

Quest for Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony

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Abstract

Ceremony is one of the celebrated novels of Silko. It aims to establish a superiority of Native American values, beliefs & traditions over the culture of whites. This novel examines psychological disturbances & dilemmatic position of a male protagonist, Tayo. He Suffers breakdown of his own identity & selfhood. He is bicultural by birth, hence mix blood ancestry that leads to confusion in his own being. He fights the World War II for the Europeans, but returns traumatized & haunted by the death of his cousin, Rocky. Rocky's death comes to him as a terrible blow & holds himself responsible for the loss. He is admitted to the sanatorium but medicines do not work upon him. Then, Tayo returns home traumatized and seeks the help of medicine man. He undergoes Native American rituals, which help him cured & cleansed. He joins the whites' army against his will & becomes confused with the culture of whites & Natives. There are two names for a every single object. Tayo requires age old rituals & traditions that help of uphold the identity of selfhood. Europeans presence in Natives land have defiled them & their identity. Tayo regains his lost identity & He Quest for it comes to end after he recovers his health & composments.

KEYWORDS : Native American, bicultural, pueblo, Ts'its'tsinako, Ethnocentric.

Leslie Marmon Silko was born on March 5, 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Virginia Leslie was her mother, and had been originally from Montana. Lee Howard, her father, had left army and began his career as a photographer in the village of old Laguna. Silko was born into a family ambient already rich with story. Her progenitors had been prominent in Laguna's history of contact with Euro-American social, political, Economic and educational forces. Silko grew up in a house full of books and stories- Laguna stories about Euro-American contact : a legacy of bicultural interplay and mediation that has profoundly influenced her own storytelling style and repertoire. One of the most complex aspects of the story of Native America is its intertwining with the story of the European colonists. There is no way to know what Indian societies might have been like, if Europeans had not come. Native American literature has been greatly influenced by the invaders. These invaders were varied in their characteristic, motives, values, attitudes, styles, goals and tactics. Spanish were the first to invade, then come the French, the Russians, the Dutch, the British and the Americans. European particularly British exploration of America in the 16th century was the first attempt of colonization in 'New world'.

Works of many Native American novelists like N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdich, Sherman Alexie, Gerard Vizenor and Leslie NarmonSilko reflect the dissent for colonialists in their works. Some try to assimilate & appease the mainstream culture of the Europeans while novelist like Silko vehemently oppose & try to establish the superiority of Native Culture. Native American tribes also resisted the Anglo-American encroachment on their lands after 1800 and also fought a series of war with them. Slave-trading was usual practice among the most Native American tribal groups; but none exploited slave labourer on a large scale. Indian groups frequently enslaved war captives whom they used for small-scale labour and in ritual sacrifice. Once Europeans arrived as colonialists in North-America, the nature of Indian slavery

changed abruptly and dramatically. More & more Indians began selling war captives to whites rather than integrating them into their own societies.

Silko is an inheritor of mix-blood ancestry and bicultural descent that leads to the loss of social and cultural identity of self-hood. Her conflicts become the basis for quest for Identity. Living between two cultures becomes a serious challenge to people who are placed in a society where they don't fit in; and they are not comfortable. When individuals become bicultural, they can learn to adapt & cope with their environment and to the larger society in which they live. Yet, as they strive to survive & maintain their own ethnic identity & to keep their traditions & cultural beliefs as a legacy to pass on from one generation to another. Leslie Silko's Laguna Pueblo (village) tribe which has been probably the most interesting pueblo to the geologist because of the rich Uranium deposits found in its tribal lands. Colonial imperialism of Europeans resulted into devastation of cultural and social heritage of the Natives. Lust for colonial expansion also annihilated many indigenous tribes for no traits behind.

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Many of the oral traditional stories that Silko hears & read resulted into the structure and texture of her first and most famous novel Ceremony. At the very onset of the novel, the narrator (raconteur) aligns herself with Keresan oral tradition by claiming to be one of a very long line of storytellers whose duty is to preserve and pass along the story set in motion "Ts' its' tsinako"- 'Thought Woman'. The story is set in the year following World War II. Ceremony is all about healing and about the healing power of the stories and the land and regaining lost identity. The disease has broken out and infected the people at reservation including Silko's protagonist 'Tayo'. Ethnocentric imperialism of the Europeans dragged the Native into World War II and its dreadful fallouts : new art form as nuclear fission and the atomic weapons capable of destroying all life; the polarization of the World's populations along both ideological and generational lines, including the emergence of a bitter animosity between "full-bloods" and "half-breeds" that intimidates to destroy twentieth century Native communities, and the ubiquitous feeling of separation and isolation.

The quest of the novel's main character, Tayo begins with his home return at the end of World War II. His homecoming is troubled after having suffered from "battle fatigue" caused by the loss of his cousin, Rocky, in the Philippines jungle. He is terrified and does not respond to the treatment by white doctor in Los Angeles and remains delirious & irascible in his family house on the Laguna Pueblo reservation. Tayo's condition appears to have a sense of alienation as well his insomnia comes with dreams of black night and loud voices interminably lurching him like debris trapped in a freshet. He speaks about himself in third person and his words are formed with an invisible tongue they have no sound (15). It seems that Tayo experiences the condition of expatriation which Edward Said describes as someone's "Lost without a tellable history" (175). Tayo's story is symptomatic of the condition of Indians in the colonial encounter and his quest is one of regaining the voice, restoring, reclaiming land and history (175). Tayo is the son of an Indian woman and of a white father raised by a family where aunt is resolute Christian who raises him first to show that she is a kind soul. She always makes him feel unlike from her own son Rocky. In colonial discourse, Rocky is a "good" (mean successful) in Europeans perspective, Rocky is good because he has left Laguna reservation and built a life in the white's world. But for Natives, a good Indian means a dead Indian, one that does not belong to Indianness any longer. Rocky is dead in one sense, but is successful from whites' world & to enlist in the army. He says to Tayo : Hey, I know you're homesick. But, Tayo, we're supposed to be here. This is what we're supposed to do" (8).

Both Tayo & Rocky join the army. Rocky adapts the whites' culture & tries to learn new things which were unknown to the people on reservation. Possibly because, Rocky is full-blood Native while Tayo half-breed that results into confusing state of mind. Rocky is injured in the war & dies ultimately. Tayo comes back to Laguna reservation but he no longer feels his home. Rocky's death comes to him as a shock and blames himself for the death of Rocky, so also his aunt does not spare him. Nature, land, jungles, trees, animals, rivers, rain water are much more & life-givers to the Native Americans. Europeans have defiled and contaminated these Nature's elements sacrosanct to the Natives. Unbalanced in Nature, Tayo thinks, caused by the curse afflicted upon rain, and according to the Indian belief which the same Rocky called superstitions that also result into his death. Tayo experiences a double exile from his people's and his own. As Ines Hernandez Avila explains, for indigenous peoples, the concern with "home" involves a concern with "homeland" (492) : as objects of colonialists, they "were given no choice but to" leave home, and to move unwillingly to other homes which were often the sites of racism" (495). The Native world became entangled with European names : the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of animals and plants – all of creation suddenly had two names : an Indian name and a White name" (68). By doing so, the colonial culture destabilises & deteriorates the culture of the Natives. Tayo is completely shattered & disturbed by the colonial invasion and does not respond to whites' treatment. Natives are one with Nature; only nature, the age old stories of their ancestors can work as healers. Their body is a kind of second Nature. They have become oblivious to the treasure of lands & lost the identity that can only be reclaimed by upholding age-long beliefs & traditions which are pivotal for the existence of Natives. Betonie is a medicine man, who performs healing rituals for Tayo, understands whites' as "destroyer", destroyer of the Native Tribes, corrupters of the elements that Indians treat sacred. This has certainly resulted into the loss of identity of Indians, like Tayo, the protagonist, and others who likewise him. The corrupt influence & culture of the white's have penetrated deeply into the bodies of Indians that needs holistic cleansing, and it can only be done through rituals & ceremonies.

Tayo is psychologically traumatized after service in WW II as a result of an unstable childhood, likewise Silko's own. He needs to recover himself by finding a link to Native Indian culture. His recovery is long & difficult. He suffers from nightmares & traumatic events that occurred in his life. Resultantly, Tayo feels alienated since he has few connections to the land or his people. He eventually returns to the reservation where his aunt and grandmother try to recuperate him, but he is not helped. He visits Ku'oosh, a medicine man to help him healed. He feels uncomfortable with the medicine man and return home. Tayo now realizes he must also eliminate his old friends because they have been acculturated into whites' culture and has bad influence on his life. He finally realizes that 'Quest for Identity' can only be had by connecting spiritually to the Native traditions he has lost. So he travels to mountains in an attempt to find peace. He indulges into sex with a spiritual Woman who teaches him about the Native traditions he is oblivious to. In due course, while there in the mountains, Tayo's healing Ceremony takes place.

In a nutshell, it is clearly evident that Silko vehemently emphasises the need to return to Native culture that can only be helpful to recuperate the illness the Whites have imposed upon them. It is also noticeable throughout the novel the 'full-bloods' have easily fallen prey to the enticements & exploitation done by the whites to the Natives while "half breeds" like Tayo is psychologically traumatized by the WW II and survives the war and returns home only disturbed & shattered. On the other hand,

Rocky, the full-blood, lost his life in the war who abhorred the Native beliefs & traditions. Silko does not appear completely submissive to the mainstream culture while upholds the unique importance of Native values & beliefs. The protagonist of the novel, Tayo, regains his health & Identity only after he undergoes healing Ceremony.

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