

The Significance of Rituals in Cogewea: A Study

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Abstract

Cogewea: The Half Blood is the first Native American novel written by a woman novelist, Mourning Dove. This novel was published in 1927 and it has an autobiographical touch. The importance of rituals and traditions has been presented in this novel. The novel gives an excellent picture of Okanogan traditions. The stories in this novel give an impression of Mourning Dove's personality and tradition as well as the folk material she had gathered. Native American tradition has always regarded various rituals with reverence. Significance of Okanogan rituals is an integral part of this novel. Present study aims at revealing the significance of rituals for the characters of the novel as well for the plot and theme of the novel.

Mourning Dove was born near Bonner's Ferry, Idaho. Her English name was Christine Quintasket. Besides English name, she was given the name *Hum-Ishu-ma*. Her father's name was Joseph Quintasket, Okanogan mother's name was Lucy Stukin, a Colville. On her mother's side she was descended from an ancient line of warriors and her paternal grandfather was an Irishman who worked for the Hudson's Bay company. She received some education at Sacred Heart Convent at Ward, Washington, but she left the school to care for four younger sisters and brother. In her later teenage years Mourning Dove lived with her maternal grandmother and through her developed interest in the oral tradition of her people, Okanogans. Okanogans today live in the her western part of the Colville Reservation, near the Columbia and Okanogan rivers and Canadian border. She presents themes like ancestral storytelling practice and exploring themes of conflicted identity and communal reintegration which locate the narrative quite securely within this century's fiction by American Indian writers. The present novel can be studied focusing different themes. But the significance of traditions and rituals has been prominently presented in this novel. The protagonist of the novel is Cogewea who is a half-blood. Half-bloods were treated inferior those days. Cogewea belongs to Okanogan tribe. Other major characters of the novel are Stemteema, Cogewea's grandmother, Jim, the man who loves Cogewea and Densmore who is a white man. He is in love with Cogewea. Cogewea considers Jim at the place of her brother. She does not know that he loves her and wants to marry her.

Some characters like Stemteema strongly believe in the traditions and rituals of Okanogans, whereas the characters like Cogewea do not believe in these rituals. So Cogewea, the protagonist of the novel, has strong willingness to marry Densmore who is a white man. Stemteema, Cogewea's grandmother, strongly opposes the relationship between Cogewea and Densmore. When Cogewea comes across a rattlesnake she tries to kill the rattlesnake. In Okanogan tradition it is not allowed to kill the rattlesnake. It proves that the protagonist of the novel does not want to stick up to the traditions of the Okanogans in the first half of the novel. But in the latter part of the novel we find she is in a dilemma whether she should follow the traditions of the Okanogans or not. Till the end of the story she is having this dilemma. When she realizes that she is going to suffer if she goes away from the Okanogan traditions the situation makes her come back to the Okanogans because she is deprived by the white man, Densmore. Being an old lady Stemteema, Cogewea's grandmother, prefers to stay in the tepee. Mourning Dove describes the typical house of Okanogans. It proves that the Okanogans want to live a traditional life. They do not want to go away from the traditions.

Although constructed on allotted Indian lands, it was typical of the pioneer homes of certain parts of the west and at one time traceable across the continent. The large airy rooms gave to the interior a pleasant home like appearance. The living room was commodious, with leather upholstered chairs and divan. The floor was bare, save for the buffalo, bear and mountain lion skins scattered about. The great open fireplace with its tall brass and irons, was piled with rustic wood. A case for books, and a center table with lamp, composed the furniture. The walls were decorated by a few paintings portraying wild life, several antlers of deer and elk, while above the bookcase leaned and mounted head of a mighty buffalo bull. (Mourning Dove 1981:31)

This is the appearance of a typical house of Okanogans with heads of different animals mounted on its walls. Storytelling is another major tradition presented in this novel. Stemteema narrates the stories to her granddaughters and the grand daughters are also interested to listen to those stories. These stories present the past experiences of Okanogan people. The purpose of this narration is to teach the importance of rituals and traditions to the young Okanogans. Another purpose of storytelling is to advise Cogewea not to indulge with Densmore because he is a white man and there are several examples of deprivation of Okanogans by the white people. Stemteema tells her some stories showing such kind of deprivation. As Stemteema is habituated to tell different stories to her granddaughters, Densmore and Cogewea go to her. She is sitting on a blanketed bed. Stemteema wants to follow the rituals of her tribe. This time before telling the story Stemteema ritualises the occasion by smoking sacred pipe so that she will be able to recollect the incidents.

Cogewea gives her a pipe with tobacco. After ritualising the occasion Stemteema is ready to tell a story. Mourning Dove has tried to depict the importance of tradition and rituals for Okanogans. Okanogans believe that old people should tell the stories in the evening. This time Stemteema tells them a story of old man's prophecy. Stemteema's father had told this story to Stemteema as a part of Okanogan tradition. He expected her to tell the story to her grandsons. These stories were sacred to their tribe. At that time white people were away from their tribe and Great Spirit was kind to their tribe. Another interesting tradition has been introduced by Mourning Dove. Whenever a medicine man would die, the people would bury the dead man in his own tepee and they would kill his best horse at its doorway. Two days after the death of this medicine man he would come to the earth to show the right path to go to the Great Spirit.

Mourning Dove informs about a belief of Okanogans. When Cogewea and Densmore go to the river under the pines, first of all Densmore tries to attract Cogewea towards city life by telling charms of city life. Cogewea naturally gets attracted to city life. Soon there comes a frog or a land-toad. Densmore tries to turn it on its back and Cogewea exclaims:

"Oh! Alfred ! Don't do that to the poor little helpless thing. Besides, it will bring a storm sure. Indians claim that if you place a frog on its back it will cause a storm without doubt. There is an old legend which tells the story of Swa-lah-kin the „frog woman"! It is in connection with sun; that if you turn the frog thus, she will look up at the sun and first with him as in the beginning." (Mourning Dove 1981:159)

At this time Cogewea warns him not to turn the frog on its back because it will cause heavy rain and storm. But before she warns him he turns the frog. This incident states that Cogewea believes the legends and traditions of the tribe. But in the in the first half of the novel when Cogewea goes for a trial ride, while coming back she comes across a rattlesnake, she tries to kill the snake. According to the senior tribesmen nobody should kill a rattlesnake. But here she tries to kill it without believing the tradition of tribe. On other hand when Densmore tries to turn the frog on its back she tries to stop him, but it is too late for her. After some time it rains heavily before they reach the tepee. It shows that Cogewea has a dilemma whether to follow the traditions of her tribe or not.

Mourning Dove introduces another tradition of Okanogans; the Sweat House. Whenever these people want to purify their body, mind and before taking any major decision they consult the Sweat House to invoke the spirit powers. This is an important ritual of the tribe. But there is a tradition among the warrior. Warriors do not permit a woman to enter their sweat house, and if she did, they would never use it again. Cogewea consults the sweat house, but at that time a stone explodes. Whenever a wish is made without the explosion of stone it is expected

that it will be fulfilled and if a stone will explode then it is expected that the wish will not come true. When Cogewea consults the Sweat House and makes her wish, a stone explodes indicating that whatever wish she had made will not come true. But she cannot recognise it, as she does not believe these traditions. That is a warning given by Great Spirit or spirit power. When Stemteema wants to invoke the spirit power she consults the Sweat House. Jim and Mary construct the Sweat House for Stemteema because spirit power guides them to do so. As Cogewea does not believe all these traditions she ignores it and finally meets with a tragedy. So Mary says:

“ I do not wonder! This is the trouble, the fate of the average breed of today. They are encouraged to try forget their Indian ancestry, after they once learn the white man’s books and ways. They banish the idea of old tribal customs and laugh to scorn that which was sacred to the generations past.”
(Mourning Dove 1981:242)

Mary says that it will not be surprise if the youngsters will not believe their traditions. If they will not believe their traditions it will be troublesome for them. The white man’s books misguide them, take them away from their ancestors. So they forget their tribal customs and laugh at the sacred things. So Mary and Stemteema always hate Densmore. It can be seen that most of the characters in the novel prefer to follow the Native American tradition and culture. Those who do not believe these traditions meet with the tragedies like Cogewea. When Stemteema feels that it is very difficult for her to turn Cogewea away from Densmore she takes the help of spirit power. To invoke spirit powers she consults Sweat House where she comes to know about the problems in her future. Sweat House is a way to communicate with the Great Spirit. Tribal people consult the Sweat House for success in love, war, hunting and gambling. The person who wants to consult the Sweat House has to get some stones. He sprinkles some water on the stones with a sacred spoon and he sings a ritual song to invoke the aid of deity. With the help of depiction of all these beliefs Mourning Dove wants to save slipping heritage and to present her way of life in an acceptable and intelligible manner. A conflict between the two generations of Okanogans has been presented by Mourning Dove. Stemteema, the old lady, prefers to adhere to the age-old traditions of her tribe whereas Cogewea does not like to follow all the age-old traditions of her race. Initially, she declines the possibility of her marriage with Densmore. But Densmore convinces her by telling the attractions of city life. She is tempted easily and she elopes with Densmore only to get disillusioned.

After having a thorough analysis of the novel it can be pointed out that the importance of ritual has been focused in the present novel. For Native Americans ritual is something having the greatest importance. One may say that it is the inseparable part of Native American life. We observe that the old lady, Stemteema, follows the rituals like Sweat House. With the

help of these traditions and rituals Stemteema can warn Cogewea about the problems in future, she opposes Cogewea to get indulged with Densmore. In Cogewea's world the tension of opposites exists between tradition and change. Age-old traditions of Okanogans are weapons to fight against the tribal problems. Cogewea has not been deaf to her grandmother's teaching that warns her that she is stepping wrong, but she suffers her own doubts at times about the place of those traditions in the modern world. Mourning Dove incorporates elements from the Okanogan oral tradition into the novel through the character of Cogewea. Following the traditions of Okanogans Stemteema prefers tepee to the ranch house. She pursued basket weaving in the morning hours. Before taking any major decision and before telling a story, she ritualised the occasion by smoking a pipe. Although the time has changes, she continues to instruct her granddaughters through the stories about the coming of the first white people and tragedies that have befallen her tribe. It proves that Mourning Dove is faithful to all these rituals and traditions. Here Mourning Dove has created a tight dramatic device that works effectively. After hearing the description of Sweat House spirit, Cogewea goes to Sweat House to make her wish, but at the last moment one of the rocks explodes into millions of fragments. Ignoring the meaning of the event Cogewea elopes with Densmore. All these examples focus Okanogan's tradition and the rituals.

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