

# Psychological Struggle of Native Women

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**Abstract:** This article gives an overview of Historical significance of Native American women's writings in mainstream Literature. Changing position of Native Women, Cultural significance, issues and themes of native tradition, psychological struggle for identity, are highlighted. The article is based at the backdrop of popular Native American women writer Paula Gunn Allen's novel *The Woman Who Owned Shadows*. The protagonist of the novel Ephanie undergoes great psychological struggle to establish her identity. Article concludes depicting Allen's opinion that peace is found only if one sticks to one's own culture and tradition. Real identity can be established only if one returns to one's own roots.

**Keywords:** *Native Tradition, Culture, Women Literature, Identity of Allen's Protagonist Ephanie*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature about American Indian Women has increased during the past twenty years. During the years from 1754 to 1829, American Women Writers made many contributions to the progress of the American Nation. Native American Women are multifaceted, but sometimes this aspect is overlooked. Their voices speak through private diaries and journals, and in their letters we discover a record of the events of their own lives. Their poems, novels, and sermons unite religious teachings with domestic themes, as they question their place in the emergent social, political, and geographical landscapes of the United States of America. Few among these women reflect the religious belief of Native Society which suggests that a woman's place in the domestic sphere is actually very powerful. Other women's writing explores the psychological struggles of women in their relationships with men. As women gained self-confidence in their abilities and access to education, their writing reflected an evolution in thinking about significant issues, including religion, attitudes toward Native Americans, racial and gender inequities, and human relationships with the natural world. Contemporary Native American women writers who write fiction about contemporary Indian life mainly focused on the significant themes like violence against women and child abuse. These writers depicted violence from within their own Native American community. They highlighted the issues of Indian women who are battered by Indian men and Indian children who are abused by their own parents. Besides they wrote about the violence on natives from outside the community, by racist white individuals and institutions.

The task of the ethnic woman in literature is multi-fold: the realization of her artistic self, the search for a literary tradition within her own culture as well as the dominant one, the expression of woman's perspective, and the recognition that she will be critically observed by popular Native American Women writer, Paula Gunn Allen.

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## 2. ALLEN'S NATIVE THEMES AND ISSUES

Paula Gunn Allen writes, in a more abstract and quite rhythmical way, of women's power and their stories. Allen is a Laguna-Lakota-Lebanese-American Women Writer. She is poet-essayist, novelist, critic, educator and editor born in 1939. She has numerous works to her credit. She has worked to encourage the publication of Native American literature. She is a scholar and literary critic. She wanted to make others aware of Native themes, contexts, and structures. She highlighted the power of women in Native Tradition and depicted woman-centered structures of traditional Pueblo society. She was active in American feminist movements along with her role in antiwar and antinuclear organizations. Her fiction and poetry frequently refer to her identity as a mixed blood. Allen emphasizes the status of Amerindian women in various Native cultures.

## 3. STICKING TO THE ROOTS

Allen's *The Woman Who Owned Shadows*, written in 1983 is one of the first novels written by American Indian woman, that probes into the dilemma of the contemporary Amerindian woman in ascertaining her identity and role in the multi-ethnic, racist and resistant, individualist and uncaring Post War II America which in itself is in turmoil with collapsed values, family units, cultural root. This novel is about the confusion of the protagonist. The protagonist passes the varying influences to reclaim a Native American women's spiritual tradition. On her journey, the protagonist uses traditional Laguna Pueblo healing ceremonies as well as psychotherapy, the Iroquois story of Sky Woman, and the aid of a psychic Euro-American woman.

Throughout the novel Allen writes from the perspective of a Laguna Pueblo woman. In this culture women are respected and their descent is matrilineal. Unlike our society in native society where men own the houses in native societies women owned the houses. Even their major deities are female. Thus in a major part of Allen's work we find the theme of woman-centered culture. Her work is full of the mythic dimensions of women's relationship to the sacred and also the plight of contemporary Native American women whose powerful position is lost due to the influence of Euro American culture. Allen very clearly proves that until the effect of Euro American culture that is until some 15 year back women in her culture were respected a lot. They were never considered to be weak. She wanted to educate the Euro-American women this aspect and wished to prove that women were not held down in all the cultures. She wanted those writers to understand that issues are not same in all cases and if white writers write something against native women then it hurts them a lot. But at the same time Allen admits the fact that feminist have proved the best audience for their work and have given her much support.

The protagonist of Allen's *The Woman Who Owned Shadows* a lesbian half-blood, eventually learns to accept her sexual orientation and cultural identity rather than conform to social stereotypes. This work is dedicated to the Native American deity Thought Woman. It emphasizes the importance of storytelling in Native American culture, incorporating such diverse narrative modes as folk tales, letters, legends, dreams, and Pueblo "thought

singing”. The novel is divided into four parts. Four is a unifying number in tribal tradition. Each part begins with a prologue which tells about Amerindian myth on woman as the creative Spirit. Each part reflects the memory, thoughts, emotions and imaginings of EphanieAtencio, the protagonist of the novel.

Allen’s protagonist Ephanie lived her life in the shadows of men. Ephanie is a woman, a divorcee, a daughter and a granddaughter seeking to find herself among strangers in a strange land. She is a Guadalupe woman living in New Mexico. Ephanie is in the midst of a severe psychological breakdown which has presumably reached its peak with her broken marriage with an Amerindian. Ephanie feels that even her body which is short, choppy and sturdy was at odds with her name. She likes tall and serene personality. Thus she is longing for towering, serene, free and graceful image.

In her childhood Ephanie had an inseparable companion, Elena. Ephanie and Elena were forcibly separated by Elena’s mother and a school nun who feared the girls’ physical affection for one another and hence separated them. Ephanie remembers how as a child she had jumped down an apple tree just to have “the feel of soaring”. She had jumped from a rope as she was challenged by her cousin, Stephen. She slips and breaks her ribs and punctures her lung. She feels that she has been tricked and betrayed by Stephen and the loss of her relationship with Elena, this “fall” causes her much pain both psychically and physically. She also recollects her first cultural shock at the government boarding school and her early confrontations with the dominant culture. As a child she was overwhelmed with confusion, rage, shame, red cheeked tightness. She was always haunted by the shadows of her private past. She tries to re-affirm herself through her native cultural roots. She meets her grandfather at the village. Her grandfather was not an Indian but he has spent his lifetime with the Natives, working with them. He shared their food, their anger, their joy, their grief, their life and their death. They never talked about division. This shows how the Native and Non Native cultures meet. Ephanie doesn’t feel herself a part of the pattern; maybe her Western education raises the barrier or the too individualistic modern times.

Ephanie’s psychological breakdown might be because of her broken marriage with an Amerindian. Abandoned by her first husband, she moves with her two children to San Francisco. Ephanie feels a close bond to her cousin, but recognizes that he smothers her, does not allow her to be real. Out of loneliness she drifts into sexual liaison and later marriage with Juda, a Japanese-American filled with hatred over the mistreatment of his people during World War II. Her hyphenated existence becomes more complicated after marrying Thomas Yoshuri, the Japanese-American, who himself suffers from identity dislocation. Juda, whose symbol is his Rising Sun flag, impregnates her, but does not give her the affection she craves. Ephanie gives birth to twins and when one of the twins dies, a victim of crib-death, Judah leaves. Like Naotsete of Keres mythology Ephanie isolated herself and as a consequence was impregnated by the Sun, which abandoned her. Like Naotsete, she must give one of the twin sons she bears.

Ephanie tries to adopt urban life. She joins a therapy group where most of the members are white. She imitates the money-status-success oriented white life. She believes that the world safe and within her control. This thought comforted her. But the white community did not accept her either as white or as an Indian. Ephanie has to face the problem

of belonging all on her own. Ephanie feels ashamed that once she had a dream to grow up as a traditional tribal woman. A mixed-blood Amerindian, she has a feeling that even her ethnic identity is mostly a golden dream.

Ephanie thinks of her grandmother Shimanna. Shimanna had white education and had married a white man. She had been able to bring the two seemingly discrete cultures into accord in her life. All her life she was waiting for something which was not revealed to Ephanie. Waiting had been her way of coming to terms with her life and the self. But her granddaughter Ephanie has failed to inherit it. In her process toward the visionary state Ephanie is aided by her cousin Stephen and the psychic Teresa. Teresa and Stephen act as shamans to initiate her into healing rituals and to transmit to her message from Keres deities until she can communicate directly. She is also aided by another Shaman-like character, a therapist. The therapist enables Ephanie to express her own unconscious thoughts and those of her family. These thoughts are necessary to her psychological progress. However, Ephanie must separate herself from each of these intermediaries in order to proceed to the next stage of spiritual power. Ultimately Ephanie finds a way to herself, relying no longer on men but her primary connections to the spirit women of her people and to the women of her own world.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The novel is very complex blend of myth, oral history and personal memory which retells in modern circumstances the ancient quest for ritual and supernatural understanding in order to achieve harmony with gods, one's tribal home, and oneself. The novel very clearly depicts the psychological struggle of women in their relationships with men and it also depicts the importance of women as spirituals in Native American literature. Ephanie is able to establish her identity only after she understands the importance of her own culture and tradition. She becomes real returning to her own Native Roots.

#### 5. REFERENCE

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