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**RECLAMATION OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY: A TRAVEL BACK HOME IN
JAMES WELCH'S *WINTER IN THE BLOOD***

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Abstract:

*The indigenous cultures' writing and ways of life are frequently suppressed and ignored. Given the White monopoly, it is difficult for the indigenous Native Americans to be respectfully acknowledged for their long-standing culture and identity. In *Winter in the Blood*, Native American author James Welch explores the struggle of indigenous identity through the story of a nameless protagonist, who, often lost and adrift, embarks on the quest to discover his identity, culture, community and home. The protagonist is depicted as tormented and distant from his roots owing to the lack of guidance and acquaintance of indigenous past. His father and his brother's sporadic recollections are reenacted during his aimless wanderings and trips, on the reservation, in and out of boundaries, causing agony and grief. However, the narrator's rendezvous with the traditional Yellow Calf rekindles a connection to his cultural heritage. The paper concludes suggesting the repossession and reintegration of culture, identity and community as the characters succeed in coming back, back to home, to self, and the community, grappling with the complexities of culture and identity. The "winter in their blood" metaphorically thaws, symbolizing the warmth of rediscovered cultural identity. The narrative ultimately advocates for the reclamation and reintegration of indigenous culture.*

Keywords: *Identity, Indigenous, Distance, Culture, Community, Stories, Memories, Repossession, etc.*

The fact of belonging, being recognized and respected for one's alignment and affinity is what a person deserves in society and community. However, this concept of identity somewhat faces suppression and is put under lens in the Native American writings. Native American author James Welch features in his debut and classical novel *Winter in the Blood* an unnamed character, a traveler so to say, who is often alienated and marginalized and represents the grief and loss of identity of his culture and community. The indigenous American when came across the Europeans in 1492 post the meeting with Christopher Columbus was judged from



an outside point of view, resulting in a faulty and erroneous conclusion. The aspects considered about history, origins, inheritors, inhabitation and many of the similar matters have usually and frequently “been superficial, distorted, or false” (Josephy, 4). Though the white men acknowledged the existence of the indigenous but called them “savage and barbaric” (Josephy, 5). The crystallization of the long, rich oral and tribal identity into unrealistic and unjust images demeaned the need to bring the indigenous culture into forefront or be considered enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with the dominant or alongside the mainstream. Despite having beginnings in the precolonial era, the Natives are imposed with alienation and marginalization that features evocatively in the works of the genre.

The monopoly of the dominant white prevented the blooming of the indigenous, Native American culture in the contemporary world. The publication of the literature that expressed marginalized cultures was seen during the time between “the second half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first” (Patell, 3). The literature of the indigenous communities still stood less and was a part of “the minority literatures within “U.S. minority literature”” (Patell, 3). As literature is an institution of the culture, 1974 was the year of the publication of *Winter in the Blood*, four years before the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1978. Here, the natives gained a sense of recognition and pride. The 23rd United States Poet Laureate and the first Native American with this honor, Joy Harjo writes in Foreword to the novel, “We asserted ourselves nationally as tribal nations, as cultural peoples, as individuals: for all sovereign human rights” (ix).

Kara Stewart asserts with this idea of publishing books that talk about ‘our voice’. She supports it, first, to eradicate the colonialist’s inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals of the indigenous life and second, to leave the responsibility of identity construction on the native authors. The indigenous characters, she discusses, act as tool to avoid stereotypes or harmful narratives.

This experience runs parallelly in the novel centering the struggle of identity and possessing culture. The nameless protagonist is depicted as tormented and distant from his roots owing to the lack of guidance and acquaintance of indigenous past. Correspondingly, grief permeates his life. The reader moves with the protagonist in and out of boundaries, from places to places, from home to Malta to ranch to Harlem and Havre to back home again. Although the novel is set in the reservation of Montana, the travels cause a mental and emotional exhaustion. This exhaustion reflects the loss and pain in the life of the protagonist in particular and indigenous man in general. The continual movement is a result of the instability of the Native American protagonist at one place and with one identity. The aimlessness and loss are because of the absence of the loved ones of the protagonist as well as the white impact that he receives from the world outside of his native land. The lost sense of identity in terms of heritage, family secrets and death of his brother catalyzes the trauma in him. The trauma doesn’t seem to resolve along his journey as it starts with an alienated man who feels at distance and is hopeless about everything. This “distance” reverberates throughout his odyssey. His loss with the tribal roots and culture brings the abysmal distance, alienation and separation. The indigenous man says, “I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through years” (Welch, 2). The distance that sets him



afar from his people, his community is not imposed by anyone but “came from within” (Welch, 2).

The narrator has returned from Tacoma where he had undergone a knee operation. The experience at the hospital throws him on the margins with a realization that the indigenous Indians are not welcome in the white oriented so-called modern world. This indigenous narrator had tried to enter the white world of the dominant in order to escalate his life and status but is thwarted with racism and mainstream politics.

I had had my opportunity, a chance to work in the rehabilitation clinic in Tacoma. They liked me because I was smarter than practically anybody they had ever seen. That’s what they said and I believed them. It took a nurse who hated Indians to tell me the truth, that they needed a grant to build another wing and I was to be the first of the male Indians they needed to employ in order to get the grant. She turned out to be my benefactor. So I came home. (Welch, 16)

The tradition of subjugation of the indigenous natives and crafting of harmful narratives has been followed since long and few people today are able to comprehend the contributions of the American Indians. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. states, “all aspects of Indian existence- agriculture, government, religion, trade, mythology, economics, and arts and crafts- influenced white men at one time or another and helped to shape the destiny of each of the countries of the western hemisphere” (Josephy, 31). Teresa being a proud indigenous suggests the narrator of the futility of approaching the dominant white stating “there’s nothing wrong with being an Indian” (Welch, 15). The reason, however, that still holds him alienated is the inadequacy in the continuation of the age-old tradition of storytelling by the ancestors and taking pride in his culture. On top of it the memories of his father and brother keep haunting him being “memory as timeless” (Welch, 14).

The culture that belongs to the native Americans has unique notions of time, nature and spirituality. The stories and storytelling shape the lives of people and communities. Shanley opines in her article that these stories can thwart imperialist perspective and have the power to contradict and counter stereotypes. The land the natives live on has life in itself. They talk with the universe, they live in clans, they have animals to talk to and guide them, “the deer come...they seem to talk...about the happy days gone by...” (Welch, 52). This idea of collectiveness and inclusivity of all parts of community and surroundings throw light on the collective cultural identity. However, the encroachment of the white men categorized and assorted the identity into only dominant and marginalized. Consequently, the marginalized indigenous lives are miniscule and incompetent for the Euro-American. Welch is portraying the alienation of Native Americans in a white society with an importance of native traditions and community in helping them cope up. The nature thus guides, “Things change- things have changed...They know what a bad time it is...They understand the signs. The earth is cockeyed.” (Welch, 52) This change is foreshadowed in the beginning when the narrator had brought his Cree girlfriend home. As the Cree was one of the earliest tribes to befriend the white encroachers, narrator’s relationship with her reflects his loss of cultural identity.



The culture that is collective and communal is suppressed under the existence of the dominant. The exclusion of Native American culture that has given rise to the emergent literature, resonates with Williams' 'residual'. The narrative thus awakens the residues in the form of memories. The narrator, for instance, is at constant distance and exclusion but part by part the memories ignite him for the quest to find answers. The answers, per se, lie in Gerald Vizenor's term "post Indian literature" (Matterson, 149) where he categorizes the Native American literature to be "necessarily hybrid" as it confronts and explores the tension between what seems to be the necessity of assimilation into the dominant culture and maintenance of ethnic identities. Homi Bhabha popularized this concept of hybridity so as to show impactful essence of the works of the minority. His more wide and general opposition of center and margin destabilize the binaries and gives rise to the cultural identity proposed by Stuart Hall. The new gained identity thus belongs as much as to the future as it does to the past.

The protagonist is initially stoic to his Cree girlfriend or his mother or anyone around, but gains realization with a slow pace. The heritage and reality hit him in parts and parcels, sometimes with the stories that he seems to have heard from his grandmother, sometimes his instances with his brother, a few times from his mother about his father and their community, and other times through the spiritual nature around him. The realization of not sticking only to the roots but also getting along with the ongoing nuances will, consequently, help him survive and sustain.

The narrator finds it hard to come home and is constantly travelling. The metaphor of journey explains the need to come home, to oneself, to one's family, to one's heritage. But his departures and returns are occupied with various flashbacks, majority of which are about the death of his relatives, especially elder brother Mose. The narrator discloses himself that he has become a servant to the memory of death. Death in many of the cultures across the globe have a high significance reflecting on deeds and duties for life. The Blackfeet regard it as a time when it's important to mourn profoundly with an external display, justifying the reason why we see the narrator depressed at most instances. Clark Wissler, an American anthropologist and ethnologist, who has done a lot of work about Blackfeet talks about the indeterminable mourning period that this community has in culture. The bond between the brothers and the death cause in narrator an irreversible trauma for life:

There is a peculiar artificial relationship among boys that deserves attention. Many of them have a male companion from whom they are almost inseparable. The pairs are usually of the same age and grow up together as it were; they play together, they go to war together, they aid each other in courtship and in after life call on each other for help and advice. These bonds often last until death. [22] The terms of relationship for brothers are sometimes used by them and it is not unusual for them to assume the equality of twins (Wissler).

The memories with the brother are catapulted at various intervals keeping the narrator from moving on in life. The crisis in his cultural identity and familial bond with community is partly for the same reason. His living in past and ignoring the present makes him a victim of distance.



Another aspect that lacks from his life is the stories that connect the natives to their heritage, culture and identity and golden memories. The figure of grandmother is missed in this dire situation.

This woman who was Teresa's mother had told me many things, many stories from her early life. My brother, Mose, had been alive at the time when, one winter evening as we sat at the foot of her rocker, she revealed a life we never knew, this woman who was our own kin (Welch, 26).

The communal practice of storytelling prevailed in the presence of mothers and grandmothers but the narrator had no connection with the mother initially and the latter is not present to help him. Andrea Hernandez Holm discusses how the storytelling facilitates survival as it is now the centre that would tell the story and resist colonialism and loss of identity. When he reaches Malta in search of his runaway girlfriend who had stolen his material, he curses the white man as he analyses of the loss of his culture and identity to the white encroachers. He is found "on a great earth of stalking white men. I cursed the loss of my possessions..." (Welch, 41). While he is at distance with his mother, by this time on his advent in Malta he experiences a sporadic recollection from the time when his mother was friends with the priest. The despise for his mother converts into protectiveness when the hatred for the white overpowers on encountering "a letter written by a white man who refused to bury Indians in their own plots, who refused to set foot on the reservation" (Welch, 44). The memories of humiliation provoke him to keep the White at distance, thus ripping up the letter. The tearing up of something with the white association brings in narrator an inexplicable pleasure.

With troughs and crests in coming home, meandering journeys on the reservation, the narrator experiences the extreme peak of loss of identity and culture when he walks out of Havre and finds "no mirrors anywhere" (Welch, 95). The tired and exhausted indigenous American comes face to face with reality hitherto as the absence of the mirror reflects the inability of getting to see his real self, identity. The presence of mirrors could help or guide him in right path, a path that could take him home, to his culture and people.

The narrator who was long lost and at distance with everything has to resort to the traditional healer Yellow Calf to turn back to his culture and self-identity of relief. Yellow Calf, the culture hero is a member of the indigenous tribe who informs people of the ways of life from past and restores the ill natives. (Joseph, 26) The impact and influential stories of the Dominant have, however, diminished the importance Yellow Calf- "Teresa says you are dead. I guess you died and didn't know it" (Welch, 95). Contrastingly, the socially dead Yellow Calf turns out to be "a good housekeeper, old man" (50) who tells the narrator the stories that were concealed by his family members and about the arrival and destruction caused by the white encroachers. His family secrets and origins also unveil as the narrator comes to know that the Yellow Calf is his actual grandfather and he has a past and identity deep rooted in the Indigenous Culture. The realization of a good lot of things bring to him a cure from old ailments and awaken in him concern and emotion for his surroundings and culture.



After the going away of the “old lady” (100) the warm water thaws the chilling winter and for the first time, the narrator did not feel as an outsider at distance but a person belonging to this community. Loosening of the ties from the cow in the mud frees the tied narrator from his own pains of past. Forgetting the stiff idea of olden identity and accepting the need to adapt with the contemporary ethos to amalgamate in hybrid brings the comfort of holding on to roots and culture and proceed in fast moving world. Identifying with his culture and community ends his journey to a knowledge of self-“ It was good to be home. The weariness I had felt earlier vanished from my bones” (101).

Gassim Dohal counters Alan Velie’s view about the change in the narrator. While Velie negates the change, Dohal asserts that the emotions and behaviour summon a positive change in the narrator causing his rebirth. Dohal’s idea of rebirth of the narrator is agreeable in the way that along with the rebirth, getting rid of his dead and lost humanity, it also regenerates and reconnects his faith in cultural heritage of belongingness, community and continuing stories. Additionally, the homecoming becomes a triumph.

The rain that was expected anxiously from the beginning finally falls “for the first time” (129) in part four of the novel and does the cleansing process. The narrator finally comes back home to his culture and identity with warmth in blood and feeling comfortable of the distance that got washed by the rain. The tormented identity that experienced the topsy turvy route of binaries of presence and absence, acceptance and negation gain the status of “Reclamation” (Welch, 124) and repossession. The epilogue discusses narrator’s growth and his closeness with the old woman and culture.

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