

# Native American Female Playwrights and their Role in Growth and Development of Native American Drama: An Overview

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## Abstract:

The Native American Literature has its root in the form of oral storytelling tradition before Europeans arrived on Native American lands. It was then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it developed into written literature. Early Native American writers used poetry, novel, and autobiography to express their feelings for human rights, lands, culture, sovereignty, and their community. Despite its rich legacy, Native American drama faced challenges and hardly received its recognition as a genre in later half of the twentieth century. Not only men playwrights, but also scholarly and prolific Native American women playwrights have contributed significantly to the success of Native American theatre. Their unique writing styles and contributions are equally important as male playwrights. The present paper studies Native American drama with the aim to find out the contribution of Native American women playwrights to Native American theatre and drama. The present study being interpretive and descriptive in nature hence it has applied close reading and interpretation of the primary and secondary sources.

**Keywords:** Culture, Native American, Oral tradition, Sovereignty, Theatre, and Women playwrights.

## Introduction

Native American drama came to the limelight in the latter half of the twentieth century. It has gone through many problems and hardships to be recognized as a genre of Native American Literature. Modern Native Indian drama was altogether different from traditional theatrical drama. The old traditional drama was played by and about Indians, which was held in theatre buildings or outdoor theaters. It was Lynn Riggs, the first well-known Native American playwright, to direct Native plays for the first time. He held an event called the Forest Theater at the Six Nations Forest Reserve in Ontario. The organization of this event marked a turning point in the journey of Native American theatre, which made it mainstream. This event led to the emergence of the new Native American theatre. The event was resulted in the origin of new Native American theatre. Since then, following the legacy of Lynn Riggs, many other prolific Native American male playwrights, such as Arthur Junaluska and Jay Silverheels, were able to produce plays with Native themes during the 1950s and 1960s.

Hanay Geigomah is another important Native American figure appears in the 1970s. Native American Theater Company, (NATE), was Production Company founded by him and "Body Indian" the first play by him presented on 25<sup>th</sup> October, 1972 at the theater Brodway La Mama Experimental Theater Club. This incident inspired many new Native American playwrights, such as Yellow Robe,

Bruce King, and the women's group Spiderwoman Theatre who also formed their theatrical groups with varying success. Off-course, the contribution of male playwrights in the development of Native drama was paramount and tremendous, but at the same time, the contribution of female playwrights cannot be overlooked and ignored. The Native American theatre provided an opportunity for Native American women playwrights who used plays as a powerful tool of expression for delivering their personal, social, and cultural stories to society. They also presented and focused on Native American women's issues through their plays. Shirley Hustson-Findley, a well-known playwrights states, "Most of their scripts, not surprisingly, focus on women; their personal stories, their relationships with other women and friends, and their cultural and personal identities of Native American women." (Shirley A, H.-F., & Howard, R). Native American Women playwrights created their own identity and space by writing plays on issues of Native American society.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This research paper is written only for studying the role and contribution of Native American women dramatists in developing Native American drama. Therefore the following aims and objectives have been framed and formulated by the researchers.

- To Study the history and culture of Native American literature
- To focus on the history of American Indian theater
- To trace the origins of American Indian theater.
- To study the contribution of American Indian playwrights to Native plays.
- Research American Indian playwrights' contributions.
- Summary of the contribution of Native American women playwrights to the growth and development of Native American drama

### **Scope and Limitation of the study**

Literature by Native American writers is a fresh, intelligent, and innovative literary trend that is growing within the canon of American literature. Native American writers' suppressed voices are reflected in the various genre of literature. Due to the ongoing contributions of Native American writers in the forms of novels, poems, autobiographies, and plays, it has grown to be fairly expansive. This research paper has focused the contribution of Native American women playwrights and their role in developing Native American Theatre. For the sake of the current research study, the study has been restricted to Native American women playwrights even though the field of Native American dramatic works is extensive.

### **A Short History of Native American Drama**

Theatrical culture has always been a part of Native American society. It began in Native American communities as an oral tradition. In Native American culture the tradition of oral storytelling had significant place and it has resulted in the formation of a New Native American Theatre. Contemporary Native American playwright William S. Yellow rightly said in one of his interviews "there is a very theatrical tradition in Native American culture". ("Interview with William S. Yellow Robe Jr" XXXX)). The main purpose of these storytelling traditions was to deliver old cultural knowledge to the next generation. The stories were transmitted orally to the next generation for entertainment and educational purpose and to preserve their Native American cultural heritage. They

were not transmitted orally but sometimes they were enacted and performed by storyteller to enrich their audience about their cultural treasure. This old storytelling tradition was considered a foundation of contemporary Native American theatre. When the written culture developed in Native regions, the Native American writers started to write down their oral stories in other different forms of literature, such as poetry, autobiography, and short story in the 18th century but not in dramatic form. On the one hand, the writing in other forms of literature flourished; on the other, the Native American drama was struggling for survival. Many reasons have been given for the absence of drama during that age. The major reason was given that there was difficulty in forming and supporting Native American theatre groups, and there were no places to do the actual plays. The other reason was financial, which created a big problem for the development of Native American Theatre. Many well-known drama companies existed in the 1980s, including Oneida playwright Bruce King's troupe, which was situated in the Turtle Museum in Niagara Falls. - collapsed in twentieth century's second part due to a lack of financial support.

Many successful male dramatists in the twentieth century brought Native American drama to global fame and recognition with their scholarship in drama writing. Lynne Riggs, is considered as the major figure behind the successful journey of the modern playwriting in 1930s. He published over twenty-five successful plays. He became well recognized and popular after the publication of his most popular plays such as *Green Grow the Lilacs*(1929),*The Cream in the Well* (1940), and *The Cherokee Night* (1936). His plays were challenging and unconventional and explicitly dealt with American Indian culture and identity.

Hanay Geiogamah, a Kiowa/Delaware playwright, is being considered the first successful and well-known Native American playwright, director, producer, and academic. He devoted and spent almost four decades of his life for developing Native American theatre. In 1972, as a pioneer of Native American theater, he founded the first Native American theater company, the American Indian Theater Ensemble, which became famous later by the name the Native American Theater Company (NATE). This Company tremendously worked through drama to present a new image of Native Americans. The white Americans presented Native Americans as an uncivilized savage and fragile creation of nature in their writings, but Native American playwrights, through their plays, tried to break stereotypical characters of the Native Americans and presented realistic pictures of their people and community. They freed themselves from centuries of stereotypes. The Native American Theatre Ensemble was not only worked to develop the cultural image of Native Americans but it was also produced some dramas intended primarily for the Native community. Many plays were written by him in association with NATE. His plays such as *Foghorn* (1973), *Body Indian* (1972), and *49* (1975) were produced by NATE. The most adorable thing about him was that he was the first Native American man who published a volume of plays. His first three volumes appeared in *New American Drama* (1980). His other works, such as *Coon Cons Coyote*, *Grandma*, and *Grandpa* (1984), were published in *Stories of Our Way* (1999) and performed throughout the United States and Europe. His contribution in the other areas of Native American performance was also notable. He founded the American Indian Dance Theatre in 1987 and worked on the development of a project with Jaye T. Darby HOOP (Honouring Our Origins and People through Native Theatre, Education, and Community Development) through the University of California, Los Angeles. The revolution in the Native American artistic theatre in the United States was brought by Hanah Geiogamah.

William S. Yellow Robe is such major influential and prolific Native American playwright belonging to Fort Peck reservation in Montana. He was an articulate spokesperson of Native American Theatre. His long career as an actor, director, producer, and playwright contributed in shaping artistic creativity and innovation in the Native Theatre. He published his plays in five anthologies that examined and depicted contemporary social issues through his sincere and realistic dramatic characters. The name of Bruce King is important and deserves more attention and notices like other playwrights such as Hanay Geiogamah, Yellow S. Robe, and women playwright from Spiderwoman group. He is one of such artists who rendered his services to Native Theatre for a long time. His writing career as a playwright started in the 1960s. He worked with several native theatre companies and finally founded his own theatre company Indian Time Theatre in 1981. He became well-known for his play *Evening at the Warbonnet* despite his vast contribution to the Native Theatre.

### **Contribution of Native American Women Playwrights to Native American Drama**

The contribution of American Indian women playwrights to the development of Native drama is no less important as compared with their male counterpart playwrights. These women playwrights presented and depicted issues of Native Americans from the female point of view in their dramatic writings. In a society dominated by whites, their voices were silenced for a long time because of their gender. They are unaware of their rich Native American heritage and have little ties to their Indian past. Realizing their rich cultural heritage, they created and reinvented themselves not just as Native Americans but as members of the white community in general. Their writing focuses on American culture, life, and especially the lives of Native American women. There emerged many prolific and influential Native American women playwrights who showed cultural rootedness through their writings. This new emerging group of female playwrights explored new Native American history and culture.

Mary Te Atta Thompson Fisher is seen as an inspiration to Native American women playwrights. She was a famous Chickasaw who taught Native American stories. She started her career as an artist while in college. She used Native American stories and songs of several different tribes for performing her art. Francis Disnsmore Davies, theatre teacher of Te Ata encouraged her acting abilities. After the premiere, it was University of Oklahoma invited her and received very positive reactions. She was very professional and devoted to her performance. She doesn't just work for fun; her main purpose is to convey information about the diversity of Native Americans. JudyLee Oliva, a playwright on the life of Te Ata, writes that "Te Ata had to borrow much of her Indian props, including a drum, a bow and arrow, and a costume. Not of the props nor the costume was authentic, but the presentation marked the beginning of her career".(Oliva).She maintained professionalism throughout her long sixty years tenure in which she upheld the dignity of Native American culture.

In 1975, a feminist theater troupe called Spiderwoman Theater was born in the United States, promoting plays by Native and non-Indigenous women. The three sisters, Lisa Mayo, Gloria and Muriel Miguel of Kuna and Rappahannock blood are the main members of the group. This was the first Native American women's group that became well-known worldwide. The focus of the group was on producing work generally related to feminist issues. The Spiderwoman group was not a Native theatre group in the year 1970, but it was a group of women belonging to multiracial. Founders Muriel Miguel, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel have created a unique style of storytelling they call 'story-weaving.' They gave their company name Spiderwoman Theatre because of their inspiration, the Hopi deity; they believed that she taught her people to weave. The Spiderwoman group has a strong belief in their culture

and traditions, so they believe the story is linked to traditional stories and the idea and style of radical feminist drama. Spiderwoman describes this process as "creating and weaving stories with words and movements." In 1981 With the publication of their plays *Feather, Moon, and Sun*, the group brought into the highlights issues of indigenous, particularly the representation of Indian American and image of indigenous women. They published satirical play *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* on Europeans' arrival in Native America. Through this drama they also criticized German preference for Native Americans. The group attempted to establish themselves as Native American women. This was an attempt by Spiderwoman group to establish their identity as Native American women.

Another aspect of Spiderwoman Theater members is that during their tenure with the Theater Company, they continue to support the diversity of ethnic and non-ethnic groups through their work, by organizing workshops on story-weaving at reservations and conferences at universities. The good thing about all women is that they work as independent artists, create their own theater and join artists in various theaters - a book called Native American Women Archives of Playwrights was created for Spiderwoman Theater in 1997. NAWPA defines collects, and protects the works of women playwrights. The Archives of Native American Playwrights at the University of Miami in Oxford, Ohio recognized their work and awarded them Honorary Doctorates of Fine Arts in 1997. The Honor was also given to Spiderwoman Theatre in 2005 by Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women's Caucus for Art in 2010 was also given to them. The legacy of them has been successfully carried out by the next generation into the future. Gloria Miguel's daughter Monique Mojica and Muriel Miguel's daughter Murielle Borste are acting, publishing and growing theater companies that are shaping the future of Native American theatre.

Other prominent Native women playwrights who have made significant contributions to the development of Native American theater include Diane Glancy, Linda Hogan, LeAnne Howe, Annette Arkeketa, and Larisa FastHorse. Diane Galncy is one of the major women playwrights who published her collection of plays. She published her first volume of plays *American Gypsy: Six Native American Plays* (2000) and *War Cries* (1997), which reflect her Native American cultural heritage. She is well recognized as a poet, essayist, short story writer, and novelist in Native American literature. His writings always oppose the drama style and focus on the influence of storytelling and mythological time on the structure of scenes and dialogues. The conversation between grandmother and granddaughter and some short monologues can be found in her play *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer*, is the best example of this style. Linda Hogan is another major figure in Native American playwriting. She is the author of Chickasaw Descent and began her career as a journal writer, but after realization of her mistake, she spent her quality time in writing books and essays on the world of Native Americans, the environment, and the indigenous spirits and culture. Her major plays are *A Piece of Moon* (1981), a three act-play, and *Fire and Light*. The role of LeAnne Howe, LarissaFastHorse, and Annetle Arkeketa is important in the development of Native American drama. LeAnne Howe produced a great number of plays in collaboration with her fellow Choctaw writer Roxy Gordon. They produced their first play *Big Pow Wow* (1987), at Sojourner Truth Theatre in Fort Worth, Texas) with some success. Their second play was the satirical radio play *Indian Radio Days*, which focused misunderstanding, failure, and sin of European American and Native throughout Native American history and culture. Howe's writings appeared in several anthologies as author and co-author of five theatre productions. Larissa FastHorse is the contemporary well-recognized an award-winner writer. She is co-founder of Indigenous Direction, established for nations' arts and audiences. She has produced great number plays such as *Teaching Disco*

*Squaredancing to Our Elders: a Class The Thanksgiving, Landless and Coow, Average Family, Cherokee Family Reunion Vanishing Point (Eagle Project), and, Pie Bingo What Would Crazy Horse Do?*. No other women playwrights were able to have presented number of plays in a single season but Larissa FastHorse is one of the writers to have this record on her name. Her contribution to the Native American theatre is vast and stupendous. Annette Arkeketa's name is also significant in Native American playwriting. Her plays have been published in anthologies and produced at regional theatres across America. Her major plays are *Hokti* and *Ghost Dance*. In 1999, her debut play, *Hokti*, was published in the anthology *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays* by the UCLA American Indian Studies Center. In 2003, her second play, *Ghost Dance*, was included in *Keepers of the Morning Star: An Anthology of Native Women's Theater* by the UCLA American Indian Studies Center.

The fact is that the single one of the women playwrights extensively highlights Native American culture and life in their works is the trait they all have most in common. They take on the role of the Native American women's voice. Each woman dramatist has a unique story to tell that depicts Native American life from their perspective. They show that they have been spokespersons for their cultural heritage, and the same is reflected in their writing. Their personal experiences, diverse tribal backgrounds, hybrid cultural lifestyles, and adherence to their own culture have a great and deep impact on their writings. Playwriting has been used as a weapon by all the above-mentioned play writers for the protection of their human rights and freedom.

### Major Findings

Native American drama has a long and complex journey but it emerged and becomes a prominent literary genre of Native American literature due to the enormous and vast contributions of many intelligent and prolific Native American playwrights. After a thorough interpretation and investigation of the primary and secondary sources, it has been found that American Indian women playwrights have played huge role in the development of Native American drama has not been less significant than that of male playwrights. This paper has discussed in depth the key role of women playwrights in enriching and enhancing Native American drama through their distinctive and unique writing style. It has also highlighted how the issues of Native American women such as cultural conflict, suppression of Native women by Native as well as White dominant society, and identity-crisis have been presented from the female point of view. Therefore, this research paper is very important in understanding the contribution of women playwrights in developing American Indian Theatre in the United States of America.

### Conclusion

Although its history is complex, complex, and extensive, it emerged as a genre and spread throughout the United States of America in the second half of the twentieth. Its origins can be traced back to oral communication and performance practices. The oral storytelling tradition is seen as the forerunner of modern Native American theatre. The Native American drama was not developed as fast as other Native American genres like poetry, autobiography, and novel due to some factors, but some male and female playwrights Native American drama has emerged as an autonomous literary genre in Native American literature as a result of scholars' using of new approaches, methodologies, and unique perspectives. The women Playwrights were not behind in this scholarly work. They created their respectable place in the growth and development of Native American theatre with their different and

unique playwriting style and by presenting Native Americans, especially women's issues, through their plays. Contemporary Native American theater now plays an important role in America's multicultural literature.

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