

Territorial Chauvinism and Indian Ethos in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony



English Literature

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the themes of territorial chauvinism and Indian value system in the novel Ceremony. The concept of "land" is central to the understanding of American Indian literature and the same has been reflected in this novel. The protagonist of the novel Tayo undergoes several trials and tribulations and finally emerges victorious. Silko in this novel speaks of the need for telling stories for keeping the native culture alive. Story telling is a sacred duty of every American Indian and the same has to be transmitted to the posterity. The idea of resistance to the White culture is clearly discernible in the novel.

In an essay entitled "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," Silko discusses the impact of the decision in the early 1950s to begin open-pit mining of the huge uranium deposits north of Laguna: "I was a child when the mining began and the apocalyptic warning stories were being told. I have lived long enough to begin hearing the stories which verify the earlier warnings" (510). The Laguna response to this devastation of the landscape was to include it in their stories, thus ensuring its memory: "By its very ugliness and by the violence it does to the land, the Jackpile Mine insures that from now on it, too, will be included in the vast body of narratives which make up the history of the Laguna people" (511). There are two strands of thought in Silko's analysis of the mines that provide a basis for reading Ceremony. On the one hand is the devastation of the land; on the other, the continuation of the story, and thus the land itself. If apocalypse suggests the destruction of the earth and the unraveling of the Pueblo culture, the story is that which will hold it together. Ceremony thus represents a site of warfare between the destruction of the world by the colonizers and the appropriation of these very weapons through the stories of the colonized. This is not to say that the Laguna Indians appropriate Euro-American weapons for the purpose of destruction, but rather that the effects of nuclear development must be included in the story. The story becomes, in this way, a sort of territorial remembering or etching on the earth. The radioactive dust that settles upon the narrative in Ceremony threatens to destroy the story, and thus the world. The challenge in Ceremony, therefore, is to find a way to reincorporate, and thus disarm, this very threat. The idea of process as a method of understanding is reflected in the Laguna tradition of the story, which serves to tie the people and territory together and build narrative simultaneously with community. The Laguna story radically redefines traditional notions of authorship and reader-response. As Bonnie TuSmith suggests, "When the novel is viewed as a process rather than as a finite product it incorporates the reader into the text" (123). Silko also defines the reader's role as being caught up in the community of the storyteller: "I realize now how the telling at Laguna was meant to prevent the withdrawal and isolation at times like these" (121). The story is that which keeps people together during difficult times - it is a weapon to use against stasis and isolation. Stories in Laguna culture bind people - and the world - together as a means of preserving life, for if stasis is death so is the atomization or dissolution of the community. As William Bevis explains the Laguna perspective, "Individuality is not even the scene of success or failure; it is nothing" (102). While the Euro-American tradition generally associates the rise of the author with the rise of the individual, Silko's work radically dissociates from this tradition. Her narrative is one of accretion, building upon the narratives of her community, and thus presenting the apocalyptic vision that the Jackpile Mine brought to Laguna and incorporating it into their myths. Silko initially displaces individualist notions of authorship by

attributing the Ceremony tale to Thought-Woman, the mythic creator of the universe, while presenting herself as a mere transcriber of the tale. TuSmith explains, "This arrangement forgoes individual ownership of the text in the Eurocentric sense. At the outset of the novel, then, the author places herself within a communal context of shared authorship. The story belongs to everyone" (122). Silko also shapes a communal identity through a complex system of incorporating white signification back into the narrative. In this sense, the reader - who may be white - is forced to participate in a Laguna narrative, thus disarming the "witchery" itself. Silko writes in Ceremony, "Witches crawl into skins of dead animals, but they can do nothing but play around with object and bodies" (131). Witches are able to enclose themselves in static formations, magically separating themselves from life. Betonie says to Tayo, "Things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are the things the witchery people want" (126). Translating this into white culture, the witchery could be called the reified image, or that which is separated from its referent. It thus precludes growth or knowledge and, culturally, involves the erasure of a process-oriented people and the establishment of reified structures of meaning. Betonie claims in Ceremony that the witchery does not come from the white people, but rather they themselves are manifestations of this witchcraft. Therefore the cure must be "inclusive of everything" - or, as Silko explains, "A great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (57). Ceremony does not allow the reader to sit back passively and absorb the narrative; indeed, the narrative offers itself as a cure for which the reader is in need. Just as the traditional author is the active but separate individual, so the traditional reader is the passive but separate individual - and the means to separation is that third term, narrative. This is why Silko claimed in an oral presentation that Laguna people are generally suspect of writing, because it separates the speaker from the listener. The reader, in this sense, could be called the "dead object" that absorbs narration - he or she is the private subject that sits in a room and reads about something other than real life. The cure, then, is affected by the reincorporation of the private subject into the narrative. Ceremony further requires that the reader take an active role through its non-chronological narration; it presents itself as a spatial and chronological enigma in need of understanding or ordering. The landscape of Ceremony is a teeming space of tangles, flows, and webs. It is non-linear and fragmented and fluctuates between native legend and modern novel. For this reason it is difficult even to summarize the plot of Ceremony. Ostensibly, a Laguna Indian has returned from World War II with "shell shock" problems, an illness that he attempts to cure throughout the narrative. Tayo is sent to white doctors, a medicine man, a woman healer, and so on. On his journeys he crosses many territorial boundaries that signify shifts in Indian identity. At the same time he struggles with friends also returned from the war (Emo, Leroy, and Pinkie) who

are suffering under their own illness: alcoholism. In the dramatic conclusion these friends torture Emo, and Tayo refuses to participate. This refusal has been called a "hopeful" ending for a peaceful Indian future.⁵ However, I would suggest that Indian non-violence is far from the moral of Ceremony. Instead, the narrative uses the ultimate signifier of violence - nuclear holocaust - to invoke a new global community, thus weaving even this destructive element back in the narrative. Violence is not something that can be avoided or put in the past, but rather something for which one must find a name to include in the narrative. Ceremony thus describes two narratives that spread throughout the world: the story and the bomb. The question, then, is which one will win.

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