



The Function of Native American Storytelling as Means of Education in Luci Tapahonso's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Native American storytelling has become a very vital issue in education. It preserves Native American history for the next generation and teaches them important lessons about the Native American culture. It also conveys moral meanings, knowledge and social values of the Native American people to the universe. More importantly, Native American storytelling teaches people not to be isolated, and the key issues discussed in this paper are borrowed from the selected poems of Native American Luci Tapahonso: 'The Holy Twins' and 'Remember the Things that you told.'

Keywords: folklore, narrating, Native American, oral tradition, storytelling

1. Introduction

In Native American literature two opposing cultural modes are linked: the oral tradition of the People and the written tradition of the white man. The oral tradition is rooted in the ancient voices of the tribes, their stories, myths and rites that give rise to an art which, while adhering to its own rules and laws, nonetheless adjusts to the passing of time and "comes up different every time" (Erdrich, 1988: 31). At the opposite pole is the written record which, with its static, immutable page, imposes itself on the oral tradition and, in so doing, distorts it. (Secco, 1992: 59) Greg Sarris described Storytelling forms as an important part of Native American culture. He stated that:

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of culture, and stories are used in a number of ways and for a multitude of purposes. Stories can work as cultural indexes for appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. They can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or to enlighten". (Sarris, 1993: 4)

One primary purpose why Native American stories are being told is to preserve Native American history, their culture and identity for the next generations of their own people. As Nabokov (2002) explains:

For many Indian peoples, their sense of history and its conduct are not just secular or abstract pursuits. For them, no less than for any modern or New historian, the "doing of history" can become a pathway to rediscoveries of identity, home and inner purpose" (ix).

Stories serve as a means of education passed from the elders to the youngsters and convey moral meanings – children learn from them about their tribes, about famous warriors but also about moral rules and customs. As there was usually no written history of the tribe in the past centuries, everything was passed through storytelling.

Native American verbal art was an oral performative tradition in which stories were used as a means for the preservice and delivery of cultural knowledge and societal values. Native American used stories and ceremonies to entertain and teach the audience. An oral storyteller or spiritual leader performed to pass the cultural knowledge from one generation to another. According to Shelley Stigter: "From colonial contact and to the present, the oral tradition has developed from an oral into a written literary form in which Native American authors now revitalize and maintain past oral traditions or allusions to oral traditions." (Stigter, 2005: 1)

However, the role of storytellers was much greater than this and had a tight relationship with Indians' life. Storytellers educated people "about the —roles of trees, the —roles of medicinal plants, and the —behaviors of animals and people when they speak about nature". (Schulhoff, 2010: 54) For the dominant white culture, these stories; folklores have little to no value in the modern world. (Ibid.)

Young people study the scene and why it is formed the way it is, the reason creatures are molded the way they are and why they carry on the way they do. They likewise look into the plants; what plants might be utilized at what time of the year, how they could be utilized and what amount you could use at one time. The children additionally look into how they should carry on with nature. When they develop more seasoned they translate these things with a deeper understanding. So these stories are extremely significant to the future generation. (Schulhoff, 2010: 54) Folklore is stuffed with Native American social rationales about the common world, its uses, and its implications. These

enlightening stories are not kept private. They are however taught, told again and again, as their capacity to standardize youth and fortify this perspective to grown-ups (Berkes, 1999: 23).

American Indians were, because of necessity, very practical peoples whose physical survival was often in jeopardy. They delighted in jokes and funny tales, but many of their stories dealt with very serious social, moral, environmental, and psychological problems central to their immediate wellbeing. The violent, impossible and weird features of their narratives were not escapist fantasizing, but a means for imagining real and common situations, feelings, attitudes, beliefs of the utmost importance to the functioning of their societies. They thought of storytelling as an exercise. Indian stories were intended to highlight and evaluate the deepest personal emotions and the most fundamental social structures that allowed a community to function productively and enduringly. (Kroeber, 2008: 6).

But these violent exaggerations with which their stories were bound, were means for arousing awareness of private feelings that few of us ever express publicly. What seem to us absurdities are dramatizing modes to enable Indian listeners to explore in their minds the most essential and sacred principles of the institutions upon which their society is founded and depends for its successful continuance. (Ibid.)

For us, stories are usually light entertainment, trivial amusements, with which we while away – waste – time. For Indians, storytelling was their most important cultural activity. Every one of their most sacred rituals was rooted in a narrative. Storytelling articulated the foundational systems and commitments by which each unique cultural life was formed, and at the same time it was the primary means by which those systems and commitments could be examined so as to be better understood, sustained, modified, and improved. (Ibid.)

Their narratives seem to us strange because they are far more culturally serious than the stories we read and watch on television, and they demand far more daring, adventurous, and ultimately responsible imagining that we are trained to bring to our story responses. We cannot begin to comprehend the power of these narratives until we recognize that nothing that is strange or exaggerated in them is told simply for superficial effect. (Ibid)

Native American storytelling was focused on helping people understand their place in the natural world. Native American tales were part metaphorical, part real, part spiritual, part mythological, part instructional and part transformational. Most of all, however, they were entertaining and memorable to the audiences who heard them. This guaranteed these stories would be remembered and passed down to the coming generations, who needed to understand who they were, where they had come from, and why the world is the way it is, if they were to survive and prosper in the challenging times that were – and still are - always just ahead. ('Storytelling Traditions of Native Americans', 2004)

2. Storytelling as a Traditional Approach to Education

Narrating is one of the soonest method for societal correspondence (Tooze, 1959: 24). Around American Indians, narrating is a method for correspondence and additionally excitement. Utilizing narrating to transmit instructive messages is a universal pedagogical system polished by numerous American Indian tribes (Moody, 1984: 8). The American Indian society is looked after through recounting stories, especially on the grounds that it is a society dependent upon oral instead of composed custom. The spoken word is the thing that gives life and meaning to Indian history and traditions. Songs, chants, curing rites, prayers, lullabies, jokes, personal narratives, and stories most importantly are the means by which Indians transmit the heritage of their most significant lessons from one generation to the next. (Hodge, 2011)

American Indian stories address each believable circumstance. They are insignias of living religion and regularly allude to an inventor who is aided by supportive creatures. They demonstrate the starting point of the area, seas, individuals, creatures, plants, the sun, the moon, planets, stars, fire, and ice. Stories likewise give solid structure to the qualities and practices that connect to current eras with their progenitors. They indicate antiquated social requests and everyday life, how families are sorted out, how political structures work, how men chase and fish, and how power is partitioned between men and ladies. Stories are filed for suitable and improper practices; they give illustrations to copy or to evade. They show kids and remind grown-ups where they fit in, what their social order wants of them, and how to live agreeably with others and be mindful, commendable parts of their tribes. (Ibid)

In spite of the fact that American Indian stories give stimulation, their basic role is to teach. There may be a given time, spot, and individual to recount a given story. Oral histories and other unique sorts of stories were frequently the right of specific families, elderly folks, heads, and medication individuals. These people had parts that obliged particular sorts of information. These storytellers were instructors who imparted the history and memory that held the tribe's group shrewdness; they were prepared to present stories in ways that reflected antiquated learning. Their crowd was relied upon to listen mindfully from starting to end, to take in these stories for future eras, and to support the coherence of the story through time. (Ibid.)

Stories are often used for teaching and sometimes to disciplining people about important cultural issues, especially among Native Americans who live in close proximity to each other. In her interview with Jim Meadows, Luci Tapahonso said:

“Well, I think in Navajo tradition, it is probably different in that stories are used to teach, to instruct, may be sometimes to discipline, to show the listener how the experience is similar to or not as unusual as one may think. And this would be in terms of where a person or situation in which a person might be feeling isolated or a person might be feeling bad about a certain situation, and the story is told to show that this has happened before and to show how someone has managed to get free of whatever situation it is.” (qtd. In Brill de Rameriz142)

In other words, Tapahonso emphasizes that Native American people often share their common experiences to learn from each other, and their stories often provide them with good insight for their future undertakings.

Part of the values of the Natives is their wisdom and ability of teaching and applying healing powers among their family members. In 'A Radiant Curve', Luci Tapahonso has told some traditional Dine stories with the central theme of illustrating her family's wisdom of keeping traditional Dine values and the significance of such wisdom to her family members as well as to the Dine Nation. By the occasional usage of the Dine language in her short stories, Tapahonso has expressed the significance of traditional ceremonial events within nuclear families which are extended to people that are not blood relatives. Mixing several Dine texts with short definitions in her stories, such as 'Shisóí' – to mean 'my daughter's child' at one instance and 'my grandson' at another instance, Luci was able to demonstrate the importance of the Dine language to the characters of her story and to her family in real sense. Tapahonso has mixed the characters of her short stories with the members of her family to express the strong bonds of love that exist among Native American families – such as husbands and wives, parents and children as well as grandparents and grandchildren. Furthermore, by incorporating the Dine language in her poetry collections and explaining the Dine texts promptly Tapahonso is able to keep her non-Dine readers on track. Tapahonso was also able to show the significance of storytelling to her family and to the Dine people in general.

Through storytelling, adults and children interact within the family, with the adults being considered as the teachers and the children as students. Tapahonso's choice and use of words does not only imply what happened in the past but also what happens when the Natives come together as a tribe or a family – a central holy space (Dean Reader:89). This in essence is Tapahonso's important contribution to the Native American world by translating the culture of the natives into her poems because "translator is like a messenger that must understand the message fully and transfer it to the TL [target language] in way that seems appealing to the reader"(Babae, Wan Yahya, & Babae, 2014:17) and "the process of translation enriches the literary learning experience; ... and ways by which one culture differs from another, and ways one can bridge cultural gaps." (Merican & Hashim, 1994:150).

In Tapahonso's 'Remember the Things They Told Us' the significance of remembering the counsel of the 'The Holy People' was echoed. Counsels like nurturing the children and observing the taboos of pregnancy were highlighted. Tapahonso wrote that the Native mothers should not forget to place pollen on their children's tongues and bury their infants' stomach knobs properly.

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves visible
by becoming clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder
rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way,
they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to them
and pray, no matter where we are and how we feel. Biyázhí daniidli,
we are their little ones. (1-5)

Tapahonso wanted her fellow Diné women to remember the teachings of the Holy People – their ancestors and also pass them across to the generations after them in order to sustain the Dine culture. To Tapahonso, passing on of the cultural stories and heritage of the Diné tribe can sustain the younger children more than milk would do. Tapahonso further advised the Navajo children to remember the treasures and the good tidings that the Holy People left for them to inherit and to also remember the important lessons they were taught by those loving ancestors. She then recalled some of the teachings – 'never cook while angry, so as not to transfer the discord to the food'. According to the ancestral teachings of the Natives, if one cooks food while angry, one's anger would be transferred to the food and whoever eats the food would become angry. Hence, they were taught to think of good things while cooking.

Tapahonso's writing was characterized by a resonant tune that depicted her love for the Navajo culture and her keen attachment with the beauty and strength of her people and her homeland (Cline, 1997):

Since the beginning, the people have gone outdoors at dawn to pray,
The morning light, *adinídiin*, represents knowledge and mental awareness.
With the dawn come the holy ones who bring blessings and daily gifts,
because they are grateful when we remember them.

When you were born and took your first breath, different colors
and different kinds of wind entered through your fingertips
and the whorl on top of your head. Within us, as we breathe,
are the light breezes that cool a summer afternoon,
within us the tumbling winds that precede rain,
within us sheets of hard-thundering rain,
within us dust-filled layers of wind that sweep in from the mountains,
within us gentle night flutters that lull us to sleep.
To see this, blow on your hand now.
Each sound we make evokes the power of these winds
and we are, at once, gentle and powerful. (6-20)

In her poem, 'The Holy Twins' Tapahonso tells about the profound distress of the Native American children and the expectant insistence that they exhibited as they grew older, evolving with an understanding of their moments of youthful predicaments, being enslaved into a strange world. The narrative facade of Tapahonso's 'The Holy Twins', tells of the fatality of an entire community that became casualties of rabies because they were surrounded by dogs and haunted by the bereavement of the survivors of the events who were predominantly children. The truths in Tapahonso's story lines connect one generation of the Native Americans with another and reflect the notion of resistance against colonial intrusion and the loss of lives and cultural heritage.

Ours was play-filled childhood; irrigation ditches ran deep
 During the summers. We played in the water and dirt, then inscribed
 ABCs and numbers onto the smooth ground. Our cat Polly died
 Of rabies; then all the pets had be shot, some in the rib cage
 As they thrashed in panic (1-5)

Tapahonso's 'The Holy Twins' shows that no one is exempted from the pain of losing their loved ones, or dying themselves in spite of their years of existence, skin color or belief. Over the centuries and across all civilization these agony has remained unavoidable in human history. The last words in each of the lines of the poem inscribe a general understanding of the poem's tone in minds of the readers. Her choice of words such as "deep," "die," "cage" and "bruise," reverberates the foreseeable agony of the "loss and love" of cherished lives cited in the poem's concluding lines.

Mark this down, we've paid our dues. Our hearts are inscribed
 With loss after loss. For some reason, after everything, our rib cages
 Held up and continued to cradle tender hearts. They must have figured
 That all the prayers and careful teachings would prevent bruises
 That would weaken us. Our love for those homely animals was deep. (31-35)

3. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to underscore the moral meanings, knowledge and social values of the Native American people to their younger generations and the universe as a whole, on the basis of some selected works by Luci Tapahonso. The paper has highlighted on the link between two opposing cultural modes: the oral tradition of the people and the written tradition of the white man. The paper has also underlined the essence of Native American stories as means by which they attempt to preserve their culture and identity for the next generations of their own people.

Implications of the Native American folklore in the current age of civilization is that it educates the youngsters and convey moral lessons and meanings about tribes and customs of the ancient people. Overall, Tapahonso's writings have shown that the Native American people often share their common experiences to learn from each other, and their stories often provide them with good insights for their future undertakings. Hence, her writing is characterized by a resonant tune that depict her love for the Navajo culture and her keen attachment with the beauty and strength of her people and her homeland.

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