

Relocating Culture in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract: *In her novel, Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko illustrates the many paradoxes of American culture, values, and history. While Tayo grapples with his own internal struggles, the struggles of America are revealed through Silko's writing. America's perception of and relationship with Native Americans are detailed through Tayo's experiences of biculturalism. America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, blatantly discriminates and devalues its true native citizens. Furthermore, America's ideal of bravery is tested. Not only are Native American soldiers dying for the country that seized their land, but one is led to rethink the traditional American ideal of bravery. The paradoxical nature of the American tradition of recording history is also evident within Ceremony as Silko introduces the Native American values attached to the importance of oral tradition. While history sustains Native American culture, Americans often either discredit or manipulate history to justify its actions. Thus, this Nativity captures the unique experience of non-linear storytelling to the degree that Silko advocates in Ceremony.*

The Native American tradition of oral history is not meant to be read or understood in a linear fashion. Therefore the present research paper; while highlighting the core or the content essentially featured with the aspect of interconnectedness. Which is the aspect of the paradoxical nature of American society? The history of Native Americans and their struggle with the American government have been incredibly bleak. Native American cultures as fictionalized by the writers like Momaday, Silko and James Welch. This historical culture is the construct of native life style, narrative techniques, the collective consciousness and rich oral tradition. These aspects are important because the entry of Europeans brought so many cultural differences in the lives of all kinds of the ethnic groups by replacing indigenous languages with the colonizer's language and by Christianizing the masses at the physical and mostly ideological level. As Elvira Pulitano points out, "*Native American literature is a product of cultural hybridity aims at developing a separatist form of discourse*". 1

Ceremony is set on Laguna Pueblo reservation where Silko grew up. *Pueblo Indians* refers to the group of Native Americans, including Hopi, Zuni, and Laguna, from the Pueblo crescent, which runs from central New Mexico through northeastern Arizona. The Laguna Reservation lies between Albuquerque and Los Alamos, New Mexico. The Pueblos first came into contact with whites in the 16th century when the Spanish settled in the area. All of Silko's work draws on her personal experience as a Native American. As she often points out in interviews, Native American culture is passed on through a profoundly communal process of storytelling. Silko bases her work on traditional Native American stories, using narrative techniques that emphasize their communal aspects, even in books authored by one woman. The oral nature of traditional Native American storytelling ensures that each version will be slightly changed, and updated. In this spirit, she affirms in interviews, Silko's works are a continuation, not a reinterpretation, of the traditional stories. *Ceremony* features the three most important figures in Pueblo mythology, Thought Woman, Corn Mother, and Sun Father both in their traditional stories and in updated versions. The motifs is on-linear narrative structure; combination of poetry and prose. Tayo, the main character in *Ceremony*, is also a figure in traditional Laguna stories. After spending several months recovering from injuries sustained during his captivity at a Veteran Hospital in Los Angeles. Tayo returns home to his family's home at Laguna Pueblo. Tayo suffers from increasing mental instability and turns to alcoholism to escape his inner turmoil. Tayo eventually turns to traditional Pueblo spirituality and ceremony as a source of healing. All of Silko's works demonstrate her concern with the preservation of Native American culture, including traditions, languages, and natural resources, in combination with an awareness of the reality of cultural miscegenation (mixing). Tayo embodies the confluence of Native American and white cultures, both present in his ancestry, and in his experience, which brings him from the reservation, to the US army, to the Philippines, to a Veteran's Hospital, and back to the reservation. Carrying the signs of the cultural mixing in his green eyes often makes Tayo bear the brunt of a whole society's confusion at the ways in which the world is changing. Especially since he never knew his father and was abandoned by his mother at the age of four, Tayo encounters great difficulty in negotiating his mixed identity and experience. This is exacerbated by his Auntie who raises him with the constant reminder of his difference. Like most of his peers, Tayo is educated in white-run schools. Unlike his friends, however, he often finds the white ways of life faulty and continues to respect and to believe in

the Native American traditions he learns from his family as well. Tayo is prepared to serve as a bridge between the older and younger generations of Native Americans.

World War II interrupts Tayo's life, as it does to most Americans of his generation. He comes of age on the battlefield, amidst tremendous death and destruction. His awareness of the connections among of all people and all things makes it incredibly difficult for Tayo to kill in a war he does not understand, in a place far from his home. The majority of the Native American men who return from World War II drown their trauma in alcohol, full of confused anger. Tayo, however, is more sad than angry. Painfully aware of the ways in which Native Americans were and are mistreated by whites, Tayo is not interested in glorifying his time in the army. These characteristics allow him to respond to the help the medicine men Ku'oosh and Betonie offer.

His lifelong desperation to belong in his family and his community, along with his deep seated belief in the power of the old traditions, allow Tayo to take up the challenge offered by Betonie and to undertake the completion of the ceremony, which can cure both himself and his people. Although he often falters along the path, Tayo's acceptance of the Native American mythical world allows him to benefit from the aid of accidents, animals, spirits, and the elements. .

“By virtue of his status as an outcaste who, at the same time, is one of the Laguna people in his heart, he is able to suffer the ritual and dissolution. Only total annihilation of the mundane self could produce a magic man of sufficient power to carry off the ceremony that Tayo is embroiled in”.²

Tayo returns home from the war both sick with malaria and deeply troubled on an emotional level. His stay with the Veterans' Hospital does to help with the latter problem once home, as soon as he is well enough to get out of the bed, Tayo's Grandma arranges for him to see the medicine man, Ku'oosh. The ceremony begins by repeating to Tayo the names and locations of the places that are sacred to Laguna, and the basis of their understanding of the world. With Spider Woman as one of the most important figures in Pueblo mythology, the metaphor of the web is most appropriate for describing their world-view. Throughout the novel, animals and plants serve as symbol of the deep connection the Pueblo people have with the

natural world. Although the entire novel is written in English, we have been informed that in this section Ku'oosh speaks to Tayo "using the old dialect." Although we read English words, it is insisted upon that these are only a translation of the original language in which Ku'oosh's words are uttered. In addition, in that language the particular choice of individual words is of prime importance. As this is insisted on, the reader is reminded that although we can read and understand *Ceremony*, it does not offer us complete access to every element either of the original story or, more significantly, of Laguna culture.

Betonie had explained to Tayo that in order to cure the new illnesses, new ceremonies were needed and that since the illnesses included the influence of the whites, the ceremonies would also need to make use of objects from the whites. The uranium mine represents this element. It represents the relationship of the whites to the earth. They think that they can take possession of it, take what they need from it, and then leave it, without offering anything in return and without completing any ceremonies. As Tayo incorporates the abandoned mine into his ceremony, he reincorporates that part of land, and symbolically all of the land that the whites have claimed, into the Native American tradition and into the reservation.

Tayo is performing the ceremony not only for himself, but also for all of the men who went to the war and for all of his people who are affected by the contact between different cultures and who are afflicted by the drought. He is not, however, able to save everyone. In order to complete the ceremony, Tayo must also accept that a certain element of loss is a part of life. He must not become completely dispirited by the failure of Harley and Leroy to stand up for him in the face of Emo, and he must stand by while Harley is tortured to death. This latter is almost too much for him. But just when he is about to give in, the natural elements come to his aid, reminding him that the people and the community he now belongs to include the animals, the earth, and the elements, which will always be with him.

Although we do not see the rain return to the Laguna land, we know that it will through the parallel that has been established with the story of Hummingbird and Fly. Since they complete their ceremony and see the rain return, we know that the same will happen for Tayo. Although Tayo had to go out and meet another medicine man and make use of many things from outside of the Laguna tradition, he ends his ceremony with Ku'oosh and the elders of his home

town. Everything in the novel comes full circle with this return, and the last three lines of the book repeat the first line, corresponding to Tayo's comment on the first morning he woke up with Ts'eh that "the Dawn people began and ended all their words with 'sunrise'.

References: -

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