

The Native American Renaissance: Pioneering 20th Century Writers

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Abstract

The literature of the Native Indian writers of America did not spring from one moment forth but was rather a process of many years of rekindling from, what can be called, a period of latency. 'Renaissance' came to these people, as an opportunity for their cultural and traditional evolution. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* jolted the native writers of the late nineteenth century, however, it is certainly a partially viable statement, as there was subsequent input by Native Indian writers even before this, only largely unrecognized.

The depiction of the Native Indians and their lives, by authors representing their own tribes, and extensively their community, is dignified and real as these characters display contemporary prototypes of their lived realities.

The writers of the Renaissance, particularly the ones discussed in this paper, appear keen on developing a distinguished literary genre, one which adapts wholeheartedly from their own tribal traditions, and expands on their oral-literature, as well as the mythological trickster-tale. Dwelling on contemporary characters and themes, these writers aimed to achieve the standards, which were established for American writers, and accounted for their grading among influential authors of Americas.

In this study, with a historical analysis of the 20th Century literature of the Native American writers, and the structure and narrative techniques they employ, I intend to expound on the design of these endeavours and delineate their path towards a set objective; one which they did not necessarily preordain to derive at so efficiently.

Key Words: Native American, Renaissance, American Indian, storytelling, trickster-tale, tribal, culture, tradition.

Introduction:

The term Native American Renaissance is not justified, first of all, and is a topic for much discussion. It is as if to say, that the publishing of texts of these influential writers after the 1960s, is the advent of the Native American literature, and before this there was no literature owed to the native writers. This, however, is not the case and there are strains of Native American writings much earlier than this so-called Renaissance. It is not a renaissance, rather a "renascence", a revitalizing of the endeavours of these writers (Hobson 2).

So where did this term come from? It was coined by Kenneth Lincoln as the title of his book published in 1983, *Native American Renaissance*. In this book, Lincoln has stated that the production of the native American literature saw a subsequent rise in late 1960s and since. The "Indian writers" resurfaced in the 1960s, with faces like those of Momaday, Welch, Silko and Ortiz, however they were behind the shadows and not really considered as proponents of Western literature (Lincoln 7).

The Coming of a New Era

Nevertheless, the marking of the Native American Renaissance as a literary movement alludes to the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and its being awarded the Pulitzer Prize

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subsequently. It is not so that the talent of the natives before this period went completely unnoticed. These people, being deeply rooted in their tribal cultures had petroglyphs and bark scrolls which they used for recording oral literature, an abundance of stories, composed of seances and rituals, heroes and messiahs, social and political customs, etc. which their writers of the 17th and 18th centuries used as sources for their works. They had, however, stuck to non-fiction forms, among which biographies were the most common.

It is only in the late 19th century that fiction, particularly the novel, surfaced in their works, with the publication of the first Native American novel, *Joaquin Murrieta* (1854) by Cherokee John Rollin Ridge; and the first novel by a Native American female writer, *Wynema* (1891) by Creek Alice Callahan (Teuton 790).

These early writers, with publication such as Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories* (1921), Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927), John Joseph Mathew's *Sundown* (1934), John Milton Oskinson's *The Brothers Three* (1935) and D'Arcy McNickle's *Surrounded* (1936), plunged into their traditional oral literature combining it with fictional genre, and here they could fully expand their imaginations, and at the same time, revive and sustain their cultural history.

Momaday's novel was a midway between the old form of writing and the new native writing influenced by modern America. The Native American writers, just like their counterparts in the contemporary Western American canon, were also influenced by the spirit of rejection and interrogation, and they used this, to break the maintained misconceptions build around the 'American-Indian' identity. The modern world, which viewed the native cultures and tribal traditions in their poorest, or as they say, 'primitive' forms through the European lens, needed to look at it through a different perspective, one of a native itself.

Context

The backdrop of the 1950s needs no introduction as such. The post-World War America entered the McCarthy era and the generation of the Beat writers, heavily influenced by sexuality, modernism, French surrealism, Daoism, and love for jazz. The economy as well as the population of America underwent a subsequent upsurge, and urbanization was inevitable. With the Civil Rights Movement and the dawn of The Cold War, America was preoccupied in emerging as one of the strongest powers. The influence of pop culture and arts was hefty, laying foreground for the tumultuous 1960s.

For the natives, representatives like Maurice Kenny, whose *Dead Letters Sent*, an anthology of poems published in 1958, was among the earliest of Native American writers, regardless it was not even recognized as "Indian", as were other works of native writers of the time (Bruchac 311).

They began taking their future in their own hands, with Native American activists coming into play against racism, violence, poverty, and territorialisation.

The Natives' Narrative Style and Themes

The Native American Renaissance brought new possibilities to the Native American writers of fiction, who learned from the ongoing trends, of modern narrative styles, thematic multiplicity, importance of character building and striking language in the novel. They are seen, however, carrying on their traditional story-telling narrative, something rooted strongly in their culture.

It is evident by Leslie Silko's title to her collection of stories and narrative poems, *Storyteller* (1981), that this very genre is "vitally important" to the Native American writers (Bruchac 314).

The theme of 'dulce domum' which literally translates to 'sweet home' or 'at sweet home' is observed as a common ground, depicting the protagonist as a Native Indian, coming back home after much suffering in the outside world, only to be treated in his homeland as an outsider by his own people. This is central to the novels of many writers of the renaissance, following in the style of Momaday's protagonist Abel in *House Made of Dawn*. Moreover, they are depicted as poor, usually out of work and heavy drinkers and drug users, but with the sense of essential duty towards humankind rooted at their core. The Native Americans, being the compassionate people that they are, their characters too are depicted as humane and selfless. These characters, grounded in their beliefs, represent the modern dilemma of the American man, which is old traditions versus new fashions. They are confounded by a sense of belonging for their tribes back home.

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To Indians tribe means family, not just bloodlines, but extended family, clan, community, ceremonial exchanges with nature, and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful... Tribe means, the basics of human community shared, lean to fat, a catalyst to the creation of common bonds against suffering." (Lincoln 8)

Another genre, the 'trickster-tale', a famous type of ancient Native American story-telling tradition, which even forms the present-day stock for American fantasy movies and serials, was made popular by many writers of the Native American Renaissance period. There are many such tales in every culture, featuring a protagonist, often an anthropomorphized animal, who has magical powers, and serves as a picaresque hero symbolizing the 'victory of good over evil' motif, e.g., the 'coyote' tale, one of the most popular among Native Americans. In the true sense, these writers wished to renew their traditional art, and represent it to a larger audience against the earlier Indian writings, many of which were falsifications under the claim of Native American ancestry.

Momaday, the Man of Movivation and Other Prominent Writers

Momaday's novel, a ground-breaking explosion in the field of Native American Literature, carried the author's intention of introducing 'American-Indians' into the larger category of American authors.

He did not write to become a "spokesman", but rather took a step further, leading his fellow writers towards mainstream literature (Bruchac 313).

Through his work, he inspired public interest into native culture and traditions, particularly his own Kiowa tribe. In his other works too, he skilfully connects the modern reader to his culture and its interwoven tales, taking them to a world of fantasies, free from the chaos of contemporary America.

James Welch's first novel, *Winter in The Blood* (1974), deals with the theme of identity. The unnamed protagonist is disoriented all his life due to the death of his brother and father, a tragedy which he went through at a young age. He quanders between emotional and sexual encounters and is mostly devoid of satisfaction from both, only to bury himself deep in drinking. The climax of the novel unfolds the protagonist's deep sense of devotion for his roots, when he finds out his grandfather was a hero in the Blackfeet famine; and at his grandmother's funeral, he performs a Blackfeet custom of burying a prized possession with the deceased and throws her tobacco pouch with an arrowhead into the grave with her, which serves as a symbolic relic belonging to the wife of a great chief. Welch, in his work, much like Momaday, shows the dilemma of contemporary Native Indian life, and their faith in the traditional 'American-Indian' beliefs.

Leslie Marmon Silko, a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, published her *Ceremony* in 1977, a novel which follows the 'trickster myth' of the Laguna. Tayo, the protagonist of the novel suffers from PTSD after he served in the World War II. He comes back to his Laguna reservation, and is completely disoriented by the horrors of war and the death of his cousin Rocky during the Bataan Death March of 1942. He believed that the drought on his tribe's lands is his fault, and resorts to alcoholism initially, but is later helped by his grandmother and a Navajo healer Betonie, who assigns Tayo on a spiritual quest. The novel is an example of 'grail' fiction, in which the protagonist finds the path to attain his ultimate goal, by overcoming several challenges. Tayo falls under the category of a trickster-hero, one pertaining to the Laguna myth, who defeats the Evil Gambler, an evil spirit that had caused the drought on his lands.

Simon J. Ortiz, a significant Native American poet of the late 20th century, believed that the oral-narrative tradition of his Alcoma Pueblo tribe is their artistic gift, and he makes it his inspiration for writing. Although he is majorly a poet, he ventures into the creative power of storytelling and uses it in poetry, adding captivating scenes, and depicting pain and discomfort that his community has suffered from times immemorial. His famous book of poetry, *from Sand Creek* (1981) is a lament on the massacre of 133 Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples, including women and children, by U.S. soldiers at Sand Creek on 29th -30th November 1864. To talk about the injustice faced by the Native Americans in the name of Manifest Destiny and European superiority, one even wonders does this term 'injustice' say enough? Ortiz talks about three separate identities in the United States, what is to be an American, a U.S. citizen and an 'Indian' in America. The Native Indians have been the victims, the subjects, the oppressed, and they themselves now hold the belief that they had no part to play in the history of the Americas.

Louise Erdrich, a half-Chippewa American author, wrote a trilogy of powerful novels, though she still utilizes the traditional story-telling narrative form in them. She published her debut novel *Love Medicine* in 1984, a complex interplay of three generations of an Ojibwe family from 1934 to 1984. Events are pushed further right from the beginning by the surreal death of June Morrisey and the discovery by her son Lipsha Morrisey that his father is Gerry Nanapush, one who represents the trickster character of the Chippewa tradition. The addition of a love-triangle between Lulu Lamartine, Marie Lazarre and Nector Kashpaw, gives a humorous tone to the storyline. As noticed in other writers as well, there is a strong focus on themes of tribal identity, beliefs and belonging.

Conclusion

Native American Renaissance writers targeted the existing European-styled conventions in their literature and sought for a resurgence in their traditional method of oral and tribal literature, thereby laying the seed for their successors, to possess a distinct art form. They began the end of the conundrum which their predecessors had faced when their literature was not even considered a genuine American Indian piece of literature, and many-a-times was even passed-off as a work of anthropology.

The movement, then, becomes a "hybrid", one which does "neither focuses on anthropology nor on literary criticism" (Lincoln 9).

With the efforts of these writers, a new literature emerged, one which not only focused on voicing the 'Indian' experiences in the Americas, but also brings them their rightful contemporary literary genre, a representation of the then and now existing tribal cultures and traditions of a long line of Native American heritage.

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