

Spiritual and Emotional Illnesses: Recovery and Healing in Indigenous Women's Poetry

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Abstract

The history of invasion, colonisation, loss of land, culture and identity, marginalisation, assimilation and racism has led to the spiritual and emotional illnesses in most of the indigenous peoples around the globe. Our indigenous spirituality, knowledge and wisdom, the cosmo-centric way of life was all subjected to historical and political influences and restrictions and their culture was undermined by the incoming of religious authorities and forced urbanisation. Thus, the effects of intergenerational and historic traumas impact the lives of indigenous peoples across time and generations. The indigenous people with different culture and ethnicity around the world face the same harsh realities- alienation, violence, discrimination, racism etc. as a result of which they face spiritual, emotional and physical health problems and diseases. The fundamental impact of colonialism on indigenous peoples is now well-recognised within public health discourses (King et al.; Sherwood; Czyzewski).

This paper aims to explore research dimensions of Native American and Northeast Indian indigenous women's poetry that has spiritual and emotional healing potential. For this, it intends to closely examine the select poems of Linda Hogan (1947) and Mamang Dai (1957) that exhibit essence of spirit, recovery and collective healing. From the perspective of indigenous comparative literary framework, these two traditions in spite of sharing similar epistemological foundations based on spiritual illnesses, energy and healing have received relatively less scholarly attention. Thus, this paper will take into account established studies on

indigenous spiritual and healing in the context of Native American poetry while recognising the almost negligible research on similar paradigms in the context of Northeast Indian poetry.

Further during this unprecedented time of physical, emotional and mental crisis, reading indigenous women's poetry will not only enable us to share a common bond, experiences and a sense of belonging but also to understand indigenous women's expression and perception of poetics that show tremendous healing potential.

Keywords: indigenous spirituality, spirituality, illness, healing, alienation, memory.

Introduction

The definition of the term 'indigenous peoples' seems to be fundamentally difficult and there is no consensus as to the precise meaning of the term. The United Nations Working Group on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, for example, could not agree on a formal definition (Coates). However there has been a working definition UN system has developed for understanding of the term based on self-identification; historical continuity with pre-colonial and/ or pre-settler societies; strong link to territories and surrounding resources; distinctive language, cultures and beliefs; formation of non-dominant societal groups; and resolve to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities (UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues).

Indigenous health cannot be understood outside of the context of colonial policies and practices both past and present (Allan and Smylie). The health inequalities, disproportionate rates of disease, disability, addiction and violence in Indigenous communities around the world are the result of colonisation (Reading and Wien). To analyse the health gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous populations would be difficult because they vary across cultures and ecologies and thus cannot be generalised. However, three emergent themes connect the ethno-history of most indigenous populations with their current health situation-

the devastating effects of colonisation, the loss of ancestral land and its associated loss of resources, and language and cultural barriers for access to health care (Valeggia and Snodgrass). There are clear dichotomies that exist between Indigenous peoples' perception of illness and healing and the western conventional notion of disease and recovery. "Indigenous peoples' concept of health and survival is both a collective and an individual inter-generational continuum encompassing a holistic perspective incorporating four distinct shared dimensions of life. These dimensions are the spiritual, the intellectual, physical, and emotional. Linking these four fundamental dimensions, health and survival manifests itself on multiple levels where the past, present, and future co-exist simultaneously" (WHO). The dominant Eurocentric way of looking at illness is the appearance of infectious/ chronic diseases that can be treated with drugs or surgery whereas for indigenous illness is the disruption/imbalance of the body-mind-spirit that must be collectively treated. For non-indigenous/urban health perspective, good health is considered equal to the absence of diseases whereas indigenous worldview defines health as the harmonious and holistic wellbeing of the individual and the community (Douglas). For modern/urban understanding, healing is the disappearance of symptoms of disease whereas for indigenous healing means herbal and/or spiritual therapy one adopts lifelong for maintenance of wellbeing. This is because the Indigenous worldviews are shaped by a deep sense that all living things are interconnected (Cajete) and a disruption in connectedness seriously challenges our continuing survival in the world (Groves et. al). Everything has life and everything in the cosmos is a part of the whole. Therefore, for indigenous communities, health is not experienced at an individual level but in terms of the completeness of society as a whole, connectedness and harmonisation between the living human kingdoms/ beings and their ancestors, animal kingdoms and environment (Nemutandani, Mbulaheni S. et al).

The consequences of history of invasion, colonisation, loss of land, culture and identity, marginalisation, assimilation and racism have had a profound impact on the life and health of

indigenous populations worldwide. The devastating effects of colonisation, the loss of ancestral land, and language and cultural barriers for access to health care have led to the poor health situation of indigenous people (Valeggia and Snodgrass). Almost 400 million indigenous peoples worldwide face common thread of low standards of health compared with national averages and compared with non-indigenous counterparts in the same regions (Stephens et al.). Mental health disease, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, suicide, alcoholism, substance abuse etc are some of the common and prevalent health problems among indigenous peoples worldwide (Gracey and King). Though indigenous peoples of Native America and Northeast India are distinct and different from one another in terms of history, culture and tradition, yet they share similar epistemological foundations and for the fact that they were and are still subjected to historical and political influences and restrictions (Marks). The indigenous/tribal people with different culture and ethnicity of Native America and Northeast India face the same harsh realities- alienation, violence, discrimination, racism etc. as a result of which they face spiritual, emotional and physical health problems and diseases. American Indians have a history of health inequity. 28.3% of American Indians live in poverty; this is the highest rate among any other race (United States Census Bureau). The health scenario in the Northeast India is the poorest and many of the common health indicators are ranked lowest in various North-eastern states (Govt. of India). Also, the national mental health survey, on the prevalence of mental health issues, conducted by NIMHANS in 2016 ranked Manipur first with 14.1 percent (Murthy). High rates of depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide, poverty, violence and mental health issues are common among the tribal population of Northeast India but the data available is sporadic and almost scarce. “As a result of insurgency, military atrocities, frequent violence, human rights violation, ethnic clashes, substance abuse, remoteness and drastic change in the customary and traditional way of life to the new modern era” has led to mental health problems in Northeast India (Tawfeeq, et. al).

Convergence of Indigenous Healing and Medical Science

Recent studies and scholarly articles in medical science and humanities suggest incorporating and integrating indigenous practices of healing and wellness in the health care system. (Struthers, Eschiti et al; Massey and Kirk; Eggertson; Nemitandani et al). Indigenous traditional healing is an ancient, spiritual and holistic worldview practiced by indigenous people around the world. It is "the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness" (WHO). Sylvie Lucas, President of United Nation's Economic and Social Council in 2009 stressed on "the potential of traditional medicine... a field in which the knowledge and know-how of developing countries was 'enormous'—and that was a source of hope for improving the world's health-care situation." Up to 80% of the population in Asian and African countries rely on the traditional medicine or alternative medicine (Longkumer). Indigenous medicine systems are uniquely characterised by oral traditions, distinct languages, the importance of community, and the view that human health is interconnected with the earth (Robbins and Dewar). The integration of traditional and modern medicine for healing various physical and psychological disorders led to emerging studies such as Narrative medicine in the medical field. Incorporating indigenous narrative stories in the medical field not only challenges the dominant Eurocentric way of looking at physical health and healing, but also considers the neglected mental and spiritual health and healing modalities among indigenous population. Inclusion of the indigenous epistemologies and worldviews in the healthcare system will provide for physical, spiritual and psychological healing and transformation. In this view Narrative medicine shows the validity and a profound power of narrative in healing (Madrona; Gonzales; Encke). Native American medicine is based upon a spiritual rather than a materialistic or Cartesian world view and its ancient feature conveys it is

possibly the most ancient form of holistic medicine (Struthers, Eschiti et al). Tribal/indigenous peoples of Northeast India also still depend on the indigenous systems of medicine. Some of the medicinal uses of these tribal communities are now incorporated in the organised system of medicine (Deka) which will act as an interface between the traditional and modern healing modalities.

Recovery And Healing in Indigenous Women's Poetry

This indigenous concept of medicine can be translated into poetic form and can bring healing. Especially in the context of Native American literature many scholars stress on the integration of indigenous poetic and healing as act of decolonisation, an act of centring the marginal voices in the Eurocentric world (Smith; Minor; Manathunga; Williams et.al). Poetry often acts as medicine for a very specific injury or disease and can heal the broad effects of colonial violence (Minor). In traditional native poetry, the medicine song captures the powers of the supernatural and a cure could be affected (Grant). There are emerging body of Native American literature that validate the healing potential of poetry written by indigenous as they integrate indigenous cosmo-vision that exhibit spiritual healing and interconnectedness as their major themes (Allen; Hua; Minor; Bailey). I argue that literature from Northeast India can be explored in this light as the tribal poets of Northeast India incorporate all these indigenous worldviews but are usually read from the perspective of violence, terror, and clashes or analysed from historical or political frameworks.

This paper proposes a trans-indigenous paradigm for the study of indigenous poetry a new way of looking at literature in the Northeast. Reading indigenous women's poetry from this paradigm will open up adequately unexplored research discourse in the context of Northeast women's poetry that have been over analysed from material, social and historical frameworks. Further this paradigm calls for trans-indigenous solidarity. A poetry written by an indigenous poet from one part of the world can be understood and experienced and therefore

can have a healing effect on the indigenous peoples globally. Trans-indigenous paradigm also explores and recognises indigenous women's voices and perception of spiritual healing. This will be a new way of looking at the voices of the marginalised. It paves the way for exchange and conversation for trans-indigenous sisterhood that will provide consolation and salvation and healing by sharing and reading poetries of one another. It can be a step towards legitimising women's psycho spiritual health through women's writing itself (Xiang and Yi). Further this paper attempts to read Northeast literature from the perspective of mental health. Tribal people of Northeast India, especially the tribal youths, suffer from a range of mental health problems yet this prominent issue have been almost absent in the literary critical discourse of the Northeast literature. I argue that reading poetry from the tribal perspective and worldviews will act as a therapy to combat mental, physical and spiritual problems of an individual as well as the community. Therefore, this paper highlights poems by indigenous women poets Linda Hogan and Mamang Dai that can be read from a trans-indigenous psycho spiritual paradigm, an integration of spiritual and psychological in the context of healing.

Linda Hogan (b 1947), a Chickasaw poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and activist, is one of the pioneers of Native American literature. She is a prolific writer who incorporates issues related environment, eco-feminism, historical trauma and narratives, native oral histories in her works. She also integrates a spirit-based vision in her work. She is keenly aware of the presence of spirit in the tribal universe and emphasises on the power of spirit to heal her people and nature from the trans-generational trauma and colonisation evident in her poem 'To Be Held':

... the way a tree always shelters the unborn life
waiting for the healing
after the storm
which has been our life (Dark Sweet)

The impact of genocide in the minds of American Indian poets and writers cannot be exaggerated. It is a pervasive feature of the consciousness of every American Indian in the United States, and the poets are never unaware of it (Allen). Hogan articulates this awareness into her poetry to bring healing for the injuries inflicted by colonialism in her poem 'Tear':

This blood
is a map of the road between us.
I am why they survived.
The world behind them did not close.
The world before them is still open.
All around me are my ancestors,
my unborn children.
I am the tear between them
and both sides live (The Book of Medicines).

Linda Hogan, like many indigenous poets, writes for survival and continuance repairing and re-establishing their lost identity and redefining political, cultural and spiritual spaces. In *The History of Red* she asserts,

Red is the human house
I come back to at night
swimming inside the cave of skin
that remembers bison.
In that round nation
of blood
we are all burning,
red, inseparable fires
the living have crawled
and climbed through

in order to live
so, nothing will be left
for death at the end.
This life in the fire, I love it.
I want it,
this life (The Book of Medicine).

Further, the inclusion of healing chants and ritual are distinct features of indigenous poetry as they-emphasise restoration and harmony of the whole. The poet transports herself into dream vision or altered state of conscious to create a poetry that heal or transform the readers. This process of poetic creation can then be compared to process of trance a shameness goes through in order to heal her community. Paula Gunn Allen (1992) quotes Linda Hogan who has spoken about a phase when she started having visions of spirit people- “It took years before I realised that there wasn’t anything wrong with me... An Indian friend of mine made this clear to me... She was telling me about how she finally realised the same thing was true of her... said I should have known it years ago; that I was different from others around me because I am an Indian, and that was why I didn’t fit into the white-dominated world I was living in. I try to turn that into strength now” (Allen 229).

Mamang Dai (b 1957), an Adi poet, novelist and journalist, is one of the acclaimed poets from Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. Her works often incorporates the revival of her tribal Ao heritage and draws on the imagery of environment, myth and folk tradition. Like Linda Hogan, she integrates history, effects of modernisation, loss of faith and tribal identity, and the presence of spiritual and mystical elements in her poems. Dai observes that the tenets of traditional practices that are deep rooted in environmental ethics supported a close and harmonious relationship with Nature. Even through the changing times, the tribes preserve traditional customs and spiritual belief that inspire peaceful coexistence with the natural world (Reshmi R). This has been explored in her poem Small Towns and the River:

... The dead are placed pointing west.

When the soul rises

it will walk into the golden east,

into the house of the sun.

in the cool bamboo,

restored in sunlight,

life matters, like this.

In small towns by the river

We all want to walk with gods (River Poems).

Our present is the outcome of the past. We must remember and keep our ancestor spirits alive and pass on the knowledge to the future generation. This idea of remembering of our indigenous past and ancestors is reiterated by many indigenous writers. In a collection of interviews titled *Winged Words* Harjo spoke of time as nonlinear: "I also see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories" (Coltelli). This is reflected by Dai in her poem 'Prayer Flag 2':

We found each other yesterday,

After they told us the past is over.

Now we are floating smudges of colour

Flying high over the mountain barrier (Prayer Flag 2).

Indigenous poets and healers stress on the multiple relationality that exists among different layers of beings. Dai also draws on the holistic worldview concept of all encompassing, eco centric and spiritual indigenous way of life and knowledge. This indigenous worldview based on interconnectedness and harmonious co-existence among nature, humans, non-humans and spirits is manifested in her poetry.

The river has a soul.

It knows, stretching past the town,
From the first drop of rain to dry earth
And mist on the mountain tops,
the immortality of water (Small Towns and the Rivers).

Dai's writings also reflect the trauma and negative experiences of historical and political influences and restrictions in the Northeast parts of India and by voicing her thoughts through her poetry acts as a healing process not only for her but for her community as a whole. She provides an excellent example of this understanding in *The Wind and the Rain*:

And our dreams have been stolen
by the hunger of men travelling long distance,
like bats in the dark.
Soft fruit, flesh, blood.
There is a war and directly now
it must be about guns, metal, dust
and the fear that climbs the trees every night
when our names are written
without will or favour in the present,
watching the frailty of our lives
spilled in the blood of these hills
right before our disbelieving eyes (*The Wind and the Rain*).

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples worldwide have faced lots of challenges due to colonisation, loss of ancestral land, rapid cultural change, alienation, marginalisation, assimilation and racism that have a profound impact on mental health problems such as depression, stress, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, violence etc especially among the youths. (King et.al.; Sherwood; Vallengia

and Snodgrass). This is evident in various parts of Northeast states of India, particularly the mental health illness in Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram being on the higher side (Longkumer). Poetry therapy in the context of narrative medicine is used as a supplement tool that can be helpful in breaking down resistance, encouraging self-expression, promoting family and group interaction, as well as providing a sense of validation to the troubled adolescent (Nicholas). Poems by indigenous poet Hogan and Dai will act as a healing tool to combat psychological and spiritual health problems among the individual and the community. Creative expressions by indigenous women can serve to develop individual and collective consciousness around healing, political resistance, and social transformation and offer profound relief for the writer, the reader, and the larger community (Hua). “During this unprecedented time of physical, emotional and mental crisis, reading indigenous women’s poetry will enable us to share a common bond, experiences, and a sense of belonging to heal with one another” (Chaturvedi). Thus, Linda Hogan and Mamang Dai can be seen acting as indigenous healers who bridge the creative and the spiritual worlds in order to transform humans to greater consciousness and integration. Trans-indigenous psycho spiritual paradigm is a way forward of reading poems in the time of crisis that bring about new awareness and healing to the readers as well as writers around the globe.

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