

VOICE OF A HYBRID SPEAKING FROM A DISCRETE CULTURAL POSITION IN THE NOVEL CEREMONY BY LESLIE MARMON SILKO

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Abstract: The literature of post colonialism is a literature of marginality and liminality, portraying characters caught between one culture and another. The work represents a deep cultural conflict in the mind of an American who is from mixed ancestry. Ethnic nationalism and the recovery of traditional culture a classic formulation: A group withdraws into itself and labels the historically oppressive culture as the enemy. The nation or group feels that its social oppression is inextricably tied with the destruction of its traditional culture. To recover an aspect of the suppressed culture - even as fantasy - can be an act not only of revival but of subversion, a way of reifying the oppressed group's sense of separateness and entitlement.

Key words: double binds of assimilation, oppression, culture, Manichean view, regeneration, destroyers.

INTRODUCTION

Ceremony, a nonlinear pastiche of narrative, poetry, memory, and legend, is set two decades later, just after the World War II, on a

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reservation in New Mexico. What drives the novel is the tension between the forces of good and evil, evil is associated with anomie, illness, rape, barrenness, drought, witchery, industrialization, and annihilation. Out of sorts with each other and out of touch with the earth, the characters in the novel are drawn inexorably into evil's force field. On the other hand earth, mothering, wisdom, lovemaking, fecundity, ceremony: these things are good, rediscovering them, the people find in themselves the power to survive, even to heal.

That earth in the novel is a sentient being engaged in the struggle for body and soul and to a Native American this is not a pathetic fallacy but reality. "The earth," writes, Allen (1993:234). Meanwhile B. Ballard and J. Clanchy (1991:211) believe that "being as all creatures are also beings: aware, palpable, intelligent, and alive"

In the novel, Silko uses the literary trope of magical realism to portray the earth as human and humans as the earth. Similes, metaphors, images, and juxtapositions flow in directions anthropomorphizing the land and landscaping the human body. They are like Night Swan and Ts'eh in Ceremony, incarnations of Ts'its'tsi'nako, Grandmother Spider, or Mount Tse-pi'na, "The Woman Veiled in Clouds." Tayo says to his lover, "You never told me your name," and she replies, "I'm a Montano" (1977:223).

A mountain, Flesh-and-blood beings such as Ts'eh and the Hill Indians appear and disappear mysteriously throughout the novel. They are like apparitions always at the corner of one's eye. They function like neurotransmitters, connecting up the mind and body of a temporarily lobotomized patient.

Ceremony was written toward the end of a time of activism when American Indians, in an effort to call attention to their historic oppression, demonstrated at Wounded Knee Battlefield, occupied Alcatraz Island, and called for the restoration of traditional salmon

fishing rights in the Columbia River. In his study of Black Nationalism in American literature, Larry Neal (1976:782) gives ethnic nationalism and the recovery of traditional culture a classic formulation:

A group withdraws into itself and labels the historically oppressive culture as the enemy. . . . The nation or group feels that its social oppression is inextricably tied with the destruction of its traditional culture.

To recover an aspect of the suppressed culture -- even as fantasy -- can be an act not only of revival but of subversion, a way of reifying the oppressed group's sense of separateness and entitlement.

In *Manichean Aesthetics*, his study of the literature of African colonialism, Abdul Jan Mohammed (1983:5) has written of the double binds of assimilation:

For the native to choose the traditional culture is to doom himself to remain in "a calcified society whose momentum has been checked by colonization." On the other hand, to choose assimilation is to be "trapped in a form of historical catalepsy" in which his own culture has been replaced by the colonizers.

The literature of post colonialism is a literature of marginality and liminality, portraying characters caught between one culture and another.

Jan Mohammed's title is taken from a passage in Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which the double binds are moral, almost metaphysical. Fanon argues that the colonizer, in order to justify his conquest of an indigenous people, constructs a Manichean world-view in which the native is perceived as "a sort of quintessence of evil. . . . The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values." For

Fanon, then, the recovery of a traditional spiritual culture is a way of defeating that Manichean polarization. Silko in her equivocations and evasions may be trying to slip the double binds of assimilation and to avoid a counter-Manicheanism that could be the unhappy effect of the theme of the recovery of the traditional culture. To forestall this counter-Manicheanism, author invents protagonists of mixed racial origin; and significantly, constructs alternative versions of the traditional myths.

TAYO – A LAGUNA INDIAN AND NEW MEXICAN BRED

Ceremony is the story of Tayo a half breed born of a Laguna Indian mother and an unidentified white man in Gallup, New Mexico. His mother is homeless, and his earliest memories are of a man who came in and out of their corrugated tin shelter in an arroyo outside of town, and of sleeping under the tables in a local tavern when his mother would go off with some man or another. When four years old, his mother takes him to her home in the Laguna Pueblo and leaves him with her family, a group of proud and respectable Laguna's, where he grows up under the resentful care of her sister. 'Auntie' had not wanted to take him, but she was overruled by her mother, Old Grandma, and her brother Josiah. She continues to resent him as she cares for him and always communicates to him that he is not quite acceptable. Old Grandma is also a part of his growth, as well as Uncle Robert and his uncle Josiah, both of whom treat him with kindness and affection. Josiah plays a major male figure role in his life, and Tayo loves and admires him as a father. When Tayo's mother passes away, Josiah stands with him at the funeral and holds his hand. The most important member of the family is Rocky, Auntie and Robert's son, who is near Tayo's age. The two have a brotherly relationship growing up in the Laguna Pueblo.

Tayo survives the war physically, but not mentally and he goes to Ku'oosh to finish the ceremony, and Old Grandma sends a pot of

chili and fry bread for their feast. The story ends with another Laguna chant:

Whirling darkness
Started its journey
With its witchery
And Its witchery
Has returned upon it.
Its witchery
Has returned
Into its belly.

In the verbal exchange, between Night Swan and Tayo, Night Swan mentions Tayo's hazel-green eyes, which have long been a source of shame to him because they mark him as a "half-breed." But Night Swan's attitude toward Tayo's eye color is different from that of people he has met so far. For her, Tayo's green eyes mark him as kin to the green bottle fly and to the hummingbird, whose role as messengers in time immemorial is crucial to help the people communicate with the Goddess and thus end the drought. Precisely because of his "half-breed" status, Tayo can be an effective messenger. Fully accepted neither by the whites nor by the Laguna people, he knows both cultures well--not because that cultural knowledge is somehow, mystically "in his blood," but because he has been forced all his life to stand a little outside of both cultures. From that outsider's vantage point, he has learned to understand each culture more objectively and to adjust so that he could function in each. Though painfully acquired, Tayo's adaptive skills are valuable because they are transferable to more important tasks. When he is called upon to intercede with the Goddess to end the drought, Tayo can make the necessary transitions. He can be a messenger on behalf of the people, a messenger between them and the Earth Goddess to help restore balance and harmony to the land. As he is about to leave, Night Swan says only, "You don't have to understand what is

happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now." She thanks him for "bringing the message" (Silko, 1977:100).

Tayo is an intriguing and complex character, his search for a cure, fills the reader with sympathize due to his plight, and when Tayo confronts Emo and the evil forces he represents at book's end, we support him. Like Tayo, we come to recognize the responsibilities he has to his world, but also that meeting these responsibilities results in his gaining the power to survive the confrontation through his awareness of appropriate action, or inaction in this case. Like Laguna oral literature, Ceremony is concerned with entertainment and enduring cultural values, and when Silko writes of a man trying to come to grips with a chaotic world seemingly bent on self-destruction, she does what past Laguna storytellers have done: clarify the changes in their world and dramatize how old ways may be adapted to accommodate those changes. Tayo's story emerges from a long-standing literary tradition which continues to define and redefine the sources of power found in the Laguna landscape, and to provide knowledge of the ways that these sources may be utilized. As Tayo moves through his narrative, his awareness of the relationship between his experiences and those told of in the stories of his people grows, and he in turn moves from an isolated, ill individual to a powerful, competent representative of his people. In a word, he becomes a hero.

SILKO'S TRADITIONAL STORIES

Silko's use of traditional stories as bases for her fiction is easily demonstrated. Such as in "Yellow Woman" she acknowledges the relevance of the old stories to an understanding of the present. In it, a woman is carried away, quite literally, by a man she meets near the stream on the outskirts of Laguna, and throughout the story she continually asks herself if the man is actually a mountain Katsina and

if she is a modern incarnation of Kochininako, or Yellow Woman. Silko never overtly answers the question, but the mere fact that another, updated version of the stories of Yellow Woman is being "told" is answer enough. Yellow Woman, the perennial heroine, lives through Silko's story. Tayo shares a similar life in that Silko conscientiously tells the stories that relate to Tayo's life and from which his story emerges. When she tells of Hummingbird's and Fly's endeavors to set the world right and bring the rains back, she establishes the ways that individuals may act for the people and work transformations through correctly ordered actions and perseverance. And when she tells of Sun Man's confrontation with the Evil Gambler, Kaup'a'ta, she provides both the genesis of the plot for Tayo's narrative, and his genealogy as a fictional character.

Sun Man climbs a mountain to rescue the rain clouds from Kaup'a'ta. He is successful because Spiderwoman tells him what the Gambler will do, so he can anticipate events and react accordingly, thus turning the Gambler's evil back on himself. Obviously, these characters have contemporary counterparts in Silko's tale; *Ceremony* has its own hero who climbs the mountain and who with the aid of mysterious beings--Ts'eh and the hunter--is able to bring the rains and turn evil into its own defeat. If there is doubt about Emo's nature, one need only remember the scene in which Silko describes him playing with the teeth of a dead Japanese officer. He rolls them like dice; he is quite literally gambling for Tayo's life, and he nearly wins. If there is any doubt about Tayo's character, one need only re-examine the stages in his story that speak of his identity, but also the ways by which he comes to understand what is happening in his world and how to react to the changes he sees taking place. His strength comes from his awareness that his story is very similar to those he heard from Josiah as a child.

For Native Americans, the earth was and is Self. Sooner grant them title to their heart or their lungs or their right foot -- or their

mothers -- than a piece of property. But the U.S. government forged ahead. During this century, it has compensated Native Americans for stolen land by creating reservations, doling out money, and, through the Dawes Act and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, allotting parcels to individuals. But there is not way to make amends for what is irretrievable. D'Arcy McNickle writes:

Even today, when Indian tribes may go into court and sue the United States for inadequate compensation or no compensation for land taken from them, they still are dealing in alien concepts. One cannot grow a tree on a pile of money, or cause water to gush from it. . . (Bevis 1993:2)

For Native Americans, the illusion that an "aware, palpable, intelligent, alive" (Allen 1993:234) being such as a piece of land can be traded for money printed on the bark of dead trees describes the extent of white people's rupture with mother earth. As Silko writes in her legend about how white people came into the world: "Stolen rivers and mountains / the stolen land will eat their hearts / and jerk their mouths from the Mother 1993:136).

The white men are like *Ceremony's* destroyers. They conspire to own the Indians' land and, literally, their bodies. Poor Benoit spends months in jail before getting strung up -- an apparent suicide -- on the night of his wedding. Stolen land and stole lives, locked-up mountains and locked-up men: all are metaphors for a world whose polar axis had shifted.

Separating illness from wellness in Silko's novels is like severing night from day: it is unnatural. If the inability to see landscape as metaphor characterizes the "literature of illness," then the "literature of wellness" must be defined by the ability to empathize with the landscape. And these novels are as much about wellness and healing as about illness and death. Tayo's tending to the apricot tree in Ts'eh's yard signifies growth. An early storm catches the tree

"vulnerable with leaves that caught snow and held it in drifts until the branches dragged the ground" (Silko 1997:208). Gently shaking the tree's limbs, Tayo frees it from its prison house of snow. The nurturing, feminine side of his nature, which began to thaw during lovemaking, is asserting itself. Later, Tayo vows to gather seeds for Ts'eh and plant them near the sandy hills at the right time, thereby mothering the earth in ways that he himself was never mothered:

He would gather the seeds . . . and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills. The rainwater would seep down gently and the delicate membranes would not be crushed or broken before the emergence of tiny fingers, roots, and leaves pressing out in all directions. (Silko 1997:254)

Regeneration comes about when Tayo harnesses his human power to that of the earth. To Native Americans, night and day are just two sides of the same multi-faceted being, characteristics of human nature as well as Mother Nature.

The novel has a plot that has become common in the postcolonial novel. In labeling novels by an American Indian "postcolonial," the term is used in a fairly broad sense. The plot pattern identified here, common in postcolonial novelists as diverse as Achebe, Narayan, and Ousmene, is a literary representation of a deep cultural conflict among formerly colonized people. A member of an oppressed and marginalized people is suffering from a grave illness, a malady that seems simultaneously to be psychological, physical, and spiritual. Eventually this character is healed through traditional ritual and through a literal encounter with the supernatural, whose reawakening accompanies the main character's rebirth. At the end of the novel this powerless person has appropriated a source of transcendent power, and there is hope for a new society based on the values of the reborn traditional culture: as Silko puts it at the end of *Ceremony*, the witchery "is dead for now" (1977:261).

CONCLUSION

Silko's novel seems to suggest that those, like Emo, Harley, Leroy, and Pinkie, who seek to deny their Indian heritage and uncritically embrace the materialistic and individualistic values of Anglo-European cultures, can sometimes hinder cultural survival as much as the whites have done. Those characters, like Emo and the others, who reject Indian identity and curse the land in favor of the bright lights, soft food, and powerful weaponry of the white culture all meet with death or dispossession.

Throughout the course of the novel, Tayo must struggle against his own fear and doubt and against the destructive powers of the witchery to complete the ceremony. When Tayo was in the veterans' hospital in Los Angeles, he had been invisible, like "white smoke." (Silko 1977:14) "The smoke had been dense; visions and memories of the past did not penetrate there, and he had drifted in colors of smoke, where there was no pain." (Silko 1977:15) As Susan Scarberry (1979) argues, however, Tayo must seek to remember and to come to terms with the past; only in so doing can he recover his lost identity. (Silko 1977:19-26) "Memory insures the preservation of tribal heritage. By coming to terms with his memory, Tayo assumes responsibility for the quality of his own life and for the old ways." (Silko 1977:19)

James Ruppert (1988:82) argues, "Tayo's recovery is contingent upon his realization that mythic and real worlds are one, just as the success of the novel is contingent upon the reader realizing the same thing". Whereas, Ramsey (1993) notes that Silko rejects the classic tragic premise, in which the noble Native American protagonist meets with a tragic end, and the rest is silence.

In *Ceremony*, Silko subverts the myth of the "vanishing American" by insisting upon the vitality, strength, and adaptability inherent in her mixed-blood Native American protagonist, she

replaces the tragic mode in fiction about Native peoples with one that rejects victimization and affirms empowerment and recovery. The novel embodies a fundamental difference between the fiction of white Americans and that of Native Americans. Simply stated, whites are taught (by the Bible, for one, which gives man "dominion" over the earth) to see the land as separate from themselves, whereas Native Americans believe the land is the same as themselves. Just as the white European literary tradition springs from the white European history of colonization, Native American writing arises from the experience of dispossession.

Native American legend has it that earth and humankind originated as thoughts in the mind of Grandmother Spider, and today they communicate through stories. Poet and scholar Paula Gunn Allen, a member of the Laguna Pueblo, writes that "the gap between isolate human being and lonely landscape is closed [through the stories]" (1993:234). The typical hero in Native American fiction, instead of seeking his fortune in unfamiliar territory, comes home: to a past, to a people, to a place (Bevis 1993:16). In *Ceremony*, this homecoming is literal as well as metaphoric, involving Tayo's renewed ties to the Pueblo and earth.

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