

## Night Travel by Esther Belin : A Native American Perspective

**N. R. Gopal\***

*Esther Belin, a Native American poet, is a member of the Diné, or Navajo Nation. The poem Night Travel is from her first book, From the Belly of My Beauty which won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. This paper illustrates how Esther Belin distinctly brings out the pain resulting due to the fallacious popular misconceptions about the native American people and their society in America, while they as a community strive to preserve their culture and their unique way of living. She portrays her pride in her ethnicity and identity while she in her narrative style describes a road trip taken by her at night as she simultaneously brings forth her childhood memories and experiences of night travel with her family.*

[**Keywords** : Native American Literature, Native American Poetry, Night Travel, Esther Belin]

### 1. Introduction

Multiculturalism in American literature came to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century. In spite of talking much

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh (India) E-mail: <neelargopal@gmail.com>

about multiculturalism, today we get a very clear impression of subjugation, marginalization and of the poor plight of people of various ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds in United States. Their plight shows that they want to be accepted but are still facing discrimination. Why after all the Native American people have to live in reservations? Why do they have to strive hard to keep their native original traditions alive in the prevailing condition of imposed identity. The discrimination on the basis of race and colour by Euro-immigrants has been beyond comprehension. Discrimination is a harsh reality even today.

*Since 1970 American literature has been characterized by an extraordinary proliferation of imaginative writing, a good deal of it by African, Native, Asian, and Latino Americans. While writing and scholarship of the 1970s focused on defining overlooked and marginalized literary traditions, history, and identity, over time literary study has expanded to encompass transnationalism, comparative race and ethnic studies, and Postmodernist/poststructuralist ideas.*

*The richness of works by writers of different cultural backgrounds makes it impossible to speak of American literature as a monolithic or unified entity. Any interpretation needs to situate ethnic American literature within the historical and cultural contexts of its cultural tradition while also working through parallels and connections to other ethnic American discourses. The emphasis must always be on plurality. Although this makes the categorization and analysis of American literature a more complicated task, it is ultimately more rewarding than accepting the illusion of homogeneity (Wiget, 85).*

Native American literature, hence undoubtedly, forms an important component of American Literature. It manifests some of its own unique characteristics :

*Native American literature often features a combination of oral storytelling techniques and tribal mythology with European literary forms such as the novel or short story. Many works of Native American literature are strongly rooted in myth and symbolic archetypes... Much Native American literature is rooted in the vitality of the oral tradition. Thus, many novels or poems may incorporate storytelling techniques such as song or repetition. The novels of M. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko use techniques often associated with oral storytelling. Native American poetry*

*especially shares many of these characteristics and may even be written for performance and involve instruments and refrains (Millisaw, n.p).*

## **2. Night Travel**

Native American poetry can be aptly delineated as Narrative poetry. Anecdotal representation in various forms, encompasses significant measure of native American literature. The Oral traditions and narratives form an important part of Native American Literature. Esther Belin in the poem "*Night Travel*" unswervingly addresses the readers and narrates her experiences of night journeys both alone and with her family. She utilizes the art of storytelling to pin down two sets of journeys. One from her University to her mother in Los Angeles and another one during her childhood to Navajo reservation where her grandparents lived. Belin as a citified Indian, manoeuvres between the two worlds with deft through her non-formal confabulatory resonance. She herself reiterates the following about her writings :

*Writing is considered part of oral tradition- a presentation, telling your story. Now that people are watching me more carefully, I want to make sure I keep writing natural because I still have stories I want to tell. I see myself as an interpreter of what happened in my parents' generation, and I want to let people know about their experiences, especially with boarding schools and relocation. I see my book as an anthropological text - telling what it's like for native people. Writing for me is a gift. If I'm supposed to keep doing it , it will keep coming (Jacobs, 6).*

Also, she considers herself as a Storyteller in the tradition of native American storytellers thus :

*I am telling the stories for my children, for my family, to acknowledge my history as valid... what I am trying to do is to document the history of a whole generation of people, to give voice to once silent Native American (Jacobs, 11).*

Esther Belin in her works deals with a plethora of challenges faced by the Indigenous Native American people in the metropolitan expanse. Socio-cultural alienation, psychological and historical traumas leading to depression and alcoholism are some of them. The major themes of her poetry have been: urban Indians, relocation, survival, motherhood, and forced assimilation. While hers is a new

Native American voice that comes from a new generation, it also comes from a new place - the city. Belin forces her readers to consider the experiences of urban Indians as important and even necessary components of contemporary notions of American Indian identity (Rader, 18).

She portrays the Navajo life in contrast to the life of natives living in the great wen of cities like Los Angeles. Belin mentions in her writings that her worldly achievements fail to make up for the feeling of dislocation which her kindred and her community underwent in the Indian Boarding Schools. Belin was raised in Los Angeles by her Navajo parents who were part of the Federal Indian relocation programme of the mid 1950s. In spite of all the hardships, the indigenous people continue to strive for the revival of their culture and identity at the places they populate. Esther Belin belongs to a generation of native Indians who are away from life on the reservation. They are not presently in touch with the custom, traditions, language and their community. Belin speaks about issues faced by increasing number of such natives who are educated, urban, and an outcome of two contrasting worlds. Belin through her poetry tries to stand up in a fight against both the cultural and political annihilation aroused by relocating Native people to urban locale. She also opposes the five hundred year old legacy of the Government's policy to wipe out the native people and their culture. Her weapons are words , her poems and her stories. Her ultimate goal is to go and live on the reservation.

In her own words as mentioned in *From the Belly of My Beauty* :

*From the  
melodic muse in my belly I  
create what lives: survival  
of coloured peoples in this  
country called United states (Belin, 1999).*

According to Belin, poems are an attachment of oneself :

*I write about, an experience , and then let it go for someone else to use  
and interpret. This is how you grow and see what you are able to do...  
I see my main audience as Navajo people , those who have relocated  
and come back where language is an issue for them, and I want to  
directly speak to them... I want readers to be aware that I am one voice*

*for native people....There aren't enough native writers. We need to foster that voice (Jacobs, 10).*

Esther Belin covers many important inner experiences and realizations in her poetry. Belin uses the theme of darkness as a source and energy which bestows in strength and security. Her night journey's which she loves, end at the dawn. The dawn that signifies the hope but also bring out a feeling of intimidation. Her trip from Berkeley to Los Angeles ends with the "white dawning" :

*I know the darkness of the roads  
endless into the glowy path before me  
lit by the moon high above and the heat rising from my  
truck's engine.  
The humming from tires whisper mile after mile  
endless alongside roadside of fields shadowy from glow*

*I know the darkness of the roads  
It swims through my veins  
dark like my skin  
and silenced like a battered wife.  
I know the darkness of the roads  
It floods my liver  
pollutes my breath  
yet I still witness the white dawning (Belin, 1999).*

In the later part of the poem Belin maintains that she relates to the darkness of the road to the dark blood in her veins. The dark road and her dark skin represent the silence of a "battered wife". She relates to the society where poverty leads to various forms of crime, violence especially against women. She also compares the darkness of the road to the issue of alcohol addiction.

Her family trip with her parents from Los Angeles to Navajo Nation, ends with "the harsh light" infringe the darkness.

*About an hour from Flagstaff  
the sun would greet us  
and the harsh light would break the darkness  
and we'd be hungry from travel and for being almost home  
(Belin, 1999).*

With the dawn ends the protective sheath of darkness and the harsh realities of life confronted with challenges of poverty and discrimination appears whether living in reservations and metropolis. Family, however, as a coherent unit occupies a pivotal role in the Native American life. Belin's poem displays how her family advances across the geographical traverse in the United States- from Los Angeles to the Navajo Nation in Arizona. She describes that lying on her belly she could stare out into the empty darkness of the highway which led to the Navajo Nation during her childhood. Her Navajo identity gets defined by her matrilineal origin with a rich heritage of traditions intertwining the members of the family as described in the poem. For instance, Belin's parents who are Native Americans pray in a unique manner characteristic of the Navajo for journey mercies before they start any trip. Her family and the tribe are the source of her pride and strength for her.

*The dark roads take me back to my childhood  
riding in the camper of daddy's truck headed home.  
My brother, sister and I would be put to sleep in the camper  
and sometime in the darkness of the day  
daddy would clime into the cab with mom carrying a thermos  
full of coffee and some Pendleton blankets  
And they would pray  
before daddy started the truck  
for journey mercies (Belin, 1999).*

Belin's Navajo identity mirrors through the display of her inherent inclination towards the preserving and instinctive energy of darkness. The plight of native people disturbs her as she mentions the deficient tendencies among the community. Belin associates the Native Americans and other immigrants to the smog and attributes LA as a "crowded", "brown", and "smoggy" city that the Native Americans are not intruders or interlopers. They are in fact the first denizens of the Americas :

*I like to travel to L.A. by myself  
My trips to the crowded smoggy polluted by brown  
indigenous and immigrant haze are healing.  
I travel from one pollution to another.  
Being urban I return to where I came from*

*My mother  
survives in L.A.  
Now for over forty years (Belin, 1999).*

### **3. Conclusion**

Native Americans began writing about their experiences in the 1970s. This phase of increase in native American literary works has been termed as the Native American Renaissance. An effort from then on began to teach how to interpret the indigenous American writings from a Native point of view. Native American viewpoints even now are not comprehensively known and acknowledged. The good work of the writers in the 1970s has definitely made the Native American perspectives reachable to a majority of people who were earlier not able to interpret them.

In the same sequence, we conclude that Esther Belin successfully portrays her the conflict of identities both as a Navajo and as an urban Indian. She has a unique poetical style through which she artistically handles language- like use of hyphenated words and also alternating the public voice with her private thoughts. She effectively combines poetry and prose in her book .She acquaints the readers with the realistic and true picture of her community with brevity but along with intricate display of human emotions. Rightfully, a review from Library Journal states that , “Belin provides graphic descriptions of the ‘wounds’ one endures remaining true to a ‘native lifestyle’” (Allen, 197). She has often been described as a poet of sorrowful details who tells indigenous history. But according to her, from sorrow you get inspiration to move on :

*It is important to see me as a native American , because that is my ancestry and being native American is an important part of our history. I consider myself native American first. The content in my book covers all areas of Native life and no single category can label my book... (Jacob : 7).*

In conclusion, the theme of Universal equality as described by Shri Krishna in the Bhagvad Gita acquires significance here as in the undermentioned verse :

*maya tatam idam sarvam jagad avyakta-murtina  
“All beings remain in My unfold image, everything is an expansion of Me” (Bhagvad Gita - Chapter 9, Verse 4).*

When all human beings are born equal, how can discrimination at any level in society remain prevalent. It is time for humanity to transcend all differences and embrace each other irrespective of race or culture or class differences taking each other to be a unique representation of the divine. The feeling of racial superiority has no place in a world view with broader vision.

## References

- A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita As it is*, New York : Bhakti Vedanta Book Trust, 1972.
- Allen, Frank, "Book Reviews : Arts & Humanities", *Library Journal*, 124, 1999, 197.
- Berglund, Jeff, "Planting the Seeds of Revolution : An Interview with Poet Esther Belin (Diné)", *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 17, 2005, 62-72.
- Belin, Esther, *From the Belly of My Beauty*, Tucson, AZ : University of Arizona Press, 1999.
- Jacobs, Connie and Esther G. Belin, "From California to the Four Corners: An Urban Navajo Returns Home : An Interview with Esther G. Belin", *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 12(3), 2000, 1-13.
- Millisaw, Lee, "Five Characteristics of Native American Literature", *Classroom*, 29 September 2017. (<https://classroom.synonym.com>)
- Rader, Dean, "I Don't Speak Navajo: Esther G. Belin's In the Belly of My Beauty", *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 12(3), 2000, 14-34.
- Wiget, Andrew (ed.), *Handbook of Native American Literature*, New York : Routledge, 2012. ★