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## Strategies of Survival in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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### **Abstract:**

*Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony stands as a seminal work in Native American literature, exploring survival amidst post-war trauma, cultural upheaval, and environmental degradation in the Laguna Pueblo community. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the novel intricately weaves historical threads into the narrative, using the character Tayo to delve into the psychological toll of war and the broader challenges faced by indigenous communities caught between tradition and modernity. Silko's masterful storytelling unveils a nuanced struggle for survival that extends beyond physical needs, emphasizing the imperative of preserving cultural identity in the face of external pressures and the encroachment of Western influences.*

**Keywords:** *Survival, cultural disintegration, storytelling, ceremony and native spirituality*

### **Introduction:**

Leslie Marmon Silko, a prominent Native American writer of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and Anglo-American heritage, has made an indelible mark on the landscape of contemporary American literature. Throughout her career, Silko has skillfully woven narratives that delve into the intricate tapestry of Native American life, culture, and spirituality. Her novels, including the groundbreaking *Ceremony* and the critically acclaimed *Almanac of the Dead*, are characterized by a profound exploration of identity, the impact of colonialism, and the intersection of traditional indigenous wisdom with the modern world. Silko's writing, deeply rooted in her own cultural background, reflects a commitment to preserving and revitalizing Native American traditions while addressing the pressing issues faced by indigenous communities. Through her evocative prose and rich storytelling, Silko invites readers to contemplate the enduring themes of resilience, interconnectedness, survival and the enduring power of cultural heritage in the face of social and environmental challenges.

Silko's novel *Ceremony* stands as a seminal work within the canon of Native American literature, offering a profound exploration of survival amidst the intricate tapestry of post-war trauma, cultural upheaval, and environmental degradation. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the novel delves into the repercussions of the conflict on the Laguna Pueblo community in the American Southwest. Silko paints a vivid picture of a community grappling with the devastating consequences of war, as its young men return home forever changed by the horrors they witnessed and participated in. The protagonist, Tayo, embodies the collective trauma experienced by the Laguna people, and his personal journey becomes a microcosm of the larger challenges faced by the community.

The historical context of World War II is pivotal in understanding the depth of the survival theme in *Ceremony*. The war becomes a crucible that not only tests the mettle of nations but also leaves an indelible mark on the individuals who participate in it. The impact reverberates across continents and cultures, reaching even the remote and seemingly insulated Laguna Pueblo. Silko skillfully weaves the historical threads into the narrative, underscoring how global events can disrupt the delicate balance of traditional ways of life, compelling communities to adapt and survive in the face of profound change.

Tayo, the novel's central character, serves as a poignant lens through which the theme of survival is refracted. Having fought in the war, Tayo returns home haunted by the memories of battle, struggling to reintegrate into a society that seems simultaneously familiar and alien. His journey encapsulates the psychological and emotional toll of war, showcasing the profound challenges of surviving not just physically but also spiritually and culturally. "So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah; and even after Rocky started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was still Josiah lying there" (25). Tayo's personal struggles become emblematic of the broader plight of indigenous communities, caught between the forces of modernity and the imperative to preserve their cultural heritage.

The aftermath of World War II becomes a catalyst for a cultural disintegration that permeates the Laguna Pueblo community. The encroachment of Western influences, coupled with the trauma of war, threatens the survival of traditional values and practices. Silko paints a nuanced picture of the tension between the old and new ways of life, illustrating how the struggle for survival extends beyond the immediate physical needs to encompass the preservation of cultural identity. As the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that the survival of the Laguna people is intricately linked to their ability to reconcile the ancient wisdom of their traditions with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

The theme of survival in *Ceremony* extends beyond the individual and encompasses the broader cultural context of the Laguna Pueblo community. The novel artfully navigates the

challenges posed by the encroachment of Western influences, portraying the erosion of traditional values and the clash between old and new ways of life. This exploration is pivotal in understanding the multifaceted nature of survival for indigenous communities, particularly the Laguna people, as they grapple with the complexities of preserving their cultural identity amidst external pressures. The Laguna Pueblo community, deeply rooted in its rich cultural heritage, finds itself at a crossroads as the post-war era brings with it the inexorable march of Western influences. The encroachment is not just physical but permeates the very fabric of the community's existence, challenging its core values and threatening the continuity of age-old traditions. Silko crafts a narrative that underscores the delicate balance between adaptation and preservation, as the Laguna people navigate the turbulent waters of change.

One of the primary challenges faced by the Laguna Pueblo community is the erosion of traditional values. The introduction of Western ideologies, fuelled by the aftermath of World War II, disrupts the symbiotic relationship the community has with its land, ancestors, and spiritual practices. The novel paints a vivid picture of the clash between the ancestral wisdom of the Laguna people and the external forces seeking to reshape their worldview. The survival of the community hinges on its ability to withstand this cultural erosion, requiring a delicate dance between adaptation and the unwavering preservation of essential values. The clash between the old and new ways of life is a central theme that permeates the narrative, mirroring the broader struggles of indigenous communities worldwide. Silko depicts the tension between the traditional Laguna worldview, grounded in a profound connection to nature and ancestral spirits, and the encroaching Western paradigm that seeks to impose its own values and norms. This clash is not merely ideological but has tangible consequences for the daily lives of the Laguna people, as they grapple with issues such as land ownership, resource utilization, and the preservation of sacred sites.

Tayo, as the novel's protagonist, embodies this internal conflict within the Laguna community. His mixed heritage and experiences in the war intensify his struggle to reconcile the traditional practices of his Laguna upbringing with the external influences that have shaped his worldview. “ He remembered how the white men who were building the new highway through Laguna had pointed at him. They had elbowed each other and winked. He never forgot that, and finally, years later, he understood what it was about white men and Indian women: the disgrace of Indian women who went with them. And during the war Tayo learned about white women and Indian men” (63). Tayo becomes a microcosm of the broader cultural clash, emphasizing that survival is not only about physical existence but also about maintaining the cultural and spiritual integrity that defines a community.

To survive cultural erosion, the Laguna people engage in a delicate dance of adaptation while fiercely holding onto their core values. Traditional ceremonies, rituals, and storytelling emerge as

essential tools for cultural preservation. Silko portrays these ceremonies not as relics of a bygone era but as living, dynamic forces that evolve to meet the challenges of the present. Through the narrative, readers witness the transformative power of ceremonies, which serve as a means of cultural resistance, healing, and community cohesion. The survival of the Laguna Pueblo community, therefore, is intrinsically linked to its ability to navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation without losing the essence of its identity. The novel challenges the dichotomy between tradition and change, presenting a nuanced perspective that recognizes the need for adaptation while emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural roots. In doing so, Silko prompts readers to reflect on the broader implications of cultural survival, urging them to consider the delicate balance required when facing the inevitability of change.

The erosion of traditional values and the clash between old and new ways of life, as depicted in *Ceremony*, offer a poignant commentary on the challenges faced by indigenous communities globally. Silko's narrative transcends the specific historical and cultural context of the Laguna Pueblo to resonate with the universal struggle for cultural survival. It invites readers to contemplate the impact of external influences on cultural identity, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the survival of indigenous knowledge, traditions, and ways of life. *Ceremony* transcends the conventional boundaries of survival, extending the theme beyond the realm of human experience to intricately weave in the delicate balance between humanity and the natural environment. Silko's portrayal of the ecological dimensions of survival emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings. Through vivid depictions of the southwestern landscape and the spiritual significance attributed to the natural world by the Laguna people, Silko crafts a narrative that underscores the profound symbiosis between human survival and the well-being of the environment.

Silko's portrayal of the natural environment in *Ceremony* is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic, living entity with agency and resonance. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of the southwestern landscape, where the earth, sky, and mountains become active participants in the characters' lives. The land is not a passive setting but an integral part of the narrative, influencing and being influenced by the struggles of the Laguna people. The survival of both individuals and the community is intricately tied to the well-being of the land, emphasizing the reciprocity between humanity and nature.

Central to this ecological exploration is the concept of 'hozho,' a Navajo term that encapsulates the harmonious balance and beauty inherent in all aspects of life. Silko borrows and adapts this concept, weaving it into the fabric of the Laguna Pueblo's worldview. Hozho becomes a guiding principle for survival, not just for individuals but for the entire community. The characters' connection to the land is not solely utilitarian; it is a spiritual relationship that acknowledges the

interconnectedness of all living beings and the cyclical rhythms of nature. Silko's narrative vividly illustrates how the characters in *Ceremony* navigate the challenges posed by an environment undergoing transformation. The post-war era brings not only cultural disintegration but also environmental changes, with the landscape reflecting the scars of human activity. The survival of the Laguna people is now intricately tied to the regeneration and healing of the land. This ecological dimension of survival prompts readers to consider the broader implications of environmental degradation and the responsibility of humanity to maintain the delicate balance of the natural world.

Tayo, the protagonist, embodies this interconnectedness between human and environmental survival. His journey is not only a quest for personal healing but also a pilgrimage to restore hozho to the land. The novel portrays Tayo's deep connection to nature, his ability to communicate with animals, and the spiritual guidance he receives from the natural world. Tayo's experiences underscore the idea that survival is not a solitary endeavour; it is a collaborative effort that involves humans, animals, and the land working in harmony. The Laguna people's reliance on the natural world extends beyond mere sustenance; it encompasses the spiritual and cultural dimensions of survival. Traditional ceremonies, deeply rooted in the earth and its cycles, become a means of restoring balance and harmony. Silko portrays ceremonies as acts of reciprocity, where the Laguna people express gratitude to the land for its sustenance and seek guidance for their own survival. The ceremonial rituals serve as a bridge between the human and natural realms, highlighting the interconnectedness that defines the Laguna worldview.

Silko's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all living beings challenges the conventional dichotomy between humanity and nature. In *Ceremony*, survival is not a competition for resources but a shared journey where the well-being of one is inseparable from the well-being of all. The novel prompts readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment, urging them to recognize the consequences of disrupting the delicate balance that sustains life. Through the Laguna people's reverence for nature, Silko invites readers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of survival and the responsibility of humans to act as stewards of the earth.

The novel's ecological exploration extends beyond the physical landscape to encompass the spiritual and metaphysical realms. Silko introduces mythical elements that blur the boundaries between the human and natural worlds. Characters like the 'tsegihi,' spiritual beings associated with mountains, embody the idea that survival is not confined to the material plane but involves a harmonious coexistence between the seen and unseen forces that shape the universe. This blending of the mythic and the earthly reinforces the novel's message about the interconnectedness of all life forms and the necessity of recognizing the spiritual dimensions of survival. Tayo recalls the words of Josiah telling him "This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going.... These dry years you hear some people complaining,

you know, about the dust and the wind, and how dry it is. But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky. You don't swear at them. It's people, see. They're the ones. The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave" (55). The novel places traditional ceremonies at the heart of its narrative, underscoring their profound significance in facilitating survival on both individual and communal levels. Through vibrant and evocative portrayals, Silko weaves a narrative that illustrates the transformative power of ceremonies, portraying them as living entities that bridge the gap between the spiritual and material worlds. The novel unfolds in the aftermath of World War II, a period marked by unprecedented challenges for the Laguna Pueblo community. The psychological scars of war, coupled with the encroachment of Western influences, threaten the very fabric of Laguna cultural identity. In this turbulent context, traditional ceremonies emerge as vital tools for survival. Silko presents these rituals not as mere vestiges of a bygone era but as dynamic forces that evolve to meet the challenges of the present.

One of the central ceremonies in the novel is the Kiva ceremony, a sacred ritual that holds immense cultural and spiritual significance for the Laguna people. The Kiva, an underground chamber where ceremonies take place, becomes a symbolic space where the community comes together to reaffirm its connection to the earth, ancestors, and spiritual forces. Silko's vivid descriptions immerse the reader in the sensory experience of the ceremony, capturing the rhythmic beats of drums, the scent of burning herbs, and the visual spectacle of masked dancers. The Kiva ceremony becomes a sanctuary where individuals find solace, community members bond, and the collective resilience of the Laguna people is reaffirmed. It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and the time of day; they asked about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes. It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that he noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the sun.

A'moo'oooh, you say you have seen her

Last winter

up north

with Mountain Lion

the hunter

All summer

she was south

near Acu

They started crying

the old men started crying

“A'moo'oooh! A'moo'oooh!”

You have seen her

We will be blessed

again. (233)

Tayo, the novel's protagonist, embarks on a transformative journey that is intricately connected to traditional ceremonies. Haunted by the trauma of war and cultural disintegration, Tayo turns to the rituals of his people as a pathway to healing. Silko skillfully portrays Tayo's participation in the ceremonies as a process of self-discovery and restoration. The ceremonial rites, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Laguna community, become a source of solace for Tayo, offering a space where he can confront his inner demons and navigate the complex terrain of post-war survival.

The importance of storytelling within the ceremonies becomes another avenue through which cultural preservation is achieved. Through oral traditions, myths, and legends, the Laguna people pass on their history, values, and beliefs. "In the act of telling a story the listener participates in that reality. ...The characters and events of the narrative are experientially encountered" (Frey 129). For Silko skillfully integrates these storytelling elements into the fabric of the ceremonies, portraying them as a living archive of the community's collective memory. The survival of these stories becomes synonymous with the survival of Laguna culture, reinforcing the idea that traditional ceremonies are not static relics but dynamic processes that sustain and rejuvenate the cultural identity of the community. The stories are important and that they are reality:

It is the stories that grant order and form to the flow of events, and these stories codify meaning in such a way that the listener or reader can understand events in the world around him. Only when the reader understands the meaning of events can he act in an effective manner. But to do so, it is essential that the reader understands that the stories and reality in the novel are one. (Rupert 78-85)

The novel also explores the notion of ritual as a means of connecting with the spiritual forces that govern the natural world. Silko introduces the idea that ceremonies are not isolated events but part of a larger cosmic dance that involves the earth, sky, and ancestral spirits. "Unlike Western rhetorics that privilege product over process and discourse over silence, that assign to the speaker/writer responsibility for meaning-making, Native American rhetorics are listener Responsible" (Hindman 6). The interconnectedness between the human and spiritual realms is vividly portrayed through the characters' interactions with mythical beings and the natural environment.

The novel intricately weaves a narrative that not only explores the individual struggles of its characters but also delves into the symbiotic relationship between personal journeys and communal

survival within the Laguna Pueblo community. At the heart of this exploration is the protagonist, Tayo, whose personal journey mirrors the broader challenges faced by the Laguna people. Tayo returns from World War II deeply scarred, not only by the physical ravages of war but by the psychological toll of loss and displacement. Silko crafts Tayo's character as a microcosm of the community's struggle for survival, emphasizing that individual healing is an essential catalyst for the revitalization of cultural practices and the overall well-being of the Laguna Pueblo.

Tayo's quest for healing becomes a focal point for understanding the reciprocity between individual and communal survival. His internal struggles, shaped by war-induced trauma and cultural disintegration, serve as a metaphor for the wider challenges faced by the Laguna community. Tayo's journey is not only one of personal redemption but also a transformative process that resonates with the collective consciousness of his people. Silko portrays the interconnectedness between Tayo's healing and the community's resilience through the lens of traditional ceremonies. As Tayo engages with these rituals to overcome the haunting memories of war and find a sense of purpose, the communal impact becomes evident. The Kiva ceremonies, in particular, act as a conduit for both individual and collective healing. Tayo's participation in these rituals not only facilitates his personal transformation but also contributes to the communal energy that sustains the Laguna Pueblo.

The reciprocity between Tayo's healing and the revitalization of cultural practices is further exemplified through his connection with spiritual figures and the natural world. Tayo's encounters with the mythical 'tsegihi' and his ability to communicate with animals highlight the novel's exploration of the harmonious interplay between the seen and unseen forces that shape the universe. Tayo also recollects, "Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened...and he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school—that long long ago things had been different, and human beings could understand what the animals said, and once the Gambler had trapped the storm clouds on his mountaintop" (93). Through Tayo's personal journey, Silko suggests that individual healing is inseparable from the restoration of the cultural and spiritual fabric of the community.

In conclusion, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* stands as a literary masterpiece that intricately weaves together the threads of survival, trauma, and cultural resilience. Through the rich tapestry of characters, ceremonies, and the interconnectedness of individual and communal journeys, the novel offers profound insights into the complexities of survival faced by the Laguna Pueblo community in the aftermath of World War II. The exploration of individual healing, cultural preservation, and the reciprocity between the two unveils a nuanced understanding of how personal odysseys contribute to the collective well-being of a community. *Ceremony* transcends its specific cultural and historical context to make a timeless contribution to the broader discourse on survival, inviting readers to contemplate the universal themes of trauma, resilience, and the intricate dance

between tradition and change.

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