



RESEARCH PAPER

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* as Counter Discourse of American Indians

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ABSTRACT

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) offers a compelling counter-discourse in response to the Euro-American stereotyping of the Native Americans. Challenging historical injustices, Silko's narrative reclaims Indian identity. The objective of this research is to explore the ways in which *Ceremony* resists the prevalent white ideologies and discursive agencies that have propagated misleading stereotypes of the Indian culture and marginalized indigenous experiences. Moreover, this article also aims to probe how the novel engages in historical revisionism, the role of spirituality, cultural identity, and traditional knowledge in challenging assimilationist agendas, and to highlight resistance within indigenous communities. By employing John Guillory's theoretical approaches on canon formation and Craig Womack's nationalist and separatist stance for cultural representation of Native Americans, this research paper explores the strategies Silko has employed to reshape the discourse surrounding Native Americans and provide such a vibrant voice that challenges historical oppression, nurturing a profound understanding of Indian epistemologies and experiences. This research reveals that Silko has offered an authentic and culturally rich perspective of Native Americans, rejecting stereotypes. Moreover, the novel underscores the significance of Indian spirituality, cultural identity and addresses the reconciliation process within Native communities. This study recommends the inclusion of *Ceremony* and similar Indian works in educational curricula to promote a more accurate and respectful understanding of indigenous culture and history.

KEYWORDS Agency, Counter-Discourse, Epistemology, Marginalization, Stereotypes

Introduction

Laslie Marmon Silko, a versatile Native American author of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican and White ancestry, is one of the key figures in contemporary Indian literature. She was nurtured in the reservations of Laguna Pueblo where she acquired wholesome knowledge about Native legends and oral stories from her female flesh and blood. Most of Silko's works reflect the influence of her mixed ancestry. *Ceremony* (1977) bears the theme of cultural crises of the mixed ancestry subject. For instance, the protagonist of the story, Tayo has been a victim of the similar situation. This novel, well acclaimed for its exploration of Indian identity, the traumatic impact of colonization and its Native spirituality, interweaves an intricate story that blends traditional oral story telling with contemporary literary techniques.

Silko's *Ceremony* is a testament to the lasting connection between Indian subject and land. She depicts the Laguna Pueblo landscape and its spiritual significance, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the land and its inhabitants. Womack in *Red on Red* (1999) observes that *Ceremony* is a story about a war veteran who tries to reinstate his relationship with his tribe, Laguna Pueblo. The novel postulates that Indians will one day

regain their land (Womack, 1999, p.11). Womack is of the view that America is fascinated by Native culture but at the same time less enthusiastic about Indian land title (Womack, 1999, p.11). Moreover, the novel also deals with the struggle of Native subject for healing and renewal of their distorted identity. Tayo's Journey to find healing, steered by traditional Native practices and spiritual ceremonies, foregrounds the dissonance and resilience of Native cultures in the phase of adversity. Silko's internalization of Laguna oral stories highlights the significance of wielding Native cultural heritage as a means of strength and transformation. Novel's narrative, blending myth and reality, aligns with the panoptic trends in modern literature. Silko's interweaving of different narrative fibrils reflects the complexities of Indian experiences through incorporation of Native ideology, language, epistemology and worldview. It challenges conventional norms of western storytelling, expanding the traditional perspectives on literature and the formation of literary canon.

Literature Review

Ceremony has egressed from several of Silko's experiences of mixed heritage. Being a mixed-blood Native author, she had to face acrimonious identity crisis, especially the cultural identity, which she wishes to reconstitute with the writing of *Ceremony*. Robert Nelson is of the view that the plot of the *Ceremony* possess unique characteristic as the whole narrative consists of embedded texts which help to produce meaning by comparing them with ethnographic texts. Moreover, major portion of these texts is written in narrative style just like the ancient traditional oral stories (p.13). Similarly, Elaine Jahner notes the relationship between the text written in prose and the events described in mythic style and contends that they are dependent upon each other and are continuously engaged in shaping each other. Hence, the meanings suggested in poetic portions of the narrative are carried forward and realized in the prose section (p.43). Nonetheless, the term, event, according to her, conveys more profound meanings than merely actions and happenings. She is particularly interested, in the epochal events which determine Tayo's journey towards healing following the mythic text. Moreover, she opines that the story relates myth to immediate action, describing cause and effect patterns, which is entirely different from the existing technique of novel writing (Jahner, p.49).

Silko consciously compares the several events of the novel with some historical realities to define Native dissonance and resistance in order to highlight the injustices inflicted upon the Indians. Thus, the resilience of Native Americans during 19th century does not only take the form of warriors on horsebacks, but indigenous subjects also write books that demand Native rights and criticized land theft (Womack, 1999, p. 3). The mingling of historicity with the current events in the plot of *Ceremony* is mentioned in the episode where the protagonist joins Harley and Leroy in an old truck, recently purchased by them. *Ceremony* suggests that any act of courtesy on the part of Anglo-Americans might be barbed snare. "White people selling Indians junk cars and trucks reminded Tayo of the Army captain in the 1860s who made a gift of wool blankets to the Apaches: the entire stock of blankets was infected with smallpox" (Silko, 1977, pp.157-158).

Silko's *Ceremony* nurtures awareness of the possibility of a new Indian collective identity. She gives a profound message to the canon makers of the era that Indian oral stories and their literary thoughts provide sufficient insight for the development of Native discourse, strong enough to alter the contemporary beliefs of sovereignty and literature (Womack, 1999, p. 3). The novel highlights not only the misdoings that Indians had to undergo for centuries but also the stereotypes swamped into the myths of Euro-American community.

Eagleton (1991) observes that ideology is a peculiar set of coherent and interconnected concepts or doctrines that form a particular worldview (p.194). He adds that ideology is the system of beliefs, values, ideas, and principles that guides and influences the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of individuals, groups, or societies, representing a kind of inevitable bond with the philosophy it represents (Eagleton, 1991, p.200). Although innumerable critiques of the treatment Euro-Americans rendered to Native subject is seen in the *Ceremony* divulging the oppression they imposed, Silko's narrative suggests an alternative discourse that does not aim to increase the disgust Native populace already faced. Apart from relieving Anglo-Americans from the crimes they have committed hitherto, *Ceremony* proposes a realization of the damage engendered by them and at the same time reflects white's attitude towards Indians. Thus, Silko's narrative uncloaks white ideologies, the stereotypes, the alleged lies, and counteract the Anglo-American dominance symbolized by the US government and the Euro-American privileged class, and at the same time pleads the case of Native authors for their representation in American canon as Guillory (1993) contends that literature is the manifestation of ideological conceptions and literary works should be analyzed in the context of their institutional presentation (p. ix). Solidifying this perspective, Womack also strengthens Silko's stance and argues that Native perspective exists and it is worth mentioning enterprise to seek it out (Womack, 1999, p. 4).

Ceremony warns Native Americans about the dangers their culture is in. Both the Euro-American culture and Christianity pose a great threat to the Indian identity, culture and traditions. Emo, Tayo, and Harley all faced disillusion and a sense of inferiority complex due to the racist attitude of white society. They were deemed respectable and acceptable and were given equal status in the white society when they were in military uniforms. This protocol gives them confidence that by assimilating into white culture, they can earn recognition, identity and a respectable social status. This confidence motivated them to give up their affluent cultural heritage and tribal traditions. Alas! there also, they had to suffer from discrimination and disappointment and resultantly they turned to alcohol for solace. Silko argues that all the policies, strategies and activities of Euro-Americans just strengthen white discourse of marginalization and discrimination. Thus, "Materialism, drug trafficking, sexual avarice, disrespect for the earth, and a failure of belief characterize the underbelly of American culture. The root cause of this problem is land theft, identity theft, and the subjugation of brown/black-skinned peoples" (Lundquist, 2004, p. 241).

Marginal discourse, is thus a result of damage systematically inflicted upon minority cultures by the dominant one. In *Ceremony*, Silko has depicted a true picture of cultural / racial marginalization of the Indians and their motherland. She deconstructs the wrong conceptions and stereotypes concocted about Native Americans through several discursive practices of Euro-Americans, and reconstructs a real perspective of Native Americans' life and their rich tribal and cultural heritage and consequently suggests that it is mandatory for the individuals to understand Indian worldview in order to analyze indigenous cultures (Womack, 1999, p.5).

Theoretical Framework

Following John Guillory's *Culture Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), this article takes a critical view of what he asserts the 'liberal pluralists' demand for the representation of various ethnic groups in the literary canon. Guillory contends "the Critique of the canon responds to the disunity of the culture as a whole, as a fragmented whole, by constituting new cultural unities at the level of gender, race, or more recently ethnic subcultures, or gay and lesbian subcultures" (Guillory, 1993, p.34).

Guillory challenges the conventional understanding of the canon as an objective and fixed entity. He argues that the formation and maintenance of a literary canon are inherently political acts that reflect the interests and power dynamics of the dominant social groups. According to Guillory, the canon is not simply a neutral reflection of literary merit but a complex cultural construction that serves to legitimize and perpetuate certain ideologies.

This paper utilizes *Cultural Capital* (1993) to concentrate on its theoretical sources, the techniques in which ideology plays its part in Guillory's rendition of the idea of canonicity, of the whole process of canon formation, and of how it provides space for the minority discourses. *Cultural Capital* is comprehensive study of the whole debate of canon formation from an original and direct angle where Guillory argues for a complete rethinking of the ways in which the literary canon was being examined.

Moreover, this paper also employs Craig Womack's Native separatist stance to explore certain textual strategies through which *Ceremony* challenges the Euro-Americans cultural hegemony, the profound effects of war, dispossession of Indian subject, and the loss of Native cultural heritage and at the same time put emphasis on the significance of preserving Native stories in the face of cultural erasure.

Red on Red, Native American Literary Separatism (1999) is a collection of short stories that offers a diverse and multifaceted portrayal of Native American experiences. Womack presents a range of characters, each with their own unique perspectives, challenges, and triumphs. The stories delve into themes such as identity, cultural preservation, the impact of colonization, and the resilience of Indigenous communities. Through his narratives, Womack confronts stereotypes and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities and diversity within Native American cultures. It explores the theme of identity and the quest for a sense of belonging among Native Americans. The characters in the stories grapple with the complexities of their cultural heritage, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the challenges of navigating a world that often marginalizes and misunderstands Indigenous identities.

Womack (1999) stresses on the need of nation-based rendition of Native literature. He is of the view that each tribe needs to recognize and evolve its own canon and literary interpretations based on experiences of tribal members along with symbolism and methods of interpretations imparted through oral traditions. He devoted his intellectual abilities to plead the case of Native separatism. As a nationalist, he believes that it is the time for the Indians to exclude any Euro-American influence from Native aesthetics. He believes that the tribal perspective of the world is unparalleled, worthy of autonomous enquiry, and hence, at this period of time, be exclusionist. Womack asserts that Indians are not merely dupes but lively participants in history, the originators of new modes, indigenous modes of thoughts, and being and speaking and writing in the colonial world (Womack, 1999, pp.5-6).

Results and Discussion

Silko in *Ceremony* engineers Native sovereignty instead of yielding to Euro-American hegemonic colonial discourse. The narrative legitimizes Indians' claim for Native sovereignty by showcasing a powerful resistive discourse that advocates indigenous standpoint. *Ceremony* conflates Native Americans' claim for tribal sovereignty with cross cultural identity discourse to file a vehement resistance against under-representations, misrepresentations and oppressive stereotypical ideologies. Silko, through her writings, achieved what she has acquired from her childhood and girlhood

experiences – a harmony between her tribal beliefs and traditions modes of the outer world (Silko, 1997, p. 17). The novel suggests a revision of what is termed as American literature, providing an alternative counter-discourse as Womack argues that Indian worldview allows indigenous people to speak for themselves with Indian voices. Although, these voices are different in quality, they represent a historical reality wherein Indians have been excluded from discourse. He stresses that Native voices must be heard now (Womack, 1999, p.5).

Ceremony Challenges the so-called sacredness and superiority of the dominant narratives of Euro-American cultures and epistemology by offering an alternative perspective. The novel refutes the stereotypical portrayals of Native American often seen in media and mainstream American literature and provides an intricate depiction of Indian characters who rejects white stereotypes, emphasizing upon Indian myths and traditions to attain appropriate meaning. The novel suggests reevaluation of the history by throwing light on the untold historical facts of Indian life and literature. It addresses the traumatic experiences of Native Americans in the wake of World War II, and the impact of colonization and cultural assimilation. Silko creative imagination is nurtured by her Laguna beliefs and Indian worldview which are contrary to Anglo-American understanding and epistemology. Speaking about the plot of *Ceremony* Silko says that the Euro-American principles of story writing don't apply. The fascinating fact about *Ceremony* is that it's immensely open. It goes ahead and raise hell with linear time (Silko quoted in Arnold 2000, p.103).

Ceremony's startling opening with the thinking and creating ability of Thought-Woman or Spider-Woman, the mother of creation, in Laguna belief system, not only challenges but also rejects the supremacy of European individualistic and literary modes. In this way, Silko rendered authority to the Ts'its'tsi'nako, the Thought-Woman right from the beginning of the novel, which remained till the end and ultimately handed over to where it started, in the Laguna beliefs and tribal realm. Concluding remarks of Tayo's grandmother are the testimony of the dynamic and unrestrained nature of the narrative which does not belong to author, but to that particular community. She says, "it seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only thing is, the names sound different" (Silko, 1977, p.260). Ending the novel in such a manner, removes the fears of the Indians regarding the modernization of their stories. Moreover, it also connotes seceding from Euro-American superior philosophy that gives importance to art for its novelty, or amusement, rather than spiritual power (Evasdaughter, 1988, p.88).

Through an episodic structure and by repeating key words and events, Silko indianises the Euro-American genre of novel. The structure of the *Ceremony*, in accordance with the Spider-Woman's myth of creativity is just like a web of a spider which generates meanings not in fragments but in totality. Brown (1995) argues that the *Ceremony* urges readers to suspend Christian dogmas of earth, hell and heaven (p.172). The ritual of Tayo's recovery prepares the readers to think differently. In order to achieve this end, Silko depends upon Indian myths and oral traditions that strengthens the *Ceremony* and address the need for healing and reconciliation within Indian communities. She not only modifies the technique of novel writing, but also turns down assimilationist agenda of the white by exhibiting the difference. In an interview to Everett, Silko suggests that all of us should take better care of one another, pay proper heed to the land and water, and above all to honour and recognize differences (Everett, 2007). Honouring this ideology of difference, *Ceremony* provides an alternative counter-discourse to the Native Americans against their psychological colonization by the white hegemonic ideologies, enabling them to assert that Indian perspective exists and has been forcibly silenced historically, which should be heard

now. Moreover, tribal sovereignty is the legal reality, and the world should own it (Womack, 1999, p.6).

During the course of Tayo's healing journey, there emerged a new perspective of Indian culture and identity in general and Laguna worldviews and cultural legacies in particular. As for as the role of the stories in Indian tribal setting is concerned, Silko maintains that in the Laguna tribe identity for individual is formed by incorporating him into stories whose language is impulsive enough to assimilate people and places. She is of the view that people describe you and your families through these stories and hence construct your identity. In this way, you have been told who you are by the stories about you (Jaskoski, 1998, p.95). Anyhow, Tayo had to face Euro-American psychological colonization throughout his recovery process but his participation in the ritual assures his healing and also ensures the sustainability of tradition for the future generation. As is observed later in the story: "nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself" (Silko, 1977, p.219).

Silko exhorts the Indians that nothing is lost since they are connected to their cultural roots through ceremonies and stories and resist every new challenge, believing their ancestral beliefs. She disseminates the perspective that neither the Euro-American literary tradition nor the colonial discourse can restrict or narrow the ethos of the indigenous story formed by rudimentary tribal and cultural beliefs. Silko says that her use of English language renders her Native stories certain basic assumptions and serves as a counter-discourse to challenge the prevailing narratives about Native subject. She is self-conscious about knowing the Laguna language and believes that one must know the stories in the same fashion as reported by the anthropologists (Jaskoski, 1998, p.96).

Thus, Silko's technique of writing broadens readers' insight to circumscribe what had been alien to him. She employs various writing strategies to maintain not only the essence of Indian traditions, but also forces the reader to shift his perception. Womack strengthens Silko's counter-discourse by saying that "there is an inherent right of tribal people to interpret events and time in their worlds according to their own aesthetics and values, as a component of American history, even when this interpretation is different from that of mainstream history" (Womack, 1999, p.9).

In *Ceremony*, Silko epitomizes the Indian worldview which lays stress on indigenous traditions and gives value to tribal relation with the land as contrary to white hegemonic perspective. She unravels out the nationalistic dispositions of the Euro-Americans and sets them against the Indians' humanity-centered values. She further says that Euro-American epistemological paradigm believes in vertical relationship with the land and other creatures where man is superior and is positioned on the top, and everything is there for the man to possess, subjugate, plunder, and subdue either through fair or foul means. Contrarily, Indians believe on horizontal relationship with land and other natural objects, where everything including animals, birds, plants etc. stand on equal footings with man. Moreover, Natives believe that raven, fox, turtle, hawk, buffalo, rabbit, and many other animals are their relatives. Luther Standing Bear (1868-1939) contends, "kinship with all the creatures of the earth, sky and water was a real and active principle," and they considered them "their feathered and furred friends... they spoke a common tongue" (Bear quoted in McLuhan, 1971). Furthermore, in Native epistemology, Indians are also considered plant people and corn, fir, berries, squash, cedar, oak, pine, maple, and roots are deemed their relatives. These animal and plant people also contributed handsomely to history and maintained it through their oral traditions (p.1). Whereas, for Euro-Americans geography, landscape, and flora and fauna of the region are meaningless and lifeless entities and are separated from human existence. Therefore, Silko argues that the massive

devastation spawned by the wars and the overwhelming desire for power and authority, which resulted in huge massacre of mankind and perturbation of harmony in the universe, is directly connected to psychological disorder round the globe. Silko maintains that the methods and strategies of killing introduced by the European world is too frightening and devastating to be comprehended by the naïve Indians:

In the old way of warfare, you couldn't kill another human being in battle without knowing it, without seeing the result ... killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehend, the mortars and big guns. (Silko, 1977, p.36)

Piper (1977) stressed the need to understand the devastation of Native land caused by the US projects of uranium-mining near Laguna. She says that it is mandatory to include the reaction of Laguna people to this destruction of the landscape in their stories to ensure its memory (p.483). *Ceremony*, when viewed from this perspective, is a resistance against the neo-colonial ambitions of Euro-American corporate institutions. The encroachment of indigenous land, violation of Indian geology, and infringement of treaty rights and the collateral penury of Indian populace, both socially as well as economically has been portrayed in the *Ceremony*. At the same time, presenting Native worldview and tribal myths as substitutes, Silko not only challenges the colonial aspirations of the United States but also make academia realize that "in constructing the process of canon formation as an exclusionary process essentially the same as the exclusion of socially defined minorities from power, the strategy of opening the canon aims to reconstruct it as a true image of social diversity" (Guillory, 1993, p.8). Moreover, Laguna perspective, addressing time, history, and creation begins to achieve foremost position in handling the Euro-American industrial and military power. Owing to this aesthetic experiment, nationalistic aspirations of US Govt. and military are exposed as repressive and brutal because their roots originate from profaned land. The ensuing wars motivated by such political aspirations are considered injudicious and fueled by witchery.

Moreover, Euro-Americans' state policy demands Native subject to get themselves assimilated into white culture if they want to called American citizens. Anyhow, this assimilation and sense of belongingness mean eliminating their Indian identity. Wearing white man's uniform, they were considered worthy of reverence: "old white ladies on the street smiled at them... These Indians got treated the same as anyone... They got the same medals for bravery, the same flag over the coffin" (Silko, 1977, p. 42). But once the war ends and they return to their indigenous tribal identity, "All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she's really careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change" (Silko, 1977, p. 42). This fragmentation, caused by such conflicting perspectives, led many Indians to psychological disorders and identity crisis.

Tayo is also unable to assimilate into his tribal community, and at the same time, cannot defy the white culture. *Ceremony* denounces such type of psychic colonization of Indians. Being war veterans, Tayo, Rocky, and Emo expressed different sentiments and viewpoints on hostility and ferocity they experienced, rendering significant awareness regarding Native epistemological discourse the author puts forth. Silko, narrating the stories of her childhood experiences, contends that she has learnt to distinguish between the two epistemologies i.e. the Euro-Americans and that of Indians. She feels that there are some discreet lines that separate the two paradigms. "Once we crossed this invisible line onto the school grounds, talking Indian was forbidden.... That was the first thing the teachers taught us on the first day of kindergarten" (Silko, 2010, p.48). Nonetheless, despite of her white education she not only retains but also carries forward her ancestral Laguna

legacies. In the same fashion, her protagonist also holds the Indian understanding and after going through his healing ceremony, he emerges as a much confident, balanced, and enlightened individual.

In *Ceremony*, Silko's counter discourse is represented through the character of Betonie whose ceremony ultimately cures Tayo. His method of cure is entirely different to Ku'oosh who cannot treat Tayo's sufferings. When Ku'oosh's ceremony fails to cure, he comes to conclusion that "there are some things we can't cure like we used to, ...not since the white people came" (Silko, 1977, p.38). Convinced by her viewpoint, Silko considers Betonie as a prototype of Laguna culture and its ceremonies. In this regard, it can be ascertained that Betonie's modifying of the ceremonies is basically the modification of the Native medicine man. Tayo is astonished to face him, cannot connect himself to him. "This Betonie didn't talk the way Tayo expected a medicine man to talk. He didn't act like a medicine man at all" (Silko, 1977, p.118).

Conclusion

Ceremony provides a substructure, advocating Native epistemology and validating Indian oral stories as veritable evidence of Indians' claim to their land, flora and fauna, tribal traditions and their indigenous culture which ultimately strengthens their claim to re-position American literary canon as Womack asserts, "the tribal writer also has the moral responsibility to use writing in whatever ways possible to build that society, to strengthen the tribal nation" (Womack, 1999, p.258). The novel also furnishes a resistive approach that demands a complete modification of epistemological footings upon which Euro-American, institutional and legal discourse rests. Silko, through *Ceremony*, suggests Euro-Americans to accept and confess the evils, misdoings, cruelties and injustices they have been committing against the Native subject for centuries so that the discursive stereotypical misrepresentation of the Indians as inferior and savages may be shattered and the charm of witchery would pull back to from where it began. Look at this passage of the text that represents Silko's approach towards resistance against white suppression:

white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. The destroyers had only to set it into motion, and sit back to count the casualties. (Silko, 1977, p.191)

Resultantly, the foundations upon which Euro-American empire of manifest destiny, diseased nationalism and so-called individualism rested, dealt a blow through this text. Silko opines that white mechanized view of life and land comprised of mining industries, automobiles and the advances in technology should be restricted and checked by promoting the sense of harmony among land, life, plants, animals, and human beings in order to protect the world against this modernization. Thus, the diverse social issues confronted by the indigenous people which resulted in the form of dissonance among the members of tribe should be comprehended within Native American context. *Ceremony* stands as a transformative work and serves as vibrating counter-discourse to the historically prevalent narratives concerning Native experiences and identity. It epitomizes a communal all-encompassing approach to deal with evils and white repressive epistemology. Through its narrative structure, indigenous themes, and character portrayals, *Ceremony* challenges the dominant white stereotypes and misconceptions that have plagued Native communities. Moreover, Silko refutes to reduce Indian characters to one-dimensional stereotypes, portraying their diversity, complexity, and individuality. The novel encourages the readers to reassess their preconceived notions, acknowledge the resilience of Indian communities, and actively engage with the historical and

contemporary issues face by Native Americans. It not only challenges the prevailing white discourse but also reshapes it, offering a more inclusive, empathetic, and authentic representation of the Native American experience. Hence, *Ceremony*, by providing counter discourse, proposes a revision of literary canon and claims that academia should not only acknowledge the diversity of Native literature but also give due respect to such a splendid edifice of Indian literature because “without Native American literature, there is no American canon” (Womack, 1999, p.7).

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