

Re-imagining Gender In Nature: Gender Subjectivity In Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract

Feminist literary criticism of the past decades has often pointed to powerful women figures in American literature. From Hawthorne's Hester Prynne to Alice Walker's Meridian one can find many images which counter the stereotype of the clinging, submissive, and self-sacrificing woman. By contrast, these powerful women are courageous, independent of judgement, and as intelligent as any man, without becoming egocentric or losing their sense of interpersonal relationships. Little attention has been paid to male figures who are sensitive instead of ruthless, gentle instead of heroic, community-conscious instead of individualistic. It is especially important to find such images in Native American literature because in the popular imagination the American Indian male is still either a savage killer, a degenerate drunkard or nature's stoic, noble man. Since the initial period of the beginning of literature, role and position of women in our society has been a much-discussed topic. Speaking of portrayal of women in whole literature, women have always been treated as object rather than important member of the society. Such pictures of weak and subaltern women are evident in the writings of all the prominent writers of literature, especially European literature. However, in the writings of Native American Literature, the scenario is totally reversed. Here women not only enjoy prominent position in the society but their status is much higher than males. Ranging from local deities and spiritual beings to normal housewives, these feminine figures of Native American Literature possess a strong and impressive identity. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony* (1977), depicts women in different roles who play different and prominent roles in helping the main character, Tayo in his healing process. This novel is the finest example of texts treating women as central figures.

Keywords-Feminine, Masculinity, Spiritual Being, Ceremony, Healing.

In the history of Native American tribes, women played an important and prominent role. Since the origin of Native American culture and tradition, Native American women have always been associated with power. The responsibility of providing knowledge of Native American historical stories and tradition tales lied only on the women of native tribes of America. Because of their skill and ability to have, raise and teach their children, Native American women have been compared with the earth. According to the views of Native

American tribes, both women and the earth had the ability to nurture their children. Because of their prominent role in sustaining native culture, Native American women were treated as mothers. This status was not only given to biological mother but to every woman, because in Native American culture, every woman knew and even fulfilled her responsibility of nurturing and teaching every child. In the words of M.A. James Guerrero, prior to the colonial process, Native American women “provided matrilineal continuity in their roles as ‘clan mothers’ who determined role responsibilities among all members through collective cultural practices and reciprocal kinship traditions” (Guerrero 63). In addition to the role of mothers, Native American women also possess property rights. They owned house and were considered as head of the family. Even local deities who guarded these tribes were also females. Because of these specialties, Native American women enjoyed high status and much respect in their society.

Till the commencement of the process of European incursion and colonization, Native American women fully enjoyed the status of being prominent members of American society. European colonialism and patriarchy have snatched the very basic rights from Native American people, especially women. European arrival is responsible for bringing the notion of inferiority of non-western communities. However, the legacy of possessing the mentality of inferiority of all women, irrespective of race, also belongs to the European colonizers. European colonizers are responsible for the introduction of patriarchal system in America. With the introduction of European patriarchal system in America, Native American women suffered a lot and have been forced to “bear a double burden because they must deal with both racist and sexist attitudes, and with the discrimination that results from such prejudice” (Guerrero 65). After their encounter with the European colonizers, Native American women lost their power of being respected and prestigious beings. During the process of colonization, Native women become victims of European settler’s lust and greed. They faced exploitation at both physical as well as social level. European colonizers clearly demarcated the boundaries of superior males and inferior females.

Such pictures of superior males and inferior females are clearly visible in literature of European origin. In the texts of European literature, discussion of female characters has always been associated with terms such as inferior, other, weak, powerless, dependence. But in Native American Literature, perspective of introducing feminism is entirely different. Here these stereotypes of weak and subversive women are totally inversed. In Native American Literature, women exhibit a strong identity and play a vital role. In such literature, women are

associated with the capacities of power and authority. These powerful and authoritative women are courageous, self independent and capable of taking decisions of family as well as of society. In a similar manner, Silko's novel *Ceremony* is full of number of women who play an important part in the life of the protagonist, Tayo. Silko "uses several key female characters to help her male protagonist reject the stereotypical male world of dominance and destruction in favour of the traditional female world of community, connections to people, and connection to the land" (Temple & Velie 74) While favouring Silko's aim of introducing feministic idea in the novel, Susan Perez Castillo claims: "Silko herself is descended from a line of strong women such as her great-grandmother, Marie Anaya, who took care of her and told her traditional laguna stories, her grandmother Lillie, a model a mechanic, and her Aunt Susie, the first laguna woman to get a university degree" (Castillo 233). Because of having these women in her life, Silko is able to become a part of Laguna culture.

In the novel, thoughts and words originate from the powerful thinking and sayings of a woman. Here Silko incorporates mythical world of laguna tradition. Louise Barnett rightly claims: "Pueblo religion reinforced the idea of a female creative principle that actively contributed to the well-being of the people through such female deities as Thought Woman, Spider Woman, Corn Mother and others" (Barnett 19). Similarly, the whole story of *Ceremony* arises from thoughts and words of mythical woman and local deity known as Thought Woman/Spider Woman. She weaves the whole idea of the novel. She is the creator of the universe that consists of the earth, the world we live in and the four worlds where the spirits of the dead people go and reside. "She thought of her sisters...and together they created the universe/this world/ and the four worlds below. (Silko 01). Similarly, "Thought Woman, the spider, / named things and/ as she named them/ they appeared" (Silko 01). Even whole story of the novel is also the creation of the mind of Thought Woman. By incorporating laguna myth in the form of spiritual character of Thought Woman, Silko places woman at the center of the world.

Silko centers the novel around the life and struggles of its protagonist, Tayo. Tayo is a world war veteran who suffers from problem of post war traumatic disorder. His bad mental condition is because of his feeling of guilty for the death of his cousin, Rocky, in the war. Because of his disgust with the war, Tayo also connects death of a Japanese soldier to his uncle, Josiah. He thinks that the Japanese soldier who dies in the war is his uncle. So, unable to bear the burden of death of Rocky and Josiah, Tayo loses his mental balance. Even after his treatment in the hospital, Tayo's health doesn't improve. Because of his bad mental

condition, Tayo fails to adjust himself in the society. In order to help Tayo in his fast recovery, many characters play their role. “These characters are lodged in the spiritual realm of the novel, and they put Tayo in the ceremonial nature of gender. Identification with men teaches the profile of masculinity through hunting, herding, warfare and curing, while identification with women gives Tayo his social identity by reuniting him with the land” (Swan 313). These characters are mostly women who manifest in either physical or spiritual roles and guide Tayo at every step of his journey of self-realization. It is only with the help of these women, Tayo is successful in recovering from his mental disorder.

Silko belongs to Laguna tribe of Native America and in a similar way, *Ceremony* also reflects matriarchal structure of Laguna tribe. Tayo’s upbringing takes place in a matrilineal family. The house where Tayo stays, belong to his grandmother, Tayo’s aunt and her husband Robert and Tayo’s uncle, Josiah. This family structure where Tayo’s aunt stays at her mother’s home even after getting married to Robert, indicate popularity of culture of exogamy among the Native Americans. Edith Swan defines exogamy, a situation when “a person must marry outside of her clan, yet at marriage a bride continues to live with or near her mother (matrilocality), requiring that her husband move to her household...thus spatially concentrating woman of the same bloodline” (Swan). In Tayo’s family all decisions are taken by his grandmother or aunt while male members have to obey all rules constructed by female decision makers. Tayo’s aunt manages all household as well as external affairs while Robert being a passive character fulfills the responsibility of taking care of the ranch and the animals. His inactive position in the family is evident from the following statement Tayo realized that as long as Josiah and Rocky had been alive, he had never known Robert except as a quiet man in the house that belonged to old grandma and auntie. When auntie and old grandma and Josiah used to argue over how many lambs should be sold, or when auntie and old grandma scold Josiah for the scandal with his Mexican girlfriend, Robert sat quietly. He had cultivated this deafness for as many years as he had been married to Auntie. (Silko 29) Tayo’s mother, Laura who gave him birth leaves him at the age of four. Reason for her departure is the biggest twist in the life of Tayo. Tayo is illegitimate son born from a white settler. When Tayo was only four years old, Laura left him to the care of her sister, Tayo’s aunt. Tayo’s aunt take responsibility of Tayo not because her willingness or care but because she thinks Tayo is her burden and she has to fulfill her responsibility and nothing else. Since then, while his stay in the ranch with her aunt, Tayo “learns the smells of animals and the sights and sounds of mountains, winds and rivers” (Herzog 28).

In the novel, grandma represents tradition of native culture who possesses the responsibility of bearing and passing culture and heritage of Laguna tribe. Grandma truly “exemplifies a generation that adheres to native teachings, respects the wisdom and status of the elders, and honors the way it has always been” (Swan 313). Grandma is the oldest member of the clan that is why, Aunt claims: our family, our old grandma’s family, was so highly regarded at one time. She is used to being respected by people” (Silko 81). While playing the fictional role of Silko’s great-grandmother, grandma becomes a true storyteller. She narrates the old and immortal stories of laguna tribe to her grand-sons Tayo and Rocky. She fulfils the responsibility of making Tayo and Rocky well versed with the native culture. She is also indulgent in gossips, “she liked to sit by her stove and gossip about the people who were talking about their family...she pounded her cane on the floor in triumph. The story was all that counted. If she had a better one about them, then it didn’t matter what they said” (Silko 82). In order to make the role of grandma more influential, Silko ends the novel with the last narrative of the grandma saying “it seems like I already heard these stories before...only thing is, the names sound different” (Silko 242). Being an oldest and responsible member of the family as well as the clan, grandma also helps in Tayo’s recovery. When Tayo’s health does not improve, grandma decides to seek the help of medicine man, K’oosh. However even after K’oosh’s treatment, when Tayo doesn’t recover completely, grandma suggests the name of another medicine man, Betonie. Grandma’s decisions are so strong that even Tayo’s aunt cannot ignore them. Another significant role of grandma is when she informs Tayo about “witnessing the first atomic bomb blast in the desert south east of Laguna, and thus enables him to resist the lifedestroying forces of witchery embodied by his adversary Emo” (Castillo 233).

Next prominent feminine character who is associated with Tayo’s ceremony is, Night Swan. In the beginning of the novel, aunt refers her a ‘whore’ and a ‘dirty Mexican girl’, but as the novel proceed, she becomes a powerful spiritual figure who questions the fixed notions of spirituality, culture and gender. According to Tara Causey, Night Swan represents “a symbol of crosscultural exchange and a site where commonly held notions of authenticity and inauthenticity, physicality and spirituality, masculinity and femininity, and death and love become disrupted and redefined” (Causey 210). Josiah’s cattle deal, to buy hybrid cattle, is fixed by Night Swan. These cattle that Josiah buys are hybrid version of Mexican breed and Hereford breed. This deal proves successful because these hybrid cattlesymbolize strengthand resistance and this strength and resistance results from blending of different cultures. Next

important role that Night Swan plays is to explain the meaning of hazel eyes. Actually, when Tayo feels disgusted with his hazel eyes and says, "I always wished I had dark eyes like other people. When they look at me, they remember things that happened. My mother" (Silko 92). At this moment Night Swan explains that these hazel eyes of theirs represent change. She further explains that native people are afraid of these changes, they are afraid...they feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians of 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 what has happened inside themselves. (Silko 92)

Night Swan explains to Tayo that these hazel eyes are strength for them and instead of feeling disgraced, Tayo should accept these changes as important segment of his life. Another Mexican woman who helps Tayo in his journey is T'seh. Tayo meets T'seh when he goes to search Josiah's lost cattle. Tayo's search for lost cattle culminates when he meets T'seh because T'seh helps him in finding the lost cattle. T'seh is dressed in clouds when she meets Tayo on sacred mountain of the Laguna known as Mount Taylor. In Keresan language, language of Laguna tribe, T'seh is known as women. Kristin Herzog calls her "the mysterious woman who is also-on the mythological level-a goddess or mountain spirit" (Herzog 29). "She is the source, the female fulcrum of this gynocritic system. As she thinks, reality is named: cosmogony is woven into her linguistic universe" (Swan 394). While he was with T'seh, Tayo visualizes cattle in his dreams. About this visualization, Silko speaks he dreamed about the cattle that night. It was a continuous dream that was not interrupted even when she reached out for him again and pulled him on top of her. He went on dreaming while he moved inside her, and when he heard her whisper, he saw them scatter over the crest of a round bare hill, running away from him, scattering out around him like ripples in still water. (Silko 168)

Associated with the regenerative power of the earth, T'seh "wiggled her bare toes and looked up at the sandstone cliffs where the swallows were inside their round mud nests, making high-pitched noises. The shadows of the willow leaves made her skin look mottled and dark, the way the iron deposits streaked the yellow sandstone cliffs dark orange" (Silko 206). T'seh also causes rain thus relieving the surroundings for the prolonged draught. After making spiritual love with T'seh, Tayo began to feel his gradual recovery from mental ailment "because he has loved the woman who brings all things into being, and because he is at last

conscious that she has always loved them, his people, and him. He is able at last to take his normal place in the life of the people” (Allen 12). Finally, when Tayo realizes “the motherhood of the earth and the nurturing spirit instilled in him” (Herzog 31), his ailment is completely healed. Being a physical as well as a spiritual entity, T’sseh helps Tayo to remember and realize his connection with the nature. He breathed deeply, and each breath had a distinct smell of snow from the north, of ponderosa pine on the rimrock above; finally he smelled horses from the direction of the corral, and he smiled. Being alive was all right then... he squatted down by the pool and watched the dawn spreading across the sky like yellow wings. The mare jingled the steel shanks of the bit with her grazing, and he remembered the sound of the bells in late November, when the air carried the jingling like snowflakes in the wind. (Silko 168)

There is a stark contrast between Euro American and Native American way of treating women. Women are treated merely as object in Euro-American society while in Native American society, these women receive much prestigious position. Like other Native American writers, Silko’s feminism is evident from the role that her female characters play in her novel. These women especially grandma, Night Swan and T’sseh possess physical as well as spiritual qualities who play a significant role in helping Tayo’s in every step of his journey self-realization and mental stability. Swan and Herzog claim that both Night Swan and T’sseh can be interpreted as incarnation of local deity, Thought Woman, mother-creatrix. Herzog claims: “Night Swan is partially a mythological figure, and the encounter with her is more than sexual: like T’sseh, she is connected with life bearing rain and damp earth, with the sky-and-mountain-color blue and with the mountain itself” (Herzog 31) Without their help Tayo’s mental revival would have been impossible.

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