



## Truth is what we hear in our stories’: Legitimation of myth in *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance*

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### Abstract

The essay discusses *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance* (2002), a play by Diane Glancy, a Native American woman playwright. It attempts to point out how transformation myths work into the lives of the native American communities and is part of their reality.

*Keywords: myth, narrative, transformation, survival*

### Introduction

Historically speaking, Native American drama is often shaped by experiences related to dislocation and communal marginalization. Both in some ways, signify a larger sense of identity crisis. Native American performances were usually built around a sense of shared history and community. Further, they had the unique objective of reflecting lived experience along with the concurrent belief systems, which are almost always specific to the tribes and their world views. In such drama, the experiences related to colonization and dispossession assume significance, and hence, function as a historical construct.

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Notwithstanding the pervading sense of colonization and dispossession, a perceptible difference can be observed in ideologies of Native American drama over a period of time. During the 1980s and 1990s, the emerging discipline of Native American Studies was largely concerned with questions of the canon, political and cultural sovereignty, and of visibility and agency. By the turn of the twentieth century, the relationship between various indigenous people around the world, their shared historical knowledge and common political agenda became the focal points of consideration (Dawes, Fitz and, Meyer 1). Therefore, in a step that was apparently characteristic of postmodern and postcolonial literatures, possibilities emerged to rewrite history through a deep engagement with individual memory working in tandem with mythical, spiritual and metaphysical elements. When integrated into contemporary plots sourced in everyday experiences of life from within a marginalized location, the dramatic discourse acquired a locational aspect.

One of the ways in which this can possibly happen is through the integration of myths into the narrative discourse of the play. This, by itself, approximates to a process of 're-inscribing' cultural memory. In fact, the idea of myth and its operation within the construct of such plays becomes an 'insurgent act of cultural translation' (Bhabha 10)<sup>1</sup>, especially because the interpretation of the myth is impacted by the locational aspect of the play. Therefore, drama can also be considered as a modality of re-articulating the past through specific systems of reference which are apparent within the narrative discourse. In this context, therefore, this paper proposes that one such ways of articulation could be through the pervasive dominance of a myth within the dramatic discourse. This paper would further seek to show that while the myth (s) reinforce the socio-cultural concerns that form the basis of the play, the dramatic discourse itself is impacted by the narrative strategies of the myth, its alternate expressions and interpretations, thereby shaping the stylistics of drama at a very fundamental level. While this may appropriate to what would conventionally be termed as 'subversion' of the myth, it will also be seen how such inflections appear to be consistent with the Native American world view and belief systems. *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for*

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*the Deer Dance* (2002), a play by Diane Glancy, a Native American woman playwright, will be examined from this perspective.

### **Myth and Native American Drama**

In *The Hero's Journey* Joseph Campbell considers mythology as an organization of symbols, narratives and images that are metaphorical of the possibilities of human experiences and fulfilment in a given society at a given time (134). The obvious implication is that the dynamic aspect of 'myth' is defined by the culture and the context in which it 'happens'. Therefore, he asserts elsewhere that when a myth is read as a fact, it loses its transparency and it becomes an aberration and as a result, a deluding guide (167). The meaning happens only when the myth is situated within the context. The word 'transparency' suggests that the myth functions more like a mirror, and, like the stories it carries, is often significant for what it reflects.

In his opening assertions in *Myth Today*, Barthes seems to be articulating a similar view: he says that the myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept or an idea, but a mode of signification (107). This means that the reader plays an active role revealing the essential function of the myth. Since, the perspectives of such articulations differ, Barthes proposes that the 'ambiguous signification' of the myth which foregrounds the reader living the myth as a story at once true and unreal', allows for the dynamic aspects of meaning (127).

However, Paula Gunn Allen, while subscribing to the notion of the 'dynamic aspect', treads a radically different ground. In an essay titled "Something Sacred Going on Out There", she shows how the common understanding of the term myth belies a belief in its 'fictitiousness' especially because it is often considered to be either a 'traditional' or a 'legendary' story. (102) Taking off from Mann's assertion that a myth is the legitimization of life (cited by Allen 104), Gunn says that it is a kind of a story that allows a holistic image to pervade and shape consciousness, thus providing a coherent and empowering matrix for action and relationship (105). She feels that this sense of the myth challenges the rationalistic mind because in the culture and literature of 'Indian

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America’, the meaning of the myth may be discovered, not as a speculation about ‘primitive long-dead ancestral societies, but in terms of what is real, actual and viable in living cultures in America’ (105). Such myths depend upon the relationship and participation between the story of the myth and the audience for their meaning. Therefore, she says, ‘Only a participant in mythic image can relate to the myth and can enter into its meaning on its own terms’ (105). Seen from this point of view, the myth acquires a dynamic aspect precisely through the articulation of connections between the present living cultures and the mythical frame of reference. In this sense, myth becomes a ‘vehicle of transmission, of sharing, of renewal ...’ (116).

Such a notion challenges our normative understanding of the term, especially because the form of myths, are often predicated on a system of comparisons and metaphors, resulting in a perception that a symbol stands in for something else. However, in Native American performances, the symbols operate as a central point for the demonstration of oneness. They are thought of not as articulating an imagined reality but that reality where thought and feeling are one - it is a part of the world from which interconnected spaces are available to be experienced (Saxon 27).

Gunn also goes on to identify a different aspect of commonality between myth and ritual: the visionary experience (107). When seen from this perspective, the ‘visionary experience’ gains validity precisely because in most Native American cultures, vision is not dismissed as a figment of imagination, but ‘is actively pursued and brought back to the people as a gift of power and guidance’ (107). Hence, the ultimate aim of a myth is to relate separate experiences into one another, which helps to create a totality. This totality, in Gunn’s words, ‘constitutes a direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are an integral part’ (117). This process itself approximates to a ceremony or a ritual, because it is symptomatic of forging a connection between the individual and the spirit world.

Hence it becomes very obvious that there are significant points of divergence between the conventional and the Native American conceptions of myth. These differences lie in the

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conception of the link between myth and the pervasive ideology associated with it. Thus, from the Native American, especially in a ‘subversive’ context, myths which are experienced, gain a sense of validity. They are seen results of ceremonial processes holding a message of healing for the participants. Such an assessment enables us to theorize the function of the myths that form the basis of some Native American plays.

### **Myth and Historicity**

A sense of history and a sharing of ‘connected past’ play a major role in the construction of the meaning of a myth. When considered as a constituent of dramatic discourse, however, the emphasis of myth lies not only in the interpretation of the story, but also the interpretive possibilities that open up especially with reference to ‘reenactment’ and ‘revisioning’. This is because the myth is seen as a ‘performance’, thereby leading towards ‘accretions of meaning’. The myth pushes the events of the play into a sense of mythical timelessness thereby foregrounding the ideological aspect that forms the motivation for the play in the first place. Since the idea of historicity also includes the specific location(s) from where the ‘reenactment’ or ‘revisioning’ is happening, the locational aspect of the characters/author impinge upon the inflections of meaning generated by the myth.

Therefore, a myth acquires a particularized meaning according to its ‘social geography’ (Barthes cited by Sanders 80). This suggests that the myth works more as a ‘site of adaptation’ while invoking a ‘projective past’ which is a sum of all the collective experiences. Hence, the myth is often never transported wholesale into a new context - it undergoes its own metamorphoses across cultures and generations (Sanders 81).

Further, there is a certain sense of collective historicity which operates during the process of constructing alternate versions of the myth. It is in this context that Glancy strikes a comparison between the process of writing a play and the Turtle Island creation myth (60). Such a model presupposes the location of the characters in a difficult situation and the story begins when the

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animals lose their ground and fall into the water below. The role of the playwright, within this frame of reference is that of establishing meaning against a mythical frame of reference. This framework can be easily correlated to the Native American condition in which the Native Americans had been dispossessed of their lands and by extension, their culture as well. Hence, the Turtle Island creation myth generates possibilities not only for creation of meaning in drama, but also for survival.

Glancy's plays often embark on a journey to go back and retrieve "what was there but had not a voice". Hence, it becomes possible to conceive of historicity in her plays as an 'unrolling of many scrolls, going back and receiving what was there but had not a voice' (Conversation 7). In some cases, this could also be an interpretation of a myth that hadn't existed earlier, but remains crucial in filling the gaps. As a result, the alternating perspectives on myth which operate through the narrative discourse of the plays engender the voices of an alternate history. In the process, the cultural persistence in 'transcribing' the myth empowers the characters (through the act of filling a gap in the story handed down through generations) thereby engendering a transformation from "history" to "his/her story". The implication is that the alternate perspectives are often rooted in contemporary and socio-cultural realities as much as they depend upon the past, thereby lending them a sense of validity.

Further, the use of the myth in Glancy's plays has a very specific purpose: it represents an attempt to access the spirit world. She talks about this in her essay, where she says that the Native American play often combines the shadow world and real world, 'often asking which is which' (200) and thereby rejecting a straightforward distinction between ordinary reality and supernatural spirit world. She uses the term, 'realized improbabilities', to contextualize such shifts since it suggests a network of possibilities through which events, experience and perceptions become interconnected. Interestingly, while approximating to the notion of 'survivance', (Vizenor 57), such a position allows the integration of the historical into the personal and generational. Within this framework of creating 'realized improbabilities', myth plays a central role.

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The following sections of the paper will illustrate how myth can be seen as one of the critical markers of such transformations in the play *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance*.

**Ceremony and Myth: *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance***

Glancy stated in a personal interview that the act of writing can be considered as a ‘rigorous ceremony’. She said, ‘A sweat lodge requires discomfort, endurance, and a suffering of sort for a certain end. It is a spiritual pilgrimage to find both myself and the characters I’m writing about’. Seen from this perspective, the process of a play approximates to a ceremony with the aim being that of engendering healing or what Vizenor would term as ‘survivance’. Hence conflict resolution often assumes the pattern of finding modes of survival within a “sociocultural-centric” context.

The phenomenon of the contact zone (Pratt 24)<sup>3</sup>, often lies in the intersection between the Native American conception of life and a post-colonial perspective of life. The movement towards the idea of healing borders on theorizing the marginal space between the cultural zones which leads to possibilities for contact, and the discovery of new paths of connection and relatedness across stories and cultures. For instance, in her collection of essays, *The West Pole*, Glancy looks at the echoes between the death of the Selu, the Corn Woman in a Cherokee myth and Christ’s crucifixion. While the pattern of violence and the annihilation of life form the common thread, the suggestive import of both signifies the power of compassion. The gap, however, comes across in the conception of spirituality. While the crucifixion is suggestive of sins and redemption, the myth of Selu imparts a sociocultural compatibility by bringing into focus the role of the woman. In the myth, while being put to death, Selu gives instructions for growing corn to her sons, thereby assuring a lifetime supply of food. Glancy compares this myth to the Christian sense of new life coming from the blood of Christ (22).

With reference to her plays, we can see that Glancy’s characters often turn to myths to negotiate such gaps in their cultural and spiritual profile. Such a process of claiming a transcultural space to

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negotiate the upheavals caused by sociocultural encounters assumes the parameters of a tensional negotiation between the various versions of the myth articulated within the narrative discourse of the play. The gaps are closed when the characters re-inscribe their own version of the myth into the larger narrative framework.

When seen from the perspective of a ceremony, the plays approximate to a process where the characters have to make the necessary connections to the idea of ritual and appeal to the spirits in order to survive the present conflation of conflicting perspectives. Such a process is tensional and sometimes, a compulsive act involving the translocation of a cultural belief to the present sociocultural condition and arriving at a reworked meaning. This can be observed with reference to the myth of Ahw'uste in *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance*.

In the play, the Grandmother appears to believe in the presence of the mythical spirit, deer Ahwu'ste, while the Girl questions the spirit's existence. However, when the Grandmother asserts that her deer dress is transformed by the power of ceremony, the granddaughter realizes that such a dress would indeed be emblematic of her sense of identity. But since she does not possess one, she accepts her rootlessness as an existential condition and says, 'I'll have to pass through this world not having a place, but I'll go anyway' (11).

Gunn Allen describes the Grandmother(s) figure in the Native American culture as the Old Spiderwoman, who weaves together everything to interconnect (11). The Grandmother(s) is also responsible for the creation of the firmament, the earth and all the spirit beings in it, by thinking into being. The Grandmother in *The Woman who was a Red Deer*, performs a similar role, albeit in a relocated context. She uses the myth of the Ahw'uste as the vital tool which enables her to connect the world beyond the "tacky world" (15). However, in a frame of a dialogic mediation, she encounters opposition in the form of the Girl who consistently questions the presence of the Ahw'uste. Located in a liminal space between her Native American antecedents and Christianity,

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the Girl is able to integrate only the seeable aspect of the world into her consciousness and hence wants to define the myth in rational terms.

The dialogues/monologues which constitute the narrative discourse of the play show that the myth of Ahw'uste does not lend itself to a particular description either for the Grandmother or the Girl. The belief rests upon a personalized interpretation which is more a matter of faith, and is revealed through a process of questioning/answering. In the process, the marginalized locations of the Grandmother and the Girl are revealed. While the Grandmother had to struggle with a life in which she could not think of wanting love (16), the Girl faces an economic crisis after the loss of her job in the Church soup kitchen, exacerbated by a lack of sense of belonging.

Acknowledging her marginalized location and the limited visibility of the Spirits in her life, the Grandmother tries to look for connections and correlations in the world of Nature. She uses the metaphor of the maple tree waiting for its red leaves and she says, "We're the tree waiting for the red leaves. We count on what's not there as though it is because the maple has red leaves – only you can't always see them" (12). Hence, to connect with the Spirit World, there is a need to presuppose and believe in a connection between the physical, natural and the Spirit world. The myth of Ahw'uste precisely allows her to do that. However, the Girl has trouble accepting such an idea since she believes in the 'seeable'. Hence to her, 'A vision is not always enough-' (12). Interestingly, the monologues also reveal that the 'damned spirits' didn't always help out the Grandmother (17).

While interrogating and accommodating the Ahw'uste to their locations, they are in fact engaged in a process of cultural translation. The myth and the accompanying idea of deer dress and deer dance become fluid constructs which are culturally translated into the contextual requirements for the Grandmother and the Girl so that they can arrive at a location for survival. Such a perspective is supported by the final narration of her job interviews by the Girl. She says:

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So I told ‘em at my first job interview – no, I hadn’t worked that kind of machine – but I could learn.  
I told ‘em them at my second interview the same thing –  
I told ‘em at the third –  
At the fourth I told ‘em –  
My grandmother was a deer. I could see her change before my eyes. She caused stories to happen. That’s how I knew she could be a deer. (18)

While at the first interview, the Girl appears to be willing to learn the machine, an aspect which hints at her encounters with the contact culture, by the fourth interview, she affirms by her Native American identity by talking about her grandmother. In fact, her grandmother becomes the myth, as signified by the assertion, ‘She caused stories to happen’ (18). This becomes a process of cultural translation. While the image offered by Western materialism is that of the static machine, her Native American culture offers her the dynamic Ahw’uste, allowing her to transform her perspective in such a manner as would empower her.

Glancy states in the introduction of the play that, aided by memory, the story moves like “...rain on a windshield. Between differing and unreliable experiences” (4). Nowhere is this more obvious as in the encoding of the differing versions of the myth into the narrative discourse. Such encoding is predicated on some aspect of transformation: for instance, the girl states that her grandmother had transformed into a deer.

The power of the Native American transformation myths, lies in their ability to bring about new transformations. They observe that animal transformations speak to a new generation of listeners and empowers them with the means to bring about transformation in themselves (Richard and Judy Dockerey Young 11). This implies that transformation is a dynamic process which depends upon the participation of the listener or the subject, so that he/she is in a position to see beyond the seeable and connect the physical to the natural and thereby the spirit world. In her interview to Jennifer Andrews, Glancy asserts her belief in animal transformations and describes them as an

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accepted construct in Native American mythology, as magic performed by “conjurers and magicians” .<sup>2</sup>

From this, it can be seen how, in the conception of the Girl, the Grandmother was transformed into the spirit-deer. The structure of the play aids us in recognizing this. It brings into relief the margins between the mythic world of the grandmother and the visible world of the granddaughter by conflating them together, and thereby enabling us to consider the ‘magical’ process through which the Grandmother might have transformed into the spirit-deer. The combination of dialogue and monologue breaks the barrier of the stage and allows the Girl to address an imaginative audience in an attempt to record her shifting perspectives on the Ahw’uste. Very significantly, the dialogues are laced with interrogation, irony and sarcasm, while the monologues establish a space where the Girl attempts to confront the validity of the myth. Further while the dialogues establish sufficient distance between the Grandmother and the Girl, the monologues ironically reveal that their life experiences might have been similar. The effort to “combine the overlapping realities of myth, imagination, and memory with spaces for silences” (Six Native American Plays 4) brings out the crucial point of difference between the Grandmother and the Girl. While the Grandmother confesses that her initial subscription to the Ahw’uste was more out of a sense of survival, the Girl, from her socio-cultural location, experiences them as an abstraction. As she says, ‘A vision is not always enough -’ (12). Hence, she feels the need to construct an alternative version that would be valid for her. Finally, the blurring of boundaries between dialogue and monologue also allows the Girl to selectively recollect only those excerpts of the “frustrating” conversations which would permit her to connect the everyday realities with the sacred and the spiritual. As a result, it also becomes possible to see how the Girl constructs an alternate version of the myth of Ahwu’ste - she arrives at this location only after the passing away of the Grandmother, but remembers her for the stories that she had told.

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Therefore, the discourse of the play provides for an intrinsic reading of the text at multiple levels. At one level, it puts women at the centre of experience, while at another, it illustrates generational conflict exacerbated by sociocultural experiences. Towards the end of the play, the granddaughter declares, ‘I’m sewing my own red deer dress. It’s different than my grandma’s’(18). This emerges to be in stark contrast to her earlier position where she says: ‘Why would I want to be a deer like you? Why would I want to eat without my hands? Why would I want four feet? What would I want with a tail? It would make a lump behind my jeans. Do you know what would happen if I walked down the street in a deer dress? ... (10) The transition from such a position is obvious: the story of Ahw’uste has transformed into a myth offering a ‘medicine’ of stories through which the Girl will continue her efforts at cultural persistence. And her interpretation of the myth holds a sense of validity as suggested by the active voice in ‘I’m sewing my own red-deer dress. It’s different than my grandma’s. Mine is a dress of words. I see the Ahw’uste also’. (18)

### Conclusion

In a book, titled *Friends of Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma, Cherokees*, Anna G Kilpatrick presents a record of two conversations on the Ahw’uste. While the dialogue *Doi* on Ahu’usti establishes the fact that the spirit deer was often associated with medicine and by extension ‘healing’ (141-142), the second dialogue titled *Asudi* on Ahw’usti records an instance of sighting (143-144). Just like the Grandmother’s experience, the spirit deer was sighted in Asuwosg Precinct, and the sighting is considered to be a ‘learning experience’. Very significantly, the Grandmother uses similar terms to narrate her sighting and foregrounds the aspect of healing. She says that the function of the deer was that they made the songs ‘happen’. Very significantly, by the end of the play, the Girl sees her Grandmother as the Ahw’uste, thereby rendering the myth into her everyday life.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the myth occupies a central role within the narrative discourse. It not only directs the course of the play, but also impacts its form and structure. To

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indicate the timelessness of the encounter, the ‘Grandmother’ and the ‘Girl’ are not referred to by any other names, nor is there any kind of an exposition. However, the Grandmother performs an instrumental role in enabling the Girl to translocate the myth through recollections and reflections. Therefore, the play is structured as a monologue/dialogue.

Hence myth seems to be functioning as a relative construct, a tensional objective correlative, but with some gaps with reference to the voices operating within the myth. Each attempt to fill the gaps provides a new opportunity to the reader/audience to create a new meaning, and hence the myth has multiple versions. It gains an actual validity as a story of a version of the myth as it exists. As the Indian Woman in *The Truth Teller*, another play by Diane Glancy remarks: ‘Truth is what we hear in our stories’ (265)

**Notes**

1. Bhabha opines that the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with newness which is not a part of the continuum of the past and the present. Such works renew the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space, which innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. However, the past is seen more as a necessity rather than ‘nostalgia’.

2. Vizenor considers ‘survance’ as an ongoing process of survival, mainly through the humour and irony of stories. He says in *Post-Indian Conversations*, “Native stories are sound and vision, and both are ‘survance’ (57). In Glancy’s plays, the same idea appears in a continuous process of survival, which integrates the patterns of exchange, relationship and interaction. This is contingent upon the recognition a sense of identity which rests in the points of contact between tribes, settlements and cultures.

3. Mary Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* describes transculturation as a phenomenon of the contact zone. ‘Contact zone’, as used by Pratt, refers to the space of colonial encounters, in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. Therefore, transculturation can be seen as a phenomenon of the contact zone.

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