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INDIGENOUS HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND BHARATIYA ITIHASA TRADITION

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the concept of indigenous historical consciousness through Native American literature and the Bharatiya itihasa tradition, which together represent alternative epistemologies that challenge Western positivist historiography. An analysis of the works of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita proves that oral tradition, sacred geography, genealogy, and cyclical temporality are valid forms of historical knowledge. The paper opposes the colonial myth-history dichotomy and argues that Indigenous histories are living, ethical, and relational practices, which ensure cultural continuity, collective memory, and civilizational survival.

KEYWORDS: *Indigenous Historical Consciousness; Bharatiya itihasa; Oral Tradition; Sacred Time; Counter-History.*

HISTORY BEYOND COLONIAL ARCHIVES

Enlightenment rationalism and empirical positivism (Vorster) in Western historiography have long focused on written archives as the only source of historical truth. This perception became institutionalized in colonial epistemology and discounted indigenous oral knowledge, and a hierarchy was introduced, which prioritized linear and objective time over relational and cyclical experience. This epistemological violence divides communities from their own systems of knowledge and disrupts their right to historical consciousness (IWGIA). However, indigenous people have never stopped passing their histories orally. An example of counter-historiographic strategies that deny the colonial division between myth and history, sacred and secular, and text and practice is Native American literature, e.g., *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by Momaday, *Ceremony* by Silko, and *Tracks* by Erdrich. These traditions consider the past as an active, interpersonal existence based on land and ceremony, which is intended to restore morality.

In this paper, the historical consciousness of indigenous people in three Native American writings and in Bharatiya itihasa will be compared. It claims that the two traditions:

1. Reject the Western dualisms of history and memory, past and present, knowledge and ethics.
2. Remember and live the past using the tools of oral transmission, cyclical temporality, sacred geography, and narrative multiplicity.
3. These instruments are political measures that stop colonial marginalization and allow indigenous people to manage their history and identity themselves.

Indigenous awareness is not ahistorical or "myth" in the colonial sense of false or fictional narrative. It comprises a distinct mode of truth grounded in sacred memory, land, and ethical continuity. It does so by emphasizing the role of oral tradition as an archive, land as witness, sacred time as a historical framework, and literature as a counter-historical practice.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The indigenous historical consciousness questions the fundamental beliefs of Western historiography, which make a distinction between subject and object, view history as linear evolution, and consider written archives as objective truth. Western culture perceives the past as separate and distant from the present, understood through writings, whereas memory and tradition are perceived as unreliable. The indigenous traditions do not support such a split and interpret the past as the present, know-how as relational, and history as morally accountable to the community, land, ancestors, and posterity. The myth and history are not divided into two categories by the principles of Bharatiya itihasa and Smrti, as well as native traditions like the Kiowa Tai-me tradition and the Anishinaabe aadizookaan tradition. They consider religious narratives as a true means to get to know history, morality, and community.

Indigenous epistemology operates in terms of relationality (Gould et al. 1), in which knowing the past is a way of respecting relationships and taking responsibility, as expressed in notions such as *mitakuye oyasin* and *dharma.* Methodologically, this study does not claim universality and takes an indigenous-focused comparative approach, emphasizing resonance rather than equivalence. Lastly, the paper discards the colonial myth/history dichotomy as a means of delegitimizing indigenous knowledge by stating that texts such as the Mahabharata or Native histories serve as legitimate forms of historical knowledge, which retain genealogy, place, morality, and identity, necessitating the relational, rather than the objective, interpretation of truth.

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ORAL TRADITION AND NARRATIVE AS HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969) by N. Scott Momaday is a masterpiece of modern Native American literature and a perfect example of indigenous historiography. It is organized in three layers: tribal legend, historical commentary, and personal memory. These layers situate mythical temporality, chronological record, and lived experience in a mutual relationship, without necessarily prioritizing one of the epistemic modalities. This triadic model is a good example of how oral tradition, archival research, and personal remembrance all contribute to maintaining Kiowa historical consciousness and making oral narration an epistemology, which views history as being relational, multi-voiced, and ethically engaged with communal identity.

The synergistic action of myth, history, and personal reflection is evident in the opening emergence story in which genealogical beginnings, belonging to the territory, cosmological meaning, and collective belonging are conveyed. The fact that the role of these oral histories is to serve as archives of intergenerational knowledge in the face of no written record is obscured by making them a mythologized form of entertainment. The methodological position of Momaday is strikingly similar to the Bharatiya itihasa tradition, especially the Mahabharata, which also uses the layered narration as a means of building a historiography based on telling and retelling. Both customs consider oral tradition not subservient to writing, but rather a complex system of cultural memory, in which the operation of the oral tradition follows the form of a living, authoritative archive (Mukherjee et al.).

In *Tracks* (1988), Louise Erdrich provides the indigenous history in a narrative form that is much more similar to the oral storytelling than the linear Western historiography. The novel alternates between Nanapush and Pauline, whose opposing views form a stratified, disputed historical account. The storytelling of Nanapush serves as a survival act, as the author employs memory, humor, and repetition to maintain the Ojibwa history at the time of allotment, displacement, and erosion of their culture. Instead of presenting a single authoritative version, Erdrich considers narrative an archive in which the truth is generated through relational memory and community experience. Erdrich endorses the indigenous perception that oral description is not subordinate to written history but a living store of historical information.

Genealogy plays a central role in the work of Momaday as well as the Mahabharata. The fact that the protagonist decides to take a pilgrimage to the gravesite of his grandmother Aho connects personal identity with the whole Kiowa tradition, and the epic's long lineages aim to create continuity across time, space, and socio-historical space. In these traditions, genealogical practice is a historical practice that places individuals within broad systems of kin and territory. Momaday also elevates Kiowa oral knowledge beyond the colonial documents and uses it to reconstruct events the Western archives have swept away. Memory is, in this case, not a symbolic construct but a historical entity that is carried over the generations.

Genealogy and land memory are central themes in *Tracks*, where personal identity is impossible without lineage and the land. The story follows the kinship connections in generations, which highlights that Ojibwa identity is based on the connections with the ancestors and the land, as opposed to personal identity. Nanapush repeatedly constructs history by using family ties, names of people, places, and relationships as a tactic to avoid being erased by colonial land policies. Similar to the Mahabharata passages of genealogy, the lineages do not serve as digressions but as historiographic means to create continuity, legitimacy, and moral responsibility. *Tracks*, therefore, proves that genealogy is a historical practice that places people in the collective memory and sacred geography.

Indigenous historical consciousness is further developed in *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, which combines temporal cycles, trauma, and healing (Slesinger). The novel assumes that the way to personal and group healing is through re-encountering indigenous cosmology and cyclical time frames. Through the combination of prose and sacred narratives, Silko shows that mythic and historical temporality are not opposed but coexist. Compared to the Western linear sense of history, which supports colonial ideas of progress, indigenous time is cyclic, curative, suggesting that healing is not part of an ongoing progressive flow but rather a restoration of the cycles of the sacred, which restores the balance.

SACRED TIME AND HISTORICAL RENEWAL

In *Ceremony,* there is a linear historical time and a cyclical sacred time that Tayo travels in. Linear time encompasses his post-World War II coming back, life on the reservation, and his experience with racism and loss. Sacred time, however, is subject to the repetitive patterns of Corn Mother and other sacred creatures. This coexistence of time is manifested in the novel's non-linear form. There is a connection between the past and the present through the memory and through the ritual. Silko notes that bad magic that harmed Tayo is not new, but has been underway since time immemorial, with colonialism, racism, the creation of the atomic bomb on stolen Pueblo land, and a higher-order imbalance. Healing then requires a ritual that will repair all these layers of time simultaneously.

A helpful parallel is found in the Bharatiya cosmology with regard to its conception of cyclical time. Hindu conception explains the various concentric cycles, starting with the daily rhythms, up to the cosmic ages or yugas. Time in this case is repetitive, characterized by creation, preservation, destruction, and renewal. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the decline of dharma and the

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rise of adharma will always necessitate divine intervention to restore order (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 4, Verse 7). Despite the fact that the Ramayana and Mahabharata belong to previous yugas, their moral lessons are applicable today since moral crisis and responsibility trends replicate through time.

This worldview can also be explained by the theory of *yugas*. *Satya, Treta, Dvapara,* and *Kali Yuga* are the stages of the universe, where the moral order gradually decreases, after which destruction and regeneration occur. Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata occur during transitional and crisis periods, when harmony must be vigorously reestablished through righteous and heroic deeds. It is not a vision that leads to passive submission to decay but rather focuses on active effort through ritual and morally upright actions. In this sense, history is not a dead past, but it is a process of life in which the patterns of the past direct the present.

Ceremony is no different. The witchery that the Laguna people were facing is not something that has happened only in history, but a tendency toward imbalance that is manifested today in other forms like colonization, uranium mining, atomic warfare, alcoholism, and cultural loss. The ceremony of Tayo is not an attempt to go back to the pre-colonial past but rather a restoration to ancient traditions of healing that can be used to solve modern crises. He did not kill Emo because of a decision to balance and not to destroy. By referring to the ceremony as a pattern of stars, Silko points to both the permanence of the universe and the particularity of the historical era, since ritual works demonstrate the correspondence between the action in the present moment and eternity.

Sacred time and historical time exist together in *Tracks*, and as a result, it challenges the Western distinction between myth and history. Characters like Fleur Pillager blur the boundaries between the human and the supernatural, representing outdated cosmological powers that still linger in historical times. These aspects do not free the novel of history, but instead define an indigenous vision in which not only sacred presence and historical experience coincide, but also remain coherent. The cyclical nature of time in the novel echoes indigenous cosmologies where the past patterns emerge in new manifestations, especially when there is a crisis. Thus, the intrusion of colonialists, destruction of the environment, and social disintegration are perceived as reenactments of the previous unsettling events that require spiritual and moral reactions instead of linear historical narratives.

Ritual is the key to entering sacred time in both traditions and is the way to allow historical renewal. Laguna ceremony cures Tayo by immersing in the past instead of avoiding it and making his trauma part of a greater cosmic order. In the same way, Bharatiya practices like yajna, puja, and samskara are used to maintain the stability in the universe. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the proper performance of rituals sustains interdependence between the cosmic and human worlds. Ritual in both instances is not symbolic in itself but effective, restoring balance in lived reality. History is then seen not as progressive or retrogressive, but as an unceasing striving to preserve order by religious action.

LITERATURE: COUNTER-HISTORY AND CIVILIZATIONAL SURVIVAL.

The new indigenous political movements emerged coinciding with the appearance of Native American literature, which started in the 1960s and 70s. These authors were not simply writing fiction; they were also questioning the manner in which history was written by the colonizers. The stories by Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich responded to colonial histories, demonstrated that indigenous people can think in their own ways, and that the history of indigenous people is not extinct. Their works combine art and history; they do not treat poetics and politics as separate domains but as mutually reinforcing modes of cultural survival and sovereignty. They talk of the past, present, and future in a manner that can be described uniquely by the indigenous people. They do this by way of their worldviews.

It is a similar method of narrating stories as Audra Simpson terms it, an ethnographic refusal. It involves fighting against colonial modes of gathering and consuming knowledge. Through the novels, readers can observe the history of indigenous peoples without compromising sacred secrets or oversimplifying the narrative. According to them, indigenous peoples have rich and complex histories that need not conform to Western principles. Writing in English but employing native storytelling techniques and demonstrating the shortcomings of Western literary genres, Native writers have developed what LeAnne Howe calls tribalography (Bauerkemper). One method of narrating stories is called tribalography, which places indigenous knowledge at its heart.

The same principle applies to Indian epic tales. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are interpreted in the itihasa tradition, in which a narrative, cosmology, genealogy and ethical truth are inseparable, and do not follow the modern positivist historiography. These are religious, political, and artistic and they assist people to live well. These stories helped preserve Indian culture amid wars, colonization, and cultural transformation by offering comprehensive worldviews that encompass ideas about the universe, morality, society, and history. Colonial historiography frequently put Hindu epics and puranic narratives to the status of "myth," thus denying their epistemic and historical legitimacy within indigenous knowledge systems. They are still read at home, in villages, and in rituals, a testament to the fact that stories can preserve a culture even when formal institutions collapse.

The two discussed traditions exhibit that history should not just be evoked to preserve old specifics. It should be remembered to live with those features and aspects of the past. The Native books written nowadays do not simply repeat old material; they transform it

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to address issues of the modern world, such as war trauma, land policies, and cultural loss. Also, the epics may be narrated in numerous local forms, each with a focus on what is important locally. This is not corruption, but a form of keeping a living culture relevant. The point is that history serves living people, and tradition evolves while preserving its essence.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that Native American and Indian epic traditions possess powerful modes of thought about history that challenge Western thought. These traditions do not allow a division of myth and history. History, they say, is not just facts, but relations; not a part of land, but a ceremony. It is a motivating force for righteous action, not impartial chronicling, nor books alone, but through verbal narratives and stories in books. Layered stories, non-linear time, landscape as record, and moral memory are used in the three novels examined. These characteristics parallel significant points in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

This study demonstrates that indigenous ways of seeing history are not an appurtenance to Western history. There are various forms of knowledge, each with its own recognition. In too many cases, indigenous knowledge is disregarded or distorted to fit Western systems that deprive it of its own logic. This study celebrates Native American as well as Bharatiya traditions and exhibits similarities leading to common values: relationships, cycles, body knowledge, and moral duty. This study does not seek to replace Western historical frameworks but to create space for multiple ways of knowing history to coexist on equal epistemic terms.

Further studies might use this comparison with other indigenous people to examine how they all become great historians without writing or Western influence. Further studies might also examine how indigenous histories can form an academic past that is decolonized, going beyond tokenism to actual change in thinking. It is not intended to replace Western history with other ways of knowing history, but to share and make space for a multitude of ways of knowing history. This pluralism is necessary to mend the damage of colonial history on indigenous people across the world.

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