

From Myth to Culture: A Postmodernist Reading of Native American Fiction

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Abstract

Native American literature is the oldest literary tradition on the American continent and the last one to be recognized by the mainstream American academia. It is only in literature Native American cultures survive. Native American novelists have been dealing with the contemporary tribal reality representing it in art and literature. Leslie Marmon Silko's use of traditional Laguna Pueblo stories makes it a tool for cultural transmission and reclamation. Thereby, she distinguishes the Native American culture, from the "other." Postmodernism celebrates the idea of the coexistence of diverse cultures in the world. These characteristics with the post-modern techniques used by Silko makes her novel postmodern.

Keywords: Native American fiction, culture, myth, post modernism, Native American tribe, ceremony, rituals.

Native American literature is now enjoying a popular status and has become an acceptable material for reading and research. Native American literature is, not a new genre of literature. Literary expression has always existed among people who are native to America. It is unfortunate that the Native American literature has not been given its due credit in the main stream American Academia till the 19th century. Arnold Krupat states "to urge the inclusion of Indian literature in the canon of American literature is not only to propose an addition but a re-evaluation of what American literature means". (Krupat 98)

In the book *Mapping the Post-Modern* Huyssen describes post-modernism as 'the latest Fad', 'an advertising pitch', 'a hollow spectacle' 'a slowly emerging cultural transformation' and 'a change in sensibility'. Moreover, there is "more to learn from the study of popular and vernacular landscapes than from the pursuit of some abstract, theoretical, doctrinaire ideals".(Harvey 40).It is time to create "for people rather than for Man" (Harvey 40). Postmodern texts deal with multitude of worlds that coexist with each other. Postmodernism with

its characteristics of cultural pluralism, fragmentation of narrative, multiple identities seems to give a chance of new possibilities to Native American Indian voices. It rejects master narratives and gives way to the marginalized literature. There is always a need to the re-establishment of Native histories and their validity. Postmodernism is a culturally dominant concept, which admits the coexistence of other divergent traits to exist simultaneously within the societies of the world.

Ceremony is the story of the healing of a young Laguna pueblo man, Tayo from the effects of his war time experiences in the South Pacific. During war time, he is imprisoned by the Japanese in the Philippine jungle. There he witnesses the death of his cousin Rocky, who is infected by malarial fever, and treated in an Anglo hospital in Los Angeles. After returning home, he undergoes a series of healing ceremonies, and goes on a vision quest. He tries to retrieve the cattle which he and his uncle Josiah have bought before the war. In this process, he has to combat former friends who have turned them against their native culture. The rest of the story narrates how he is healed by the Native American healing ceremonies.

The novel has an oral storytelling tradition of the Pueblo people. Tayo, the protagonist is a child of mixed blood. His mother is Pueblo and his father is white. Tayo is raised on the outskirts of Gallup, New Mexico, by his mother-an alcoholic, homeless prostitute. She brings Tayo back to the pueblo to live with his Aunt Thelma, Uncle Robert, and cousin Rocky. After bringing him back to the pueblo, Tayo's mother dies and Tayo is left an orphan. Tayo is never allowed to forget his status as an outsider. His aunt makes sure, at every opportunity, to use this knowledge to perpetuate Tayo's status as an outsider. Tayo's story is intertwined with the cultural practices of laguna.

Laguna village is located in New Mexico, 45 miles west of Albuquerque. Laguna is a place nourished with all kinds of land resources such as flora, fauna. Keres is the language spoken by the Laguna. Their pueblo is located in north western New Mexico at the foot of a volcanic peak called Mount Taylor. This community is unique among the other matrilineal pueblos of the Southwest. Laguna unites diverse groups and cultures of native Americans. Pueblo is one of the chieftains of the prevalent 573 federally recognized Native American tribes. It possesses six villages which are Encinal, Laguna, Mesita, Paguate, Paraje and Seama. Native Americans have a deep sense of belonging and attachment to the land to which they belong. The people cling onto the land not only for its ancestral growth, but also for the enriched civilization and culture followed by Laguna people. The Clans have their own stories. Such stories become integral components of the novel *Ceremony*.

Silko in *Language and Literature* states, " the Origin story functions basically as a maker of our identity-with the story we know who we are" (Language and Literature from a Pueblo

Indian Perspective 50). At Laguna, the clans are divided into a dual entity. Among the western clans one finds animals like Bear, Parrot, Coyote, Roadrunner, and Oak. The eastern clans associate themselves with Sun, Turkey, Corn, Water, and Turquoise. Laguna myth assigns most clan names to one of the four cardinal directions of north, south, east and west. Thus it links the clan to a discrete set of symbols. This prompts a series of associated symbols, including those of Summer, Thunder and Lightning, Eagle, Red, Red Corn, Wildcat, and Badger. Ceremonial names, names of mountains, colors, animals, and spiritual powers are repeated many times in the novel.

The circle is a sacred, key symbol in Native American spirituality and everyday life. Tyon, a Professional Oglala Lakota storyteller explains the importance of the circle as in Native American culture:

The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon, are round . . . Everything that breathes is round like the body of a man. Everything that grows from the ground is round like the stem of a plant. Since the Great Spirit has caused everything to be round mankind should look upon the circle as sacred, for it is the symbol of all things in nature except stone. It is also the symbol of the year. The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. Therefore the circle is a symbol of these divisions of time and hence the symbol of all time. (Tyon 203)

Circular patterns are abound in the content of Leslie Marmon Silko's novels. The themes of the novel such as physical, mental, and spiritual health or healing, community and interconnectedness drought and fertility, the cycle of the seasons, the sunrise cycle, and mythic patterns of questing, rituals and ceremony involve circular concepts.

The Indians impart stories in the form of 'Myth' to the forthcoming generations. According to Laguna mythology, the five worlds are: First World comprises the holy spirits, land, water, air and language. Second World contains water and land mammals. In this world, the Holy Spirit has created the Spider man and his wife Spider woman. Third World consists of universe, geometrical directions and trees. Fourth World has the living beings – humans in it. Fifth World created by gods has still not been explored.

C'ko'yoto myth, otherwise called as 'Coyote myth', is a story about a mortal that is identical to a wolf or fox, which walks on two legs as man. It is considered to be evil. It is learnt that Coyote is mischievous, selfish, and cunning which brings ill - omen to men. This type of myth is recited to caution about the wickedness and promotes goodness. This myth is related to the European settlers who symbolise the evil qualities.

The Trickster myth goes hand in hand with the Coyote myth. Trickster symbolizes the tricky, cunning method to deceive the common and ignorant people. Trickster has the ability to transform his shape, cheat people, do mischief and cause trouble. Trickster is regarded as an anti-social element and through his clever, witty acts deceives innocent people. Trickster is also compared to a person having positive and creative powers, but since his villainous nature is superior, his advantages are silenced. Trickster tales are mainly narrated to children to advise them to walk in the path of righteousness.

The myth of Spider-woman, who is created by pure and holy spirits, is said to have created the entire universe. She uses her talent only in a productive way. When she pays heed to the instructions given by the holy spirits, her integrity is revealed. Josiah and Ts'eh are compared to the Spider women who are honest, selfless and follow the righteous path.

The myth of bear people is associated with Shush, the helper of Betonie who cures Tayo with the help of 'Ceremony'. Shush behaves like a bear, since he has been with bears from his childhood, and it is natural for him to act the same way. He is later adopted as a helper by Betonie as he believes that Shush possesses medical qualities to cure people. Navajo Witchcraft or Navajo Witchery is the myth that tells that evil power is attained by those who rob graves and by those who kill their own siblings to acquire ultimate power.

The ceremonies and rituals are associated with Story-telling methodologies. The Native Americans follow the traditional method of following ceremonies. The stories told by the Medicine Man are more hypnotizing to listen and that makes Tayo share his intricacies with Betonie. Moreover, the protagonist suffers from internal conflict and he arrives at a conclusion that he belongs to the reservation of Laguna and not that of the army. At the end of the ritual, when his scalp is cut Tayo feels a change in him, but he understands that he is not completely cured. Tayo could still find the evils inside him and concludes that a part of him is only partly cured.

At Laguna, the lineage is decided only through females and the matrilineality is followed. The children belong to the clan of their mother. The clan also practises Exogamy which means that a person must marry outside of her clan, yet at marriage a bride continues to live with or near her mother. Only her husband moves near her residence. Thus Laguna pueblo spatially concentrates women of the same bloodline. This practice is alluded in the novel when the hero, Tayo marries Ts'eh and moves near her residence.

Tayo's warm, positively toned relationship with Grandma is often repeated in the novel. In *Ceremony* Grandma bears her Laguna heritage with pride. She follows the native teachings, respects the wisdom and status of the elderly people. She believes that people can be cured by

the tribal methods used by medicine men. She prefers the same for treating her grandson, Tayo. She is stubbornly relentless in her survival strategies as she is a powerful force in determining family affairs. Grandma is a true symbol of Laguna culture.

Matrilineal principles decide the family name of the pueblo clan. Auntie claims that: “Our family, old Grandma's family, was so highly regarded at one time. She is used to being respected by people.” (*Ceremony* 92) Several lineages have a common ancestor, forming the clan, a social unit above the level of the extended family. Parsons’ Genealogies discloses 19 clans among the 124 houses scattered through the 8 village settlements comprising the pueblo of Laguna. The name of the maternal line gives social identity shared with those in the tribe possessing the same name. The clan name endows status, ensures etiquette, and gives knowledge of where one belongs.

Tayo is portrayed as the hero of his culture, when he returns to Laguna. He relates his journey to the journey of Spider Woman in the folk lore. This is Silko’s portrait of the half-breed, who overcomes his alienation and solves the mystery of his ancestry. Finally, he has a name, place and a story. He has returned to his people and the land. In *Ceremony*, the Navajo medicine man makes a statement cutting across both linguistic and cultural boundaries for Tayo:

“We are comfortable here.” There was something about the way the old man said the word ‘comfortable.’ It had a different meaning - not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills. (*Ceremony* 123)

Apart from rekindling the roots of Tayo’s Native American identity, Tayo’s quest ends with his meeting of the murderous Emo in an abandoned uranium mine. Tayo should choose between the good of his traditional values and the evils of modern culture. He decides not to kill as he feels that the response to evil and death need not be evil and death. Instead, Tayo chooses to stand firm in his belief in the sanctity of life, creating a new space for Native traditions and spirituality in the modern world. He undergoes a ceremony reuniting him with the land and the place from which he originates. Silko in *Ceremony* asserts that Native American tradition; culture and wisdom will not only endure, but that it is crucial for the survival of the world.

Silko uses many post-modern techniques to render magical realism to her novel. Temporal distortion used by the novelist is centered on the use of a non-linear timeline (Postmodern blog). The scene of the narrative shifts from Emo, Tayo, Harley and some other Indian old men in the bar talking and drinking to a scene in which Tayo is with Rocky. Dramatic shifts in the timeline, like this one, occur throughout Silko’s novel. The magic of the folklore affects Tayo’s narrative. The “magical things” that happen in the stories start to appear in Tayo’s otherwise realistic life.

The healing process makes the readers believe that the magic of the story is very real. After all, Silko also makes use of a lot of postmodern conventions, like fractured, non-linear narratives and textual experiments like bricolage (literary mash up) and pastiche (inter textuality). The combination of all these different genres make one consider *Ceremony* a postmodern novel. Most of the contemporary literature in the post-modern approach is of sociological discourse and the cultural underpinnings of the society are in the centre stage of literary interpretations. The growth in the human sciences has shifted the focus from literary to social and from mythical to cultural. The crucial relevance of culture in the evolution of post-modern discourse is apparent in Native American literature and *Ceremony* is an archetypal example of cultural discourse.

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