

THEMATIC STUDY OF CHEYENNE AUTUMN BY MARY SANDOZ

Dr. Rupal S. Patel

(H.O.D. English)

Shree Meghmani Parivar and Shree Bhailalbhai A. Patel (Detrojwala) Umiya Arts & Commerce College for Girls,
Sola,

Ahmedabad-60.

(M) 9879874883

Email : rupalashok@gmail.com

Patel Naisargee Ashokkumar

Pre - Med. (Junior)

University of Nebraska

Lincoln,

USA

Cheyenne Autumn, written by Mari Sandoz, is an epic novel in which she recreates the historical events of hardships and struggle of the survival of Cheyennes. Mari Sandoz is a dedicated and prolific novelist of Nebraska frontier. It is the third in the series of six books by Mari Sandoz in which she told the story of the struggle and settlement of the Great Plains. *Cheyenne Autumn* is one of the most powerful and effective novels which evoke an elegiac mood because of the heroic flight of the Northern Cheyenne back to their ancestral homeland during which many of them had lost their lives. Other works written by her are *Old Jules*, *The Strange Man of the Oglalas*, *The Story of the Hide Men*, *The Cattlemen of the Rio Grande Across the Far Marias* and *The Beaver Men : Spearheads of Empire*.

The incidents of *Cheyenne Autumn* revolve round the fifteen hundred miles heart breaking flight of the Northern Cheyenne from the Indian Territory to their native homeland in the Yellowstone country during 1878 and 1889. The novel is a stalwart historical portrayal of physical devastation and cultural uprootedness of the Cheyennes at the hands of falseness of the U.S. Government. They were promised good treatment, but the promises were not carried out. The writer describes the Cheyenne outbreak beginning from barren Oklahoma reservation and concluding at the surrender of the leading character named Little Wolf and his followers hundreds of miles and six months later in Montana. In fact, the U.S. Government promised the Northern Cheyennes of land, food and protection in treaties and signed but these agreements were ruthlessly broken by the government. Under the government coercion, hundreds of northern Cheyennes agreed to migrate on one condition that they would come back if any adversity arose. Finding the Indian Territory unacceptable, Little Wolf led his group people back to Yellowstone region. But on the course of returning, they underwent massive resistance and malignancy by the U.S. army as the whole incident was seen by the U.S. Government as an act of rebellion. The press also misinterpreted the Cheyenne's migration as malicious and exaggerated the whole incident. The Cheyennes struggled a lot and passed through critical conditions like loyalty and betrayal, cooperation and brutality and resolve and hesitation. The starving and helpless people had no alternative. The Northern Cheyennes were reunited with the southern Cheyennes at their new reservation near Ford Reno in the Indian Territory, but they were hungry and suffering from malaria. They never got promised supplies and at least Dull Knife and Little Wolf decided to return to the Yellowstone with their troops. The writer has minutely described how the Cheyennes' culture and civilization was under extreme and unforgettable compulsion by the dominant society which was motivated by fear, greed and changing winds of popular opinion.

Among two Cheyenne chiefs, Little Wolf, an old Man Chief and a fifty seven year old Cheyenne man who had highest responsibility for the preservation of the people play vital role in the fifteen hundred miles flight of Cheyenne. He was a dignified person and his strength and integrity came through his forbearance towards the Whites and he did not want to indulge in unnecessary violence as he wanted to save the lives of women and children of his tribe also. Even in the face of continual failure of the U.S. Army and Indian Bureau agents to honour the agreements of his tribe, he tried his best to keep word and to honour his promises.

Little Wolf, a tribal chief, was honoured for his bravery as a warrior and entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the people. As the writer narrated:

Soft-spoken and gentle, he could whip any unruly Elk warrior to his duty and still, at fifty-seven, lead him in any battle. The Wolf had fought so hard when the soldiers struck the Cheyennes up on the Power Fork two years ago that it stopped the heart Under his arm he bore the bundle brought to the Cheyennes by Sweet Medicine very long ago, and so was selected as the dedicated one of all the tribe, the man who must always forget himself, as their culture hero had done, and remember only the people (Sandoz: 1953, 15-16).

He led a resolute party of Cheyennes from Oklahoma to Montana while Dull Knife led a splinter group of Cheyenne into virtual annihilation. He was one of four tribal chiefs of the Northern Cheyennes and a Dog soldier in his youth. He was a

revered leader and a man of absolute integrity. Though he suffered a lot at the hands of the whites, experienced sickness, hunger and the loss of his people's land, witnessed many broken promises and much killing during the journey north, Dull Knife steadfastly believed that the northern soldiers would not harm his people. Having been promised that the Northern Cheyennes would be free to return to their homeland if they were dissatisfied at the Southern Agency, Dull Knife took the leadership to return at their place. In the face of malaria, dysentery and starvation, he was determined to go north.

They both played leading role in migrating three hundred starved and weary Cheyenne people. It is really tragic that both the leaders had to witness the vanishing of culture and disappearing way of life. Mary Sandoz has excellently used this Cheyenne historical event through personal stories and experiences of the principal American Indian participants. The words chosen by Mary Sandoz are highly circumspect, but she does not side step incidents of brutality like humiliation, rape, murder, cruelty towards children and women, mutilation and infanticide. The Cheyenne's struggle to return home is an example of extreme and unpardonable duress by the dominant group.

The condition of Cheyennes was worst after the attack of U.S. Army. The first army attack on Cheyenne troop was on 13th and 14th September, 1878 at Turkey Springs. The struggle was unbearable for children and women as they were already starved and suffered from many diseases. The level of their starvation was so extreme that they started to live on buffalo and horse carcasses left behind after the fight. For hunters, it was too hard to find out enough meat for three hundred people. Young worriers started capturing wild horses to feed their exhausted mouths as they were also suffering from hunger, diseases, callous treatment and a longing to return to their own country. As the writer described:

We are sickly and dying men If we die here and go to the burial rocks, no one will speak our names. So now we go north, and if we die in battle on the way, our names will be remembered by all the people. They will tell the story and say, 'This is the place'(Sandoz: 1953, 11).

In Kansas, they were brutally harassed by cowboys and troopers. They killed many women and children. In the counterforce, the Cheyennes started to attack white settlers. The Cheyennes searched for army guns and ammunition also.

The major part focuses on the health related issues of the Cheyennes. They were not only physically but mentally and emotionally suppressed and exploited. The harsh treatment from the U.S. Government forced them to suffer from mental agony and pain. As she narrated, "Even strong ones died or turned strange, like Bear Rope"(19). About the trouble by Black Coyote, she narrated, "Some thought it was the sickness of Bear Rope growing in him" (166) .When they started their journey, they had faith that they had been promised a chance to come back but when it was not fulfilled, the group simply left. This book is a proof of their flight because they wanted to avoid the military, climbed the ladder of rivers until they reach the Platte; form where the group splits into two. Dull Knife hoped to reach their relatives on a reservation in South Dakota while the other group under Little Wolf's leadership decided to continue to Montana. Unfortunately, the Dull Knife's group was captured and was brought to Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Many Cheyennes were killed or injured because they tried to escape. Little Wolf's group remained hidden deep in the Sand hills of Nebraska during the worst weather of winter months of Nebraska. Then, they started their journey to their destination and eventually and fortunately they were given a reservation of their own. However, adverse publicity reverses the government's removal policy and the survived Cheyennes were allowed to stay in the North at present it is Montana. The book ends with an afterword description of Little Wolf's subsequent fall from his leadership and death in 1904.

Another important theme of this novel is the preservation of culture and heritage of Cheyennes. They began their flight of fifteen hundred miles to their old lands because they were mistreated, humiliated, starving and sick and also they could not think themselves away from their home country. Even during their journey, they did not give up their religion. In chapter four, when the cattle had been brought in by the hunting party, they built a large fire, danced on song and played with drums. It shows that they were struggling to preserve their culture and heritage, identity and their attempts to continue their traditional values of life and society. The systematic removal of the Native Americans from their land to Indian Territories reflects the destruction of their culture. On the surface level, it is the story of journey of Cheyennes as historical panorama while the deep reading exposes the clash of values and culture.

In short, Cheyenne Autumn exposes many social and personal issues like strong leadership quality, hardships, physical and mental suffering, obstacles in life, struggle for the survival of people as well as culture and civilization, honor and attitudes towards violence, retaliation and pardon.

In *Cheyenne Autumn*, through the characterization of Dull Knife and Little Wolf, Sandoz explored the history of conflict on the plains. The struggle of women is reflected also. The writer has narrated the role of Cheyenne women in hiding guns. As he described: "Some still kept their revolvers hidden. Black Bear's wife carried his between her breasts"(25).

The women, sometimes, dried meat and prepared skins in their temporary camp but they left it in the camp in order to escape from the cavalry. Cheyenne women also selected difficult options. Women like Buffalo Calf Road became warriors who equally participated in the fight with Cheyenne males. Women like Singing Cloud, learnt the healing ways and they realized that their traditional knowledge of healing could help to save their people is being lost. The other women faced the brutal ravishment, humiliation and abasement by U.S. Army and at last, they made awful choice between killing themselves and their children while on the other hand, they had to surrender themselves to the life of captivity. The issue of survival is important here. It was not the matter of individuals' survival but it was the matter of the survival of homeland, children and grandchildren.

The fundamental villains in Cheyenne Autumn are institutionalized social patterns : fraudulent government policies, economic opportunism and brutal and cruel racism.

Biographical element is also found in this novel. Her writing comes naturally. She has attachment with Nebraska and wrote about migration. The author in *Cheyenne Autumn* has tried to reveal the real and carefully documented account of the fortune of the Northern Cheyennes. She studied government records, newspaper accounts, memories written by Cheyennes, Indian fighters, soldiers and settlers and published works on the Cheyennes. Mari Sandoz herself was an accomplished historian who worked for the Nebraska State Historical Society. She co-edited Nebraska History – a scholarly journal. Before writing this novel the author herself had taken numerous interviews with Cheyenne who had actually taken part in Little Wolf's flight and created an epic tragedy which is more like a novel. She heard many stories of the earlier years of whites and Indians. Her purpose of writing this novel is to describe the novel from Cheyenne's point of view and has described how land, greed and broken promises turn human beings inhumane. Sandoz wishes to convey the readers what she perceived as the heroism of the Cheyennes as they struggle for freedom. The story of the Cheyenne's resistance to preserve their tribe, culture and heritage became a gigantic account of the brave, determined and dedicated people's struggle against overwhelming odds. Through the description of white and Indian, one can clearly find out that Mari Sandoz's sympathy is with Cheyennes.

Mari Sandoz got the information about Cheyenne from a number of Indian sources also. She heard some stories from old Cheyenne women when she was a child and also from her father's recollection of his conversation with Wild Hog who was the survivor of the winter. Wild Hog was the headman of the Cheyenne people who died before the birth of Mari Sandoz but she heard about his life from his father.

Mari Sandoz, through the characters of two leaders, represents two point of view that had long divided the people. Dull Knife, the elder one, believed that man's word even a white man's was inviolable, solid and fixed while the second one, Little Wolf, in his prime of fifty seven, was a pure realist and strongly believed that the white man's word was shifting and loose. The views of both of them are different. One represents the old morality while the other represents the new morality.

The element of migration is also found in this novel. The Cheyennes migrated towards their homeland and suffered many hardships during the course of their journey. Some of them became the victim of U.S. government. Some had lost their lives and after many ups and downs, only a few reached at their destination.

The struggles for recognition of the protagonists are found. In *The Cheyenne Autumn*, both the leading characters fought against U.S. army to reach again at their homeland. They both struggled with the questions of cultural identity and were dedicated in guarding the welfare of the Cheyennes.

The end of the novel is somewhat remarkable. Sandoz recounts the unhappy fates of her protagonist. Dull Knife resides at Montana with silent, sorrowful and embittered life until his death in 1883. As described here:

With his crippled, orphaned band he came to sit in this North Country that had cost so much. But the beaded lizard of his medicine dreaming, of his power to save the people, no longer hung on his breast (Sandoz: 1953, 271).

Little Wolf's last years were also painful and remorse. He was obliged to act solely for the people showing anger at the injustice done to them. He was deprived of his chief's status by the whites.

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