
The Cyclical Pattern in Cree Philosophy

A Study of Louise Bernice Halfe's Poem "The End and the Beginning"

Chribuna Viswas

Government Arts and Science College
Kozhinjampara, Palakkad, India
Chribuna_viswas@rediffmail.com

Abstract

As an experimental poet stitching together various aspects of language, especially Cree and English, Louise Bernice Halfe (Sky Dancer)has introduced innovative styles in hybrid diction in conjugating history, myth, oral narration, testimonies, memories, actual incidents, the devastation of First Nations culture by the Church, the residential school system and its organised pogrom in annihilating and erasing the native way of perceiving the world and the robustness presence of women characters and strong views uplift her literary status to the leading position in Canadian Literature in general and specific in First Nations literature. This paper will introspect the concept of cyclical belief systems of Cree philosophy in "The End and the Beginning" from *The Crooked Good* (2008).

Keywords: First Nations Women poetry-Rereading patriarchal oral narratives- Turn Around Woman, -or ê-kwêskît

Louise Bernice Halfe, born in Two Hills, Alberta, was raised on the Saddle Lake Reserve before being compelled to enrol in Blue Quills Residential School in St. Paul, Alberta when she was only seven. She lived there for nine years, and during her time in high school, she used to write about her personal experiences, journals, and memories. Through this, she discovered that she enjoys creative writing. Her social work bachelor's degree program and honorary degrees of letters from Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Saskatchewan, and Mount Royal University helped her develop this talent. Halfe was named the poet laureate of Saskatchewan in 2005. First, Halfe published in the collection *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* in 1990. Her following publication was a piece in *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (1993), a collection of writings by residential school survivors. Ms Halfe's published works include *Bear Bones and Feathers* (1994), *Blue Marrow* (2004), *The Crooked Good* (2007), and *Burning in this Midnight Dream* (2016), all of which have received numerous accolades and awards. *Sôhkêyihta*, published in 2018, features selected poems, and Ms Halfe's latest work, *awâsis – Kinky and Dishevelled*, was released in April 2021. Louise Bernice Halfe, commonly known by her Cree name Sky Dancer, is the first national poet from the First Nations community. As an experimental poet stitching together various aspects of language, especially Cree and English, Sky Dancer has introduced innovative styles in hybrid diction in conjugating history, myth, oral narration, testimonies, memories, actual incidents, the devastation of First Nations culture by the Church, the residential school system, and its organised pogrom in annihilating and erasing the native way of perceiving the world, and the robust presence of women characters and strong views uplift her literary status to the leading position in Canadian Literature in general and specific in First Nations literature. Becoming the ninth Parliamentary poet of Canada on January 1st, 2021, Ms Halfe has a strong and appealing presence in the cultural scenario of Canada as an activist poet.

The Crooked Good, a poetry collection released in 2007, demonstrates the inherent art of fusing various elements of First Nations poetry. The text exhibits the author's predominance of a poetic sensibility at the height of her thought, which is well-liked by the poetic community and occupies a significant position in the First Nations literary landscape. Ms Halfe, a vibrant researcher of her poetic creation, developed the cultural-centric poetic text *The Crooked Good* in 2007. The text is stuffed with the amalgamation of Cree and English words, the technique of applying the Code Switch, a hybrid way of conveying meaning by focusing on the cultural

liminality of postcolonial society, and historical reasons entangled with numerous issues related to linguistic colonialism.

The creative writing of First Nations people incorporates the traits of Indigenous and Cree oral storytelling, gender-neutral language, and ethical and environmental perspectives. When examining the oral tales of the First Nations, a synchronic analysis can be applied to the sacred stories in the *Sweet Grass Plains Cree Texts*. These stories uncover a troubling trend in which patriarchal narrative voices relegate the voices and narratives of women to a secondary position. This issue is particularly prominent as it appears in revered and sacred texts. Poetry is the medicinal narrative to cure ailments, precisely psychological wounds that sweep into the community and individual. Still, it also provides an essential instrument to empower the two entities.

Relating to the dichotomy between the voices of patriarchal narratives and the voices of women, who are being deliberated as objects and subjects, especially in oral and contemporary narratives, an obvious observation perhaps, but fundamental to poetry's experimental evidence shows that the imperturbability of the voices of women often creates a contiguous space to conceive a vigilant feminist perception and constantly to resilience against patriarchal stereotypes. Admittedly, the foundations of Cree's poetic and theoretical framework emerged from the sacred oral narratives. There is a subtle distinction between recognising First Nations women's writing as a concrete (possibly visual) identification and recognising it as a more expansive form that encompasses the full significance of their work. It involves dialogic elements of reinterpreting and recreating master narratives while foregrounding numerous political and philosophical introspections. Keeping the older texts as the master reference to a greater extent, the recurring unconscious images of the sufferings of the women are a source of inspiration to Halfe, whose narratives renew the ancestors' narratives, and thereby, the hybrid and hyphenated texts are discreet and inconspicuously interwoven with the blend of a woman's perspectives on the patriarchal narratives. Indeed, the rudimentary characteristic of this method is to empower and enlighten a community, which gives them the impetus to go through the transformations that take place in their lives. As a writer whose predicament lies at the core of the traditional and modern, Halfe says:

I grew up listening to stories. Books and the written word were not yet the flavour and never were for as long as both my parents lived. One of these stories was "The Creation Legend," a long and convoluted epic. "The Sacred Story of the Rolling Head" (cihcipiscikwân-âtayôhkêwin) is part of it, and the part I wish to discuss today. This

story is ancient. No one knows its origins, and no one knows how much of it has been framed to suit the needs of a society in transition. Unfortunately, Catholicism continues to wave its twisted tongue and our stories and our beliefs. I have made an effort to understand the depths of this story. In the attempt to arrive at the interior I have had to delve deeper into the Cree language. Within the language lies the philosophy, psychology, and the spirituality of our people. I have also explored other snake ideologies. Perhaps, all I can offer at this time is a whirlwind of Cree thought (Keynote Address, 65–66).

To observe the Manichean discipline of various thoughts as classified by the Western critical, literary, and philosophical canon as the foundational discourse in the Department of English may not be legitimately considered, as multidisciplinary hybrid discourse and theory are predisposed in academia.

In a truly captivating way, contemporary Cree culture skillfully connects the past with the present by fusing narrative memory, fantasy, and futuristic visions. Storytellers and creative writers contemplate the reflective aspect of language through the mixed use of different languages to preserve Cree memoirs and perspectives. For these reasons, they taught younger generations the value of the Cree language to maintain the continuity of memories.

The Cree Nations believe that àtayóhkéuina, sacred stories, or spiritual history, should be the basis for Cree's literary theory. Literary texts reflect narrative memory and perceptions of a hybrid outlook relating to other cultures and languages. The dichotomy of First Nations àtayóhkéuina, sacred stories narrated by Indigenous Canadians, and the interpretations of First Nations literary texts using Western literary theory are visible in Canadian literature. Predominantly, the Cree people perceive the world from their perspectives, embodied in sacred stories. Neal McLeod clarifies how Cree people survive against the odds of modernity in a globalised world. He concludes *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (2007) as follows:

The survival of the Cree people depends on the creative powers found within the collective narrative imagination. It is through drawing on the best of our past traditions and the embodiment of contemporary experiences can move toward a dynamic future. This has organically happened in the past the horse, syllabics, Christianity, farming-but the adaptation of new elements has always been in relation to older ones. Cree narrative imagination can be best articulated by the Cree term mamähtäwisiwin, which could perhaps be best translated as "tapping into the Great Mystery" or "tapping into

the Life Force ... All these beings struggled to move beyond the ordinary, and to rethink the space and world around them (McLeod, 100).

The Cree people's oral stories and sacred narratives are essential critical tools for challenging the misguided assumptions that non-indigenous individuals may hold. These storytelling traditions were instrumental in helping the Cree people persevere and were passed down from their forebears to ensure their survival. The Cree narratives are interlinked with the past, present, and future.

The Crooked Good begins with the poem "The End and the Beginning," the title forces us to think about the poet's spiritual journey. The poet foregrounds the cyclical time because the readers feel about the point of the end and the beginning, and the meaning would have been different if the poem title had been "The Beginning and the End ". The poem is narrated in the first person, 'I', because the poet envisages imprinting a strong impression on the readers regarding her personal views and visions. The poet visited the largest lake and then went to the place where the "long noses" lived, and there on the Hill, she could see the "Boulder" sitting in a "Talking Circle." The writer walked around and gave tobacco, and to their surprise, they "squeezed their stone-ground hands" (1) on the poet's chest. Then the poet "choked on a decision" that the poet took. It is obvious that the poet is immersed in her cultural identity and focuses on the belief systems of her ancestors. Then the poet says her "Beloved" held her, even though she did not speak of it, and the poet says it is in his "secret lair" (1). It is pertinent to note that the words "My Beloved" are a noun, and it could be any person from antiquity, history, or even the myth of the First Nations' ancestors.

The poem is written in two stanzas. The first and second stanzas show the shift between personal and collective nouns. In the first stanza, the poet uses "I", "they", and "he", whereas in the second stanza, the poet uses "I", "her", and "us" to contrast the past and the present with the visions of the First Nations. In the second stanza, the poet says she has sat with "Rib Woman ". The conscious intention to introduce the hybrid thought of Christianity and the Cree is highlighted because the coinage 'Rib Woman' represents Eve, the first woman of this Universe, according to The Bible. The poet uses the Cree word "atayóhkan", which means spirit being, spiritual entity, or ancient legend spirit. The poet travels across time and space to sit with Eve in front of the Ancient spirit. The critical view of the poet is exceptional in that the poet employs the technique of code-switching, a term in linguistics for shifting the language from one to another for several reasons, including cultural and social dimensions,

and the shift of identity is also stressed. The poet and Eve sat because atayóhkan had become "Big Thunder". Moreover, the poet says that "her Big Heavens" impacted them. The succinct way of conveying the shift of gender from "they", in the first stanza, to "her" in the second stanza is presented judiciously to shift the Christian ideology of the story of creation to the creation of the Universe from the Cree perspective.

Many of us have. Some of us never understand.

Some of us have learned to: Incubate,

hatch these million eyes, these million

ears, these million noses, these ancient roots

that stem through our bodies.

It is these sun-runners who go deep in the / Dwelling

Perhaps, I am one of them (1).

The poet wants to convey that she wants to distinguish herself from others because many people from the Cree tradition do not discern the Cree version of the "beginning" of life and the Universe. The poet stresses that one way to imbibe the tradition is through the natural way of adapting the cultural milieu of the foundational belief of the creation. The second version is that some people need help understanding the traditional discourse of the Cree version of creation. The poet acknowledges herself to "hatch" millions of ideas from the "ancient roots", a metaphor to denote the traditional visions of the ancestors, including the story of atayóhkan, the tremendous spiritual form. The ancient legend says the spirit is the "dwelling" place of the poet, and the poet admits this in the poem's last line. Using the first person collective noun "our bodies", the poet identifies with the bodies of Cree women; she traces the origin of life, and to be precise, the Christian ideology of creation is patriarchal. By stating this, the poet brings forth the cyclical life cycle of the First Nations Cree, and to substantiate the essence of the title "The Beginning and the End," the people believe in the Great Spirit. Another way to interpret the text from the Cree perspective is that when the poet met the "Rib Woman" or Eve, the former possessed the power to transform the latter. Because the author, a woman, takes a journey across time and space in the mythical Cree past, the "Rib Woman" has had to

start her life from the beginning of the Great Spirit, and thereby she has had to end the role of being the wife of Adam. From this perspective, the life of the "Rib Woman" is cyclical, and thereby the poet's visions are also cyclical, as is the poem's title. The poem erases the idea of Christian beliefs and thereby displaces the character "Rib Woman". The use of black humour is in the limelight as the poet observes that the woman in the poem is only a 'rib woman' and not a woman, and in coining a term like this, the poet mocks the Christian patriarchal belief system. In a sense, the poet has an alternative viewpoint in dismantling the so-called dominant worldview, and here, the characters are hybridised as the poet, the 'rib woman,' and atayóhkan are presented to the cyclical way of life in Cree philosophy or spirituality that challenges the linear narrative of the Biblical or even Western philosophy. The writer is conscious, in opposition to the ignorant people, of understanding the deep meaning of the Cree cultural and spiritual milieu, as she is also one of the "sun - runners".

Specifically, women writers of First Nations unconditionally self-consciously explore to be writers whose ideologies constantly negate the oral narration, testimonies, memories, and contemporary trends in literature. Barbara Thompson Godard, in her article "Talking About Ourselves: The Literary Productions of Native Women of Canada" (1985), discusses exhaustively how First Nations Women writers engage themselves to deliberate on the various issues that they have to encounter, especially when they try to be a bridge between the oral tradition, often gazed from the male point of view, and their experience, despite their scattered/varied perceptions across the texts. She advocates incorporating the elements of Paralinguistic features in Oral narration.

In the poetic text *The Crooked Good* by Sky Dancer, the author uses various techniques to convey the nuances of different texts, including intonations, gestures, and specific language. One example of this is the picture of Rolling Head inside a snake. The book also includes performance texts, and the author appropriates the Cree language related to ceremonial events. Through analysis of these events, it becomes clear that women were not given prominence in Western Anthropology due to patriarchal Christian viewpoints. However, First Nations women express their concerns by uncovering the many female voices repressed in male-centric narratives. Barbara Godard further discusses this topic.

We might be encouraged to look more closely at the contexts in which stories are exchanged. We might first be curious to see just who becomes a writer, and on what basis such authority is. It would seem from our investigation that women in the native

tradition are empowered to speak because of the special wisdom they possess as dreamers with knowledge of the sacred lore and myths of their tradition, and thus they may become teachers of the young. They are also empowered to speak when they become culture brokers or leaders of their people moving between white and Indian worlds. As the poem said, they have special insight into "other worlds"; they are in fact mediators as well as shamans. We might also want to further explore the communicative event from the perspective of the audience/reader, to see precisely what the contribution of the reader is in a collaborative written creation (Godard, 91).

Perceiving from the First Nations women's centric literary strategy that disseminates the equal importance of performance in Oral stories, Sky Dancer promulgates novel visions/ literary canons in creating characters from her ancestors and family, along with blending with a profusion of polyphonic voices that have numerous repercussions in *The Crooked Good*, and the dénouement of the poetic strategy is complex as the poet addresses various issues, gender, patriarchy, Colonialism, racism, history, religious conversions, residential school survival, etc. and are knitted together in a single text, though in multifaceted stories. All the characters in the story possess a unique combination of meta-poetic and dream-like qualities as they embark on a profound journey of spiritual dreaming alongside the author's self. This transcendent experience leads each character to a state of fulfilment, ultimately expressed through their creative endeavours and written works.

Conclusions

Sky Dancer has adopted the literary strategy of narrating through the perspective of Turn Around Woman, or in Cree, *ê-kwêskît*. TurnAround Woman translates the Cree word "*ê-kwêskît*", and the poet identifies herself as the Turn Around Woman. The personal "I" could be anyone -the poet, the narrator, or even *ê-kwêskît*. She remembers the mythological character *ê-kwêskît*, whose head was severed by her husband after the latter caught her dancing with a snake. In that act, her head rolled in pain, and she yelled for the love of her sons. Her thirst for vengeance is a recurrent theme in Sky Dancer's poems. Here, the poet travels across time and space to meet various characters to have dialogic communication and debate. Hence, the poetry of Louise Bernice Halfe can be described as epic poetry because of its stylistic, linguistic, and content features.

Works cited

- Bloomfield, Leonard. *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*. 1 Oct. 2015.
- Godard, Barbara, and Canadian Research Institute for The Advancement of Women. *Talking about Ourselves: The Literary Productions of the Native Women of Canada*. Ottawa, Ont., Canadian Research Institute for The Advancement of Women, 1985.
- Halfe, Louise Bernice. "Keynote Address: The Rolling Head's "Grave" Yard." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 Jan. 2006, journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/scl/article/view/10200/10548. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.
- ... *Bear Bones & Feathers*. Regina, Sk, Canada: Coteau Books, 1994.
- ... *Blue Marrow*. Regina, Sk, Canada: Coteau Books, 2004.
- *Burning in This Midnight Dream*. Kingston, Ontario: Brick Books, 2021.
- "Keynote Address: The Rolling Head's "Grave" Yard." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 Jan. 2006,
- ... *Sôhkêyihta*. Toronto: Toronto Univ. Press, 2018.
- ... *The Crooked Good*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 2008.
- McLeod, Neal. *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Saskatoon: Purich Pub, 2007.

Author's bio-brief

Chribuna Viswas is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Government Arts and Science College, Kozhinjampara, affiliated to University of Calicut, situated in Palakkad, Kerala. He has an M.Phil in English Literature from Institute of English, University of Kerala.
