

Echoes of Cherokee Existence: A Study of Diane Glancy's Select Works

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Abstract

In recent times, the significance of literature originating from marginalized communities, regardless of the historical and social context in which it is created, has gained prominence. This includes post-colonial, Dalit, gender minority, and aboriginal literature, which have played a crucial role, particularly in the 21st century. This era has witnessed challenges to established global power structures and hierarchical systems. Indigenous literature, specifically the literature of aboriginal communities, serves as a powerful discourse that exposes the politics of dominance that prevailed during and after the white European settlement era. During this period, many indigenous people were compelled to abandon their natural habitats, cultures, and traditions in the name of civilizing the indigenous. In this process, they were also forced to forsake their languages and the rich oral storytelling traditions that were integral to their identity. Native American Literature, often referred to as NAL, represents a concerted effort to restore and rejuvenate the invaluable heritage of Native American communities. NAL is not a singular body of work, but rather a collection of diverse voices, with each tribe possessing its unique literary and cultural traditions. These voices collectively strive to reclaim their lost identities. Diane Glancy, hailing from the Cherokee community, stands out as a significant voice in Native American Literature. The Cherokees are an indigenous group originating from the Southeastern woodlands of America. This paper aims to examine the select works of Glancy to assess the extent to which they have contributed to the strengthening of indigenous identities among Native American people.

Keywords: Cherokee; Indigenous literature; Literature of the marginalized; NAL.

The literature of the marginalized—whether post-colonial, Dalit, gender minority, or aboriginal—has recently emerged as a significant discourse, regardless of the historical and social context in which it is created. It has

made substantial contributions, particularly in the 21st century, as global power dynamics and hierarchies are being challenged or redefined. Indigenous literature, or the literature of aboriginal communities, is one such voice that highlights the politics of domination that occurred during and after the era of white European settlement. Many were forced to leave their natural habitat, culture, and traditions in the name of civilizing the indigenous. They were also forced to leave behind their language and their rich oral storytelling tradition in the process. Native American Literature, popularly known as NAL is an attempt to restore and revive the rich legacy of Native American communities. NAL is not a unified body of literature but a vibrant collection of voices, each tribe contributing its unique literary and cultural traditions, all woven into a rich tapestry united by the shared effort to reclaim their lost identity. Diane Glancy, who is a member of the Cherokee community, is one such significant voice in Native American Literature. Cherokees are a group of Autochthonous people of the Southeastern woodlands of America. Glancy speaks about how the Cherokees were forced to acculturate to an alien life with the advent of European settlement. She primarily draws from her own experience of navigating an ambivalent existence between the native and the foreign. This paper seeks to examine two of Glancy's poems to analyze her contribution to reinforcing the indigenous identities of Native American people.

The European settlement in North America led to the homogenization of several culturally and linguistically diverse communities under one umbrella term Indians. Wolfgang Hochbruck in his essay "Native American Literature: Developments, Contexts and Problems" states that,

We ought not to forget that the very term 'Indian' (including the more 265 politically correct 'Native American' which does not cease to be a euphemistic newspeak version of the old term because it is more politically correct) has come to us from the darkest days of colonial rule. The 'Indian' tag was put on more than 600 different tribes, all speaking different languages. (Hochbruck 265-66)

But for the indigenous people of America, this homogenization process was beyond their comprehension since they perceived themselves as different people with a great diversity of cultures, languages, rituals, traditions, and oral literature. This led to conflicts and chaos among various indigenous communities who were fighting against white supremacy. Some embraced the foreign culture and promoted assimilation while some others continued to fight to preserve native American identity. H.

W. Hertzberg in his book *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* identifies this conflicting historical context as the starting point of a collective discourse called Native American Literature. He says that the native people needed to find some meeting point beyond the diversity of their respective tribes to create a strong and firm indigenous identity “and unity based on shared cultural elements, shared experiences, shared needs, and a shared common fate” against European oppression (Hertzberg 6). Over time Native American literature, originally rich in orally transmitted stories aimed at preserving and sharing the essence of their indigenous culture, evolved into a written form. This shift saw the abandonment of their native languages in favour of English as the medium of expression.

The existence of a category of literature termed the literature of the marginalized or indigenous literature inherently signals the dominance of a mainstream literary tradition that relegates other voices to the periphery. In the context of European settlement, this dominant tradition was shaped by the colonizers. As Michel Foucault observes, the construction of dominant discourses involves mechanisms of exclusion. In his essay “The Order of Discourse,” Foucault discusses how “societies of discourse” regulate the creation and legitimacy of discourse within a given society (Foucault 51). These societies operate as exclusive communities, possessing the privilege to generate and disseminate discourses within a confined structure. Those excluded from these privileged spaces are left as passive recipients, often internalizing the notion that they lack the authority to engage with or challenge the prevailing structures of discourse.

This situation calls for the concept of reverse discourse, an attempt to rupture the foundations of the dominant discourse, to claim space for those excluded or subjugated by the dominant one. In this context, Native American Literature produced by the indigenous communities becomes a reverse discourse against the white European male discourse produced about and against them. During the 19th century, many Native American communities found their existence seriously challenged by the influence of the white domineering society, causing some indigenous people to embrace assimilation and abandon their cultures. Many native American tribes were forced to leave their native land to live on the lands authorized by the American government with the aim to relocate and assimilate them into the mainstream society. “As a result, Native American children were recruited to attend government-run boarding schools with the goal of separating them from their parents and their culture, while inculcating Christianity and white cultural values upon them and encourage[ing] or

forc[ing] them to assimilate into the dominant society" (Perez 177). Various legal reforms, such as the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, alongside significant historical events like the American Civil War and the Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota in 1890, led to the forced assimilation of Native Americans as a means of survival. This process was reflected in the indigenous literature published during the late 19th century.

But during the 20th and the 21st centuries, Native Americans began to write about the ethnohistory of their tribes and the adaptation problems they encountered in the process of forced acculturation in the white-dominated mainstream society which distanced them from their language, rituals, and ancestral land. Gradually the earlier Native American Literature, that promoted assimilation, was replaced by a new body of literature that questioned the politics of assimilation and proudly embraced the indigenous cultural heritage. Sidonie Lopez Perez in her article "A Concise Overview of Native American Written Literature: Early Beginnings to 1968" opines,

The rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s also contributed to this resurgence of Native cultures since it demanded not only an end to racial discrimination but also the right of minorities to speak for themselves. In addition, during this period, there were different social and political changes in favour of Native cultural traditions, which are widely known as the Red Power Movement and that also helped increase indigenous ethnic pride and a sense of cultural uniqueness. (183)

Diane Glancy is one such writer who voiced the worries of her tribe in her works. Part Cherokee and part English and German descent, Glancy writes from her lived experience of cultural ambiguity and ambivalence. Her father Lewis Hall was of Cherokee descent and her mother Edith Wood Hall belonged to an English-German-American background. The cultural conflict that all Native Americans experienced outside their home was a day-to-day reality for Glancy while living the life of a mixed-blooded hybrid. Like any other child of Indian origin, she too found it difficult to reconcile between her Indian lifestyle and what she was taught in school as part of western Christianized modern education. To add to all this, she encountered an identity crisis at home and was forced to witness the cultural conflict between her parents. Her mother detested her father for his Indian identity and her father found it difficult to let go of his indigenous memories. Glancy's Cherokee great-grandfather, Woods Lewis, was born in 1843 in what was then known as Indian Territory. Forced to flee to Ten-

nessee where he joined the Fourth Calvary (Union Army), Lewis settled in Arkansas after the Civil War where the family lived until Lewis Hall, Glancy's father, moved to Kansas City. In her works, Glancy often reflects upon the tension between her Cherokee and her European heritage. As a poet, dramatist, essayist, and novelist, Glancy explores the question of native identity and mixed-bloodedness in her writings. Her works are autobiographical in the sense that her characters, like the poet herself, are always in search of identity and spirituality finally finding both in their native culture. Glancy, after a phase of her problematic encounter with her Cherokee and English heritage, decided to reclaim her Cherokee descent and found it easy to express it in her works. In her award-winning collection of creative nonfiction, *Claiming Breath* (1992), Diane Glancy writes, "I was born between 2 heritages and I want to explore that empty space, that place-between-2-places, that walk-in-2-worlds" (4). The majority of Glancy's work focuses on Native American life, juxtaposing traditional values and ways of living with the modern American cultural context. Through this, she explores and critiques how her characters navigate and respond to this blended environment, mirroring the real-life experiences of Native Americans forced to balance their native heritage with foreign influences. In her conversation with Peter Mishler, she states that her intention is to give voice to the unheard voices of the past in her writing. She says,

The more I write, the more I cross back over the same territory. For me, it is voices of the past that did not have a chance to speak. Often the voices left no notes. Sacajawea on the 1804-06 Lewis & Clark expedition in Stone Heart. Kateri Tetakwitha, a 17th-century Mohawk in a Christian village established by the Jesuits in The Reason for Crows. The 1838-39 Cherokee Trail of Tears in Pushing the Bear. I just finished a piece, A Line of Driftwood, about Ada Blackjack, Inupiat, who went with four, dismissive Anglo explorers to Wrangel Island in the Arctic Ocean in 1921. She was the only survivor when she was rescued in 1923.... I have felt these voices would like recognition. I'm on a mission that has something to do with historical restoration. Or conjecture of restoration.... I think I want to bring light to the hurtfulness that the Eurocentric world has on those who are not part of it. (Glancy, "Poet")

This paper seeks to analyze how Glancy endeavours to historically restore Cherokee heritage in her select works. The texts chosen for discussion are two poems, "Without Title" and "Tuning". The poems are autobiographical, documenting Glancy's journey of self-discovery as a woman of Cherokee and English origin. The poems considered for analysis here are

a tribute to her father and through her father to all those Cherokees who were forced to leave their native identity. She believes that her father's Cherokee heritage has been the most significant influence on her life. Glancy comments "it's odd. It's also been the most discouraging, shameful, and has caused more trouble, as I am an undocumented Cherokee, which brings criticism from some people" (Luckenbill 112). It is her sense of separation from her origins while living in the land of immigrants that forces her to talk about her Cherokee identity. For her "a sense of separation is felt more intensely because interconnectedness is part of the Cherokee culture, and when it is severed, there is a need to reconstruct. If you knock down a spider web, the spider starts building again" (Luckenbill 108). Writing poems was part of her attempt to reconstruct the broken lineage that she has with her origins and the two poems mentioned above represent her attempts toward this.

"Without Title", published in 1990 in the collection *Iron Woman: Poems*, is a poem that captures the intense loneliness and helplessness her father experienced after he migrated to the city. After the second World War, the U.S. government's Urban Relocation Program promised Native Americans better jobs if they moved to cities and tried to join mainstream society. This is reminiscent of the forced displacements of the five Native American ethnic groups that occurred between 1830 to 1850 by the American government. Notoriously popular as the Trail of Tears, which Glancy wrote about in her novel *Pushing the Bear*, this ethnic cleansing agenda of the white settlers caused the natives to leave their ancestral homelands. Apart from the ethnic cleansing agenda of the US government, the Cherokee removal that occurred between 1836 to 1838 had economic reasons too. The conflict between the Cherokees and the settlers developed over ownership of the land rich in gold deposits and fertile soil that could be used for farming cotton.

Such forced dislocations were intended to politically, culturally, and economically subjugate the true inhabitants of the land. These government projects stripped away the sense of belonging and identity that Native people, including the Cherokees, once had. After the second World War, the natives were encouraged to move to the cities further displacing them from their identity and subjectivity. The subtitle of the poem "for my Father who lived without ceremony" refers to the sense of this loss. The title of the poem "Without Title" also indicates the lack of identity with which the natives were forced to live. In "Without Title", the speaker's father is forced to leave the land and life he cherished and move to the city, where he strives to adapt for the sake of his family. The transition

from the wilderness and hunting to the stockyards is a difficult adjustment for him, leading to a profound sense of loss, though he never outwardly expresses it. Despite his physical displacement from his culture, his spiritual and mental connection to his roots remains intact. The poet suggests that, no matter how far one physically moves from home, a sense of belonging endures. Through the poem, the poet skillfully juxtaposes the native and the foreign, the ancient and the modern, and the Cherokee and American cultures. She writes,

I remember the animal tracks of his car
out the drive in snow and mud,
the aerial on his old car waving
like a bow string. (Glancy "Without Title" 19)

Glancy begins the poem by admitting the fact that it is hard to live without the marks of one's identity. At the very outset of the poem, she introduces the images of his Cherokee heritage like the shaman, the buffalo and the arrow and how the father had to live without all these. But Glancy's father and many like her father were compelled to this forced acculturation. The lines, "All his life he brought us meat. / No one marked his first kill, / No one sang his buffalo song" (Glancy "Without Title" 19) refers to the sense of vacuum that every Cherokee felt while living in the city. Hunting was an integral aspect of Native American life. A man's initiation to adulthood was celebrated with his first kill. Buffalo song was part of the ritual observed during this process of initiation. But in the case of the father, nobody celebrated his initiation. Instead, his life is shut inside the four walls of an animal stockyard where he packs the meat of dead animals. From the vastness and wilderness of the homeland, he is forced to limit himself to the constructed spaces of the city. His marriage to a woman of English culture further intensified this sense of loneliness and separation from his roots. Father's attempts to keep the spirit of his tribe alive by bringing back "his horns and hides" from the packing house were detested by the Christian mother who said "get rid of them" (Glancy "Without Title" 19). The poet remembers her father and the sense of his lost power. She says she remembers the painted red buffalo on his chest and she concludes by saying "Oh, I couldn't see it / But it was there, and in the night heard / His buffalo grunts like a snore" (Glancy "Without Title" 19).

The ending of the poem underlines the fact that though the father never revealed his unhappiness in the city and tried to adapt to the changes, he was always a Cherokee at heart. Buffalo hunting was an important spiritual practice as well as the most important means of livelihood for the Indians. Reference to buffalo in the poem serves another major purpose of

reminding the world about the atrocities committed by the whites against the natives. Acknowledging the crucial role of buffaloes in sustaining Native life, the white settlers chose to kill them in order to force the natives to relocate to the cities. Generals William Sherman and Philip Sheridan believed if the soldiers could eradicate the Buffalos, the Indians would have no choice but to give up. Soon, it became the norm for Sherman and Sheridan to provide opportunities for the rich and influential to travel West and hunt Buffalo with the U.S. Cavalry guns alongside prominent generals like General William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill Cody), who claimed to kill 4,000 Buffalo himself. Hence this lack of buffalo song symbolically refers to the white man's agenda of ethnic cleansing. Glancy opines,

Any culture that has undergone assimilation is not happy. Imagine a foreign country imposing itself over your land, not being allowed to speak your own language, suddenly having to follow their customs without understanding why. Add to that the killing of sixty million buffalo, on which your lives depended, and the introduction of diseases to which you had no immunity, which wiped out half your population. (Glancy "A Conversation")

In her conversation with A M Juster, Glancy speaks about her relationship with her father and how she deciphered meaning from his silence. She says,

We didn't always communicate in words. Often, I picked up on what he didn't say, which was most of what he said. He died in 1972 at the age of sixty-two. So, I have to go back. He faced the past with silence. I was just together with him. I was part of him. He didn't need to tell me much. He didn't want to share the parts he kept to himself. (Glancy "A Conversation")

Glancy thus attempts to read meaning into the silences of the past to document the subjugation and displacement experienced by the Cherokees. In "Without Title" her father's silence is indicative of the desperate helplessness and subjugation experienced by the Cherokees who "without a vision (he) had migrated to the city" (Glancy "Without Title" 19). According to Glancy, this silence had other meanings. She observes that her father "had a work ethic and was a decent man. He took us to church. He said, without specific words, that we would get along in this postcolonial world of work and industry and doing what was necessary. Just be quiet and do your work. (Glancy "Poet"). But at the same time, his buffalo grunts

reveal how reluctant they were to leave their roots behind and how unhappy was their life in the cities.

"Tuning" published in *The Shadow's Horse* in 2005 explores the ambiguous cultural identity and the resultant isolation that Glancy experienced as one with bearings in two different cultures. The poem excellently captures the cultural crisis that her family experienced with her Cherokee father and white mother. The forced migrations had led Cherokees as well as other Natives to live in cultures and settings that were reluctant to accept them. Though the declared purpose of these dislocations was civilization and inclusion of the Indians in mainstream society, it never actually materialized. The natives remained to live as exiles. Glancy explains her problematic ties with her Cherokee and German identities like this:

I am German/English as well as part Cherokee. And the "Indian" part is further fragmented by the fact I was not raised with tradition. The concept of "Indian" I learned in school was Plains Indian, yet when we visited my father's people, I saw no buffalo, teepee, feather bonnet, etc. but a widow who was my grandmother and other rural relatives who had a few pigs and a row of corn. Not only was it hard to have two heritages, but those two heritages were further fragmented. When one's sense of self or identity is fractured, it makes a difference in one's way of seeing and way of being" (Personal correspondence). (Quoted in McGlennen 128)

This Indian part of her identity was further complicated by her father's silence about the same. She says, "My father did not explain his heritage to me. In grade school, I asked him what nationality we were because I had been asked by a teacher. He told me Cherokee, but it did not come with an instruction manual. We just were" (Glancy "A Conversation").

In "Tuning", Glancy uses memory and images from the past to accentuate the theme of cultural identity and ambiguity with respect to native Americans, especially Cherokee lineage. The poem portrays the conflicted feelings Glancy's father had about his heritage which in turn complicated Glancy's notions about her identity too. In her interview with A M Juster, Glancy explains how there was never much conversation between Glancy and her father about their Indian heritage. She says her father "didn't want to share the parts he kept to himself" (Glancy "A Conversation"). Instead, she says in the poem that "My father's Cherokee heritage tucked under some sort of shame. The past" (Glancy "Tuning" 4). For the father, past was something to be hidden, a source of shame that

he kept to himself. This shame, on further analysis of the poem, reveals to be the means her father used to assimilate into the new culture. Glancy also describes their life in the city as "a life of exile under the trees" (Glancy "Tuning"). The cultural difference between her father and mother is very evident when Glancy says, "My father came to the stockyards. / My mother from a farm" (Glancy "Tuning" 4). The lack of stability and the migratory nature of her father's life is captured in the phrase "came to the stockyard" because he never belonged there. But her mother, she says was "from the farm" (Glancy "Tuning" 4). When Glancy's father got transferred, he "flew from Kansas City to Indianapolis/to look for a house." But they never found a home of their own, and Glancy was left on earth which appeared like "a sandbox in our backyard/where I made roads to a house I never found" (Glancy "Tuning" 4). This house she never found symbolizes the truth of her inability to feel at home neither in her Cherokee nor in her English heritage. This mixed bloodedness and the subsequent identity conflicts is regular theme in Native American Literature. Towards the end of the poem, Glancy speaks about the sense of collective guilt that Glancy and her father carried in their minds about their past. She says "Sometimes I thought we were together/because of something terrible we had done" (Glancy "Tuning" 4).

Both the poems discussed here capture the spirit of Native American Literature. The poems can be seen as Glancy's attempt to successfully resist and challenge the subjugated spaces of existence allotted to the indigenous people by the white settlers. In retracing her lineage to a mixed Cherokee English past and by coming to terms with that through her writing, Glancy attempts to restructure her fragmented self to an intelligible whole. The father figure who appears in both the poems represents the plight of all the Cherokee people who were forced to live in the alien lands without an identity. Her poems "Without Title" and "Tuning," exemplify her endeavour to reconstruct the severed ties with her Cherokee roots and honour the voices of her ancestors. They highlight the emotional and cultural toll of forced relocations and assimilation policies, shedding light on the enduring strength of indigenous communities to resist erasure and sustain their traditions.

In conclusion, Diane Glancy's contributions to Native American Literature are invaluable. They not only preserve the cultural and historical essence of the Cherokee people but also inspire a broader discourse on the importance of sustaining indigenous traditions in the face of cultural homogenization. Diane Glancy's works serve as a poignant reflection of the struggles and resilience of Native American identities in the face of

historical marginalization and forced assimilation. Through her poetry, Glancy bridges the chasm between her Cherokee heritage and her European ancestry, presenting a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant for indigenous communities. Glancy's ability to intertwine personal narratives with broader historical contexts underscores her commitment to historical restoration and the advocacy of indigenous voices. Moreover, Glancy's dual heritage enables her to critique the Eurocentric frameworks that have historically silenced marginalized voices, while also offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by individuals living between cultures. Her works invite readers to engage with the intricate dynamics of cultural hybridity and the ongoing efforts to reclaim indigenous identities in a modern world dominated by globalized influences.

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