

American Indian's Cultural Identity in Mary Oliver's Poems

A. Sakthipriya and Dr. K. Muthuraman



Mary Oliver

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Abstract

This paper articulates the suppression and oppression of Native Americans who lost their cultural identity. The anthropocentric worldview of western society destroys the American Indian cultural identity and values of the past. The materialistic and consumerist culture of America was once sacred and valued by American Indian's, but today it seems ecologically destructive in nature. This cultural identity is vanishing day after day. This paper both celebrates

the American Indian culture as well as laments the destruction of their cultural identity in the poems of Mary Oliver.

Keywords: Mary Oliver Cultural identity, anthropocentrism, materialistic, nature, reconstruction

Cultural Identity

The term “cultural identity” is defined as the sense of belonging to a group or community. It is a part of a person’s self- conception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity.

People all around the world have their own culture tradition and language. These are very important, because they only show who they are, and they reveal their identity. Likewise, American Indian’s have their own cultural identity but today they are voiceless and considered as others. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century Native American lose their homelands because of Indian wars so American Indian’s were displaced and lost their reservations too and it also includes their culture, identity and history.

Mary Oliver

Many American writers are trying to pour light on American Indian culture and values. One among them is Mary Oliver, who wrote poems on American Indian’s, which help the readers to know the American Indian culture. She is a talented writer; she has received many awards and she is ‘far and away’ America’s best-selling poet. She is undoubtedly a bestseller poet because of her writing style and beautiful narrative technique. Because of her pastoral upbringing, she is very much closely associated with nature. In most of her poems, the subject matter is nature, and she also focuses on culture, identity, history in some of her poems.

As a Native American poet, she gives voice to the American Indian’s through her poems. There are five hundred and sixty-six federally accepted tribes in different parts of the nation. Slowly these tribal communities have been degraded by the development of the Western world. This American Indian’s worshipped nature and its elements as gods and all these communities have their own food habits, dressing style and they construct their own unique houses. In this they construct their cultural values as well as their identity.

Mary Oliver glorifies the culture of American Indian’s but laments for their present state. It is reflected in her poems, Tecumseh, Learning about the Indians, and The Esquimos Have No World for “war”. She shows us the culture of American Indian’s who have all the values in it and also about the identity as a group. In these three poems, Oliver shows us that these people have the ability to have close association with nature and give attention American Indian’s culture. Mary Oliver criticizes the anthropocentric worldview of the Western society and their dominance over nature and the way of exploiting natural resources.

In the poem “Learning about the Indians,” Oliver profoundly describes the Western worldview which spoiled the cultural identity of Native Americans. The American Indian’s culture has been subjugated and treated poorly by the settlers of the nations. They changed all the customs and norms of these people by their power. This poem is in mourning tone because of the oppression of American Indian’s cultural identity and it can be juxtaposed with Oliver’s ideology about natural world.

Mr. White

The persona of this poem is Mr. White; through this character, the poet criticizes the dominance of Western society. The poet describes Mr. White belonging to Indian descent who performs Indian cultural event in the school in front of children. In the past days these cultural events were sacred and considered as their cultural identity, but nowadays these cultural values are only considered as ‘fun’ and ‘extra- curricular’ activity. The very sad fact is that even Mr. White feels that his Indian cultural heritage and identity is subordinate and inferior to Western culture. After the performance before school children he is totally sad and feels that his culture has made other to laugh at him. They were not serious about Mr. White’s cultural act; instead they cracked joke on his appearance. The disappointed Mr. White changed his costume into a “shabby salesman suit;” this explicitly shows the readers that American Indian culture is subjugated and considered as subordinate and lower than Western culture.

The words ‘he packed his drums’ symbolically represent that Mr. White is ashamed of his cultural heritage so that he hides his culture by changing his appearance with a shabby salesman suit. The poet enunciates her readers that apart from Western culture all other cultures are treated as lower cultures by the Westerners. The poet used the word “shabby” salesman suit to describe the fake identity of Mr. White (American Indian). Because of the dominance of the Western culture over other culture these American Indian’s lost their cultural identity which is evidenced through the character Mr. White.

Mourns Over the Loss of Native Land - *Ghosts*

Similarly, in another poem “Ghosts,” Oliver mourns the loss of Native Americans land into the hands of settlers (Americans). This poem consists of seven sections. The first section begins with a question “Have you noticed?” This line suggests to the readers that there is a change in the current state of America and this question is repeated in the poem for some valid reason behind it. Through this repeated statement Oliver brings out their reader from blind beliefs. In the second section the poet speaks about the loss of nature as well as American Indian’s because the dominance of white man totally erased the cultural identity of American Indian’s. Even though the white man came from the decent of American Indian’s they forget to respect their culture at present.

In the third section the poet introduces the character Lewis and narrates the history of American Indian’s. The poet points out that in 1805 Lewis was watching the chicks of sparrows which was fallen blind to the land and it symbolically represents the Americans decent from Native American homeland and its shows the reader industrialisation and technological development which made this people blind so that they are running after anthropocentric world.

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This is one among the major reasons for the loss of American Indian cultural identity. The fourth section mentions: “In the book of earth it is written: / nothing can die” (25-26). It means that the poet assures that nothing can die on this Earth so that the American Indian culture can also exist till the end of this world. The poet alludes that Lewis an explorer is credited with making possible the white immigrant to the west. The poet elaborates:

In the book of the Sioux it is written:
they have gone away into the earth to hide. Not
Nothing will coax them out again
but the people dancing. (27-30)

Through these lines the poet clearly points out that the people who are born on this earth use it as a hiding place. Likewise, the dead American Indian’s will surely come out from this earth. These lines are also apt to the title of this poem as American Indian’s culture is erased away by the Americans, but their culture will flourish in the near future.

Lament for the Loss of Buffaloes

In the fifth section the poet uses the mourning tone and laments for the buffaloes which are shot by the Americans from the windows of the train. It symbolically represents American Indian’s who were killed in the Indian wars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the sixth section the poet repeats the statement, “Have you noticed?” (41). It shows the readers the life of American Indian’s. When they step into the land it will be flourished and nourished because of their close association with the natural world.

Dream Imagery

In the last section, the poet uses dream imagery in which the poets sees the birth of a calf and she thinks that it is the rebirth of the buffaloes. By this rebirth the poet meant to say that American Indian’s are still there and also following their culture and tradition which will exist forever. The poet concludes that they may make room for us so that the people around them can share their noble wild domains. The culture of American Indian’s exists somewhere in this world.

Against Government Powers

In the poem “Tecumseh,” the poet portrays the charter of Tecumseh who is the chief of Shawnee tribes. The persona of the poem criticizes the hierarchies of the government and also the dominance and power of the western society. The opening lines of the poem suggests that the river which flows towards the land of American Indian’s is now full of toxicity and it was once so sacred and valued by the people. They forget about their past. Also it represents that they forget their cultural values and is worse than the risk of death. Even though they forget about their past, all the wounds are like the litter of plastic bags. It symbolically represents the materialistic and consumerist notion of westerners.

The poet questions the Shawnee tribes and their dispossession and subjugation by the Western people who are so conscious about materialistic success and ignore the cultural identity

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of American Indian's so the poet angrily states: I would like to paint my body red and go out into/ the glittering snow/ to die (17-19). The name "Tecumseh" means shooting star from the northern side of the river. He formed his troops to save his land (Ohio) from the settlers, but failed to do so because of their potential. They didn't have any proper weapons to attack their enemies to protect them instead; they were killed mercilessly by the human beasts running after materialistic success. Even the body of Tecumseh could not be found and it will never happen. In the final lines of the poem, the poet assures her readers that Tecumseh will be reborn as a little boy and reconstruct everything into order and set back to his homeland to fight against his enemies to protect his land and people. The poet is very sure to her readers that he is angry.

Anthropocentrism

Now Americans are running after anthropocentrism. They do not care about ecological destruction around them. This poem clearly pictures the suppression of American Indian's by the western society for the past two centuries and they are subjected to the loss of their cultural identity. The poet refines the minds of her readers and shows them the injustices done to the native people and they are not treated equally by the westerners. In this poem Oliver both celebrates American Indian's culture because they look at nature as a whole and they are part of it and vice-versa. The poet also mourns the loss of their cultural identity due to industrialization, urbanization and technological development. The materialistic and consumerist nature of western world changed the fate of this American Indian's, but the poet hopes for the rebirth of their culture which is evident through all the three poems.

To Conclude

Thus, Oliver shows her love towards her native land (Ohio) likewise the Native Americans loved their land, but it was destructed by the western world. Although it was destructed by them the poet hopes for the reconstruction of the cultural identity of American Indians. People can use natural resources which are essential for them, but exploitation, destruction and subjugation of nature are dangerous; they will only affect the future generations. So people should learn to respect their culture as well as nature so that they can live a fulfilled life. Identity is important for common man; hence, it must be preserved by all. Only through understanding the prevailing situation, people can attain transcendence reattach with nature and reconstruct their cultural identity.

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