



## UNDERSTANDING NATIVE LITERATURE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF TRIBAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

**Dr. Parag. C. Athavale**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
B.P.H.E Society's Ahmednagar College,  
Ahmednagar - 414001  
Maharashtra  
[paragathavale1@gmail.com](mailto:paragathavale1@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

According to Encyclopaedia Britannia, "Native American Tribal Literature is the traditional oral and written literatures of the indigenous peoples of America. These include hieroglyphic and pictographic writings of middle America as well as extensive set of folk tales, myths and oral histories that were transmitted for centuries by story tellers." The key features of Native American Literature is- a)It articulates group identity, reclaims the past, writes their version of history-but also recognizes the influence of the colonizer b) Colonising countries often appropriate the languages, images, scenes ,traditions of the colonized land and vice-versa. The contexts for Native American Literature are-a) Oral Tradition, Ceremony and Ritual b)Creation Mythology c)Origin Mythology d) Trickster Tales e)Western Literary Tradition, English and American Poetry.

*Keywords: group identity, decolonization, Autobiography.*

### **Introduction:**

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The contexts for Native American Literature are-a) Oral Tradition, Ceremony and Ritual b) Creation Mythology c)Origin Mythology d) Trickster Tales e)Western Literary Tradition, English and American Poetry



An Oral Tradition originate from a pre-literate world and the stories are passed down peacefully. Native American stories often include a performance aspect, finally written down a few hundred years ago. With the era of decolonization coming and the overthrow of imperial powers certain geographical pockets hitherto neglected is now considered seriously. Sensibilities found in these regions point to tribal or indigenous voices and marginalized groups. These groups have been ignored for a long time as the lands captured by the European masters, were the victims of racism and genocide. Their children deliberately removed from them and brought with whites to learn their customs and manners, specially sending them to English boarding schools, and churches in order to erase their cultures and so on. Often the tribal bodies were suppose to sell their lands and starve (as a conspiracy to eliminate them). Most of the natives would suffer from emotional psychological trauma, substandard inadequate housing, frequent lack of food, alcoholism, drug addiction and high rates of poverty.

The subject of our discourse is highly relevant as tribal societies are often studied by anthropologists sometimes under the belief that they give you an insight into the nature of primitive man. But a more serious reason is that these societies show an extraordinary range of culture behavior and help modify some commonly held ideas about universal standards of aesthetics and morality. Native American Tribal society can be of interest to sociologists, linguists and environmentalists.

#### **International Status:**

Native American Tribal Literature is very popular globally. The trend has shifted more to explore the plights of the oppressed ones down the ages especially Native American Indians in America, Inuits in Canada, Aborigines in Australia and the Maori's in Australia. In addition to the Post Colonial perspective it offers us an excellent opportunity to study cultures, beliefs and practices.

#### **National Status:**

Tribal literature is an engaging discourse in our country. We have tribal groups like 'Abhors' and 'Aptanis' in Andhra Pradesh, 'Badagas', in Nilgiris, 'Baiga', and Bhils' in Madhya Pradesh, Bhils' in Maharastra, 'Bhot' in Himachal Pradesh, 'Bhutia's' in Garhwal and Kumaon region and 'Chakma' in Tripura region who face identical problems and conflicts. Moreover Tribal study offers an excellent opportunity to understand culture, practices and beliefs. It also gives us an opportunity to appreciate literary art of the Native American Tribal communities. The present study is significant as the history of Native American Literature



reflects the tribal culture and the experience and imagination of its authors. It also tells us something about the relations between the Indian tribes and the whites.

Oral literatures in several forms was dominant in many cultures. It also influenced written works(which came later).The central belief of Native Americans, to whichever tribe they belonged ,was the need to live in harmony with the physical and spiritual universe. In their understanding, breath, speech and verbal art (songs and oratory)are closely connected. In fact, in many these three are signified by the same word.For example,in Navajo culture,the emergence myth shows that in the beginning there were the word and the thing,the symbol and the object.For the Navajo, “symbol is a word, and the word is means by which substance is organized and transformed.” The inter-relation among knowledge ,thought and speech in Navajo culture is in the chant:

“Beginning of the Earth Song”...(a piece of the hymn)

The earth will be ,from ancient

times with me there is knowledge of it.

The mountains will be, from ancient times with me

There is knowledge of it.

(and so on)

It is significant that the native Americans had a great reverence for the word because they believed in the symbolic power of the word to change the world for better or worse.Even silence has its own power. Silence is described as the sanctuary of sound. “Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; there they are sacred”.

The literatures by the native Americans voice has a strong desire for harmony which is related to their reverence for the land.According to M Scott Momaday, “Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth.He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it,to dwell upon it.” The native American literature ,both oral and written, stress directionality and circularity frequently. The number 4 is a sacred number in their mythology. The directions, seasons, stages of human life are counted as 4 in each category This sacred number recurs in the content and form of literatures. Multiples of 4 are also frequent. Number 6 representing the four main directions and above and below the earth are also common. The circle is another recurring symbol in native literatures.It symbolize the sun and the earth. Human life is seen as cyclical. The circle is important in tribal ceremonies and dances. The mythic culture heroes and heroines who leave the tribe come back after many trials and



adventures, thus completing a circular journey. Another recurring theme in native American literature is the strong fellow feeling and helpfulness.

Ritual Drama, Songs and Narratives are major genres of oral literature. Chants, ceremonies and rituals play an important role in ritual drama. Here words are endowed with occult power. Words are transformed into sacred vocabulary by certain linguistic processes like affixation, reduplication, inversion and other stylistic features. Ritual Dramas are performed by priests, singers and shamans. Shamans perform spirit flight, find lost souls, cure illness and foretell future events.

Songs are integral to oral literature. For the Papago tribe, a song is “a magic which calls upon the power of nature and constrains them to man’s will.” The songs celebrate major events in human life, birth or naming, arrival of puberty, healing, death and burial. Songs are also part of fertility rites which ensure survival of the group. There are personal lyrics like the wind song of the Kiowas. These wind songs are actually war songs which describe loneliness and longing on the vast open prairies where only “the sweep of the wind broke the silence”.

The narratives emphasize external behavior. They are compressed, simple and terse. There is inconsistency in time, logic and detail. Characters are one dimensional and rarely express thought and emotion. The common themes are creation of the world, origin and migration of the tribes and adventure of the culture heroes and emergence myths are common. Oratory is one of the genre also. It may be ceremonial or non-ceremonial or both. It is used to settle political and legal questions. Autobiography is one of the genres in native American literature.

To sum up a study of Native American literature gives us an excellent opportunity to learn about the cultural practices and beliefs of the Native Americans. Their belief in oral tradition, myths, worship of natural objects gives us a new dimension to the study of literature. Its potential contribution to knowledge in the relevance to national importance, A study of Native American literature would tempt us to carry the discourse forward to other areas in India like Dalit Literature. Not only this our subject would also lead us to Tribal Studies in India, Problems like Naxal Issue, Conflict between man and nature can be read Ecocriticism With this we can analyze pieces of Native American Tribal Poetry a few Native American Tribal Short Stories and a few extracts from Native American Tribal Fiction It also helps us to identify the major poets and Fiction Writers in the realm of Native American Tribal Writers and to compare Native American Tribal Poetry with their Western counterparts.



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