

# An Indigenous Reading of Ella Cara Deloria's *Waterlily*

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## Abstract

*Ella Cara Deloria's novel "Waterlily" delves into the traditional Sioux society in America. Waterlily, the title character, is a hope for her mother Blue Bird. Blue Bird and Waterlily meet with lots of vicissitudes in their lives in the camp circles. Their family members and social relatives establish good ties and affinities with them. They sadden in their sorrows and rejoice in their smiles. This research, through an Indigenous perspective, analyzes the thematic patterns inherent in the novel and their significance for exploring ancestry and identity. The aim of the research is to show how traditions and cultures connect generations. The ideas developed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith from New Zealand and Daniel Heath Justice from America have been employed to analyze the novel. To enhance the study, Deloria's "Waterlily" and various materials by Indigenous/Non-Indigenous writers and critics have been consulted. The novel inculcates the Indigenous ethos which includes values, symbols and respects for cultures and traditions essential for good human behaviors. Kinship, a principal ethos of Indigenous literatures, is the most important theme in the novel. It is kinship that trains humans to be human. The findings of the research come out that "Waterlily" as a decolonizing novel opens up the ancestral, cultural symbols and values; bridges the present people with their ancestors and coming generations, and helps marginalized people heal and go ahead with zeal.*

**Keywords:** Sioux culture, indigenous literatures, kinship, spirituality, optimism.

## Introduction

Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971), a Native American writer from the Sioux culture, was brought up in the Sioux values mixed with Christian principles. Franz Boas, a noted American anthropologist, inspired her to become a writer. Her major works include *Dakota Texts*, *Dakota Grammar*, *Speaking of Indians* and *Waterlily*. She contributed a lot to preserve Sioux cultures and customs. Her illuminating novel *Waterlily*, completed in 1948 and posthumously published in 1988, delves into the life of a Teton Sioux woman and exposes the Native American culture.

Deloria studied and researched her Sioux culture in depth. Sioux people, one of the native North American nations, started living in the region of today's North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Nebraska thousands of years back. Sioux men participated in hunting, warfare was also their part. They bore responsibility to safeguard their community. Sioux women's responsibilities included household jobs like bead embroidery, healing and childrearing. The people believed in supernatural practices. For them, religion mattered.

Europeans arrived in the region of Sioux people in the late seventeenth century. The Sioux culture then started getting intervened. The European Americans' invasion of the Sioux territory, the Great Plains, made the native people struggle hard for their rights and sovereignty. Today Sioux tribes live in different states of America including mainly Montana, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. They also live in reservations in Canada.

The descendants of the people originally living in a particular place are Indigenous peoples. They are a native nation. They embraced more happiness in the days before they were invaded and intervened. In later days, their identity came into crisis. Dehumanization and domination undermined them. In many places, they are in minorities. The past memories haunt and rejoice them. The traumas and joys make them understand the reality of life. They connect themselves with the past and the hidden. They view possibilities to go ahead. Smith states:

'Indigenous peoples' is a relatively recent term which emerged in the 1970s out of the struggles primarily of the American Indian Movement [AIM], and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood. It is a term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world's colonized peoples. The final 's' in 'peoples' has been argued for quite vigorously by indigenous activities because of the right of peoples to self determination. It is also used as a way of recognizing that there are real differences between different indigenous peoples. (7)

Indigenous peoples are mentioned in different names or terms as per territories and countries. For instance, they are called Indigenous peoples in America and Canada, and Māori people in New Zealand. The term 'indigenous' is broader and more global as it includes various groups and communities across the world.

Indigenous literatures include oral and written texts. They represent Indigenous Peoples and their own spaces in the world. They adore their cultures, symbols, values and ancestry. They connect them with their past and instruct them to be positive for their future. They enhance the relationship of communities with other human communities and other-than-human beings. Justice argues, "Wonderworks... are rooted in the land- not generic landscapes but specific places with histories, voices, memories. They carry the past forward. They give us a future, even if it's only an imagined one" (155).

Deloria's *Waterlily* is an Indigenous novel. It focuses on the ethos of Indigenous literatures like kinship in the Sioux culture. Values, symbols and respects for cultures and traditions stand within Indigenous ethos. The novel exposes the characters' relationships among the family members, social relatives and even those who might come rude to them. Their pains and possibilities are discussed for solutions. Sympathy, hospitality and wellbeing become central in the behavior of the characters. They express sympathy for the sufferers and become happy in the happiness of their kin, friends and relatives. They seek and practice humanity.

The researcher employs the Indigenous perspective as a tool based on the knowledge and insights developed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in order to analyze the novel *Waterlily*. Previously, the novel was not abundantly analyzed via an Indigenous lens. This paper investigates to find answers to these research questions: What are the major Indigenous themes in the novel? Why

do people need Indigenous knowledge to be good relatives? How do traditions and customs connect generations? The major themes of the novel include kinship, gender, marriage, spirituality and hope. These themes enrich humans to possess values and humanness and inculcate Indigenous identity. They embrace respect for ancestry, hope for the people now and compassion for those unseen. The objectives of the paper include: to explore the major themes in the novel, to point out the significance of Indigenous knowledge for good relationship among people and to show the roles of traditions and cultures for the connectedness of generations. The research will help present *Waterlily* as a source advocating for good human relationship.

## Methodology

The researcher makes explanations and interpretations as to the dominant themes in the novel. The cultures and traditions inherent in the novel have been explored and analyzed. The research broadly uses Linda Tuhiwai Smith's and Daniel Heath Justice's perspectives to analyze *Waterlily*. Smith, a well-known Indigenous theorist from New Zealand, stresses decolonial thought and concepts. Justice, a notable Native American theorist and critic of Indigenous literatures focuses on kinship. Their arguments appeal humans to practice humanness. They strengthen decolonial thought and Indigenous concepts which can be theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the novel. Indigenous knowledge stands as a tool for literary analysis. An Indigenous view provides a clear picture of an Indigenous text. Moura-Kocoglu writes, "Pertinent to the literary analysis is a multi-disciplinary approach: A wide range of theoretical perspectives ranging from ethnological, anthropological, and sociological to cultural thought is reframed by incorporating indigenous critical discourse" (xxv).

## Thematic Patterns and Analyses

### Kinship

Kinship is a prime ethos of Indigenous literatures. Kinship does not mean just blood relation. It covers a wide range of perspectives to see how to be human. Kinship indicates biological, social and ecological relations in a broader sense. Justice argues, "Different writers will necessarily foreground different ways and different engagements, with some highlighting biology and others emphasizing more expansive notions of kinship" (75). Kinship has a wide coverage of human norms and values.

Deloria, the novelist, portrays the characters and events in *Waterlily* in a live and realistic way. The characters seem as if we are familiar with them by virtue of their good behaviors. They seem to be our near and dear people. This is a great success of Deloria. Gardner states,

During the mid-1940s, Deloria, then in her early fifties, was toiling on ... *Waterlily*, which she described in a letter to Margaret Mead - Only my characters are imaginary. The things that happen are what the many old women informants have told me as having been their own or their mothers' or other relatives' experiences. (10)

In the novel, the characters' hospitality, ways of accepting, forgiving, and caring are human values. *Waterlily* belongs not only to the Sioux people but also to the entire humans. DeMallie remarks, "Ella Deloria's work of transcription, translation, and cultural interpretation has provided the data and insight from which we can come to understand the Sioux people ... as fellow human beings" (264).

To be human, one should have compassions and respects for humans, other-than-humans, and territories. To honor ancestors is also to keep kinship with them. In *Waterlily*, Deloria has well presented the episodes and examples of good kinship. The camp circles maintain a bond among family members, relatives and even strangers. Blue Bird including *Waterlily* enjoys good courtesy and care in the camps belonging to other people. Sharing and caring becomes their custom. In visits and ceremonies, the people share gifts and delicacies. Deloria writes:

Gloku trained her own children well, so that they had good manners and were respected in the tribe. S...The first thing to learn was how to treat other people and how to address them, she said. You must not call your relatives and friends by name, for that was rude.

Use kinship terms instead. And especially, brothers and sisters, and boy cousins and girl cousins must be very kind to each other. That was the core of all kinship training. (67)

*Waterlily* adores kinship. Kinship becomes a cultural value. Ties, virtues and manners become stronger by dint of kinship. The knowledge of kinship is the knowledge of culture, and as a whole of humanity. Critics like Penelope Myrtle Kelsey opine that Indigenous knowledge functions as a tribal theory in interpretations of a literary text. A theory should entwine culture that binds a text. The Dakota/Sioux knowledge *Waterlily* disseminates is not limited to the tribes alone; it, in a broader sense, becomes a worldview. It inculcates theoretical perspectives like the ideals of kinship. Kelsey argues: “*Waterlily* is determined in every way by the function of kinship, and Deloria . . . exploring all of the manifestations of kinship in order to instruct her readership as part of a decolonizing agenda” (91).

In the novel, Blue Bird, her baby and the grandmother are taken to their original camp. Their relatives over there mourn for the dead and delight for the living. The public insult she gets from her husband haunts Blue Bird. *Waterlily* and Little Chief become friends and behave with each other like sister and brother. Black Eagle’s mother-in-law Gloku loves *Waterlily* by heart. Gloku and her husband have raised Little Chief, the son of Gloku’s son Rainbow. Thus, the characters in the novel and their hospitality and relationship among each other strongly strengthen the kinship phenomena.

The traditional concept was that Indigenous people were not kind and cooperative. They were thought to be uncivilized. Smith argues, “To consider indigenous peoples as not fully human, or not human at all, enabled distance to be maintained and justified various policies of either extermination or domestication” (27). In this light, *Waterlily*, one of the best works embracing Indigenous values, is an example of decolonizing creations.

Identity is diverse and shifting as per the nature of a person’s attitude. Lots of issues can be raised for the fading Sioux identity. Gibbon states, “Individuals who identify themselves as Sioux are taking a wider variety of paths in their lives today . . . As a result, there is no easy answer to the question, “Who is a Sioux?” (208). But still the Sioux have a strong sense of belonging. The increasing trends of multiculturalism has intervened the tribal identity. Some critics opine that comparative studies of literary works might help balance between the national and the universal. Durnin argues, “Henceforth - at least in the US - comparative studies would seek grounds for comparison within the realities of multiculturalism, which had itself emerged as a more potent counter-weight to nationalism than the idea of universals” (3).

However, Indigenous knowledge alone can disseminate the true sense of Indigenous identity.

In Indigenous Literatures, kinship is a multidimensional concept. It broadly covers blood, socio-cultural and eco-social relationships. It connects the present generations with their ancestors and coming posterity. It strengthens self and identity. It is a process in which a network of connections becomes stronger, and as a result humans practice humanness. Justice asserts, “One of the richest novels about Indigenous kinship is *Waterlily* . . . Yet for all these challenges, *Waterlily* remains a finely crafted novelistic study of the ways that kinship shapes self and identity” (42). In the camp circles, the people share, care and help for mutual joy and zeal. Kinship binds them together to their strength, hope and identity. The novel reads:

The camp circle was on the move again. Whenever one site wore out and became unsanitary, or whenever it was time to go elsewhere to hunt deer or to gather the fruits in season, the magistrates whose duty it was to think and plan for the people ordered this move. And at such times everyone must obey. To remain behind was to be without protection. (37)

The novel highlights obedience and responsibility of true friends and relatives. Kelsey writes, “Kinship is interwoven with humanity and with Dakota identity . . . All aspects of the complex plot of *Waterlily* are driven by kinship obligations and what both female and male characters must do to fulfill them” (84). Regarding Deloria’s comprehension of Indigenous knowledge on hospitality, courtesy and benevolence, *Waterlily* reflects her experiences and understandings. Picotte argues, “as previously unpublished manuscripts like *Waterlily* come to light . . . she had a deep and heartfelt understanding of—a true kinship with—those whose culture she both studied and shared” (254). Deloria beautifully crafted the frameworks of themes and events in *Waterlily* to explore and expose Indigenous identity.

### **Women’s Roles and Marriages**

Dakota Sioux people are one of the Native American Nations, residing in the Dakota state. *Waterlily* depicts the roles of women. In Deloria’s time, males were dominant as hunting and warfare were their business. The society was patriarchal, yet in circumstances women were respectable, too. In the novel, a sort of purchasing wife is common. In the novel, Blue Bird delivers a baby and names her *Waterlily*. She is happy for the child. Her childhood was happy but it is dream-like. She suffers a lot. She recalls a day in her age of fourteen that her family members were killed, and lost in an attack. From the tragedy, she and her grandmother were left to survive. Later, Blue Bird eloped with Star Elk, a bad-tempered youth. Her flashback ends. She touches *Waterlily* and smiles. For Blue Bird’s staying away for a while in childbirth, Star Elk becomes furious. In a great victory dance ceremony, he throws her away publicly. Disfavored by the public, he, shortly after, leaves forever. Despite the public insult of Blue Bird, the female characters forget and forgive. They do not go against the males. The gender equipoise in the novel justifies Deloria’s maturity and popularity. DeMallie argues, “The book’s focus on the experiences of the heroine *Waterlily* and her mother and grandmother makes it a major contribution to understanding women in traditional Sioux culture” (255).

The novel well depicts the norms a Dakota woman should pursue in the Sioux culture. Words or promises matter. They are powerful. They should be kept or accomplished. The



breach of promises creates surprises and suspicions. It devalues one. The novel provides the readers with pedantic touch to honor promises. It reads:

The silence that followed was ominous. When the old woman again found her voice, she said, "Ah, if only you had told me he was courting you so I could have warned you, grandchild. Since you have promised already, there is nothing I can do. Once she gives it, an honorable Dakota woman does not break her word to a man. Those who make false promises are ever after derided. To give your word is to give yourself." (46)

Blue Bird talks to her grandmother about her acceptance to marry Star Elk. In response, the grandmother says that the boy does not suit her as she has heard he is passive and unfriendly. However, she points to the gravity of promises. Things may go right or wrong; gains or losses may take place and prizes and pains may fall upon, promises should be seriously and sincerely implemented. This sort of message the novel imparts can be highly essential in the drought of honesty and trust in today's world.

Roles of women should not be viewed in isolation from men's roles. Men and women both should be responsible and rational for mutual good relationship. Smith writes, "Gender refers not just to the roles of women and how those roles are constituted but to the roles of men and the relations between men and women" (47). History should record the cultures, customs and lifestyles of ordinary people. In the past mainstream history excluded marginalized people's concerns. Smith further argues, "The day-to-day lives of 'ordinary' people, and of women, did not become a concern of history until much more recently" (34). *Waterlily* can serve as a document recording the everyday lives of the Sioux people.

*Waterlily* has a flashback of a woman that Lowanla had on his little finger in the Sun Dance. Nevertheless, she says nothing about it; instead, she asks him if he knew the girl who brought water to him. He responds he did not know her. *Waterlily* determines to keep in her heart and not to disclose the fact to Lowanla that she was the girl who brought water to him in the Sun Dance. This signifies the female characters' determination, dedication and farsightedness.

Sioux men had protection over the community. Sioux women participated in activities like bead embroidery, healing and childcare. They could also embrace power and freedom. Mark writes, "Women could also participate in government, concerns were raised, discussed, and decisions made." In *Waterlily*, women participate in camp circles; they celebrate and become part of family/community happiness and sorrow.

Marriage is an important theme in the novel. The whole novel draws a story of a pair of mainly two women- the mother and a daughter. This is a story of mother-daughter relationship supported in major by grandparent(s) and relatives, both blood and social. Blue Bird marries Star Elk, not well acknowledged in the camp circle. *Waterlily* is born. Blue Bird, after a public insult, becomes spouseless, when Star Elk, her husband, flees. Blue Bird marries Rainbow as the second husband. A similar fate does *Waterlily* face. In a Sun Dance celebration in a camp circle that belonged to Rainbow's friend Palani, *Waterlily* feels fond of a young boy who keeps

his promise with the Great Spirit. After months of Gloku's death, *Waterlily* marries Sacred Horse whose father is to give her family two horses in exchange of her marriage with his son. She is, of some sort, purchased. She becomes a widow. She marries Lowanla as the second husband. Mitawa, with her from the first husband, is born. Thus, the mother and daughter each marry twice. Marriages should be valid so that the life ahead can be respectable. In the novel, Deloria writes:

"I do not aspire to that for my poor orphaned grandchild," the grandmother said. "All I ask is a valid marriage, and then I should die happy." He might come to live with them or take her to his people openly. Whichever way, it should be planned and above board, and then Blue Bird would be respected. (47)

The grandmother prefers a valid marriage to a glamorous one. A marriage with a tribal approval is valid in the Sioux culture. The tribes attribute a respectable marriage to different factors associated with their kinship. The second marriages of Blue Bird and the title character may sound unacceptable but they become valid in the camp circles due to their painful and merciless situations.

### **Spirituality and Connectedness**

Spirituality is associated with both living and non-living beings. It binds people, beliefs, cultures and environmental entities together. Supernatural practices and beliefs also come under spirituality. The Indigenous concept of spirituality is based on a shared essence of life. This shared phenomenon of relationship connects the present with the past and signifies hope for future, that is to say, spirituality connects the present people with their ancestors and inspire them to go ahead even for the betterment of the coming generations. Moreover, spirituality embraces the interconnectedness between culture and nature. Smith contends:

A human person does not stand alone, but shares with other animate and, in the Western sense, 'inanimate' beings, a relationship based on a shared 'essence' of life. The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of a people, makes for a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by indigenous peoples. (77)

As in the Sioux culture, spirituality is thematically employed in *Waterlily*. Prayers and dreams are significant. The characters explore meanings in them. They participate in supernatural practices and feel heard and blessed. To illustrate, Blue Bird's baby Waterlily recovers after she uses her father's rare otterskin to be of the Holy Spirit's and prays to Him. Waterlily gets well. Likewise, one day Gloku takes Waterlily and Little Chief to Box Butte, a holy hill. She prays to the Great Mystery in the children's behalf. Her prayers are remarkable. The novel reads, "Great Mystery . . . ! "Grant them to live long and good lives . . . ! " (73). She prays for the sake of her grandchildren Waterlily and Little Chief. The otterskin and the holy hill as mentioned above are cultural and ancestral symbols. These symbols connect the present with the ancestors and the future generations. The use of such ancestral symbols helps decolonize and heal Indigenous people. Smith asserts, "Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization" (36).

Gloku's dream of a Yankton Dakota holy medicine man is very vivid and interesting. In

the dream, she, facing eastwards, stands on a great butte and sees the man, far off on another identical butte, looking at her. A snake dreamer's prophesy in regard of a huge coiled snake about a baby is also very fascinating. Once, a huge snake lies coiled about Little Chief's brother Ohiya asleep in a tipi. A snake dreamer via his supernatural method makes it move away to the wood. He states that the baby will be blessed. The novel reads, "Watch this boy," the snake dreamer advised. "You will see that he will be blessed in many ways: with long life, good fortune, and a great degree of supernatural help in time of crisis" (101).

## A Sense of Optimism

Optimism is a quality of a good work of art. Smith states, "The sense of hope and optimism is a characteristic of contemporary indigenous politics . . ." (91). *Waterlily* imparts a sense of optimism. Pain prevails in progress of the plot. The protagonists suffer. They get sympathy from readers. The story is pathetic. Tragedy and grief are also dominant in the plot. But still hope persists. Like her mother, Waterlily from childhood to her marriage age is brought up in scarcity. Even after her marriage, fate cheats her. She becomes a youth widow. Truly said, her infant as a sign of hope dwells in her. When it comes out, she becomes more optimistic. Moreover, her second husband is her favorite. As usual, she trusts her relatives. The novel reads:

Only Waterlily did not sleep; she lay gazing idly up into the tender blue sky, thinking many things. A fresh sense of security swept over her and her future looked very good. She had everything, she thought. Her brothers, Little Chief and Ohiya, would give her all the social backing a sister could desire. Already both had honored their little nephew by giving gifts away in his name. Soon they would be teaching him to ride and hunt, and to protect himself and grow up to be a real man. (248)

While Waterlily is thinking, the sky is clear enough. It symbolizes clarity, hope and new vision. She now feels secured. She is satisfied. She attributes her satisfaction to the social backing her people will, she thinks, demonstrate in her son's behalf.

The writer has used the stream of consciousness technique in the novel. The characters in it embrace flashbacks. Their memories take them back and both joy and sorrow stir them. They also use soliloquys mainly for relief. To illustrate, the novel reads, "She lay idly reminiscing in the dark tipi of her cousin . . . to recall in detail the events of that tragic day that had robbed her of her family" (42)/ "No, never!" Waterlily whispered to herself, her lips tightening with determination. "He shall never know! . . ." (251). The memories, some of them despite being traumatic, promote more rays of hope.

The changes and challenges so far in her life come cool owing to the birth of Waterlily. The mother compares her lovely child to the beautiful waterlilies around her birth place. In the novel she says, "'My daughter! My daughter!' she cried, 'How beautiful you are! As beautiful as the waterlilies. You too are a waterlily, my waterlily.' She sobbed with joy'" (39). In fact, life is a riddle mingled with pain and pleasure. This reality is heightened in Deloria's delightful novel *Waterlily*. The elation Blue Bird embraces from Waterlily's birth becomes a new dimension in her life.



## Conclusion

*Waterlily*, a wonderwork that embraces realities and possibilities, delves into the traditional Sioux society. It narrates various aspects of the people in the camp circles. In the novel, relatives often remember and care their kin. They share a sense of belonging and affinity. People help in their relatives' puzzles and problems. *Waterlily* becomes a widow. Her relative sends Lowanla to her camp for her help. The novel centrally sheds light on wellbeing and benevolence.

The research paper embraces Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonial insights and Daniel Heath Justice's ideas of Indigenous knowledge as theoretical frameworks for the analyses of the novel. The paper interprets the themes of kinship, gender, marriage, spirituality and optimism inherent in the novel and draws conclusions that Indigenous knowledge benefits humans in comprehending relationship and humanness for identity and social justice. Moreover, *Waterlily*, depicting the ancestral, cultural values and symbols, connects the present generations with their ancestors and reinforces them to be good ancestors. The research paper reveals the fact that *Waterlily* will help contribute to the promotion of humanness.

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