in the poem to justify colonization.

Early Native American authors wrote within a hostile political climate and response to a dominant literary tradition that sentimentalized and condoned the death of their ancestors/ forefathers. Also, they wanted to prove that they were neither disappearing nor silent. In simpler terms, we can say that Native American fiction refers to the era of writers who tried to break the shackles by the oppressors – the Euro-Americans. The Native Americans through their works celebrate the glory of the rich past they own and at the same time it present their tragic sufferings. The torture, ill behavior by the Whites, the feeling of unbelongingness is prevalent throughout their works. The violence created by the Whites makes them feel disarmed.

The Native American novelists tried to challenge the Euro-Americans who had used meta-narratives of Euro-American history to write the Indians out of history. These novelists tried to create space for themselves by adopting various strategies stating the need for survival and existence. The Native American literature has grown out of a context that is both rich and tragic. On the one hand, they celebrate the glory of their rich culture of spiritual past, on the other – they write about their historical experience of colonization that began with the discovery of the hemisphere (United States) by Columbus. Native Americans still regard it as invasion and counter the same. Most of the Native American writers relate in their stories, how the process of colonization has debilitated their culture, tradition and identity. Their writings reveal the pitiable state, which is due to the result of colonization. Their writings also reveal how the denial of basic necessities has led to upraise in so many social issues and problems that it compels them to regard themselves in a state of unbelongingness. This unbelongingness is in terms of their feelings of insecurity with reference to their land, their tribe, their traditions, much of which they feel, have lost now due to invasion.

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Give us, then, nationality..., give us excess of it. Let us love the yet barren hills of our own literature, and we shall learn to make them wave and smile with harvests. Let our authors... strike their roots into their native soil and spread themselves to their native sun, and... they will flourish.

Under the burden of sufferings, they cry for survival. The need for survival arises because of spectrum of features it comprises of. The first and foremost is that, it is comprised of 58 major languages. Another important feature is that, it depicts rich culture and heritage they possess. They also talk about their land and their animals. One cannot overestimate the effects of the stereotyping of the Native American on our society. The cliques of the dying warrior, the stoic hero, the mysterious stranger, or the comic drunk did not disappear as the last cavalry soldier rode off into the sunset. They are a part of American life which will never vanish. The pages are haunted by the specters of past glory and infamy.

Before taking up the discussion of the comparison of the three decades, it would be worthwhile to understand the process of colonization by Euro-Americans. The Euro- Americans adopted certain self-serving notions to marginalize and colonize the Native Americans. The first notion is of “western civilization” which means that the Euro- Americans destroyed everything that came in its path (whether people or community). Sometimes it is termed as cultural arrogance. This kind of history devours or destroys everything in its path. Next is the notion of “frontier”. It is a point where savagery meets civilization. This epic struggle explained American development. The frontier reproduced American democracy and individualism – the frontier required Americans to develop new institutions and to prove that “free land makes free men.” The third is the notion of “Wilderness” that defined natives as part of the American wilderness, also as something that had to be expunged or pushed back. Natives were regarded as a strain on mind. The next notion of “savagism dichotomy” regarded natives as savages . The notion of “Christianity and civilization” where Christianity was presented as an unquestionable good and the Indian religions were denounced as devil worship and Indians as Godless. Both were the two flip sides of the same coin. Another important notion of “Manifest Destiny” states that it becomes the sacred duty of the Americans to bring law and order and the final removal of Indian people away from white man’s civilization. They considered themselves superior, more advanced and were of the opinion that nature has given them the sacred duty to teach Natives and even to kill them.

A brief overview of the three phases of Native American writings starts with the Native American Renaissance (1960’s) marked with the publication of Kiowa and Cherokee writer (popularly known as The Man Made Of Words) N.Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn*. This phase incorporates various features like it was one of the manifestations of a loss of identity. The confrontation between the two worlds is violent. Tradition of storytelling/ oral tradition; attachment to home and land; power of word; references to rituals, trickster techniques, tribes, signs and symbols. The writers of this phase stressed on the aspect that what is orally performed is not a reproduction of the event but the event itself.

Coming to the second phase of 1970's, the issues of boundary and identity continued to permeate the writings. The stories have a flavor of myth and magic; they present American culture in all of its nightmares, yet do not eradicate the possibility of miracle and healing. The writers consider themselves as the product of land, time, and language. This phase marked the emergence of a fusion of or intermingling of poetry and prose in a novel. Importance of rituals and ceremonies; myths and legends are some of its features. The criticisms about political and social ideologies of oppression and racism are devastating, yet imagine a future in which all who love and respect will survive and thrive.

The last phase of the 1980's witnessed writings on the life of people. Art of storytelling continued. The writers wrote from the boundaries of two different and often conflicting cultures. Trickster figures were used who were a symbol of continuers of their cultural traditions. Survival was an important theme where survival depends on integrating Past and Present and also masculine and feminine. Use of multiple narrators, images, interwoven narratives and stories, land and symbols envelopes the world of the writers.

In a nutshell, the first phase can be termed as a phase of idealism/ struggle/ revolution. The writers behaved as idealists having rigid attitude and were reluctant to change. The second phase can be termed as a phase of activism/ creating space. A reconciliation of past and present; prose and poetry takes place. A future is imagined in which all who love and respect creation will survive. The third phase can be termed as a phase of acceptance/process of making/flexibility/accepting change and fusion. The writers had a broad minded approach. Thus, based on the above discussion a canon can be drawn that a level of satisfaction can never be achieved. It can be concluded that facing a threat to their individual and cultural identity, and also being suppressed on the economic and political levels, Native American writers turn to their past – traditional myths, songs, rituals, ceremonies, values, beliefs, languages and community – to counter the colonial powers and the mechanisms with which it operates and to forge a future for their communities. They weave stories of their cultural survival to emphasize that the Natives are neither disappearing nor extinguishing. There is a common thread that passes through their writings which points at the fact that stories can heal. The purpose of the native writers was to focus on their cultural endurance as it was dying. The texts were written with an aspiration to change the reader. Also, a deep understanding of their writings leads to the emergence of a new genre- the intermingling of prose and poetry. After going through their ideologies, it can be said that there is no harm in adopting good things from others because rigidity can lead to isolation and frustration. It means having a broad-minded approach, respecting others' beliefs and ideals; as unity in diversity will lead to a happy and satisfied survival in life. An understanding is also conveyed to the readers in a subtle manner that Natives and non-Natives should look for those points of intersection where both the cultures meet and avoid points of difference. To conclude: God created earth and then created mankind and bestowed us with much intelligence, culture and heritage. What to talk of animals, human has become human's enemy. Give any name Native American, subaltern, aboriginal, etc- all have a right to survive.

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