

# Remembrance of Loss: Nostalgia, Melancholy and Memory in Native American literature

Osheen Sharma

Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala (H.P.), India  
Email - osheensharma1423@gmail.com

**Abstract:** A significant theme in indigenous writings all around the Americas is nostalgia and melancholy, these people are often associated with a reflection on their past viz-a-viz the turn of events that led to the present. Native American works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are rich in oral storytelling traditions and framed as evocative pieces. The Native American literary representation of nostalgia has yet to be comprehensively examined; therefore, in this age of globalization, it is vital to continue the study of its social, cultural, political, and national manifestations. By means of a metaphorical examination of melancholy, nostalgia, and memory in indigenous literature, this study aims to investigate the portrayal of colonial experiences, with a specific focus on North-American indigenous authors who have lived in different parts of the United States. I would contend that nostalgia, remembrance, and melancholy are significant elements of the assimilation process. They contribute to the development of Native American identity, the communal recollection of the past, and the revitalization of contemporary locations which served as distant reservations for native people.

**Key Words:** Native American, nostalgia, remembrance, loss, melancholy, Native Indian.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

As we approach the dawn of a new era, we are more aware than ever of the conflicting nature of historical memory that characterized the 20th century and beyond, while fresh historical events call for accountability and critical evaluation. History may readily be used as a weapon for political misdirection or as a platform to demonstrate one's ideological and societal dominance. Historical records have been demonstrated to be closely linked to power structures, institutional processes, globalization currents, societal dreams, and personal ambitions. This has been substantiated by many critics time and again. T.S. Eliot in his famous essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), talks about "historical sense" which is a perception of the past as it is in the present, a blurring of the planes of existence of past and present, producing all literature in a "simultaneous existence" (Eliot 1093). This stance was later strongly supported by the arguments of New Historicists, like Stephen Greenblatt who stresses "methodological self-consciousness" in discourse (12), and Louis Adrian Montrose who suggests that the past is the recipient of "preservation and effacement" (20).

So how do we really think about the past, about history? Are all accounts of history pure and reliable facts? Or are they imaginary narratives, mingled with nostalgia, a wishful state of the past, and memory, our subjective perceptions and state of mind?

## 2. NOSTALGIA AND LITERATURE:

The study of the representations of the past in the present leads to a consideration of distinct forms of memory. In Humanities and Social Sciences various modes of memory such as individual and collective, have been delineated. Nostalgia may be perceived as a facet of memory. The concept of nostalgia is important since it may be a valuable tool for understanding the characteristics of consciousness and identity.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines nostalgia as "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition" ("nostalgia"). However, it was introduced as a very different concept. The earliest mention of nostalgia (not the term but the idea) is by Homer in his *Odyssey* (ca. 800 B.C.). In 1688, the

term resurfaced in Johannes Hofer's PhD thesis. Hofer, a physician, characterized it as an intense sort of homesickness experienced by Swiss troops serving in distant regions (Anspach 380). As many individuals, including soldiers and others, began to display symptoms of nostalgia, this notion quickly faded away. The relationship between nostalgia and emotion was the significant turning point, making it a psychological disorder as opposed to the previously hypothesized physiological ones. Nostalgia has been recognized as a subconscious desire to go back to a previous phase of life and has been classified as a kind of depressive condition, characterized by a sense of sorrow and bereavement coupled with a longing for home (Romanovska 129). When nostalgia evolved into a desire for the past, it became a phenomenon that could be felt by both a group and an individual. In the 20th century, the yearning for something that has been lost came to be recognized as a significant characteristic of nostalgia, as shown by the definition provided by Webster's dictionary.

Almost without exception, the literary act is nostalgic. The most cliched of introductory phrases, 'Once upon a time...' conveys a sense of desire, a yearning for the past, which is referred to as nostalgia. Nostalgia has been classified by Holak and Havlena into two categories. The first is direct or indirect and the second is individual or collective (Bhattacharya, et al.). Nostalgia is intricately connected to the notions of social, collective, and cultural memory, elucidating the processes by which memories are generated, altered, and integrated within a society (Pickering and Keightley). Nostalgia is, thus, a complex concept that encompasses both a person's longing for something from the past and an emotional construct that romanticizes the past. In literary works, the collective consciousness, desires, and needs of a community are depicted through nostalgia, which is the longing to return to the past, the lost world (Romanovska 134).

### **3. REMEMBRANCE OF LOSS IN NOSTALGIC LITERATURE:**

Nostalgia is initiated by a stimulus that prompts the recollection of a memory, followed by an emotional reaction and then a compelling want to return to that past experience. Remembrance and fantasy, reflection and retrospection, have been recognized as common features in human life and literature. A longing for something is associated with a retrospection on what could be. Remembrance is a key component of nostalgia since it both gives the past meaning and makes us melancholic over what has passed. In the recognition of nostalgic emotions, the burden of our loss has both a settling and unsettling effect. The oral literature, autobiographical writings, and novels, amongst other genres, are strong recollections of what is lost, and the authors' lament over it. It is an unexpected meditation, which invokes remembrance of existence and erasure, celebrating memory in the refuge of literature. The theme of remembrance, reflection, and retrospection is abundant in fictional writings, particularly the novel.

The most fitting example of a work in extended literary retrospection, in which lost time and return to home are significant themes, is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) (Caleb and Cuileagain 6). *Our Casuarina Tree* (1881) by Indian poetess Toru Dutt is a poem of reminiscing love for the poetess's childhood in her hometown, expressing a yearning for the joy of her youth and the time she spent with her siblings. Emily Bronte's poem *Remembrance* (1845) memorializes a loss she endured fifteen years prior, showing her melancholy as her memory of her beloved fades over time.

There is also an abundance of imperialist nostalgia in literature, with a common theme of absolving past guilt. Imperialist nostalgia laments the fact that a culture, way of life, environment, or species is on the verge of extinction, yet it is the culprit who laments (Ararguc 2). A few examples of such works are *A Passage to India* (1924) by E.M. Forster, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) by Ernest Hemingway, *To the Coral Strand* (1964) by John Masters, and *City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi* (1993) by William Dalrymple.

### **4. NOSTALGIA, MELANCHOLY, AND MEMORY IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE:**

The literature of the Native Indian writers of America was a spark rekindling from many years of latency, and it has since brought forth the innumerable histories and cultures of these people. The publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) marks the beginning of the Native American Renaissance as a literary movement. Before this, the native people had relied on nonfiction genres, the most common of which were autobiographies. It was only in the late 19th century that fiction, particularly the novel, surfaced in their works. They delved into their traditional oral literature, combining it with fictional genre, in publications such as Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories* (1921), Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927), and D'Arcy McNickle's *Surrounded* (1936), and here they could fully expand their imaginations while also revitalizing and sustaining their cultural history.

Native Americans are one community where nostalgia, both as anguish over loss and as meaningful contemplation, is likely to be found. A significant theme in indigenous writings all around the Americas is nostalgia and melancholy, these people are often associated with a reflection on their past viz-a-viz the turn of events that led to the present. Yet, in the scholarly literature on Native Americans, the term 'nostalgia' is seldom employed to characterize introspective

feelings over heritage; instead, they have been described as possessing “tradition” rather than nostalgia (Orr 1). This is the result of politicizing of the past, where minority cultures like those of the natives are given contemporary identities according to the dominant cultural scene. Raymond Orr has argued that not all native writings can be categorized as only traditional, but can be listed as being nostalgic, particularly of two types i.e., reflective and restorative (2).

Nostalgia focuses on the generative potential of the melancholic stance and positions the past, particularly memory as a potential source for the future. Nostalgia is a longing for the past, a feeling that hinders one from fully experiencing the present, a means of escaping or revisiting a non-existent reality, an unmet aspiration. The nostalgia of the native, however, does not go back to a distant irrecoverable past but is rooted in the recent lost world. It is more than most related to an emotional connection with the land, the spirit, and the essence of their culture. Whether in communal or individual form, it is a deep remembrance of the past, and nostalgia creates a dream-like escape for the sufferers of loss.

*The Life and Travels of Kah-Ge-Ga-Gah-Bowh* (1847) by Canadian author George Copway is the author’s nostalgic account of the contact between settlers and natives, particularly their recruitment as missionaries and translators. Copway has given his memorized accounts of his family and ancestral history making the book an invaluable source of generations of traditional practices and beliefs. The pattern of including oral tradition, history, and personal experience characterizes most Native Indian autobiographies. The genre is most significant as it situates the author’s memories within the history of his tribe.

Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins is principally remembered for her autobiography *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883), the first autobiography by a Native American woman writer. In the book, Winnemucca recounts her childhood as a housekeeper, the demise of her grandfather, Chief Truckee, in 1860 amidst the Pyramid Lake War, and her initiation as a Paiute language interpreter. In addition, she recounts the massacre of her family and the savagery of missionaries in the Bannock War. Not only is the book a Native American autobiography and a captivity narrative, but also an ethnographic and ethnohistoric document tracing many important events in history. The book is Winnemucca’s reminiscence of her life among her tribe and her confession of the disintegration of this utopia at the hands of the perpetrators.

Zitkala-Sa had a constant battle in her life as she navigated the conflicting pressures of American Indian and white civilization. She grew up on a Sioux reservation, went to boarding schools that emphasized assimilation, and saw significant events in the relationship between white and Indian people throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. In *American Indian Stories* (1921) Zitkala-Sa drew on her problematic personal background to produce stories that reflect the sorrow and complexities of the American Indian experience. Through her colorful and politically insightful writing, she promotes innovative perspectives on the values, beliefs, and rituals of both Sioux and white civilizations. Additionally, she explores topics of assimilation, identity, and racial relations that remain pertinent in contemporary society. In the book Zitkala-Sa’s recollections are of evenings spent around the fire listening to the elders tell them about times gone by and she refers to these seniors as her “legends”, and she thinks about them every night before going to bed.

In *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday, stories are important vessels of cultural preservation. Folk tales are transmitted via many means such as oral storytelling from a grandfather to his grandchildren, dance performances during traditional ceremonies, or religious sermons. These stories serve as a means of transmitting information, worldviews, and beliefs from a past era. Many historical and cultural stories are also told by different priests in the novel. The chapter “The Priest of the Sun” in the novel embodies several Kiowa stories that Momaday has previously explored in his earlier literary works, including *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969). Momaday acquired these tales throughout his childhood, and in this work, the mode of transmission remains unchanged—through oral means—as a contemplative recollection. *The Names* (1976) by Momaday is perhaps his most intimate and nostalgic work. A memoir of his boyhood in Oklahoma and the Southwest, it is also described by Momaday as “an act of the imagination” (Momaday ix). It is an imaginative re-creation of Native American beliefs in the timelessness of the universe. It is an integration of the collective memory through his accounts. It is also his means of sharing his heritage by establishing a channel for oral traditions to be expressed through the written word, where his memories become the reader’s memories.

Leslie Marmon Silko, widely regarded as the foremost Native American writer of her time, was inspired by Laguna legends she heard as a youngster. In *Laguna Woman* (1974), she blended the Laguna spiritual topics in retrospect, such as the link between humans and the natural elements, with intricate depictions of modern battles to preserve Native American culture in an Anglo society. Silko covers various issues in her novel *Ceremony* (1977). The text explores Tayo’s struggles with alcoholism and his journey towards recovery upon his return from World War II, as well as the connections between Pueblo mythology and these two narrative threads. The main character is grappling with grief and

a disparity between reality and idealism, which is the root cause of all the challenges. However, he finds solace by reconnecting with his heritage and engaging in rituals that aim at reclaiming the forgotten realities. The important link in the novel is memory and the interconnectedness of life. *Storyteller* (1981) is a compilation of narratives and verses that draw inspiration from the oral storytelling of the Laguna Pueblo. She dedicates the book “to the storyteller as far back as memory goes...” (Silko 7). Silko’s works in *Storyteller* are shaped by her childhood in Laguna, New Mexico, and provide vivid firsthand depictions of Laguna Pueblo traditional values. It is a collage comprising short stories, anecdotes, folktales, poems, autobiographical accounts, and photographs. In the work, she examines themes of memory, alienation, longing, and identity. In “Uncle Tony’s Goat”, one of the stories in *Storyteller*, Silko reminisces about Uncle Tony, as a kind-hearted animal lover, whose mundane life is in itself an inspirational anecdote for the boy who scares away Tony’s precious goat.

Louise Erdrich makes utmost use of the Native American theme of ‘coming home’, referred to as ‘homing’, by William Bevis in his essay, *Native American Novels: Homing In*, in which Bevis contrasts the “coming-home” plot of major Native American writers with the “leaving-home” accounts of Euro-American writers (qtd. in Stookey 25). For Erdrich, her characters show a sense of belonging to a place, a community, a home to return to, after their struggles in the outer world. This is evident in her novels *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *The Beet Queen* (1986) in which the major characters, at last, seek their connections with family, renew their ties with their homelands, and suffer from a sense of belonging. Many characters in *Love Medicine* are driven by a desire to return home. They share a feeling of longing for something that is missing. The tale concludes with protagonist June’s son, Lipsha, symbolically bringing her home by returning to the reservation. For Lipsha home is physically the reservation, but it also represents his newly discovered self-awareness.

Simon J. Ortiz’s poem “My Father’s Song”, published in his poetry collection *A Good Journey* (1977), is a recollection of his relationship with his father. The father teaches various things to him in the poem, such as planting and harvesting corn. He feels nostalgic and through his reminiscences, he keeps his father’s teachings and his traditions alive. As is elucidated from the examples above, nostalgia for the native is grounded in history, it is not a longing and motivation in an “ahistorical” or “other-worldly sphere” (Bryan 48). The literature of the Native American authors talks about the past that is wistful and commemorative, rather than mythic and aged. For these authors, nostalgia is a social, historical, and cultural emotion rooted deeply in personal memories and experiences. Native American works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are rich in oral storytelling traditions and framed as evocative pieces. Likely so, the autobiographical writings are immersed in the memories, past and present, and the sense of lost culture accounts for the tone of melancholia. With nostalgic remembrance, we pine for an impossible past rather than a possible future. Therefore, it can be argued that for the native writers, nostalgia and melancholy are the remnants of memory, like ghosts of the past haunting your present.

Loss also figures significantly in reflective nostalgia. In *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, Janelle L. Wilson explains that individuals “nostalgize” for items that symbolize their longings (Wilson 26). In other words, what they feel nostalgic for reveals their cherished and significant values. This is particularly true for Native American authors. Through their writings, these authors attempt to reconstitute their homelands, cultures, customs, identities, and language; the memory of these various parts of the past is frequently juxtaposed with their present, an existence in a world with which they have the least connection. Home is more than simply a place to live; it is connected to one’s origins and formative years.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

The Native American literary representation of nostalgia has yet to be comprehensively examined; therefore, in this age of globalization, it is vital to continue the study of its social, cultural, political, and national manifestations. In Native American studies, nostalgia is regarded as a derogatory form of remembrance, even as “half-hearted” and “half-fictitious” (Orr 3). This is surely not the case, as the past plays the most significance to the present of the natives. Therefore, their longing for the past, which is a result of the influences of the socio-political and cultural conditions of the nation they reside in, requires a complete re-evaluation of the term. The feelings of Native Americans about their own past are now referred to as “Native nostalgia” (5). The portrayal of the circumstances and encounters that prompt the characters to feel nostalgia as a means of dealing with their emotions offers a fresh perspective on nostalgia, seeing it not as a way to avoid responsibilities, but rather as a quest for self-identity and a way to cope with the loss of one’s culture and nation. It is not “an abdication of personal responsibility [...] an ethical and aesthetic failure” (Boym xiv), but, “the search for continuity” (Davis 35).



The feeling of nostalgia experienced by natives for their homeland is a result of feeling disconnected or alone, and it prompts significant inquiries regarding their identity and the concept of belonging to a place. Their ethnic and cultural distinctions weigh heavily on their route to assimilation, causing roadblocks. Ironically, the mainstream alienates them due to their ethnic and cultural differences, ignoring their strong desire to be Americans. Despite their best efforts, June, Abel, and other Native American literary heroes cannot completely integrate into American institutions. Thus, socio-economic, political, and cultural dominance make the protagonists nostalgic. Their nostalgia is therefore “an enactment and consequence of this alienation” and it elicits significant apprehensions over the influence of both historical and present circumstances, like “what it means to belong to someplace” (Ritivoi 39).

Questions regarding self and identity drive characters to rediscover themselves and return to the past. Some return to their birthplaces for a feeling of belonging, while others recall their pasts through nostalgia. The most significant part of their return home is nostalgia, but it is not for a bygone age. It is for a moment when they used to have power and identity. The transmission of principles through nostalgia and remembering for the natives, causes them to resist cultural integration. Likewise, the oral tradition has preserved their memories for decades. This orality shows regret for unpleasant past experiences and the beauty of their culture’s present. Remembering, then, acts as a resistance for future generations. Their homecoming is figurative and necessary to comprehend the idea of home, thereby a recreation of their lives in the US.

## REFERENCES:

1. Anspach, Carolyn Kiser. “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer.” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine*, vol. 2, no. 6, 1934, pp. 376-391. [www.jstor.org/stable/44437799](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44437799).
2. Ararguc, Fikret M. “Imperialist Nostalgia in Master’s *To the Coral Strand*.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-8. [doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1787](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1787).
3. Bhattacharya, Oindrila. et al., “Some Cultural and Historical Aspects of Nostalgia: Nostalgic Experience Differs Among Cultures but Appraisal of the Past Does Not.” University of Canterbury, 2015.
4. Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
5. Bryan, Catherine. “Nostalgia, Resistance and the Mestiza Migrant Subject in J.M. Gorriti’s “Si haces mal no esperes bien” and C. Matto de Turner’s “Aves sin nido” and “Herencia”.” *Letras Femeninas*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 47-74.
6. Caleb, Sam. And Niall O Cuileagain. ““Forget, remember!’: Literature and Nostalgia.” *Moveable Type*, vol. 12, 2020, pp. 3-16.
7. Davis, Fred. *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. Free Press, 1979.
8. Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2001, pp. 1092-1098.
9. Greenblatt, Stephen. “Towards a Poetics of Culture.” *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veenser, Routledge, 1989, pp. 1-14.
10. Momaday, N. Scott. *The Names: A Memoir*. Kindle ed., The U of Arizona P, 1976.
11. Montrose, Louis A. “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture.” *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veenser, Routledge, 1989, pp. 15-36.
12. "Nostalgia." *Merriam-Webster*, 2024. *Merriam-Webster.com*. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia). 9 April 2024.
13. Orr, Raymond. “The nostalgic native? The politics and terms of heritage and remembrance in two communities.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2017, pp. 1-11. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2017.1300929
14. Pickering, M. and E. Knightley. “The modalities of nostalgia.” *Current Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 6, 2006, pp. 919-941.
15. Ritivoi, Andreea Deciu. *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002.
16. Romanovska, Alina. “Nostalgia and National Identity: Idea of Revisiting the Past in Latvian Fiction.” *Respectus Philologicus*, vol. 37, no. 42, 2020, pp. 127-136. [dx.doi.org/10.15388/RESPECTUS.2020.37.42.44](https://dx.doi.org/10.15388/RESPECTUS.2020.37.42.44).
17. Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. E-book ed., Penguin Books, 2012.
18. Stookey, Lorena L. *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood P, 1999.
19. Wilson, Janelle L. *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*. Bucknell UP, 2005.