

*Contesting History: Revisiting Native American Identity Through the Narratives of  
Momaday and Erdrich*

Lalrinchhani Hmar, Mizoram University, India

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Native American Literature today has established a stable ground for itself in excavating and communicating those histories that were ignored, limited or utterly misrepresented by conventional histories. It has surpassed the boundaries set by conventional American History in that it tells the truths about the past that history cannot articulate and has been a strong force through time in asserting a different experience of American history and an altered perception of the past itself. Its strategic objective has been in considering how, “the past is conceptualized within Native cultures at the tribal and cross-tribal level and how this has informed the literary projects of specific Native writers.” (Allen, 122)

A variety of mainstream conceptualizations such as race, class, ethnicity, culture and postmodern approach have constantly been applied to explore and understand the Native American experience, which however seems to result in the noticeable intellectual marginalization of Native American Studies. Even though all these concepts are applicable in conceptualizing the Native American experience, they however are not sufficient in offering a holistic approach that centers on Native American communities and interpretations. Contemporary Native American writers have made an effort in popularizing their stories about how they were prejudicially subordinated or incorporated in alien states, which treat them as outsiders and usually as inferiors. They consequently strove to bring about a distinctive reading of their own writings by studying how as a “Nation”, they have endured innumerable battles against their marauders, by popularizing their own interpretations regarding the many treaties they signed with the US Government most of which were bigoted, by passionately retelling their stories and faithfully practicing their ceremonies for centuries and engaging in the on-going debates and controversies regarding Native American identity.

A deeper understanding of Native American tribal ways of life reveals that they have their own interpretation of individual and collective well-being. Rather than seeking emancipation from colonial oppression, Native American world view seeks spiritual and moral balance with all living forms of the world. Elizabeth Cooklyn exclaims in utter clarity why she writes in her Preface to *Anti-Indianism in Modern America*:

I write because such days and places are unforgettable, and because the colonial dictatorship imposed on the very private lives of a very private people festers still and contaminates the life of a whole country (Cooklyn, Preface x).

Although many writings by Native Americans have been published before 1968, a drastic but much desirable change regarding the perception and reception of Native American writings materialized with the publication of *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 by N.Scott Momaday. Like any other tribal nations, Native Americans also have their earliest historical records about them written by the Europeans who immigrated to America. Social disruption followed along with extensive political tension and ethnic violence as a result of the differences in cultures between the established Native Americans and immigrant Europeans. Before Momaday’s ground-breaking novel, Native Americans were viewed as sources of unique national identity and literature discrete from European traditions. Thus, the trope of the “disappearing Indian” was employed in a number of texts written by non-

natives. These texts presented the death of the Native Americans as natural, rather than the result of political exclusion or social discrimination. This could be regarded as a denial of the Indian Removal Act passed by the US Congress in 1830 that forcibly removed Native Americans from their own homelands and relocate them in small reservations as a means to set them on the course to “civilization” that best ensured their survival.

Early Native American authors paved the way for Native American Literature to flourish today. They wrote within a hostile political climate, and in response to a dominant literary tradition that sentimentalized the death of Native Americans. But they found the means to engage with mainstream critics by authoring their own accounts of Native Americans that challenged stereotypical beliefs, demanded equal political rights and proved that Native Americans were neither disappearing nor silent. The period between late 1960s and 1970s was termed as “Native American Renaissance,” a period that saw the beginning of historical revisionism which attempted to document the history and colonization of the North American continent from a native perspective. A generation of Native Americans emerged who took up the task of writing about the issues of Native rights and the burdens of racial identities in their short stories and novels.

On a literary level, it is fair to say that Momaday's works brought about a reversal of roles: the Native American way of life was now recognized and given importance. Of Kiowa descent, Momaday has been a remarkable force in the preservation and flourishing of Native American culture. *House Made of Dawn* that depicts the agonizing search for identity was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. There is much resemblance between Momaday himself and Abel, the protagonist in the novel who is conflicted between the contending prerogatives of Native American tradition and modern American culture. The idea of emphasizing the importance of Native American identity was again seen in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976) where this concept evolved in a more individual context. In an early essay, "The Morality of Indian Hating" (1964), Momaday had written that Native Americans have been for a long time generalized in the imagination of the white man. He had been denied the acknowledgment of individuality and change, and had been made to become in theory what he could not become in fact, a mixture of himself. The journey or the drive to recuperate wholeness and totality of self is thus the subject of much of Momaday's writing.

Native American texts like Momaday's continue to revise how Native American history has often been interpreted and construed from the time of colonization. It transforms the history that has been narrated, interpreted and studied by the white man, which is often in juxtaposition to the Natives' worldview and values. The White man's interruption necessitates a negation of the rich history of the Native Americans, their religion, customs and identity, as well as an identification of the Native Americans as the “Other” who is uncivilized, and thus in need of the white man's salvation.

Paula Gunn Allen points out that “the purpose of Native American Literature is never one of pure self-expression”. As a consequence, what we have in Native American writings is a quest for balance, prerequisite to seek individual, communal and environmental balance which includes a sense of interconnectedness and

relationship between all things, between animals, land, people and their language. Within Contemporary Native American Literature, the protagonists often undertake this quest for balance.

Besides Momaday, Louis Erdrich have also written novels that depict characters seeking indigenous identity while in the meantime correcting history and established notions about Native Americans through this journey. Her novels explore some of the issues and conflicts faced by the Native American community in the twentieth century. Both Momaday and Erdrich have dealt on themes that depict reformation of their indigenous tribal identity making the novel a centrepiece for a program of both cultural transformation and continuity. They focus on the importance of community to individuals and their desire to maintain an indigenous focus based on their history which encompasses the themes of loss and tragedy. They challenge the dominant culture to suppress or overcome minority literature and culture.

Situating “tribal” identity has always been the dominant theme in Native American literature. Writers emphasized on the importance of community and shared ethnic identity through rituals and rhetoric of spirit and soul concentrating on ethnic identity as internal structure and as a self-contained source of individual and group identity. Native American writers therefore use literature as a source of formulating the concept of Nationhood which is affected by imagination in the way that citizens of tribal nations perceive their cultural and political identity.

From birth, the Native American oral tradition provides instruction in the culture and beliefs of the people by transmitting a sense of self, kinship, and tribal identity. Not only does it assist in establishing a close relationship with nature, it furthermore unifies tribal history and reveals ambiguities and natural phenomena. In the Native American culture, a good storyteller has the gift of moving its listeners into another world. Today, the task of the storyteller has been effectively transferred to good writers who are able to capture the oral world of Native Americans through their writings.

Many Native American tales explain that people and the universe at the same time moved from chaos and disorder to balance and harmony. These stories offer examples of archetypal relationships that show communal and cyclic evolution, an evolution tied to a very particular place. Louise Erdrich’s recurrent theme concerns the ties between people and geographical locations, the importance of community among all living beings, the complexities of individual and cultural identity and cultural survival. In her novel, *The Beet Queen* for example, Erdrich invites readers to see through the attitudes of characters exhibiting more “Native American” than Western consciousness, and to reason about Eurocentric welfares and ideals that forcefully control the lives of people who do not embrace them. Through an acquired knowledge of an Ojibwen perspective, readers are introduced to the regional history of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe of North Dakota in *Love Medicine* and its sequels. We learn of a tribe who’s collective and individual identities have been affected drastically in their violent dealings with the Euro-Americans. The transformation of Native American culture and religion through the forceful introduction of Roman Catholicism is also dealt with by Erdrich and she does so presenting it from an indigenous perspective.

The structure of most Native American stories follows a pattern from disequilibrium to equilibrium. Often a situation occurs at the beginning of a story wherein the harmony and the equilibrium of things is destroyed or shaken and the rest of the story or myth narrates the efforts to restore this harmony. The plot of *House Made of Dawn* written by N. Scott Momaday similarly mimics Navajo chant ways or healing ceremonials undertaking a journey from conflict to harmony; from the destructive fragmentation of Abel's sense of self to its positive reassemblage. Through Abel, Momaday recounted the experience of a number of men that he knew who had been disoriented in a way that Abel is. *House Made of Dawn* interestingly is Momaday's attempt to not only delineate the causes of this behaviour but to envision what it would take to rebuild and heal from such estrangement. Through the character of Abel, he offers avenues for healing such suffering. Abel who after returning from World War II suffered a psychological inability to connect with his environment eventually achieves insight through the power of imagination and ritual language. Eventually Abel is able to locate himself once again at the center. He remembers, through his grandfather's voice, that he knew/ knows "the long journey of the sun on the black mesa, how it rode in the season and the years, and they must live according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, in time." (Momaday, 177) Thus, when Abel assumes his grandfather's place as a dawn runner, he is able to run towards re-creation.

Both Momaday's and Erdrich's texts clearly mirror the uniqueness of Native American spirituality and situate Native American identity in the interrelatedness of all things. Ines Hernandez-Avila, a Native American scholar and professor concerned with preserving the intellectual sovereignty of Native people wrote that "many Native American people who have been cut off from their traditions are hungry to recapture their ways, or at the very least, have a sense of what they have lost" (Hernández-Ávila, 334). In her essay, "Mediations of the Spirit: Native American Religious Traditions and the Ethics of Representation," she quoted Grampa Raymond: "The ceremonies, the language, the songs, the dances are not lost. We are lost; they are where they have always been, just waiting to be (re)called." (334)

Native American religion that is grounded in specific languages, lands, rituals and myths and the community of tribes is exceedingly diverse and can consequently offer no easy summary nor can it be simplified into one text. Native American spirituality have persevered countless of religious and political suppression and has nevertheless preserved its unique ethnic history till today. It is this history that provides a boulevard to contemporary scholars and writers where they could pick up the pieces in framing Native American identity however clouded and muddled the path may be. Additionally, from the methodical reflection hitherto, it is evident that Native Americans do not consider their spirituality, ceremonies, and rituals as "religion." Rather, their beliefs and practices form an essential and seamless part of their very being. From Momaday's Abel, whose fragmented self is healed through Navajo chant ways and healing ceremonies to Louise Erdrich whose characters embody Native American consciousness in their search for the "whole", we learn that the achievement of a "wholeness" of being in the Native American sense comes from an understanding and connection to their beliefs and practices. Healing chants

and ceremonies, songs and stories underline restoration of wholeness. And at the heart of it is the community of relationships that withstand and endure all its splintering, conflicts and denials. Through it all, it searches for a meaningful world of spirituality and innate commitment. The Native American tribes according to Paula Gunn Allen,

seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and the reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity... (Allen, 8)

In her analysis of the multiple representations of Native American identity taken from colonial Euro-American narratives, Mary A. McCay declares the significant alterations and misinterpretations that govern these narratives thereby concluding that Euro-American cultural narratives are “hierarchical and monolithic” often excluding multicultural dimensions. She reveals that Erdrich’s patterns and narratives on the contrary look for the possibility of the acceptance of all cultures. In McCay’s view, Native American writers like Erdrich and N. Scott Momaday deploy Native American myths and points of view in order to re-constitute and revitalize Native American cultural traditions and identity-formations, suppressed by, or eliminated from, the Euro-American-centered narratives of North American history. (Balogh, 152-153)

The narrative technique or structure of Louise Erdrich for instance has generated the interest of non-Native American readers and critics and often trouble them because of the tribal influence upon her writings as well as her core themes. Through her narrative, she establishes the durable indigenous presence of a tribal culture that endures through “survivance”. Erdrich’s novels *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Place* and *Love Medicine* all embrace the history of the same kinship. Erdrich in her novels successfully employs and recovers the narrative forms of the Native American oral tradition collectively with significant elements of Native American culture. Barbara L. Pittman and Catherine Rainwater who provided a critical study of Erdrich’s fiction discusses the difficulty of reading Native American literature like that of Erdrich denoting that it is, “challenge for Euro-American readers because it mediates between literary patterns familiar from the Euro-American literary tradition and unfamiliar structures characteristic of Native American narratives. The mixing of different traditions produces alternative cultural meanings.” (Rainwater, 405) In Pittman’s view, Erdrich in doing this, intends “to record the persistence of the Native American community and its resistance to appropriation by the monolithic discourses of the dominant culture” (Pittman, 777). Like Pittman, Rainwater accentuates Erdrich’s cultural hybridity and argues that “Erdrich’s concern with liminality and marginality pervades all levels of her texts”, (407) further arguing that the reader must respond to this conflict of cultural codes since it is a challenge to our efforts to establish an unambiguous interpretative framework.

Erdrich creates the native world inside of her stories in such a way as to invite any reader to understand the Ojibwe culture she is showing. Each chapter in *Love*

*Medicine* has a strong sense of closure and also maintains its own self-contained plot and each representing their own separate cosmos (Stookey, 19). Another distinctive narrative style that Erdrich employs is the subversion of the linear fashion in traditional fiction. She establishes her own system, destabilizing the already established one, interweaving diverse stories together for the plot and characters to progress, once again establishing the importance of communality where diversity contributes to wholeness of being. Within Elizabeth Gargano's article, "Oral Narrative and Ojibwe Story Cycles in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*," she points out that Erdrich's works serve to connect to an Ojibwe audience because the cultural relevance of her novels reflect the native experience back at them (Gargano, 27). As a mixed blood, this aspect of her identity is reflected through encounter of binaries in her novels. Erdrich's heritage manifests in her works through the constant agitation of Ojibwe characters and the white characters and more importantly through the battle between Christianity and Ojibwe tradition and culture.

The superficiality of the general comprehension of the Native Americans shaped the ways Native Americans have been represented in movies and books. Hollywood movies till date have infamously popularized the image of a romanticized warrior chief, adorned in costumes and armed with weapons rather looking savage and brutal. Another popular image is the Native American as the orator and the treaty maker of history texts, the subject of the case study or documentary, the creator of pottery displayed in museums. These fabricated images are somewhat always exotic, sometimes fearsome and greatly fragmentary. They are misrepresentations that have severely distorted the formation of young Native Americans' identity. Native American writers and film makers began to respond to these images by putting whites in their lenses, restructuring the established narratives and representing their own lives and images. Contemporary Native American writers therefore are left with the task of restructuring and correcting the false comprehensions of white ideals and stereotypes.

Reformulating indigenous cultures and languages alongside deconstructing the subject and the complexities of Contemporary Native identities, Erdrich and Momaday narrate histories and personal stories that have been suppressed, at the same time aiming to reveal key changes in practices of self-narration that reflect historical transitions. From dreams fashioned in pictographs, to performances, symbols, crafts and paintings, contemporary writers through their narrative interweave their personal stories with cultural myths and histories, emphasizing a specific subjectivity and the continuation of oral traditions. Bearing witness not only to a history of genocide, they write with the persistence of ensuring survival and the continuance of healing from the "wounds of history".

Today many Native Americans write to uplift and educate Native American audiences, taking up the task of investigating Native American history, sociology, ethnography, culture, medicine, education, law, and literary criticism, among other fields. They have also expanded their purpose in writing, seeking to instruct not just themselves but the larger world about Native Americans. Thus, repatriation of tribal artefacts and human remains also becomes an important theme distinctive of Native American or Tribal literatures. In this way, a body of contemporary fiction speaks to the processes of "inter-cultural definition and negotiation" that are central to the

many issues currently being worked out among museums, university holdings, and tribal and federal governments. (Ira Jacknis, np).

Similarly, Louise Erdrich's 2005 novel *The Painted Drum* centers its plot structure in repatriation issues and the meanings of artefacts. The novel's subject matter explores how repatriation of a tribe's drum symbolic of the tribe's culture and religion, resulted in restoring order within families and the Ojibwe community. In a letter, Bernard Shaawano, (who was later revealed as the grandson of the drum's maker), wrote to Faye and Elsie, a daughter and mother descended from Ojibwe tribe, Erdrich clearly presents the significance and the sentiment that Native Americans have over artefacts that has tribal values. Faye who discovered a huge Native American drum in a client's attic was determined to return the drum to its creator sensing that a tragic story must have prompted its sale to a white trader. In *The Painted Drum*, Shaawano offers an explanation of the reverence the tribe has towards the drum that has been returned. Communicating through a letter in a few but meaningful words he wrote,

Selling that drum was one of the things my father most regretted having done in his life. When he spoke about it, he would hang his head and stare at the floor for a long time...With the drum back, there is a good feeling here. People have come together around it. I am surprised. That young girl Shawnee has moved back with her mother to a house built on the site of the old one. (Erdrich, 269)

*The Painted Drum* is part of a body of current Native American fiction offering plot structures and oral histories relative to the context of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Native American human remains or Native American cultural items which include funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony obtained without right of possession is in violation of the NAGPRA Act and is treated as a criminal offense. Thus, it is important to understand Native American fiction as participating in a major intercultural dialogue. Narratives with artefacts and bones in their plots show us how to revisit and reread Native American cultural and spiritual outlook and see human remains and cultural artefacts not as the end, the death, of tribal identities and ways of life, but as unending manifestations in a profoundly altered view of the relationship of past and present.

Tribal literatures (including oral traditions of stories, legends and myths) are unique and culturally specific. Although translation offers a possibility for the non-Natives to experience and share the Native consciousness, the affluence in meaning and the significance of these stories and legends will not be transferred through translation. Whether the stories are culturally corrective trickster tales or emergence or historical narratives, Native American genres show the people aspiring for harmonious interaction with the earth. Native American communities continually return in prayer and ritual, story and song, to the fundamental relationships, established as part of their tribal identity. At the same time, many Native American writers who have been separated from the life of a tribal community, have also discovered new strengths in the Native American oral tradition.



Craig S. Womack, a contemporary Native American critic who has attempted to formulate a tribal-centric reading of Native American literature has made an effort to construct a meaningful way of encouraging tribal people to talk about their own literature. Being fully aware of the wealth of Native wisdom, he wanted to incorporate Native perspectives in his approaches to Native literature. He genuinely coveted that tribes and tribal members should have an increasing role in evaluating tribal literatures. Through his criticism he ventures for a proof that there is such a thing as Native perspective and he wants to testify that a search for it will be a meaningful endeavour.

From the *Indian Removal Act* of 1830, to *The Trail of Tears* in 1838 and *The Wounded Knee Massacre* in 1890 to 1969, when all Native Americans were declared a citizen of the United States of America, the forces that triggered these events have not vanished till today. According to Daniel Heath Justice, these forces,

still seek to uproot Indigenous peoples from traditional homelands; to contain, transform, displace or otherwise erase ceremonial traditions and languages; to replace the Native presence in the Americas with the ahistorical mythology of Euro-western cultural supremacy. (Justice, 9)

*Our Fire Survives the Storm* defines Indigenous nationhood as more of a response to the “assimilationist directive of imperialist nation states.” Justice in this book aims to differentiate between the nationhood that is linked to tribal nations to that which is linked to industrialized nation states. Other Native American writers and critics like Craig S. Womack, Robert Allen Warrior and Jace Weaver likewise agree on an understanding of Indigenous nationhood that is rooted in the Indigenous context; an understanding that arises from the intellectual traditions of indigenous communities or that draws inspiration from the ethic of ‘communitism’ - community and activism. They all agree on a shared sense of nationhood through the multilayered weave of experience, history and culture. Elizabeth Cooklyn, a contemporary Native American theorist, looks beyond the field of literature or texts and traces the origin of what can be termed as “anti-indianism” in the American imagination. It is rather daring and courageous of her to determine the terms’ origin in religiosity saying that anti-Indianism, “gained momentum as a fundamental element of American Christianity.” She identified what she saw as anti-andianism in the field of Literature and in the process of explaining what anti-indianism means, she establishes a very firm ground on the concept of nationhood that is constructed from the Native American perspective.

Revising a history and culture that has been misrepresented and subdued by the other powerful Nations, Native American writings emerge despite having to thrive in a hostile and challenging environment. Voices that have been suppressed and stifled for centuries took to writing and creating literature hoping to educate non-natives about Native American religions, culture, history and beliefs and most importantly to exercise their rights as self-governing human beings. Native American Literature that is rooted in the Native soil give birth to authentic Native American experiences further comprising of travel accounts, protest literature, autobiographies, sermons and tribal histories that help in a better communication of Native American experiences in the midst of dislocation, suppression, death, false treaties, alcoholism and rejection by the mainstream American society. As much as the dominant White culture attempted to erase all cultures that existed before

colonization even to the extent of a few writers pronouncing the end of Native Americans in America and reducing them to the term, “disappearing Indians,” Native cultures and literature continue to flourish among the bristly environment of contemporary cultures, ethics and literature.

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**Contact email:** [nanoihcu@gmail.com](mailto:nanoihcu@gmail.com)