

Depiction of Cultural Endurance and Tenacity in Select Native American Writings

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The advent of the European settlers and the continuous forfeiture of their lands irreversibly affected native American life and culture. History records the methodical annihilation of Native American society and culture. Today, many Native Americans are forced to live on reservations, where they face extreme poverty, unemployment, and other social problems. The Native American writers have always prominently endeavored to reintegrate their rich legacy of the past, including the social mores, principles, and customs, in their writings. Irrespective of their tribes, Native American writers have been preoccupied with and driven by the struggle for identity in a white-dominated world. With their unique literary tradition comprising of different styles of narration and multi-genre form, they emerged with conviction in the 1960s, leading to a Renaissance. This paper aims to analyze the selected writings of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Sherman Alexie, illustrating the themes of identity, political activism, dislocation,

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disappointment, and hope. After a broad analysis, we conclude that Native American writers have been a link between the dominant and dominant domains through their creativity and art.

[**Keywords** : Native American Literature, Native American Writers, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Sherman Alexie]

1. Introduction

The rich oral legacy of Native American culture is well-known. These native people used captivating storytelling to expound and elucidate their antiquity, traditions, sacraments, and folklore. Initially, they did not script their history. The Oral tradition among American Indians has been varied, vibrant, and upholds the common good and the identity of its people in virtually all of its iterations. The adulation of divinities and awe for ecology have been the crucial denominators in Native American literature. Relocation accounts, great leader anecdotes, romances, musical strains, chanting, melodies, healing music, and visionary imaginings are some illustrations of Native American literary forms. The Native American literature was finessed to nurture the Native American movement in the late 1960s. The native writers altered nonfictional prose genera to fit their political objectives and convey their own version of the “American experience.” The most prominently highlighted strands of style in their works, according to Steven Otfinoski (7), can be assessed thus :

1. The Native American writers have most keenly strutted the contention to re-establish connections with the rich cultural legacy of the past.
2. They have been concerned with and driven by their search for freedom and identity in a subjugated milieu irrespective of whether they belong to Chippewa, Kiowa, Laguna Pueblo, or any other tribe.
3. They have merged the diverse forms and arrays of native storytelling into their works of literature, extracting from the lavish mores of their earliest literature, mythology, folklore, and allegories.
4. Their literature often follows a circular narrative structure and not a chronological one.
5. Their plots are nonlinear, and the intent is evident only at the end.

6. Imaginings, reveries, and spirits play protruding parts in the native narratives as living human people, blurring the gap between the actual and the supernatural.

These are just a few unities that bind the Native American literary style. N. Momaday Scott's novel *House Made of Dawn*, published in 1968, is often acknowledged as the beginning of modern Native writing, as it encompasses many elements of traditional native descriptions. It set the stage for a generational legion of exceptional writers leading to the Native American Renaissance. The struggle for identification in a world where cultural cordons are receding is a recurring concern among these writers, many of whom have "mixed blood." Genre-bending or multi-genre writing is a unique feature of modern Native American literature. Native writers perfected the technique of mixing personal stories with traditional and historical facts to depict an intricate expedition of distinctiveness and identity search. While N. Scott Momaday and James Welch pursue displacement, identity, and disillusionment issues, Leslie Marmon Silko explores civic and feminist engagement. Sherman Alexie depicts the realities and hardships of actual Native American life, particularly the negative aspects of living on a reservation. We see the melding and synthesis of oral and written literature, which results in the continuation of the cultural legacy. The zeal now is to ascertain a rapport between the dominant and the dominated realms.

2. Native American Writings

The following is an analysis of the recurrence of the themes mentioned earlier as seen in some selected well-known Native American writings :

2.1 House Made of Dawn (1968)

N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa writer born in 1934, was instrumental in popularizing Native American literature and integrating it into mainstream American literature. *House Made of Dawn* (1968), N. Scott Momaday's debut and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, tells the narrative of Abel, a young Pueblo Indian who returns home from World War II isolated and unhappy. The portrayal of the tussle between the Native American culture and other cultures is the crucial refrain in *House Made of Dawn*. The protagonist of N. Scott

Momaday's work, *Abel*, is apportioned between his people's ideals and traditions and those of modern white culture. He doesn't feel like a part of either of them. Abel was brought up in a Pueblo reservation and participated in community life, but he never felt entirely at ease there. His father wasn't even known to him, and his mother and brother died when he was a child. His grandfather Francisco remains his only living relative. He struggles to form a meaningful bond with his grandfather until the novel's conclusion. Abel's attempt to participate in a native ceremonial game fails, and he is later humiliated by the contest's winner, the albino Juan Reyes. Abel kills Juan.

They were near a telegraph pole; it leaned upon the black sky and shone like coal. All around was silence, save for the sound of the rain and the moan of the wind in the wires. Abel waited. The white man raised his arms, as if to embrace him and came forward. But Abel had already taken hold of the knife, and he drew it. He leaned inside the white man's arms and drove the blade up under the bones of the breast and across (Momaday 150).

Abel is moved to the city under the government's relocation program after serving six years in jail for the murder of Reyes. The slaying of the albino symbolizes the cultural clash that Abel is attempting to resolve. Abel decides to return home to Walatowa after struggling to adjust to life in the city as a factory worker. Abel returns home to care for his ailing grandfather, Francisco. Francisco describes his life as a young warrior to his grandson. His tales reintroduce Abel to his tribal roots and provide him with a sense of purpose that he lacked earlier. Later, Abel decides to bury his grandfather according to the Pueblo tradition.

He dressed the body in bright ceremonial colors: the old man's wine velveteen shirt, white trousers, and low moccasins, soft and white with kaolin. From the rafters he took down the pouches of pollen and of meal, the sacred feathers and the ledger book. These, together with ears of colored corn, he placed at his grandfather's side after he had sprinkled meal in the four directions. He wrapped the body in a blanket (Momaday 363).

He joins the ceremonial run at dawn with others as he sings a tribal song. He is at peace with himself, nature, and his people. Conclusively, Abel develops a close bond with his ancestors and community, like his grandpa Francisco.

2·2 The Death of Jim Loney (1979)

James Welch (1940-2003) is a prose writer with a traditional Indian writing style who wrote about the Native American Culture and life on a reservation. In James Welch's novel *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), the protagonist is an estranged Native American trying to reconnect with his cultural origins in Montana. It's a story about isolation, growing loneliness, and death. Loney is tied to the countryside and would rather die in a familiar setting than travel to Seattle searching for a "happy life." He was half-Indian and half-white, yet he had no feelings for his ancestors. He and his sister, Kate, were abandoned by their mother and father. He had a solitary existence. Jim works for a local farmer, although he spends most of his time napping and gulping alcoholic beverages. His sister Kate, unlike him, manages to land a job in Washington, D.C. and begs Jim to join her, but he has no such plans. His girlfriend, Rhea, a local school teacher, is a knowledgeable white lady from an affluent Dallas family. Jim is opposed to Rhea's relocation plan and has nothing to give her.

And she had written Kate that she was becoming concerned about his drinking, and even more about his desire to isolate himself. Rhea had written that she was the only one he saw anymore. He had been this way for almost two months. He hardly ever left his house except when he needed things, mostly wine and cigarettes. She concluded that he seemed to be suffering (and she remembered her own phrase) "a crisis of spirit." But she thought, it was exactly that, a crisis, something to be gotten over (Welch 21).

Loney shoots his friend Pretty Weasel by mistake, which he tells his father, who betrays him and alerts the cops. An Indian cop, Quinton Doore, shoots him. The novel is tinged with a feeling of futility and meaninglessness. Themes of spiritual and physical death, as well as isolation, are established. Finally, Loney gets the tranquility he had been searching for in death. Death is a relief from a useless and wretched existence. Loney, throughout his life, has a desire to know himself and remains dissatisfied with the disjointed stories told by his father.

2·3 Ceremony (1977)

A political activist and writer Leslie Marmon Silko born in 1948 in New Mexico, has Laguna Pueblo ancestry. Silko considers herself

to be a part of a line of storytellers in Native American culture that has been solely oral for many years. Ceremony (1977), her novel, tells the narrative of a World War II veteran's effort to find redemption by expending Native American sacraments. Tayo is a mixed-blood Native American. Soon after Tayo's birth, his white father deserted him and his mother. Laura, his mother, was an irresponsible parent who ignored him as a youngster while she drank and had sex with several men, sometimes for cash. Tayo was later looked after by his grandmother and aunt, who always reminded him of the humiliation his mother had caused to their family.

Tayo remains emotionally unhappy and estranged after returning from World War II duty in the Pacific. As a prisoner of war, he experienced psychological anguish. Before being freed and permitted to return to New Mexico and the Laguna Pueblo reservation, Tayo had to be admitted to a soldier's hospital. Later in the novel, after a brawl with Emo on the reservation, Tayo is arrested and sent to an army mental facility in Los Angeles. Tayo is allowed to return to the reservation after befriending a doctor. His grandmother sends him to Ku'oosh, a native medicine man, for healing. Tayo receives a healing ritual from Ku'oosh, relieving his discomfort but not eliminating it. Ku'oosh dispatches Tayo to Betonie, a distinct type of medicine man for the cure. At a point in the novel, Tayo is about to attack Emo and murder him. Still, he fights the temptation, knowing that violence isn't the answer to his problems and will only deteriorate the situation.

The moon was lost in a cloud bank. He moved back into the boulders. It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the indications of this end had been there all along, since his release from the mental ward at the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles. The white people would shake their heads, more proud than sad that it took a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the

whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of themselves they could not save (Silko 360).

Tayo returns to his Auntie's house, and subsequently, he hears that his friends Harley and Leroy died in a car accident and were discovered dead in the pickup truck. Emo is arrested for the crime, and Tayo is saved. Tayo has completed his healing ritual and is now complete again, thus declaring triumph of good over evil.

The novel's main storyline of Tayo's journey to safety and contentment touches on vital Native American themes. It incorporates the sanctity of the landscape's ability to heal the human spirit internally and externally, the disastrous prowess of collective and individual violence, the scour for identity in a dystopian future, and the importance of ceremonies and rituals in the process of recovery. Once again, as believed by Silko, hearing or reading amazing native stories teaches people about life and the virtues that are critical for development and wisdom.

2.4 Indian Killer (1996)

Sherman Alexie is one of a new generation of Native American authors born on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington in 1966. Sherman Alexie's writing casts a critical light on the terrible realities of reservation life. Still, it is lightened by unique humor and a connection to his people's spiritual and cultural history. In addition, his art is infused with a strong sense of social consciousness and political activism. While his themes are akin to those of his elder contemporaries, his cheeky humor, contemporary characters, and straightforward style stand in stark distinction from many other Native American writers.

Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* (1996) explores the tragic story of John Smith, a young Indian who is isolated from both his native culture and the world of white society. Daniel and Olivia Smith, a middle-class white couple, adopt John, who is the son of a 14-year-old Indian mother. They introduce John to Indian culture out of a sense of obligation rather than a genuine desire to help John understand and connect with his heritage. Father Duncan, a sympathetic priest, instills in John a hatred for white people due to their brutalities against Native Americans.

His teachers were always willing to give him a little slack. They knew he was adopted, an Indian orphan, and was leading a difficult life. His teachers gave him every opportunity and he responded well. If John was a little fragile, that was perfectly understandable, considering his people's history. All that alcoholism and poverty, the lack of God in their lives (Alexie 38).

The novel is set when John is living alone in Seattle, Washington. John, a loner by nature, has severed all ties with his adoptive parents and now works on a construction team building a skyscraper since he heard it is a career in which Indians thrive. John has no friends, and his feelings of isolation and resentment drive him to want to kill a white guy. A white man's body is discovered scalped, sparking a frantic quest around the city for the Indian Killer. There were a series of killings in the city. The novelist does not disclose the killer's identity to maintain the suspense. John Smith abducts Jack Wilson, an ex-cop and mystery writer, and confines him in the unfinished building where he was previously working. In the novel's thrilling culmination, John scars Jack's face as a punishment for Jack's contempt of Native American culture. Then, having nothing left to live for, John Smith jumps from the top of the tower to his death.

John dropped the knife, turned away from Wilson, quickly walked to the edge of the building, and looked down at the streets far below. He was not afraid of falling. John stepped off the last skyscraper in Seattle...John fell. Falling in the dark, John Smith thought, was different from falling in the sunlight. It took more time to fall forty floors in the dark. John's fall was slow and precise, often stalled in midair, as if some wind had risen from the ground to counteract the force of gravity (Alexie 608).

The cathartic effect of violence, the destructive force of racism and prejudice, and the acceptance of Native American culture by the Whites are prominent thoughts in this novel. The feeling of Alienation flows across the story, portrayed most vividly in the primary character, John Smith. His attempt at self-destruction occurs in the frigid, incomplete building he previously assisted in constructing, a symbol of the sterile, urban world he inhabits. In *Indian Killer*, violence causes violence. The assassination of David

Rogers, which other white men paradoxically carried out, inspires his brother to seek vengeance on the defenseless Indians who live on the street.

3. Conclusion

The saga of oppression, suffering, and the question of self-identity has always existed in the writings of the native writers of America. The Native American Renaissance writers sought a resurgence in their traditional literature to invent their distinct literary form. They sought literature that voiced their experiences and perspectives and represented their traditions and philosophies. Native American written literature proliferated in the nineteenth century and eventually became a means to improve their socio-political dilemmas. In their literature, one consistently finds familiar reverberating and intersecting themes depicting their constant struggle for a dignified and fulfilling existence. In our study here, we encounter Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, Jim Loney in *The Death of Jim Loney*, Tayo in *Ceremony*, and John Smith in *Indian Killer*, who symbolically represent and reflect the hope and yearning for peaceful, harmonious sustenance and survival for all ethnicities on this planet.

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