



Native Sovereignty and Ethnic Chauvinism in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony

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Ethnicity, Chauvinism, Native American, Indigenous, Oral Tradition

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ABSTRACT *In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Ceremony the ethnic chauvinism of the Native American community finds a literary expression through their land which is often interpreted as having a healing effect on the community. This heightened awareness of the spiritual and redemptive power of the natural and the imaginative in Ceremony—the indelible link between land and story—is focused through the novel's protagonist, Tayo, as he (re)engages with the Laguna Pueblo landscape in a specific way: "Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it." Silko, like many Native American and Indigenous writers, sees an exact and direct relationship between oral narrative forms such as myths, ceremonies, stories and land or landscape which is reinforced in her narrative.*

Like most contemporary Native American writers, Leslie Marmon Silko, an acclaimed novelist, short story writer, poet and an essayist, in her work does not merely portray Native Americans but starts with some particular Indian locality and the descriptions of the life and local issues of Native Americans. Then she elevates the ethnic problems of local character to a universal level offering some philosophical, moral, and spiritual insights into the life and fate of humanity and ways towards its betterment. Silko does not believe in an exclusive Native American aesthetics. When asked about it, she answers: "You can go and impose such differences, but I think that really strong writing springs from such depth of the psyche that there aren't such differences" (Silko 130). Silko's contribution to both the mainstream and Native American writing lies in her typically Indian perspectives on and treatment of land, language, and identity that she sees as interconnected. For Silko, land is a living entity, life-sustaining Mother Earth which nourishes, protects comforts, inspires, and gives strength. On the other hand, separation from the land – a centre, an embodiment of history and ideas – means getting lost in wilderness, destruction, that is, turning upon each other and the earth. As a Native American, the writer treats language as storytelling, and narrative as the beginning and end of all discourse. She believes in the power of the story, the power and sanctity of words to create a reality. For Silko, identity is relative. In her criticism of American individualism, she conveys the idea that identity is not a static, isolated thing, not a given, but shapes itself through relation, transgression, and exploration. In this respect, life means growth, to live is to grow, to change, to gain new insights and a broader vision. "Such a person recognizes his or her entanglement in all things. He or she is trapped in mother spider's web but can also see the pattern. As such the individual gains meaning by recognizing the pattern and valuing similarities over differences. To do otherwise is to cut ourselves off from the relations that define us" (Weaver 53). In stressing the role of tradition Silko encourages to treat it as a process rather than a static thing. In her works Silko lays a strong emphasis on the necessity and power of community which also helps to shape one's identity, stresses its importance in people's lives showing that those who reconnect to it survive and those who do not are lost.

The focal point of Silko's first and most celebrated novel *Ceremony* (1977) is a young person's – a mixeblood's – departure and coming back, his "illness" and healing, or recovery. The author highlights two phases in the hero's life, and touches upon the issues of European conquest and its detrimental ef-

fects on Indian lives, land expropriation and injustice. However, the main conflict in the novel is between two completely different paradigms rather than between the races. The novel is set in post-war (World War II) years in a small town of New Mexico where the hero, Tayo – a young war veteran returns. At the beginning of the novel, Tayo is shown as "ill" – hallucinating, despairing, dispossessed and disoriented. He feels guilty for his cousin Rocky's death in the war though he could not do anything to save him; he blames himself for the Japanese soldiers killed in the battle in the Philippines though he himself has not killed any, he mourns the death of his uncle Joshia, his mother's brother, while he was away. Tayo rages over white racism, mourns the Indians' loss of their land and everything related to it – their language, freedom, old ways, values, dignity, and self-respect. The hero suffers because of the general moral downfall that resulted from it: Indian drunkenness, thievery, prostitution, poverty, violence, despair. Tayo mourns his mother's shame in going out with white men and his resultant illegitimate birth, her desertion of him. He is wounded by his Auntie's scornful attitude to him. At home Tayo feels unwanted, unloved, and misplaced. Tayo also blames himself for the drought, for "praying the rain away" back in the jungle in the Philippines where Rocky died. Toni Flores rightly remarks that "in Tayo there is a coming together of the sickness of the land, nature, the social order, power relations, the family, and the soul" (Flores 116). Different from the white material culture, in Indian spiritual culture there are no binary oppositions as there is a strong sense of physical and spiritual interconnectedness of all things on earth where all are equal to one another. Land and people are one entity. People show deep respect to Nature which, among other things, manifests itself in their animals' rituals. For example, Tayo, Rocky and Joshia perform the ritual of the deer, after it is slain, is sprinkled over with cornmeal to feed its spirit and thus "come to die for them the following year" (Silko 51). Animals are hunted for food and not for sport as in white culture. As they feed people they should be shown respect and appreciation. The earth nourishes people, therefore it should be respected. The novel abounds in the descriptions of nature and natural phenomena: small insects, crops, harvest, cattle raising, horses, hunting, drought, rain, and all are given an equal attention. Tayo becomes almost alive and visible again in nature, in "a world of crickets and wind and cotton-wood trees" (Silko 104). In the white culture based on dichotomies there is a human dominion over nature, a destructive detachment from it. Therefore, European colonization is shown as having brought the destruction of the proper order of the universe. This idea is poetically con-

veyed in one of the many story-poems of the novel: Then they grow away from the earth/then they grow away from the sun/then they grow away from the plants and animals./ They see no life/When they look/they see only objects./The world is a dead thing for the trees and rivers are not alive/the mountains and stones are not alive./The deer and bear are objects/they see no life...They fear/They fear the world./They destroy what they fear./They fear themselves (Silko 135). After the enumeration of the disasters that will befall the pre-European world: stealing the Indians' land, killing the animals, poisoning the water, slaughtering whole tribes, bringing terrible diseases, there is a warning that this loss will destroy the rest, those who will have survived. In the novel, the "destroyed", displaced, disoriented people are represented by a group of Tayo's friends: Emo, Leroy, Harley, and Pinkie – former veterans who spend their days drinking in bars as they want to bring back that feeling when they really belonged to America. Their problem is that they belong neither to the Indian nor to the white world. As such they cannot articulate their identity. Tayo's thoughts about white people which reveal his hatred for them for what they "did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns" (Silko 203) state the present plight of many Indians: who "had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers" (Silko 204) and could do nothing about it. A sense of inferiority was imposed on them. At war the American uniform which they wore and with which they seem to have assimilated the values of the whites, entitled them to the same treatment as that of whites. They were never discriminated as Indians, white women fought over them; they got the same medals for bravery, the same flag over the coffin. This feeling of appreciation made them feel strong and gave some sort of illusory identity. All this was over with the end of the war though Emo and his cohorts deceive themselves into not seeing it. With the land they lost their Indian identity, in fact were taught to despise it as well as all the values it embodied. On the other hand, they admired the world of the whites – their big cities, neon lights – they were no longer part of. The only reason of Emo's hatred of Tayo and his jealousy is that he is part white. In the novel Christianity, or better to say, the Indians' conversion to Christianity is also viewed as responsible for their present plight – the loss of a sense of community. Auntie's reminiscences of the Indian world in the past reveal the fact that earlier the people shared the same consciousness of the community, each was responsible for the words and actions of the others. Thus, when her Little Sister, Tayo's mother, was led astray, taught of the "deplorable" ways of the Indians at school, made to feel ashamed of herself, and thus urged to leave her home by white people who "only wanted good for the Indians", her people felt that in losing her they were losing part of themselves, that they would have an equal share of humiliation and blame.

In the novel, ceremony which means life, change, and growth in opposed to witchery that treats the world as an object, a dead thing. The essence of witchery is revealed in the story-poem about a witchery contest in which a witch conjures the white destroyers by telling a story-poem about the destruction of the natural and Indian worlds as a result of their detachment from them. The witch warns: "as I tell the story/it will begin to happen" (Silko 135) showing the power of stories to make things – good or evil – come true, and the Indian belief in the power of words and the story to make a reality. Thus storytelling is the creation of the world and all things in it. Rachel Stein claims that "the white mode of thought and behavior is based upon a fatal denial of life to anything perceived as Other" (Stein 201). They deny life to nature, Native people as well as all things they do not understand, which makes them fear them. And they kill what they fear. Thus the opposition between the subject and object produces alienation, fear, and death. The final and biggest evil foretold is the atom bomb. Thus this destruction – the evil forces they are obsessed with – turns against them and results in their own destruction. The aim of witchery is to make people fear life and growth, to refuse spiritual development and collaboration with the good forces of the universe. It works to bring fear, polarization, enmity, destruction, death. It is important to note that witchery, as Silko understands it, is performed not only by white people who are merely its tools and puppets. Ceremony, which is a certain reenactment of the tradition of being at one with the natural world, the universe, and oneself must keep changing in accordance with the world if it wants to survive, it must not "resort to a binary split of white against red, new against old" (Gray 809). In Silko's understanding, change is necessary for life, because things which do not shift and grow are dead things. Tayo can fight witchery only after he realizes its essence, as to fight evil we have to know it. When he sees Emo, Leroy and Pinkie torturing Harley in Tayo's stead, he cries not because he himself was betrayed but because they were lost, because of their being tools of witchery – the destroyers. However, he refuses to use his screwdriver to kill Emo and save Harley as he refuses to be another tool of evil – witchery. Tayo conquers evil by turning away from violence and toward life and all that is life-sustaining. And this is his victory and "recovery". The novel's concluding lines: Whirling darkness/started its journey/with its witchery/and/its witchery/has returned upon it...It has stiffened/with the effects of its own witchery...It is dead for now./It is dead for now./It is dead for now./It is dead for now (Silko 261), once again demonstrate the old ancient Indian belief in the power of the story to combat evil and that we can re-create the world in the image of our stories.

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