

# Matrilineal Memory in Shellshaker by LeAnne Howe: Women's Role in the Transmission of Native American Identity

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## Abstract

This paper explores the idea of matrilineal memory in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*, highlighting the crucial part that women play in the Choctaw community's preservation and transmission of Native American identity. The book highlights the importance of female ancestry in maintaining cultural knowledge, customs, and resistance against colonial erasure while spanning several generations and fusing stories from the 18th century with those from the present. *Shell Shaker* demonstrates how women serve as channels of cultural memory by connecting the past to the present through ritual, storytelling, and lived experience through its non-linear structure and spiritual ties throughout time. In opposition to patriarchal and Eurocentric historical frames, the ancestral voices of Choctaw women warriors, mothers, and healers act as potent representations of persistence and continuity.

This research examines how Howe revitalizes and reclaims Indigenous epistemologies by emphasizing matrilineal lineage as a means of identity creation and survival, drawing on memory studies and Indigenous feminist theory. The story reinforces the power of oral traditions, spiritual heritage, and community ties by presenting women as cultural stewards and change agents. Finally, *Shell Shaker* provides an insightful reflection on how memory, which has its roots in the maternal line, plays a crucial role in reaffirming Native identity, sovereignty, and healing across generations.

**Keywords:** Matrilineal memory, shell shaker, Choctaw community, female ancestry, colonial erasure, indigenous epistemologies, oral tradition, spiritual heritage.

## Introduction

The groundbreaking novel *Shell Shaker* by LeAnne Howe skillfully intertwines the strands of matrilineal memory and the crucial part that women play in maintaining and passing on Native American identity. The novel, which is set in the Choctaw Nation, spans two centuries and connects the experiences of Shaktatina, a respected peacemaker and shell shaker in the 18th century, with her contemporary descendants, the Billy family, in Oklahoma in 1991. As stewards of cultural legacy and identity, Howe highlights the Choctaw women's unwavering fortitude and tenacity via this intergenerational story. The Choctaw custom of tracking ancestry and inheritance via the maternal line is highlighted by *Shell Shaker's* idea of matrilineal memory. In addition to influencing family patterns, this matrilineal framework supports the passing down of cultural values, customs, and tales from one female

generation to the next. Howe subverts patriarchal tropes and emphasizes the critical role that women play in maintaining Native American societies by focusing the story on female protagonists who traverse challenging social and political environments.

The book also explores issues of resistance, identity, and power, showing how Choctaw women face and overcome structural obstacles while preserving their traditional identity. The women in *Shell Shaker* are prime examples of the significant ways that matrilineal memory functions as a vehicle for cultural empowerment and preservation through rituals, storytelling, and communal ties. *Shell Shaker* provides an engaging analysis of women's contributions to the maintenance of Native American identity by delving into the complex web of matrilineal memory and highlighting the importance of female agency in the face of past and present hardships.

### **Literature review**

In Native American literature, LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* (2001) is a seminal work that emphasizes the importance of matrilineal memory and the role of women in passing down cultural identity through a complex story. In order to emphasize the cyclical nature of memory, history, and identity, the novel, which is set inside the Choctaw Nation, interweaves the stories of ancestral women and their descendants across two temporal planes: the 18th century and the 1990s. The text's examination of Indigenous epistemologies, female agency, and the cultural role of storytelling has sparked intense scholarly interest. These topics all come together to highlight the importance of matrilineality in Native cultural continuity. The relevance of matrilineality in Indigenous communities, especially among Southeastern tribes like the Choctaw, is a fundamental idea in comprehending *Shell Shaker*. Prior to colonization, matrilineal kinship systems gave women significant power in the social, political, and spiritual domains, according to academics like Theda Perdue (1998). Howe's book vividly restores this structure, with female characters playing a prominent role in both historical and modern narratives rather than being ancillary. The tale of Shakbatina, a political mediator and shell shaker from the 18th century, and her contemporary descendant Auda Billy creates a literal and symbolic matrilineal bridge across time. Colonial attempts to eradicate or diminish the power of Indigenous women are thwarted by the female line's transfer of memory, responsibility, and cultural knowledge.

According to Kimberly Blaeser (2002), *Shell Shaker* uses narrative form to enact a recovery of Indigenous women's authority. In contrast to Western linear narrative, she observes that Howe's blending of oral tradition, mythic components, and historical testimony represents Native ways of knowing. Through these storytelling techniques, cultural memory is protected and passed down through the generations of women. The storytelling style itself, according to Blaeser, is a gesture of cultural survivance, a term that was first used by Gerald Vizenor (1999) to describe Native peoples' active presence and resistance through cultural expression. Lisa Tatonetti (2011) examines how Howe reimagines Native identity via the feminine body and spirit by utilizing queer and feminist Indigenous frameworks. According to Tatonetti, memory in *Shell Shaker* is communal, physical, and spiritual embodied in rituals, dreams, and ancestor voices rather than static or private. The Billy family's women, especially Auda, take on roles that are similar to those of their foremothers, which supports the notion that one's identity is shaped by one's place within a matrilineal knowledge lineage rather than just by personal experiences. In his more comprehensive examination of Native American literary nationalism, Craig S. Womack (1999) contends that Native authors need to recover tribal uniqueness and cultural customs in their writing. This idea is best illustrated by *Shell Shaker*'s consistent emphasis on Choctaw

language, cosmology, and history. Choctaw women's prominence as justice-seekers and knowledge-keepers is both a cultural fact and a political declaration in the book. Therefore, the patriarchal remaking of Native cultures under colonization and the elimination of tribal sovereignty are both resisted by the matrilineal transmission of identity.

The intergenerational aspect of trauma and healing is one of the main topics that academics discuss. Shell Shaker illustrates how Indigenous women bear and react to historical and modern kinds of violence, from colonial invasion to governmental corruption. In her work on gendered violence and Native women, Andrea Smith (2005) offers a framework through which attacks on Indigenous women's bodies, both physically and symbolically, can be seen as assaults on the community's cultural body. Women's bodies serve as locations of remembrance, rebirth, and resistance in Howe's book. Women regain their voices and reestablish the continuity of their heritage through storytelling and shell shaking ceremonies. Howe's work has been commended by Dean Rader (2011) for its genre-defying storyline and hybrid structure. By combining Indigenous storytelling techniques with detective fiction, political thriller, myth, and history, he contends that the book defies Western literary classification. Instead of being rigid and linear, this fusion enables a representation of memory that is fluid and cyclical. The story spans centuries while being rooted in the emotional and spiritual foundation of matrilineal wisdom, showing how Indigenous identity endures in the face of time displacement. The matrilineal theme of the book revolves around the shell shaker's own significance. The shell shaker is a historical person and a spiritual archetype who symbolizes a tradition of women who exercise power via song, ritual, and moral clarity. This character uses deeds of justice and healing to unite generations of Choctaw women. Shell shaking is a tradition that has been passed down via women and is used as a tool for resistance and cultural education in addition to being a spiritual activity. In her lengthy writings on the holy character of female roles in Native spiritual traditions, Paula Gunn Allen (1992) asserts that women's power frequently stems from their capacity for creation, memory, and nurturing. This custom is embodied by Howe's shell shakers, which serve as cultural pillars in both the historical and modern storylines. The examination of decolonial memory is another significant addition to the conversation. Reclaiming Indigenous memory from colonial histories is a crucial step in the decolonization process, according to academics like Diane Glancy and Janice Acoose. This is accomplished in *Shell Shaker* through the active, embodied memory of women who bring ancestral wisdom into the present rather than through a sentimental look back at the past. Instead of romanticizing tradition, the book demonstrates how modern Indigenous women adapt, negotiate, and perform it in order to claim agency in a world still influenced by colonial forces.

Language as cultural legacy is another topic that the book raises for consideration. Despite writing in English, Howe affirms the importance of language memory in identity preservation by incorporating Choctaw phrases and concepts into the story. This is consistent with the work of cultural theorists and linguists who stress the value of Indigenous language revitalization as a means of resistance. Throughout the book, Choctaw names, customs, and oral traditions are used to show the novel's dedication to Choctaw epistemology and to support the matrilineal line of cultural transmission.

There is broad agreement among academics on LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*'s revolutionary depiction of matrilineal memory and the significant contributions Native women make to the transmission and preservation of identity. Howe reclaims Indigenous women's role in cultural continuity through a novel narrative structure that incorporates ceremony, oral tradition, and ancestral knowledge. In *Shell Shaker*, the matrilineal line is a conduit for justice, healing, and history, not just a family tree. Howe provides a

decolonial literary approach that questions Western patriarchal narratives and promotes the continued persistence of Native American identity by emphasizing female voices and intergenerational memory.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology to examine the role of matrilineal memory in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* and how it contributes to the transmission of Native American identity, particularly through the perspectives and experiences of Choctaw women. The study is grounded in close textual analysis and informed by Indigenous feminist theory, memory studies, and decolonial literary criticism. Through these frameworks, the research aims to explore how the novel reclaims matrilineal traditions and emphasizes women's roles in sustaining cultural heritage across generations. The primary analytical approach employed is close reading, which entails a thorough investigation of the novel's language, symbolism, character development, and narrative structure.

Special emphasis is placed on the methods by which ancestral knowledge is conveyed through women's narratives, rituals, and spiritual practices. Characters like Shakbatina and Auda Billy are examined as symbolic representations that connect the past and the present through the performance and preservation of cultural memory. The narrative's dual timeline spanning both the 18th century and the 1990s facilitates a comparative analysis of how matrilineal identity is sustained in the face of historical trauma, colonial disruption, and political transformation.

This study's multidisciplinary theoretical framework is mostly based on Indigenous feminist theory, especially the writings of Paula Gunn Allen, Kim Anderson, and Andrea Smith, who highlight the importance of Native women in cultural resistance and reproduction. These viewpoints contend that Native epistemologies ought to be treated according to their own terms and contest patriarchal interpretations from the West. The spiritual, political, and communal roles that women play in their tribes are recognized by indigenous feminism, which is essential to *Shell Shaker*. Gerald Vizenor developed the idea of survivance, which is also used to explain how Indigenous identity is actively preserved through cultural performance and storytelling.

The subject also incorporates memory studies, particularly as it relates to Indigenous and postcolonial literature. A helpful lens for examining how memory works as a strategy of resistance and continuity is offered by academics like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (on decolonizing techniques) and Marianne Hirsch (on postmemory). The function of matrilineal memory in *Shell Shaker* culture extends beyond biological inheritance and includes oral history, ceremony, and storytelling all of which are intricately woven with Choctaw cultural practices.

The novel is placed within the larger context of Native American literature through the use of secondary sources, such as journal articles, literary evaluations, and historical assessments. To bolster the literary analysis and place *Shell Shaker* in the context of current discussions on gender, identity, and sovereignty in Native writing, works by authors such as Lisa Tatonetti, Craig S. Womack, and Dean Rader are consulted. By respectfully interacting with the material, elevating Native voices, and refraining from making generalizations about Indigenous experiences, ethical considerations are upheld throughout the research. This research intends to reveal the ways in which *Shell Shaker* reclaims Native identity and resists colonial erasures through a distinctively Indigenous literary form by emphasizing matrilineal memory and the crucial roles of women.

### Theoretical framework

LeAnne Howe uses her idea of tribalogy as the main theoretical framework in *Shell Shaker*. She weaves together myth, land, multigenerational memories, Choctaw oral traditions, and modern lived experiences to create a comprehensive story in which the past, present, and future coexist. Tribalogy actively creates and broadens tribal identity over time in addition to incorporating collective ancestral stories. Matrilineal memory becomes crucial in this context: female characters like Shakbatina, Anoleta, and Auda Billy serve as guardians of Choctaw legacy, expressing resiliency and cultural continuity via ritual, spiritual practice, and storytelling.

Their words anchor tribal identity during historical change by transmitting Choctaw values, cosmology, and resistance to colonial narratives. Howe affirms that ancestral memory continues to have a role in forming contemporary identity and tribal agency by depicting time as circular rather than linear.

### Conclusion

LeAnne Howe's use of tribalogy in *Shell Shaker* produces a cyclical, interwoven story that connects modern identity with ancestors' memories. By establishing tribal knowledge in ritual, storytelling, and group action, Choctaw women Shakbatina, Anoleta, Auda Billy, and their relatives embody the living thread of cultural transmission within this framework, mediating between the past and present. The matrilineal memory of the book shows that women's spiritual and collective guardianship, not heroic men or chronological history, is what ensures the Choctaw identity's survival and sovereignty. These matriarchal leaders shake their shells both physically and figuratively in defiance of colonial violence and treachery in order to preserve peace, preserve ancestral continuity, and pave the way for future generations.

In the end, Howe portrays Native identity as "ever living, ever dying, ever alive" a dynamic, relational process that is reinforced by women's intergenerational communication, ceremonial activity, and sacrifice. *Shell Shaker* effectively argues that matrilineal memory is not merely the preservation of the past but rather the fundamental basis of tribe continuity, revival, and self-determination by placing women at the center of tribal narrative authority.

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