

## LIBERATING THE SILENCE: EXPOSITION OF CRITICAL THINKING IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Liberation of both mind and body has been a significant focus of literary studies throughout the centuries. Yet literary figures still yearn to make their readers understand the interpretation and power of silence and liberation. Coercions attempt to silence the thinking that escalates resistance and violence through words to express hatred and rejection towards the social and political system. Oppression is apocalyptic yet it instigates to think differently, and this establishes a relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Ironically, resistance residing within the silence liberates itself from the frigid conditions set by the persecutor to maneuver the society. Native American's political theatre, poetry and fiction seem to be revolutionary as resistance is the outcome of consistent presence of oppression and this process invigorates the critical thinking skills. Oppression and atrocities endured by Native American People stimulate their thinking process and this process helps society to determine their stance towards oppression and their suppressed state. Indigenous Ideology of change is construed from critical thinking that bridges the gap between the individual and his urge to resist. The purpose of this research is to make the individual realize the creative process of critical thinking and how this process defines and determines an individual's deconstructive expression towards oppression and tyrannical authority. Liberating silence through critical thinking promotes the urge to resist thus helping the individual to be vocal in terms of justice, ethics and morality.

**Keywords:** Liberation, Silence, oppression, Critical Thinking, Native American Literature

### INTRODUCTION

Liberation of both mind and body has been pivotal in literary studies throughout the centuries. Yet, human expression and critical thinking towards liberation has been quite ambivalent as an individual wants to set himself free from social and cultural oppressiveness and simultaneously is quite recalcitrant to provide the same channels to other individuals. Michael Scriven & Richard Paul define Critical thinking:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or

evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. (np1987)

Critical thinking focuses on the intellectual, conceptual and informative process of understanding different ideas and thoughts. This human ability helps him to explore and analyze the

motives, thoughts and conflicting views with an in-depth understanding of varied social, political and personal opinions.

Literary Studies reveal the conflicting impressions of both oppressors and the oppressed and the tyrant's strong attempts to silence the oppressed voices. Whether its American or Native American, English or Russian, South Asian or Postcolonial, and Palestinian or African American Literature, the main subject seems to be the *silence* (my italics) of the oppressed. Literature does not only support resistance, but it itself is a medium for resistance. Exposing and projecting the resistance within the silence is the basic concentration of Literary world. Silence leads to resistance; resistance promotes critical thinking, and critical thinking encourages minds to influence both silence and resistance. "If we were all on trial for our thoughts, we would all be hanged" (Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace).

This paper aims at the analysis and projection of the complex yet strong process of critical thinking in diverse literary trends. This study will focus on different texts conceptually, thematically, spatially and temporally while concentrating on certain aspects of Native American Literature.

The idea of critical thinking is presocratic, Presocratic thinkers, who lived in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> BCE centuries anticipated the concept of questioning and seeing evidence. The philosophers like Thales, Zeno, Xenophanes and Heraclitus did not belong to a combined school of thought, instead they tried to explore and project the diversity within the expression They also added a critical stance towards religion, culture, human and supernatural worlds. Karl Popper suggested that the presocratic scholar originated the "tradition of critical discussion" (1958, 3) Rationality, questioning and paradoxical approach towards the existing religious and cultural traditions and analytical points of view are reflected in these presocratic writers.

Each of the thinkers we have considered reflected on current ideas and the views of his predecessors. They identified objections and produced new theories immune to those objections. They rejected theories because they failed to fit observed facts or because they did not satisfy rational criteria. (McKirahan, 2003, p. 11)

McKirahan maintains this point of view that these presocratic philosophers and thinkers rejected the existing beliefs and propounded the notion of fluidity and flexibility. Critical thinking reflects human expression of resistance whether through silence and words. The major aim of this skill is to emphasize general and rational reasoning. Though reason is construed from our understanding, it goes beyond it and provides us the time and space to expostulate our expressions and approaches. Regarding the origin of critical thinking Joe, Y.F, Lou mentions Socrates' points of view, "Do not take what I say as if I were merely playing, for you see the subject of our discussion—and on what subject should even a man of slight intelligence be more serious? —namely, what kind of life should one live . . ." (29) According to Lou, the origin and development of critical thinking establishes its connection between the individual and his approach towards society. Both Socrates and Aristotle believe in freedom of thought, ideology and expression.

Plato, Aristotle and Socrates emphasize critical thinking as an ability to ask questions, analyze those questions, ideas and themes. Joe, Y.F. Lau quotes Plato, "thinking is the talking of the soul itself" and "Ideas are the source of all things." (28). Lau further quotes Aristotle, "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." These Greek philosophers are critical thinkers as they not only highlight the rational approach towards thinking but also try to project the significance of intellectual expression.

Throughout the centuries, critical thinking dominated literature, human mind and action, as Descartes asseverates, I think therefore I am. This is the ability to question, analyze and develop human thoughts instead of taking some raw information as this is the process of identifying and solving the problems. As Joe Y. F. Lau points out in his article:

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'critical thinking' first appeared in 1815, in the British literary journal The Critical Review. Volume I of the May 1815 issue contained an anonymous review of an English translation of Lucretius's Nature of Things, with the reviewer

praising the translator's commentary, it contains a very fine general character of Lucretius, as a poet, written with great power of language, candid discrimination, and original strength of critical thinking. (4 2024)

So, to understand silence through critical thinking and resistance, and how this can culminate into a literary work, this research will engage different Native American literature and its silent resistance. Literature of resistance exposes cruel, gory yet very strong relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, the dictator and the weakling and the defier and the subdued. Native American Literature, for instance, explicates their resistance through their songs, melodies or even silence. As James Wilson, in his book, *The Earth Shall Weep, The History of Native America* points out "living people into shadows and delusions" (44). The time, when settlers decentered the Native Americans and in Fanon's (1968) *The Wretched of the Earth*, he argues that "[t]he zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of higher unity. Obedient to the rules of Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity" (39) Fanon's two opposed zones fail to understand the situation so what Native American does, they use humor to resist to the other zone (zone of the tyrants/ settlers). As Said reminds us, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (Said xiii). What Native American authors did, they adopted humor as a tool or as a thought process to resist. Humor silences anger and projects the lighter aspects of the situation and this situation indirectly mocks the oppressor and his tyranny.

For instance, Thomas King's novel *Green Grass and Running Water* (1993) draws readers' attention to the extinction of human race and how resistance is initiated against the colonizer's attempts to settle everything. Margaret Atwood mentions in one of her views, "his humor becomes a subversive weapon to invert white ways of thinking" (1990,244) and Vizenor has called "the [comic] sign with the utmost resistance" (1993, 196). The characters in King's novel long for

volatility and expressions which are quite common among the oppressed people. Artega sees the emergence of this kind of narratives as a sign of physical and political empowerment and he notes that "it is for this reason that a people resisting oppression constructs an alternate reality, constructs narratives of resistance" (1993, 334). This alternate reality seems to be quite evident in Hanay Gaeigomah's *Body Indian* (1971) where music becomes an instrument for resistance within the Indian culture and all native Americans are dancing without having any sense of stability and security and they are just dancing as this drama is also called, "tragedy in mundane." Resistance and silence are the important factors working behind the different forms of texts. These subjects can be explored in African American literature where silence, critical thinking and resistance can be seen as earliest as the arrival of slaves from African countries, their folk songs, music, voodoo dolls, usage of different gardening and plantation tools as musical instruments to convey their message of resistance and anguish to each other.

Native American Literature focuses on the concepts of liberation, resistance and silence while revealing and exposing the atrocities of early and modern Native American expressions. Native American Literature shows steadfastness to indigenous culture and ideology either by humor, or by silence. Their oral, narrative and poetic approaches towards the atrocities faced by them project the same themes but from different perspectives. As Edward Said asseverates, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (1993 xiii). According to Said, strong narrative plays a major role in shaping and developing the strong cultural expression. Native Americans experienced suppression, dislocation, disorientation, and discrimination, yet they have managed to make their silence free from the oppression and transformed their suppression into resistance through different literary expressions. Native American expression funnels the marginalization and subjugation of its people through different mediums.

Native American Poetry transforms silence into resistance through various poetic expressions. Focusing on indigenous cultures and rich treasure of Oral tradition of history and beliefs. Poets like Joy Harjo and Sherman Alexie revitalize the native oral traditions and indigenous identity and ancestry along with the classical expression of storytelling. William Pitt Root asserts:

Harjo has established herself as a courageous and powerful spokesperson for those who are often less heard, particularly America's indigenous peoples. Incorporating Native American myths, spirituality, and imagery into her writing...(Root 181)

Harjo's poetry focuses on the idea of suppression, liberation and resistance. Less heard expression has been the main concern of Harjo's poetry and music as she says "My audience starts with my tribal nation, spreads out to include those who are also trying to find a way through this particularly rough layer of the world. [And] I hear from them." (quoted in William Pitt Root, 4). Harjo asserts that her poetry and music lead Native American people to resist through literature, verses and musical instruments. As this poetic piece of Harjo tries to recreate the strong expression of beauty, color and vibrance of native tradition:

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
know each of the star's stories.

Remember the moon, know who she is.

Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
and the giving away to night.

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, her mother's, and hers.

Remember your father. He is your life, also.

Remember the Earth whose Ekin you are  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth.  
(Harjo)

While using imagery, personification and metaphor, Harjo, reestablishes the connection between man and earth. In this poem, she tries to explore and analyze each and every natural object and its relationship with the indigenous individual who has been forced to detach himself from the land he owned once and from nature he used to adore. However, Harjo makes some positive notes by strengthening the relationship between man and

nature and transforms that spiritual relationship into resistance. Another poem of Harjo is "Resurrection" where she tries to establish a relationship between the dead and alive and in the words of Root, "Harjo has consistently identified poetry as a literal method of survival" (5) and this survival challenges the world of atrocities and cruelties of eurocentrism and makes the spirit of resistance stronger, "We all watch for fire for all the fallen dead to return and teach us a language so terrible it could resurrect us all.

While Harjo focuses on resistance, survival and resurrection, Sherman Alexie puts forward the more aggressive expression towards the atrocities faced by the Native American People, "Survival = Anger X Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation."

(Sherman Alexie *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.) Alexie's approach towards

Native American culture and tradition is realistic and revolutionary. While using bleak humor, revolutionary expression, bold style of writing and truthful portrayal of true Native American culture, Alexie reveals a strong sense of *Native Americanness* (my italics). He explores the themes of misery, distress, alienation, disillusionment, and violence in Native American prose and poetry. Alexie's poetry focuses on the sad plight of Native American people and their loss of place and space due to alcoholism:

We lived in the HUD house for fifty bucks a month. Those were the good times.

ANNIE GREEN SPRINGS WINE was a dollar a bottle.

My uncles always came over to eat stew and fry bread to get drunk in the sweatlodge to spit and piss in the fire. (Alexie *Futures* 35)

Alexie focuses on the Native American point of view and their sad plight in modern American society. He reveals the idea of life and status of indigenous people:

It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn't give you strength or



teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor (Alexie, 2007, p.13).

Alexie's form of resistance is different from other Native American poets as he exposes the urge for resistance which follows a realistic expression of postmodernism in the displaced scenario. His approach to resistance explores the causes and reasons of Native American's alienation and isolation and he tries to present the fair picture of Native American issues.

Native American poetry focuses on resistance which tries to liberate their silence from the unseen shackles of eurocentrism and to understand their status in modern and postmodern world. This distinct approach has also been followed by the native American writers in the theatrical presentations. Music, dances, pictographs, and wampum seem to be the most important aspects of Indigenous theatre. Native American Theatre has originated from the tradition of storytelling. According to Christie Stanlake "close connection between Native American theatre and Native storytelling" (2009 23). Following the same point of view, Diane Glancy points out "storytelling in the oral tradition could be called an early form of theatre, a one-character play. The action or plot was the voice telling the story that was integral for survival" (personal communication, September 20, 2007). This form of storytelling in theatre sometimes is presented as a one actor play or based on only dancing, music and extravagant showoff of Native American culture and tradition. Terry Gomez's play *Inter-Tribal* focuses on the story of a grandmother and granddaughter who from the very beginning fail to understand each other and their way of thinking. Both Hattie (Grandmother) and Baby (Granddaughter) are trapped in their conflicting views and ideas. Hattie's resistance towards her granddaughter's expression exposes her sense of loss and insecurity and by doing this she resists the modern world. She wants to liberate her silence from modern society and tries to revitalize the tradition native culture and traditions:

BABY. Grandma, what are you doing here?

HATTIE. Looking all over town for you – where have you been? You're never home! (One of the

three men comes and puts three beers on the table. He backs away, smiling.)

HATTIE. Get that away from me!

BABY. Grandma! This is not a place for you to be.

HATTIE. Why not? It's good enough for you and your 'friends', isn't it?

BABY. You don't belong here. This is not a 'old' people place. Why can't you just let me alone for a little while. (1996 2)

Hattie and Baby both represent different cultures and traditions; former emphasizes the Native American values and while the later one urges to leave the indigenous culture. Hattie believes in her traditional values, and she wants her family to preserve those strong sense of belonging to native American traditions. This staunch belief of hers unshackles her from the ordeals of life.

Conclusion:

This study attempts to focus on the point of view of the suppressed Native American Ideology which is construed from critical thinking that bridges the gap between the individual and his urge to resist. The purpose of this research is to make the individual realize the creative process of critical thinking and how this process defines and determines an individual's deconstructive expression towards oppression and despotic authority. Liberating silence through critical thinking promotes the urge to resist thus helping the individual to be vocal in terms of justice, ethics and morality. All the abovementioned writers whether Native Americans poets, novelists or playwrights, their approach towards resistance and critical expression invite the reader to understand and deconstruct the themes and ideologies within the social and political scenarios.

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