

Native American Literature : An Ecofriendly Approach

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Native Americans or American Indians are the indigenous peoples in North America especially within the boundaries of the present-day continental United States, Parts of Alaska and the island of Hawaii.¹ In fact, Native American is an umbrella term under which there are multiple tribal groups of different cultures and language groups. They comprise 1.6% of total American population. Though they are the original inhabitants, the European colonizers exploited them and being the rulers made them as marginal group in American. Due to the biased policies of white invaders these people lost their rich inheritance and became “the most poor rank at the bottom of nearly every social statistics”² in America.

Being the first inhabitant and literally far away from the “old World” these people were from totally free were the materialistic interest. They were part of the nature and nature was very sacred for them. When we see the pre-Columbian cultures of Native Americans” they were lacking metal weapons, guns and horses,

but upon animistic belief systems that constrained their actions.”³

These people were heterogeneous, has their minimum interest and were very closely related with the nature. One of the most leading Environmental Philosopher J. Baird Callicott Claims that, “the typical traditional American Indian attitude was to regard all features of the environment as inspirited. These entitles possessed a consciousness, reason, and violation, no less intense and complete that a human beings. The Earth itself, the sky, the winds, rocks, streams, trees, insects, birds and all other animals therefore had personalities and were thus as fully persons as other human beings.”⁴

All these groups were the worshipers of the nature. The animate and inanimate things has got “personalities” in their philosophy. Due to this all the animals as per their qualities acquire a typical place in their life. Animal like – Bear, Tortoise, Wolf, Alligator, Snake etc. treated as holy creatures. Some times they are treated as family members. When they

kill the animal for food they pray god to rest the soul of such animal in the heaven. There are various examples in Native American writing where one can see animals are talking with the human beings and vice versa. Not only this the stones, rocks, mountains, rivers, trees, speak with the human beings. This is only because of the close association of man with nature. Thomas King, a Canadian Native expresses in his-common phrase, all my relations – “It is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationships with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us as of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals.... to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, “all my relations is an encouragement for us to (live) our lives in harmonious and moral manner.”⁵

‘To be one with the nature life style’ has given broad outlook to Native Americans. They learnt a lot from the nature. It is their caretaker and the ultimate source of nourishment. Their respect for nature is of sacred mother and fatherly relations. They treat each and every part of nature as their own body part.

This type of close understanding between the Native American group and

nature has been depicted in their oral as well as written literature. They are singing songs and dancing with the nature generations together. Different types of folk dances, folk songs, are the best examples of it.

Their dances like sun dance, Rain dance, ghost dance, serpent dance etc. their costumes, their painted bodies, typical music, its notes and the vocal and musical rhythm while performance gives ‘ultimate fusion’ of nature and human together. All these vocal and musical items are highly impossible to convert into linguistic world; still some of them are skillfully converted into the words.

As the Native Americans have rich oral tradition. Partly it has been converted into written tradition. When the European people came in contact with the Native some of them tried to understand the tribal language, they learnt it, at the same time they taught their languages to the Natives. In the process of time Europeans opened the school and hostels for the Natives in America. The young generations was taught not only European languages but also the values and Christian religion. Most of the time they were forced to forget their parents, language, religion and the belongings they came from. There are various examples of forced proselization by the Europeans. All these efforts by the

whites resulted into “Teaching English” language to the Native Americans.

Most of the American Indian literature spring out by two ways –

1) Told to and 2) Self written by the educated Native Americans.

As per as the ‘told to literature’ is concerned most of the creative Native Americans artists used to recite their songs, stories, autobiographies to the white people and they used to write it in their language. Most of the earliest part of Native American writing is of this type. The strong sensibility, visionary approach and the vigorous nature of this literature attracts the reader towards. (Eg. Chief Seattle’s Powerful speech, 1854)

When we go to self written literature, it is crystal clear that the people who took English education, and felt in a very strong manner to write literature, they started writing. But there are certain examples of camouflaging and writing Native American literature. These people did not come forward to give their identification as Native Americans; very famous example is of a great poet w.w.Longfellow.

Though, Native American writing has began in 1854, but it sprung very powerfully after 1960. The Native American, who were tired of protesting and fighting with the cruel white forces from almost 500 years learnt a lesson from

the Black or Afro-Americans and started Socio-political movement in America. The people who migrated from ‘Reservations’ to cities and got the chance to educate themselves were talking about ‘self respect’, ‘human rights’ and freedom from the slavery. This has accelerated the writing movement in Native Americans. Writers like N. Scott Momaday, a well university educated man mastered the art writing and won the most prestigious Pulitzer award for his novel *House made of Down*’ in 1969. This is called as a benchmark in Native American writing. At present many writers use their mother tongue as well as English language for speaking and writing. One of the leading writer Simon Ortiz in his interview on CNN. Com speaks about the importance of Native Americans literature, “If there was not a body of literature, then Native people would be invisible. Some times the term, ‘Indian’ is an abstract idea. But when we express ideas in literature, then we have a valid body of expression that is totally ours.”⁶

There are hundreds of American Indian writers who have spent almost three / four decades to establish a body of literature to keep their tribes visible.

They are writing about their plight and poverty, government policies and continuous ignoring of the Natives. They raised strong voices against the policy of

eradication of Natives from their homeland. They also write about their rich heritages and ways in which American Indians manage to keep a strong connection to their cultures.

Ortiz speaks about the Native American circle of writers which is almost '500' to 600.⁷

Joseph Bruchac, one of the leading writers says that, "Most American Indians are reading Indian writers, making for a readership of about 2 million to 3 million people."⁸

This type of devotion and dedication for literature has given a special identity to the Native Americans in America. The specialty of these people is that they are the 'mixblood' people. Intertribal marriages, interracial marriages with whites, Blacks, Spanish, French and others gave birth by certain dynamic people. They are known by different names;⁹ for eg.

- 1) Gachupins -Spanish born European elite.
- 2) Creoles-colonial born European commercial and landowning class.
- 3) Mestizo -Native American – European
- 4) Mullato -Indian + African or European African.

There are some of the examples of it most of the time Native Americans are

referred as "Red Indians" due to their skin. But due the constrain of time and situations Native American women came in contact with the Blacks or Afro-Americans. They have given birth to black children and they are called as "Black Indians."¹⁰

To speak about purity of blood and race is a matter of joke for the Americans in general and Native Americans and other slave communities in particular. They count the percentage of blood of mix community. May be due to this they seem to be open minded and always ready to face the situation. Basically they are nature loving people. Their historical documents, their oral tradition Wisdom Quotes, Saying and phrases and creative literature speaks about it. Writers like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie, Marmon silko, Linda Hogan, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Jamake Highwater, always write about the nature and its relationship with the human beings. They have strong complaints about the European encroachment, mechanical, inhuman progress, and population made there by and the poisonous weaponry being manufactured in their homeland.

The sky, the land, Rivers, the animals are of great significance in Native American life. They value it equal to their life. Chief Seattle's speech is the best example of it. Though it was delivered in the year 1854, it echoes throughout the

whole Native American literature. When the great white chief in Washington, President Franklin Pierce, made an offer for a large area of Indian land and promised a reservation, for Indian people Indian Chief Seattle replied emphatically.

“How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.”¹¹

These heart throbbing words of Chief Seattle express the love for the land, people, all flora and fauna. But the white invaders were fully prepared to grab the land to spread their colonial power all over this land. Their advanced weaponry and predecided mind proved to be superior than these innocent people. But this is a type of cheating or stealing from somebody who is innocent. In one of the wisdom sayings it is ironically said that, “Before our white brothers arrived to make us civilized men, we didn’t have any kind of prison. Because of this, we had no delinquents. Without a prison, there can be no delinquents. We had no locks, nor keys

and there fore among us there were no thieves.”¹²

The danger of European colonization has been experienced by the world. Native Americans are the victim of it like others. They are trying to raise their voice through their social and literary movements still. The encroachment of the white is not only on the land but it is like a locust spreading every area of society. It intends to destroy the well established system. It is not limited upto this it is causing imbalance in the nature itself. It is sheerly money oriented and selfish. To protest against this is essential.

Cree prophecy of Native American says :

“When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you can not eat money.”¹³

Native American people are shown as savage, primitive, backward by the whites. But the fact is that they are very sane, wise and sensitive people. Basically they love peace and progress without harming anybody. They are compassionate with every object on the earth. One can maintain all type of balance only by keeping concern with everybody. Native Americans have this inherent quality. I would like to conclude this argument with

one of the most lovely wisdom saying of Native American :

“According to the Native people, the sacred space is the space between exhalation and inhalation. To walk in balance is to have Heaven (spirituality) and Earth (Physicality) in Harmony.”¹⁴

Thus we can say that Native Americans are closely association with nature. They are interested in keeping echo friendly relationship than the materialistic interest.

Reference :

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