



The Politics of Marginal Discourses: A Study of Racial/Cultural Marginalization in the Select Novels of Leslie Marmon Silko

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ABSTRACT *Europeans have always regarded their culture as superior to other cultures. They have employed this self-proclaimed cultural superiority to dominate other cultural groups in society. The colonial powers have exploited and marginalized Native Americans on the basis of their culture and race. The Europeans, who invaded their lands, employed various discursive agencies to propagate wrong information and stereotypes of the natives and their culture. Their covert political aim was to make the natives feel inferior about their own culture and life styles and to adapt European ways and accept the colonial rule as a benign civilizing act. Having aware of the power of literature the native writers now try to reclaim their culture, rehabilitate its place and deconstruct the misconceptions created by the Europeans. The present paper entitled " The Politics of Marginal Discourses: A Study of Cultural/ Racial Marginalization in the Select Novels of Leslie Marmon Silko" tries to analyze how far Leslie Marmon Silko successfully portray and protest against the cultural, racial and political oppression and marginalization of Native Americans.*

Marginalization refers to the overt actions or tendencies prevailing in human societies whereby those perceived as being without desirability or function are excluded from the prevalent systems of protection and integration, limiting their opportunities and means for survival. Marginal groups possess certain distinct physical or cultural characteristics which the dominant group uses as a reminder to suggest that the marginalized person is different from others in the society.

Culture forms an important part of every society and its members. Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (1981) defines culture as a "whole way of life" of distinct people or other social group. Culture thus includes values, beliefs, attitudes, religion, concepts about universe, material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture is concerned with the production and circulation of social meaning among the members of a society or group. An individual's culture forms an important element in determining his/ her social status and identity in society. Culture, Race and ethnicity are interlinked to each other.

Ethnicity refers to the population of human beings whose members identify with each other on the basis shared cultural heritage, ancestry, myth of origins, homeland, language and through symbolic systems such as religion, ritual, cuisine, dressing style and physical appearance. Race refers to the concept of dividing people into groups, on the basis of various set of physical characteristics which result from generic ancestry. Race refers to a group of people who share the same physical characteristics such as skin tone, hair texture, and facial features.

Different cultural groups think, feel and act differently. These differences often create problems, conflicts and misunderstandings among various cultural/racial groups. The colonizers always regarded themselves as culturally and racially superior to natives. The Europeans constructed false notions about the culture and race of native people in colonies and propagated such notions through various

discursive agencies. Such ideologically fabricated notions influenced the colonized people and made them to regard themselves racially and culturally inferior to Europeans and to accept the colonial rule. The Native Indians in America is one such marginalized group of people who face racial, cultural and political oppression and discrimination on the basis of their cultural and racial features.

Only by deconstructing the dominant discourses marginal groups can achieve their rights and respectable position in society. This shows the necessity of creating marginal discourses to voice the real situation of minorities and to ward off the baseless inferior ideas created about them. The native writers try to deconstruct misrepresentations of native cultures on the basis of cultural and racial features with the help of narrative discourse. Literature is not merely a medium of creativity for them; it is a site of resistance and alternative politics.

One important duty of marginal discourse is to present or stress the real and continuing damage inflicted on minorities. Marginal discourses are obliged to give a sustained critique of the historical conditions and institutions that continues to legitimize marginalization. Such discourses are also entailed with the positive theoretical task of recovering excluded or marginalized cultural traditions. The present paper entitled "**The Politics of Marginal Discourses: A Study of Racial/Cultural Marginalization in the Select Novels of Leslie Marmon Silko**" tries to show how far Leslie Marmon Silko has successfully employed the genre of novel to resist the various colonial discursive agencies which try to culturally, politically and economically exploit and oppress Native Americans.

Leslie Marmon Silko, one of the exponents of the Native American Literary Renaissance in the 1970's, has authored a number of novels, short stories, essays, poetry, articles and film scripts. The shared experiences of her community and her own experiences provides material for her literary works. Her works primarily focus on the alienation of Native Americans in a white society and on the importance of native traditions and community in helping them cope with

modern life. In her works she has rejected European literary paradigms and employed non-linear text and a blend of photo, sketch, verse, prayer and anecdote with traditional chronicle.

Leslie Marmon Silko's first novel *Ceremony* (1977) is the story of a half-breed war veteran Tayo's struggle for sanity after returning home from World War II. Tayo is suffering from a sort of post traumatic stress disorder which has affected him physically as well as emotionally due to the fact that he has survived as a prisoner of war in Japan. Tayo encounters racism and brutality back at the country. At the end of the novel Tayo finds peace in the Native American ceremonies with the help and wisdom of Old Betonie.

The novel continually pits the world of the white race against Indian culture. Tayo's experience as a soldier highlights this contrast. Tayo and his cousin Rocky like many other native youths joined the American army during Second World War. In the army uniform these youths were highly regarded by everyone. They felt as if they have acquired an equal status of whites in society. The white women and store owners treated Tayo well when he is in American Uniform. With the end of war situation changed. Out of uniform, Tayo and others like him are relegated to the position of second-class citizen, either ignored or insulted by the same people who had been kind before. This imposed a sense of inferiority on them. Many of them turn to alcohol, as they do not have jobs, positive relationships, or aspirations or self-identity in society to define them.

Silko illuminates the plight of bicultural people through the novel. Tayo, as a Native American, is marginalized by the hegemonic white culture. As part Mexican, he is rendered an even lower status in the Native American culture. Tayo feels unloved at home as his aunt and cousin are also ashamed of his part white illegitimate origin.

Ceremony (1977) also serves as a sort of warning to Native American peoples of the danger their culture is in. The white culture and religion poses a great threat to the native culture and traditions. Native youths like Harley, Emo and Tayo faces disillusion and inferiority complex as a result of the racist attitudes of society. They were accepted as equal to whites in society when they were in American uniform. This gives them the feeling that by accepting the culture of whites they can gain identity and respect in society. This makes them to abandon their rich cultural heritage and traditions. Unfortunately then also they had to face discrimination and at the end they turned to alcohol for consolation.

Indian tribes were matrilineal and believe that their origin as a culture stems from the female. A woman is viewed as a source which sustains and protects. With the advent of white patriarchal system among native societies the gender roles began to change. The absence of the original Indian balance between male and female and of the mutual respect and sense of equality is evident in men's sexual abuse of Indian women as well as Indian men's wish to possess white women.

Through the novel she tries to make natives remember their rich cultural heritage which can help them to lead a meaningful and successful life in future. The novel explores the redemptive powers of Native American ceremony—not just as formal ritual but as a means of conducting one's life. Only by re-establishing the proper order and harmo-

nious relations between people and nature and the inner harmony of a human being, health, happiness, long life and material well-being can be achieved. A certain ritual – a ceremony which teaches that the world is alive and in constant change can help to achieve this harmony. Tayo's, represents the "sickness" of both his people and the white world, and his "recovery" starts with his reconnection to the community and the land. Assisted by the old man Betonie – a Navajo curer who cares for the "health" of the entire Universe Tayo recovers his sanity.

Throughout the novel Silko stresses the importance of passing down and carrying on the ceremonies. Every single time ceremonies do not have to remain the same, as the differences are what make them special. Ceremonies might lose its significance if they are not willing to adapt to the time and the circumstances in which they are being played out. Silko is making the same argument for Native American cultures. Native people must adapt and adjust to the larger society in which they find themselves even while preserving and treasuring their traditions. According to Silko, being compromising and fluid is the only way to retain a traditional culture without having it face destruction.

Leslie Marmon Silko's third novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) deals with the adventures of a young Native American girl through nineteenth-century America and Europe. The novel deals with the life of a small girl Indigo and her sister Sister Salt who are members of a fictitious Indian tribe 'Sand Lizards.' The white government authorities separate Indigo and Sister Salt. Officials admit Indigo in the Indian Boarding School. Unable to bear the cruelties and beatings at Indian school, Indigo escapes from there and reaches the house of a white couple Edward and Hattie. Indigo longs to return to her native place. Indigo at last reunites with her sister with the help of Hattie at Needles and they return to their native place Old Gardens. The novel portrays the pathetic situation of Native Americans who are culturally, economically and politically marginalized by the European colonizers.

The whites have never admitted the value of native education. After the Indian wars in the nineteenth century, they established Native American boarding schools. They claimed that only western education can civilize natives. Using force they took away the native children to Indian schools. The native parents like Grandma Fleet in the novel try to hide the children from the Indian police who often come searching for children. The Indian schools are terror houses for native children. Most of the children like Indigo find it difficult to adjust and they either tried to escape from there or commit suicide. Actually the authorities are not trying to give them a good life. The students are mainly trained to serve the white people instead of making them self-sufficient. In the novel Edward hires boys from Indian schools to help his gardener in weeding and mowing.

Language provides a distinct identity for a social group. White authorities tried to impose English language on the natives through education and church authorities. The Boarding schools educated native children in English language and compelled them to reject their own native languages. This makes the senior students to tease Indigo who speaks her language at hostel.

Religion is another important feature of culture. Native American religions are not institutionalized like westerners. It is rather experimental and personal. The white invaders

established among natives that native Gods are pagan and tried to convert natives into Christianity. The government officials know that religion is a very influential element which can bind people together. They thought that conversion of natives into Christianity will ensure their obedience towards colonizers forever. At the Indian boarding schools native children are converted to Christianity.

The Native Americans, who are from another race and ethnicity, are always considered as "Other" by the whites. The Indians with their brown colored skin, long hair and different dressing style and food habits are a strange spectacle for most of the white people. The native children are known as "papooses". Sometimes white women try to take away native children by paying their parents. Indigo is also once taken away by a white woman when Grandma Fleet tries to sell handmade baskets. The timely intervention of grandma saves Indigo from her.

Gardens in the Dunes (1999) directly contrast the traditional world of Native Americans with European and American upper-class culture and deconstructs their self-proclaimed cultural superiority. In the novel she portrays the rich culture of natives through the perspectives Indigo and the follies of European culture through the perspectives of Hattie. Silko is successful in asserting that in no ways native culture is inferior to that of Europeans. She tries to say that natives are more attached to nature unlike Europeans who destroys nature for industrial progress.

Gender roles also form an important part of one's culture. Unlike the patriarchal western culture, Native Americans always give a respectable place for women in society. Women play a very important role in the life of the Native American. Grandma Fleet and Sister Salt are the best examples for this. They are self-sufficient, ready to face challenges and take their own decisions about life. In contrast Hattie who comes from the so-called civilized society is

always restrained by family and society in her pursuit towards higher studies.

Marginal discourse is a product of damage – more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by dominant culture. Leslie Marmon Silko has provided a realistic picture of racial/cultural marginalization natives' face in their own homeland. Silko has deconstructed the wrong notions and beliefs constructed about the Native American Indians through various discursive practices of western people. She is also successful in reconstructing a true perspective on the native's life and their rich cultural heritage and traditions. All these features draws strengthens the view that Silko has successfully explored the full defamiliarizing capacity of literature as a discourse to question and deconstruct the claims of the dominant European culture which rules over others through various discursive agencies.

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