

## Walking into the Fading Past: A Critique on the life of the Native Americans

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### ABSTRACT

Tribal culture and history has become a faded knowledge in the emerging living conditions and modern technological encounters. Native American Literature serves as an amalgamation of history in the midst of imagination which concentrates on the life and achievements of the Native Indian leaders. They lived through the period of American Colonisation, American Revolution and later on through the period of conflict and turbulence between the Natives and the Settlers. The life of Natives was disturbed by the foreign explorers. They began to occupy their land, later they saw their land becoming the sole possession of the invaders. Natives saw new rules and regulations that were created to suppress and overpower them. Today there are 573 federally recognized tribes in United States of America. They have their tradition to keep and culture to be followed. They are not forced to live in their reservations, they have their freedom to choose their living place. 78% of Native Americans live outside the reservations of California, Arizona and Oklahoma.

### SUMMARY

Tribal culture and history has become a faded knowledge in the emerging living conditions and modern technological encounters. Historical interpretation of a literary work begins with the identification of historical events in the literary works. Native American Literature serves as an amalgamation of history in the midst of imagination which concentrates on the life and achievements of the Native Indian leaders. They lived through the period of American Colonisation, American Revolution and later on through the period of conflict and turbulence between the Natives and the Settlers.

Columbus discovered American continent to the world in 12 October 1492, during those days seven million to eighteen million native people were living in the continent. It was believed that more than six hundred tribes were living during those days, they spoke different dialects and followed different culture. European Colonist encountered tribal people mainly in three distinct regions, they were East woodland tribe, southeast tribe and south west tribe. An article, "1600-1754: Native Americans: Overview" in American Eras. Encyclopedia.com, states that,

Eastern Woodland tribes included the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, Abenakis, Shawnees, Delawares, Micmacs, Mahicans, and Pequots. Some of these tribes were sedentary hunter-gathers while others grew maize (corn), beans,

and squash. In the Southeast white settlers came into contact with Powhatans, Catawbas, Cherokees, Creeks, Natchez, Choctaws, and Chickasaws; these people were primarily agriculturalists. Pueblos, Zunis, Navajos, and Hopis represented some of the adobe-dwelling bands in the arid Southwest.(n.pag)

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Native Americans were food gatherers, hunters and cultivators. Hence their food culture was also determined by hunting, farming and gathering. East woodland tribal people were mostly hunters and gathers, but at the same time the southeast tribal people tried their hands in agriculture. Food habit had been changing and modifying itself from the beginning. Their food habits were partly traditional and partly modern. Men followed the traditional method and they practiced hunting. Women involved themselves in cultivation and produced grains like corn, beans, and squash.

The historiography of a specific topic covers various fields of historians, on how they had studied a topic using particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches. Spiller in the opening lines of the Literary

History of the United States: History states that each generation must rewrite the history in order to keep the values of the past and to escape from self-destruction. This might be the real reason that could have forced Native American Indian Writers like, Robert J. Conley, Win Blevins, Daniel Heath Justice, Thomas King, John Rollin Ridge, Louis Owens, Dr. Ronald Lewis, Red Haircrow Owl Goingback and Eddie Chuculate to write history based novels and fiction on the real people who lived years before in the Cherokee land. Spiller opines that,

Each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms. A redefinition of our literary past was needed at the time of the First World War, when the Cambridge History of American Literature was produced by a group of scholars. It is now needed again; and it will be needed still again . . . the values as well as the facts of modern civilization must be examined if man is to escape self-destruction. We must know and understand better the records of our experience. Scholars can no longer be content to write for scholars; they must make their knowledge meaningful and applicable to humanity. (Spiller vii)

American Indian Tribe was believed to have existed since the prehistory even further back than anyone can really say. Their origin was not known but anthropologists are of the view that the Natives of America came into American continent from Asia through the Bering Strait land bridge twelve thousand years ago. It was believed that there were no true natives but, only the early immigrants and later immigrants. But Dr. Jeffrey Goodman in American Genesis offers an opposite view to the standard belief. He had claimed that “the Modern man existed in North America . . . at least fifty thousand years ago, at a time when Europe and Asia were still populated by Neanderthal Man” (196). Scholars argued that the Native Americans were the original inhabitants of the land but others felt that they were the early immigrants. Bering Strait was a pre-historical land bridge that connected the land lying on the North American Plate and the Siberian land, east of the Chersky Range. It was a narrow passage of water between Alaska and Asia, which connected the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean. Bering Strait land bridge was a vast prairie that appeared during the late ice age about twelve thousand years ago when the water level in the Bering Strait dropped. Dr. Barbara Winter states that “Historically it formed a land bridge that was up to 1000 kilometers (620 miles) wide at its greatest extent and which covered an area as large as the British Columbia and

Alberta together” (n. pag.). The first group of people who came into this land might be hunters, who followed a game or wanderers, who might have migrated for food or water.

Discovery of the land was followed by numerous invasions by different kinds of people for various reasons. Trade was a prospective wealth process and it grew up very quickly with the cooperation of the native people. When trade flourished in the country, many foreign traders started settling in the land. The earlier settlers, in the beginning, came into the land and settled in the most convenient places. According to the earlier stories, when the first emigrants came into the land, it was fresh and new with no human population. So they lived in groups in a place, where they got food, water, and protection. Robert J. Conley and other historians altogether recall the expedition of the great Spanish warrior, Hernando De Soto. He landed on the virgin land in 1542. Spanish expedition of 1540-41 was led by, Hernando de Soto, he passed through the Cherokee Country. Historical encounters by English Colonists states that De Soto’s expedition visited villages of present day Western Georgia and Eastern Tennessee, recording them as ruled by the Coosa chieftain . . . . The Spanish recorded a Chalaque nation as living around the Keowee River where North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia meet. (n.pag.)

Hernando De Soto left the Cherokee a painful and unforgettable experience. He was very rude and brutal in his attitude. He created terror in the minds of the native people. The native people feared the Spanish for their inhuman attitude. Strong men and women were taken as slaves, women were brutally raped and some women named their children as ‘Spaniard’, in memory of their bitter experience with the “hairy-faced men” (WW 16). Spaniards were believed to be ‘Monsters’. Hernando De Soto was considered a bad Spanish warrior by the Cherokee. Historians and other writers have recorded the brutal expedition of the Spaniard. De Soto died at Mississippi and his body was dumped unceremoniously into the Mississippi River.

The bloodthirsty Spaniards enslaved tortured and killed hundreds or sometimes even thousands of Indians. “They would stop at a town and ask the Chief for gold. If he did not give them any or did not tell them where to find it, they might kill him, or kill thirty or kill two hundred” (WW18). Sometimes, they demanded slaves from the local population, they took both men and women, and if their demand was not satisfied willingly, they resorted to the same tactics which they employed asking for gold. Sometimes, they just grabbed the Chief and held him as a hostage, threatening to kill

him if the people refused to cooperate with them. One of their favourite methods of punishing an uncooperative Indian as, "to turn loose their big dogs to rip the person to death" (WW18). The foreign expedition, foreign trade, foreign exploration, even the foreign scent seemed to be a great curse on the Natives. Foreign people started flooding into the new found land in groups.

They also came to know that the Spaniards were not the only outsider to come into the land, but there were other White men, who were called French and English. Natives learned from either the Spanish or the French, or both, that the two different types of Europeans did not get along with each other. There were tremendous changes in the attitudes of the rude Spaniards after the invasion of the competitors

The traders for their economical pursuit even changed the political setup of the Cherokees. The Colonists were frequently confused to deal with the Chiefs of different Cherokee towns. Cherokee towns were autonomous and each town had two chiefs, a Peace Chief, and a War Chief. The Cherokees political set up was influenced by the White traders and it was one of the chief reasons for the real people to change their political setup. It was very difficult for the traders to deal with two or more Chiefs in towns hence they planned to have one Chief or a big Chief for all the Cherokees. A town already had a War Chief, a Peace Chief and a Priest. When they got a big Chief, they called him the 'Principal Chief'. This Principal Chief took over all the other Chiefs. Even with the Whiteman pushing for it, it took a long time for the Cherokees to agree to have one big chief and one government for all the Cherokees. The Europeans were frustrated to deal each Cherokee town separately. Hence, they presented the difficulty to the Cherokee Chief. The chiefs those who were present in the meet, agreed to select one man to represent all the Cherokee tribe in dealing with matters of trade with South Carolina. The Colonial government agreed to appoint a 'Commissioner of Trade' to oversee the various traders who dealt with the Cherokees. The Cherokees selected a man whose name was recorded as "Wrosetasatow" and the Governor appointed Colonel George Chicken as the trade commissioner of the Colonies. The Cherokees were forced to appoint a single trade commissioner by the traders. "Wrosetasatow" also known as, "Man Killer," (CN 27) which was his war title, was appointed the commissioner of trade. This was the first attempt made by the Colonies to change the system of the Cherokee government. Each step which was taken

towards the process was necessitated by dealings with the Europeans.

Trade flourished but, the Cherokees were not pleased with their trade alliance. They made numerous complaints regarding the bad behaviour of the traders. Some of the complaints had to do with them, "general rowdy manners of the traders"(CN 28) and others had to do with the cheating by the traders in their trade deals. The misbehaviour of the tradesmen is also recorded in Conley's War Woman.

Natives men and their families were disturbed by the habit of drinking. Spanish traders earned a lot of money through the liquor business. Many young real people traded for ron. When all these drinking habit went beyond the limit the traders were asked not to bring the strong drink into the town. But rules could not control it because the men who were under the influence of this drink got it from the nearby town.

The forced removal was named, 'Trail of Tears'. It was the most painful act done by the American government. The people who lived for centuries together were moved from their land. The natives could not understand the Whiteman's language and there was no room was given for preparation but, they were caught as animals and exported to the west. It was also known as the 'Black Trail'. The trial took place for more than nine months and nearly eight to ten thousand people died in the trail. Some of them escaped from the group and wandered without an address, some of them lost their family and the life of their dear ones. People lost their physical strength and their mental strength so they could not even wage war against the people who caused them pain. They were made to travel in the odd means of transport like train and ship which was very alien to the native people. They were forced to wear English men's dress and eat their food and drinks. All these acts made them weak and they did not have the courage to fight back. Thus they lived in the little reservation that was provided to them.

573 tribes were recognized as the 'Federally Recognized Tribes' in the United States of America today. They were also given the right to build their own nation within the great nation America. A recurring theme had been the amazing ability of the Natives. They consciously remade themselves, to reshape their social and governmental institutions in hopes, ironically, in maintaining their unique identity and sovereignty.

Native people of America suffered a lot due to foreign invasion. Deadly diseases were brought into the land by the traders and black slaves, constant war among

themselves, American Revolution, Trail of Tears, and struggles in establishing a separate state were some of the most important painful facts in the history of the Natives. Natives had succeeded in their struggle and established themselves once again as the most important tribe in the United States of America. They have a separate government that is controlled by the American government. The tribes are given the right to constitute their self-government, tribal recognition grants and other benefits. The United States federal agency the Bureau of Indian Affairs controls the recognition process. .

Historians cannot bring out the pain and feelings of the people in the right manner. It just gives a report of the incidents. Literature presents a pictographic representation and this visual presentation could provide more impact than a newspaper. Writers add colour to the real events that could bring out the desired effect through a picture portrait presentation through their letters.

The life of Natives was disturbed by the foreign explorers. They began to occupy their land, later they saw their land becoming the sole possession of the invaders. Natives saw new rules and regulations that were created to suppress and overpower them. They were forcefully relocated through the painful trail of tears to the reservations given to them by the American

government. Cherokee leaders like Ada'gal'kala were labelled as a terrorist and madman by the American government when they spoke about their present state of life as slaves. Robert J. Conley brought out the treaties that were signed after the revolution and the change in the situation that led the Cherokee Nation to develop as a separate nation with tribal sovereignty within the frontiers of America.

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