

The Politics of Resistance and Representation: A Critical Study of *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

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"In most places, the original inhabitants who... grouped themselves into separate cultural units (i.e. ethnicity) all but disappeared after contact, wiped out physically by disease and abuse, and later, genetically and socially by miscegenation, and lastly, culturally, by the religious and political practices of the European and their mixed paradigm."

~ J. Jorge Klor de

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the key figures in American Indian Literature. Silko's transcontinental vision and cross-cultural perspective underscore the viability of tribal world view in the postmodern world. She blends western forms such as the novel and short-story with the oral traditions of the Laguna people in order to communicate tribal concepts of time, nature and spirituality, and to examine the relevance of these concepts in the present. For her, literature is an extension of an oral tradition based on the power of the words to maintain a sense of as Native American tribal and community culture. Although nostalgia and a sense of loss haunts her stories, yet they frequently end on an optimistic note for a better future where diverse ethnic groups have learned to respect each other's unique lifestyles.

The resistance of natives to colonial and settler domination was prominent at the national level as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, the terms employed in postcolonial debates, "decolonization," "nationalism," or "national culture," when employed in the context of tribal resurgence in the U.S., are not to be thought of as referring to any actual temporal or geographical boundaries that have been altered. Instead, the terms are employed with respect to the more generalized cultural and psychological dimensions of the process. Thus, decolonization and cultural nationalism point to anti-colonial sentiments and cultural resistance on the part of the native communities who were dispossessed of their lands, and made victims of sustained internal colonialism. Understanding decolonization historically, one of the strongest modes of resistance to imperial control has been the idea of "nation". Frantz Fanon argues that a nation has to be fostered in order to legitimize the claims of a nation in the post-colonial struggle. Frantz Fanon developed the term "the native intellectual" for the educated middle class natives who end up in their efforts to find a real and imagined value in the ethnic culture that preceded colonization ("On National Culture" 170). Such efforts are made by the "native man of culture" to give the past a value that has been obscured by colonialism (178). Fanon also provides a paradigm which explains the evolution of national consciousness among the natives. Fanon's evolutionary schema recognizes three distinct

phases: the assimilationist phase, in which "the native intellectual" gives proof that he has assimilated the hegemonic culture; the cultural-nationalist phase, in which the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity, and resists attempts at assimilation; and the nationalist phase or the fighting phase, in which the "native man of culture," "... after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people will on the contrary shake the people" (178). Of the three phases, the last and decisive phase of resuscitation of past literary modes, is a defense mechanism by native intellectuals "... to shrink away from [the] Western culture in which they all risk being swamped" (168). In short, in his analysis, cultural action cannot be detached from the larger struggle for the liberation of the nation.

When the novel opens we find Tayo lost in a confused state: "For a long time he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital, because white smoke had no consciousness of itself" (14). The trauma faced by Tayo has its roots in the sense of hollowness which is both physical and spiritual. His past full of disturbing memories haunts him. The miserable death of Rocky in the endless rain in the jungle and his fruitless efforts to pull the trigger to kill the Japanese soldiers are the continuous part of his memories. His memories are entangled and he is unable to place things in proper perspective: "He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket..." (6). The memory plays a seminal role in the identity formation, for belonging and placing things in a proper perspective. The importance of remembrance has been pointed out by Vizenor for Indians in relation to their identity and for places to have a meaning. The things which happened at a place gave an identity to it and remembered in history by means of ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. The stories serve as the source of fundamental source of resistance to white colonization and aid the Natives to claim ownership of their confiscated lands. He states, "Tribal imagination, experience, and remembrance, are the real landscapes in the literature of this nation; discoveries and dominance are silence" (10). White ideologies colonize literary works by means of obliterating the remembered stories of the past.

The consciousness of Native people was bifurcated into two worlds i.e. the depiction of their Indian roots and the other of white aspirants. Silko draws such confused state in the depiction of such characters as Auntie, Emo, Tayo's mother Laura, Helen Jean, Leroy, Harley and Pinkie. These Natives assimilated the colonial perspectives and ponder upon their native roots with these modernized colonial spectacles as an

inferior culture. The disruptions and imbalances caused by the inferiority complex lead to the violent behavior of assimilated Native like Emo whereas Laura and Helen Jean try to look “like white woman” (69). Auntie encaptured by the Christian values, denounces native religions and beliefs as inferior and embraces the catholic concepts of sin, guilt and suffering. She cherishes the image of herself as a sufferer and a martyr (29-30). She had internalized the Christian understanding colored by colonial underpinnings and experienced immense shame at what Laura had done. Then she tries to transfer feelings of shame from herself to Tayo whom she sees as a manifestation of the shame as Tayo is the hybrid product of colonization of Indians at the hands of the whites. Emo’s hatred for Tayo is yet another manifestation of this internalized psychological colonization for Tayo being a mixed blood and abuses him in rage.

The Native men felt heroism and self-validation in bedding a superior white woman (55) and interpreted the Indian woman’s intercourse with a white man as emasculation of their male Indian selves, a representation of colonial disempowerment and dispossession. Consequently, it is not surprising that such a discourse results in a fear of confronting hybridity. Thus, Tayo with his hybrid identity was forced to feel alienated and psychological disturbed. Initially, Tayo was unable to trace the reasons of his being disliked and says to Night swan, “I always wished I had dark eyes like other people. When they look at me they remember things that happened” (Silko 1977:99). But she explains to him:

They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing. ...They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what has happened inside themselves. (Silko 1977: 100)

The colour of Tayo’s eyes are the representative of hybridity in the narrative. Both Betonie and the Mexican dancer (Night Swan), share this character with Tayo. Clearly, Silko prioritizes hybrid identity discourse by portraying hybrid identities like Tayo, Betonie and Night Swan in positive terms and the pure bloods like Emo and Rocky as failures. On similar terms, the Indian ceremony performed along the more traditional, tribal lines by Ku’oosh fails to cure, whereas Betonie’s modified ceremony succeeds.

Tayo’s confused memory is his failure to fuse the corpus of Laguna understanding that dates from immemorial times with the present confrontations, which include war and violence. Tayo is caught between different ways of seeing relationships, and he feels estranged because of his failure to perceive the bonds existing between contemporary action and mythic prototypes. He is unable to maintain the balance between the native ceremonies taught to him by Uncle Josiah what and between the unfolding events of colonial America. The things which he was taught in school and the acquaintance with other colonized Natives initially lead Tayo to participate in

the hegemonic colonial way of thinking. However the influence of Uncle Josiah works as a restraint to help to place his disturbing experiences of war in a proper context. ‘Logic’ and ‘reason’ fail to serve him. Rocky logically argued with him that his apprehensions are false but “he could follow the logic of what Rocky said, but he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (Silko 1977: 8). As against Josiah’s teachings, Tayo is pitted against a different identity discourse represented by Rocky, Emo and some other Indians. Uncle Josiah’s underlying belief of connectedness in all things leads to his connecting the Japanese to his own Native people. On the other hand, being a witness to the bloodshed makes him skeptical and uncertain about his participation in these activities. In comparison, these activities appear quite normal for Rocky and other Natives.

Tayo’s efforts to reconnect to the Laguna community failed as he was unable to overcome the haunting memories of the colonizer’s discourse. *Ceremony* works to resist this psychological colonization. Being the participants of war, the beliefs and outlooks of Emo, Rocky and Tayo on war and violence provide an important insight into the identity crisis Silko is trying to put forth. Uncle Josiah and the grandmother have helped Tayo in reintegrating into his culture and land. When Josiah was passing on the Native understanding and cultural legacy, Tayo listened carefully and Rocky remained absent. On the other hand, Rocky internalizes the Colonial discourse to shine like a star in the school. As Tayo was successful in keeping the Native understanding, he is able to emerge as a much balanced and enlightened self after the healing ceremony. Being a hybrid product of culture, Tayo too is afraid of confronting Betonie as it indicates the change. In the novel, Betonie is the representative of the counter discourse to the colonizers psychological discourse. Silko puts Betonie in direct contrast to Ku’oosh, whose ceremony fails to cure Tayo. After failing to cure, Ku’oosh concludes: “there are some things we can’t cure like we used to,...not since the white people came. The others who had the Scalp Ceremony, some of them are not better either” (38). Tayo was astonished at Betonie that how he could confront the extreme deplorable state to which the Indians had been reduced over the centuries of white contact symbolized by Gallup. Betonie is a great help to Tayo in order to ponder upon important insights into the contemporary realities. Tayo’s changed outlook helps to fuse the past with the present. The ceremony that eventually cures Tayo becomes symbolic of the curative potential of cultural syncretism and of cross-cultural identity formation. Even though Betonie lived on the fringes of reservation lands, “rode the train” (120) and was educated in a white school, yet he is also the medicine man who subscribes to what the colonial white discourse would term as superstition. Betonie is a modern medicine man whose resources are the amalgamation of the Native things as well as the things of white culture. In his Hogan, “bouquets of dried sage” and “brown leaves of mountain tobacco” were placed alongside “bundles of newspapers”, piles of telephone books and coke bottles (120). This amalgamation is the representative of his fundamental belief that the ceremonies must shift and grow to incorporate the very white society that threatens to destroy them. Change, remarks Betonie, is necessary for the ceremonies to remain strong:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (126)

The ceremony by Betonie cures Tayo. Finally, the ceremony breaks the spell of violence and hatred as Tayo restrains himself from reciprocating Emo's violence and bloodshed. At a broader level, the novel acts as a ceremony for the readers to actively participate in a process of change. Silko's is trying to put forth the idea of relating to land and culture by means of stories which serve as means of sharing a common aesthetic, an aesthetic which forms the essence of the Native communities. In *Ceremony*, Silko states that the modern sophisticated wars and other violations against mother earth have resulted in draughts and ecological imbalances. Even though Tayo's mother is violated he does not find her memories repulsive. As against him, Auntie who has internalized a greater deal of colonizer's ideologies, "counts life by crosses," fails to realize the importance of maternal relationship because "Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family" (68). The colonizer policy makers in the US paved a way to incorporate a cultural genocide of the Native population and a recurrent trend in the policymaking was the weaning away of the Indian children from the "bad influences" of their parents, land and culture. Throughout her writing career, Silko repeatedly deals discursive blows upon these US policies intended to separate the Indian mothers from their children. Silko argues in one of her interviews regarding the understanding of a "conventional mother" and the assumption that mothers as depicted in Gallup "are unfit and their children should be taken from them" (Arnold 24).

A new perspective towards Native American culture and identity emerges with the recovery of Tayo. The old cultural legacies and Laguna worldviews are infused with contemporary modifications to trace the recent developments in Native American life and culture. *Ceremony* renders Tayo's

disturbing experiences, which were an outcome of his failure to fuse the two influences together, available for future generations of Natives. It optimistically internalizes positive elements from the changing times to inculcate them in the Laguna story of the recovery of Tayo. Tayo emerges as the true inheritor of the Native legacy as against other pure blood characters like Rocky and Emo. This unfolding puts the hybrid mixed blood identity discourse above all other discourses and validates Silko's approach. She tells us:

What I write about and what I'm concerned about are relationships. To that I bring so many personal things that have been affected by where I come from, but I don't think one should oversimplify and say this is a Laguna point of view. It is my point of view, coming from a certain kind of background and place. (26)

Thus, in *Ceremony*, Silko prioritizes the indigenous perspective, which puts more value upon tribal relation with the land as against a colonial American perspective. Indigenous land and culture emerges as the matrix that sustains and nourishes the indigenous population. For achieving a balanced personality and identity, the Indians have to arrive at meanings via the routes of indigenous worldviews, ceremonies and rituals. This dynamism is informed by the cultural interaction with that of the outsiders and the subsequent changes that are reflected in the land and manners of the indigenous populations. Noam Chomsky reminds us:

The selection of issues that should rank high on the agenda of concern for human welfare and rights is, naturally, a subjective matter. But there are a few choices that seem unavoidable, because they bear so directly on the prospects for decent survival. Among them are at least these three: nuclear war, environmental disaster, and the fact that the government of the world's leading power is acting in ways that increase the likelihood of these catastrophes. (1)

Silko addresses all these issues in her writing through her critique of the colonial ambitions of Colonial America.

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