
Conflict of Culture in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*

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ABSTRACT:

*Paula Gunn Allen attempts to educate mainstream audiences about Native American themes, issues, and concerns by promoting Native American literature as a variable and rich source of study. Allen's work is preoccupied with her identity as a woman, mixed blood and lesbian in Laguna and white society. Focusing on the themes of assimilation, self-identity, and remembrance, she frequently examines the quest for spiritual wholeness. Allen's works have generally received positive acclaim. Her poetry is recognized for its musical qualities and her novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* has been praised for its examination of racism and sexism. She attempts to preserve Native American culture for all individuals despite for their ethnic heritage. The novel explores women's tradition.*

INTRODUCTION

The central design in the text is in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* focuses on the journey toward spiritual rebirth of the protagonist, Epiphany Atencio, half-blood. The novel presents how women have to lead a life of suffering, suffocation and underfed suffering in a male dominated society. *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* becomes socially a novel of exploration of racism and a powerful moving testament to feminism. Paula Gunn Allen measures

The shadows between Indian and non-Indian, that threshold where the majority of Native Americans now lives and ponders their Indianness. (Lincoln 1982:127).

A father forces his daughter to marry a sorcerer. Each time the young woman's courage is tested by impossible deeds, she manages to succeed. But her powers are mistrusted by her ailing husband and the other sorcerers. They advise her husband to uproot the tree of light and persuade his wife to jump into the hole. Arrogant, tricked into believing that she can float like a petal, the wife jumps. Allen emphasizes Ephanie's thought process rather her actions. The novel reveals myths, thoughts, memory, emotions, dreams and imagination and fear of Ephanie.

Ephanie experiences this division from self, from the land, the mother, as her cutting "herself off from the sweet spring of her own being" because she is a woman from a traditionally female centred culture. They were so close, they were like twins: because Elena's gold-tinged hair looked dark in the photograph's light, no one could say which Elena, which Ephanie was. With each other they were each one doubled. They were thus complete. However, when they are nine, the nuns find out they have been "playing...between each other's legs" and warn them of the seriousness of their offence. When the nuns tell Elena's mother, Elena has to tell Ephanie that they cannot see each other anymore. "Ephanie sat. Stunned. Mind empty, stomach a cold stone. The hot sun blazed on her head. She felt sick. She felt herself shrinking within. Understood, worldly, exactly, what Elena was saying. How she could understand what Ephanie had not understood. That they were becoming lovers. That they were in love. That their loving had to stop. To end. That she was falling. Had fallen. Would not recover from the fall, smashing the rocks. That they were in her, not on the ground." In the first part loving childhood friendship between Ephanie and Elena, Elena's mother and school nun who fear the girl's physical affection for one another force inseparable companies apart. In adulthood Ephanie develops friendship with psychic Teresa. Ephanie imagines the relationships with grandmother, mother and daughter. Ephanie is comfortable with female and not with the opposite sex. She develops a close bond with her brother, which is prohibited by the culture.

As they examined the descent, Elena said : "Ephanie there's something I have to tell you". She didn't look at her friend. She looked at her hands. Sweating and lightly streaked where the sweat had washed some of the dust of their

climb away. “I can’t come over to your place anymore. Not ever. My mother says I can’t see you at all. (P:28).

In the second part, white doctors treat her. She is not acceptable to the whites and Indians. She is neither a rebel nor a compromise. She feels ashamed that she once has a dream to grow up as a traditional tribal woman. Her marriage with the Japanese-American is not different. She cannot own the role of wife with Japanese who has a shadow of the Buddhist culture. She brings the divorce suit and refuses to culture. She brings the divorce suit and refuses to go the traditional Indian way of keeping family together. Her second marriage is broken. Ephanie’s grandmother is Indian and grandfather white. She owns two cultures only because of her grandmother who married a white man. Ephanie tries to commit suicide and cancels the thought as she remembers her culture. She loses her grandmother, she feels she is dying and Native wisdom resurrects her. She learns to “love her isolation” (181). Her life becomes dynamic. The faith in the tradition revitalizes Ephanie.

Thus the novel projects a picture of Ephanie is an outcast, historically and culturally shunned by the Indian community for her mixed blood and exploited as an “exotic” by whites in San Francisco where she flees with her children to start a new life. *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* charts the progress of Ephanie’s recovery from self-doubt to wholeness. It seems more like an exorcism than like fiction, and the author’s compulsion to put everything into one book has nearly obscured her talents. But in spite of its excesses, the effort it takes to read this novel is worthwhile. Not only is it an exploration of racism, but also often a powerful and moving testament to feminism.

She knew one thing. She was alone. There was no one in the house with her, to see the last Sun go, to see the darkness crawl into the room, to see the fire brighten in front of her eyes. (P:06)

The protagonist of the novel whose name is even strange for herself feels that it is unnatural as Ephanie and thinks that it would have been given to someone tall and serene where as her body choppy and short, sturdy was at odd. She herself is responsible for her present plight. Her habit of digging into past and skeptical nature is responsible for her doom.

The character and society depicts in the novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Ephanie, the central character, is on a vision quest. On the vision quest she moves further and further into a female universe, white male characters are basically negative characters. Ephanie reaches it because in a woman's life femininity is central; in a man's life masculinity is central. For Ephanie to locate who she is, she has to move from thinking of her reference group as female. That says nothing about the men. Ephanie herself is pretty crazy-out of touch with herself-until she understands that she is female. Ephanie, in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is not supposed to unite with the men. She keeps expecting men to do her life for her, because she got feminized in the western way instead of the tribal way. She made a terrible mistake and she paid for it until she understood that she had power in her own right.

She wanted him gone. To leave her to her shadows. She was afraid of what would happen to her if he did go. (P:36).

Allen's novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, the primary concern is a journey to healing – a journey back to the female center. At the beginning of the novel, the central character, Ephanie Atencio, is a half - breed who has lost the sense of who she is, she is isolated and fragmented as a human being, belonging neither to the pueblo community nor to the non-Indian community. Allen states simply, "The breed is an Indian who is not an Indian". "That is, breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to Indians while making them feel alien among whites". Realistically, more than half the native people in America today are neither Red nor White; the majority of Indians are mixed bloods living off the reservation. Fuller bloods reject these breeds on paling racial lines and broken cultural origins. Ephanie has a fragmented self from an inner war. As a half-breed Guadalupe Woman, Ephanie is caught in the erosion of the traditional place of honor and respect in which a Guadalupe Woman is held by her tribe and in the stereotyped and patriarchal view from which she is viewed by non-Indians. She is surrounded by forces which work to destroy whatever link she has to the traditional culture in which the women were central figures. The reader follows her struggle to regain her sanity as she sorts out her childhood and her tribal beliefs and connections, marries a second-generation Japanese-American man, and deals with the death of one of their twins. She joins a consciousness-

raising group, goes to a psychiatrist, studies the old traditions, and tries to commit suicide, but it is only when she is able to synthesize what she has learned from all of its connection to her tribal traditions, and reaffirm the importance of the female, especially the importance of the “amazon tradition”, that she is healed.

In both history and culture Allen’s Main character in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, as a mixed-breed person who lives apart, Ephanie is unable to fit into the old ways, there are no stories for her experiences, that history is important and one cannot run away from it is evident in the novel. Only when she makes sense of the old stories by seeing the continuities in them and how she fits into those continuities can she be healed, for the Laguna believe that everything that has happened will happen again only in a different form. Her journey to healing is primarily an isolated one, an interior journey. She puzzles over the old stories, searching for answers, looking for the patterns until, one day, she understands their continuity-how they fit together. The losses of love reflect dreams and disappointments back on this woman’s desire, tending her to search herself. Allen writes with the complete and myriad sensitiveness of a woman with children, with a husband, in love, out of love, marriage, divorces, redefinition: old women with weaving and potteries, new women with separations and self-definitions. Much of Allen’s work is a search for meaning, an attempt to understand natural harmony and to place the individual in that fusion of person, land and spirit. Each moment is placed on a web of history, natural harmony and traditional understanding. “I am Lebanese-America, I am Indian, I am breed, and I am New Mexican. I was raised in a family and in a world that was multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic, with a number of social classes involved”.

It was just a matter of time. What Grandmother spider had taught, had left them to study in the full measure of their lives. At Guadalupe, recognizing the nature of her silent instruction, they called her Thinking woman. She who is thinking. She who is waiting. For them to understand, to come in their hearts and minds to peace. The only possible hope. The only possible help. (P:189).

Allen attempts in her essays are a staggeringly difficult task. Recasting basic cultural assumptions about time, space, sexuality, and history and establishing that within discourses

like feminism, which is itself a mark and force of change, render all language more than usually vulnerable. Because of her maturity and breadth of experience, Allen succeeds in giving us what no one else has, a highly intelligent yet personal critique of basic cultural assumptions from a Native American feminist perspective. The difficulty with Allen's position here is that she is at variance with her own earlier and highly sophisticated definitions of Native American cultural dimensions.

Culture has more to do with behaviour and way of living, more generally in the novel, the healing of the main character occurs when she is able to reconnect with the female principle which is exemplified in thought woman and her sisters and consists particularly of life and strength – she recovers the ancient qualities of woman who was seen as “strong and powerful”, balancing the ancient qualities of man who was seen as having “transient or transitory” qualities (“where I come From”). This balancing of qualities where “woman-ness is not of less value than man-ness”, allows both the individual and tribe to continue and prosper. The telling of the story is to visualize how their experiences fit into the great web of being, the patterns of life. The story and the experiences become one, leading to harmony and healing. By using this journey as a model, we can begin to see how to reclaim female deities, and “the wholistic, pacifistic and spirit-based”, (“Who Is Your Mother?”) principles of their grandmothers in order to bring together mind, spirit, body, inanimate and animate to insure, continuance of the earth as well as the individual.

Allen explores the meaning of modern feminism must always be seen within the context of her sense of herself as ‘breed’, as being apart twice removed because she is alienated by race and gender. Experiences of betrayal, victimization, and loss-the familiar ingredients of women's literature-are employed in Allen's novel as means of ultimate grace and power. The feminist literary artist hopes that other women and men as well, will recognize themselves and their relations with one another in the story and will join the artist in seeking to transform their shared culture. For Allen, that shared culture is itself ambiguous; feminism is interpenetrated in her vision of self with her point of view as a “breed”. The two co-mingle-feminist and ‘breed’ – as Allen creates art which reveals, criticizes, and examines the margins between race and gender in American literature from social-interaction perspective. Allen transmutes her image of woman as “wingless fish” whose “blank utterance” is unheard in a

world of Eurocentric literary and cultural traditions and patriarchal social and personal circumstances. Like an old medicine woman, Allen concludes with a healing blessing: “dream in your silent shadow, celebrate”. Allen opens the space of women’s writing by moving beyond a patriarchal system as an enemy or as a symptom of a malignant condition; in the process, she seeks to articulate not a battleground, but a sacred terrain, a centre of being where “silent shadows celebrate”.

Society evolves from age to age as Allen’s, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is most successful when it explores women’s traditions within the Keres Pueblo for their ritual significance. Elements of pueblo “thought singing” form the novel’s theme, imagery, narrative method, and whatever its unity of design. Interpenetrated within this rich, complex recreation of the Native of American aesthetic experience is the quasi-autobiographical tale of a “halfblood breed”, Ephanie. “Too strange”, even deranged by her own alienation, Ephanie attempts to find some version of selfhood within the “empty paces”, and “long shadows” of her divided Native American and white part.

Ephanie. Too strange a name, deranging her from the time she first understood its strangeness. Her body, choppy and short, sturdy, was at odds with her name. Ephanie was for someone tall and serene. Someone filled with grace. (P:3)

Allen evokes a symbolic women’s universe created by women. The novel is about how a woman artist heals herself through the act of aesthetic creation; and its setting, time, plot, and characters are derived largely from Allen’s own contemporary time and experience in the post-war American southwest. *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* demands critical attention, despite its deficiencies, because of its subtle use of Native American aesthetic materials and because of its revelations concerning gender related restrictions and the critical evaluation of writing women, whether Native American or white or whatever their experience. For Allen the role of the dreamer beset by a world of horror is that of a magical woman who breaks the boundaries within which her society restricts her and, in the process of unmasking the reflections of sexist ideology, discovers in them the empowering myth of spider woman, a creative being of her own devising. Ephanie is still “seduced and

abandoned” in the conventional mode. Even though one of those lovers abandoning her is a woman, many others are men. The effect of powerlessness and betrayal is hopelessness, whether the relationship is heterosexual or lesbian. The Native American imagination of Spider Woman-of woman as creator, not victim-acts as a gloss on the actual experience of Ephanie; Spider Woman reveals how limited are the lives of women and how vulnerable the social construction of identity, in Allen’s vision.

For Ephanie is a character caught within the tension between positive and negative interpretations: a positive interpretation that triumphs through the imagination of a woman creating for her and other women, especially Native American women and a negative interpretation that discloses her complicity within a patriarchal, white ideology. To reveal the tension inherent in Ephanie and her experience, Allen uses social life as an image of a “dream of years, of her whole life”. The tension between these two vision of women’s experience is what, paradoxically, holds the novel together. The narrative of Ephanie’s fear is made visible through the minutiae of her life, the details of her private rituals of daily experience – what she wears, what she eats, how she deals with the “simple dust of her house” – are juxtaposed to a Native American belief system that might explain the workings of the world.

The central characters, Ephanie cannot maintain her relationship with anybody. And the relationship she has developed with the people, prove to be fatal. By being habituated to live in dreams and belief in the myth of grandmother, and spider, she always misinterprets them. Her love with Elena, Stephen and Tera are unnatural and forces her to lead a life of isolation. Her wedding with her first husband and Thomas proves to be painful because of its realistic nature where the man dominates the woman and she does not like. Whereas in regard to her relationship with her children, her mother, her school sister, grandmother, grandfather, and Sammy is never everlasting. Because she is always afraid of reality and real relationship.

She understood the combinations and recombinations that had so puzzled her, the one and then the two, the two and then the three, the three becoming the four, the four splitting becoming two and two, the three of the beginning becoming the three-in-one. One mother, twin sons; two mothers, two sons; One mother, two sons. (P:207).

Ephanie discovers her roots and herself. She knows her relationship with the world. Ephanie has four partners – four is a number which is unifying in tribal tradition. The novel is also divided into four parts. Ephanie and Elena is Lesbian. Sammy and John are homo Lucy is raped by John as per the order of her husband, Sammy. Ephanie after her first husband abandons her. Her friendship with white friend, Teresa comforts her. Her second marriage with Thomas comes to an end after twin sons are born, one of whom dies. Her grandfather is white, and grandmother is Indian change her life.

CONCLUSION:

The novel presents women's sexuality both in its scenes of love making between women and men and in the scenes that portray the love of Lesbians. Ephanie is a symbol of women's ambitions as well as desires. Her life does not prepare her for the final ceremony or unification yet the shadows are owned by her. Ephanie may not be a good wife but she is certainly good mother. Though she does not get the affection she craves, she shares her fondness with her children. The relationships are imagined by her between grandmother, mother and daughter in therapy session. "Total experience which requires an awakening of the whole consciousness when the participants succeed in living the universal" (Eliade 1965:19). This character-confused, obsessed, and repetitive, on the verge of slipping into madness – rages through her victimization in a manner that redeems it: "the room filled with shadows. And the shadows became shapes. And the shapes became women singing....and she began to sing with them."

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