

**HEALING THROUGH MYTH AND REVIVING THROUGH CULTURE: A
CRITICAL STUDY ON LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S NOVEL *CEREMONY***

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ABSTRACT

The land of Native Americans has always been renowned for its ancient culture, civilization, oral tradition and heritage. The native tribal people are primitive and they follow the cultural practices and norms regularly. To strengthen the cultural values, myths and stories are used by the ancestors. Myths have a significant method in refining and re-defining the society. The telling and re-telling of the stories have developed an everlasting bondage with the people. The process of 'passing-on' of myths from one generation to the other has aided in the progress of the Native American culture. Such myths are explored in the works of the Native American Renaissance author, Leslie Marmon Silko. Her novel, *Ceremony* has enriched content of mythical practices, cultural values, identity crisis and customary beliefs. As the title of the novel signifies, *Ceremony* signifies a formal cultural activity that has been accepted and welcomed by all. This paper aims to explore the various myths involved in the novel, *Ceremony*. The paper also focuses on the myths, which are regarded as highly potential as they possess the healing power to cure any disease and how culture is evolved along with the myths to establish the Native American tribal identity.

Key Words:

Native Americans, Myth, Culture, Ceremony, Identity crisis, healing power.

INTRODUCTION

Mythology and Culture are inter-connected and they are strongly associated with each other. Myth, as the term indicates, is a story or a collection of stories that has been told, re-told by the ancestors to the younger generations. Such stories are narrated by the older people of the community to the younger ones so that the latter leads a righteous life. To describe myth vividly, it is also a type of tale where untold occurrences like the impact of ghosts and apparitions on the humans happen during certain circumstances and mystical events like natural resources (animals and birds) are animated and take the form of humans. The term 'Myth' is best understood from the following lines of the scholars Maria Leach and Jerome Fried:

*"[A myth] is a story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc. The purpose of myth is to explain, and, as Sir G.L. Gomme said, myths explain matters in "the **science** of a pre-scientific age." Thus myths tell of the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; they tell why a certain animal has its characteristics (e.g. why the bat is blind or flies only at night), why or how certain natural phenomena came to be ... how and w(hy rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue." (Mark)*

In this manner, the ideals of myth and culture go in accordance with each other. Culture, on the other hand, describes the customary behaviours or traditional beliefs of a particular sect of people which has been followed by them for many decades. Since Culture is a vast term, it can be studied and analysed from the perspective of the people's language, oral tradition, customs and identity crisis. To study culture in detail, a brief account could be made on the beliefs, practices and customs of a particular group of people who belong to a specific community. The study of culture could be elucidated from Raymond Williams' ideas on Culture, which suggests:

"What is Culture?

- *a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development;*
- *a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general;*
- *the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. (Williams, 1976, p.90)."*

ANALYSIS

The significance of Culture and Myths can be examined effectively from the lands that have been adhering to all the rules and norms of the traditional values for many decades and it can also be learnt from native people who are primitive, rural and primordial in their nations. Alike Indians, the Native Americans, also termed as the Red Indians or the Indians have an ancient civilization and they have been following their native tribal culture for years and years. From the survey observed in the year 2011, it is seen that there are totally five hundred and sixty-six tribes in Native America.

The question of blending myth with culture and the process of attainment of healing power along with the ways of reviving culture as an analytical study is made on the novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko - The Native American Renaissance author. With the help of Laguna- Pueblo Culture, which is the culture of the Laguna people living in New Mexico, a thorough analysis is done to know and familiarise about their mythological beliefs and culture.

The Laguna people have an unswerving faith over their mythical beliefs and tribal culture. According to their Laguna culture, the native people have always possessed a strong emotional bondage with the land, they lived in. The native people of Laguna reservation have taken many efforts in conserving their land and its resources. According to them, their land and its richness has been perturbed by the intrusion of the European settlers. To extend their empire, the European settlers have abducted the land of the natives for their usage. Through the novel, it is explained that the Laguna mythology and the Laguna-Pueblo tribal culture has been taken as a least significance, by the White people.

The Native American Renaissance author and the renowned novelist, Leslie Marmon Silko has a rich cultural background. Though she has a mixed ascent of both Anglo-American and Mexican background, she has spent her life for the betterment and development of her tribal land and people. Leslie Marmon Silko has always prioritized the usage of myths and its conventional beliefs over her novels to strongly emphasize the Laguna tribal culture. *Ceremony*, the novel that is chosen for study, is the most popular and distinguished among the other works of Leslie Marmon Silko. "The title of the novel, *Ceremony*, refers to the healing ceremonies based on the ancient stories of the Dine and Pueblo people." (Silko XV) The novel and its title justify the power of healing.

The worldly acclaimed novel, *Ceremony* was written in the year 1977. The novel explains about the intense sufferings of the protagonist and his continuous struggle in safeguarding his land from the Whites. Through Tayo, who is the protagonist of the novel the popular myths of Laguna culture are learnt; and the unrevealed fact that incurable diseases can be cured through the myths is also studied. This paper focuses on the different myths connected to the novel, *Ceremony*, the significance of the myths and how it heals the disease of Tayo and also how Tayo re-establishes his tribal culture.

Leslie Marmon Silko incorporates numerous myths in the novel. Initially the five created worlds, which are explained in Laguna Mythology, are examined. The first world has water, holy spirits, land and language, whereas the second world consists of water and land mammals. The holy spirits have created the Spider Man and his wife, Spider Woman. The third world comprises of trees, universe and geometrical directions. The fourth world consists of human beings whereas the fifth world made by God has not been explored yet. The myth of Five worlds describes how the universe and its elements are generated and it has to be preserved for the future generations.

The myths of Corn Woman, Thought Woman, Spider Woman and Reed Woman in the novel educate the richness of human values and the unflinching power and control of woman over the earth and its beings. The Corn Woman refers to the Mother Earth, who is the creator of all beings. Corn is regarded as a staple food for the Laguna-Pueblo people and they worship Corn Mother (i.e.) the Corn Woman as their goddess. They exhibit their worship by singing songs to praise the Mother Earth, dancing and also offering food to God. In the novel, the novelist explains how blue and yellow pollen is offered to the Corn Woman to glorify her. This explains the fact that when the human respect and exalt the nature, the Mother Earth blesses the humans splendidly. The Corn Woman shows her blessing to the people in the form of rain showers.

Following the Corn Woman, the novelist explains about the Thought Woman who also symbolises creation of human beings. The Thought Woman is portrayed in the form of a protector of the Earth and she uses her power and control to save the land and the people in it. The Thought Woman is exemplified of a potential woman who has possessed all the feminine qualities in her. The novelist has categorised the Thought Woman into two different forms in the novel. The novelist has implied the Night Swan, who woos Josiah and supports him in all ways. Her bravery could be compared with the mightiness of the Thought Woman. The second form is

Ts'eh, whom Tayo loves dearly. Ts'eh serves to be the true epitome of Thought Woman, where she saves Tayo from being murdered by Emo, who is also a soldier of Tayo's clan (but he is deprived of Tayo). Moreover it's through Ts'eh's untiring efforts, the Laguna people are blessed with rain, since they had been affected by drought for many years.

The myth of Thought Woman is followed by the Spider Woman's myth and the latter is depicted as powerful as the Thought Woman. The role of Spider Woman is considered to be significant as the Spider Woman serves to be a tool and source of a soul's personal self-analysis and self-realization. Leslie Marmon Silko has used the Spider Woman in the novel to highlight that the dominant treatment of the White doctors' is comparatively stronger than Tayo's masculinity. Through Spider Woman, the aggressive male identity of the Whites and Tayo's negative attitudes are abolished. Tayo is revived to life from his enemies with the help of Ts'eh who is an incarnation of Spider Woman, too. Through a female soul, happiness, resurrection and revival of securing Tayo and the land is achieved.

Leslie Marmon Silko has used the myth of the Reed Woman to explain the importance of rain to the land. As explained in the myth, Reed Woman is shown to be having bath the complete day and enjoying herself with the water whereas the Corn Woman has been toiling hard in the scorching sun for the complete day. Since Reed Woman has completely used the water for bathing, the crops reared by the Corn Woman are affected by draught. This myth is narrated by the novelist in an incident, where Tayo curses the rain for its continuous downpour. Though Tayo does it unintentionally, the Rain-God has refused to bless the Laguna people with rain for years. This implies that the natural resources has to be worshipped, adorned and respected and never be abused.

Leslie Marmon Silko has provided acquaintance with the myths of Mountain Lion, Bear people, Trickster, C'ko'yoto and Navajo Witchcraft in her novel *Ceremony*. The myths have been given equal importance in the novel and it is from the myths, Laguna- Pueblo culture, traditions, religious practices and customary beliefs are learnt. The importance of myths is observed through these lines:

I will tell you something about stories,

[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

You don't have anything

if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty

but it can't stand up to our stories. (Silko 2)

The C'ko'yoto myth in the novel signifies that C'ko'yote or Coyote is an animal that resembles a wolf or fox and which walks on two legs on land. Silko has shown Coyote as a mischievous, sly and notorious animal. Silko has highlighted the usage of Coyote in order to compare the C'ko'yote's nature to the attitude of the European settlers. The European settlers have been cunning and shrewd enough to occupy the land of the Native Americans and they have started to rule the colonized. The Trickster Myth goes well in accordance with the Coyote Myth, where the former (trickster) is shown in both good and bad forms. The Trickster in Laguna-Pueblo Mythology represents both moral and amoral figure; in the context, Silko has explained 'Trickster' as an 'outsider' who has voluntarily forced themselves in. It is aptly represented to the Whites, who have forced themselves to stay in the land of the natives and they have also taken advantage of the available resources.

The Navajo Witchery is explained through Kaup'a'ta, a Coyote magician, who is also a gambler, trickily cheats people, kills them and robs off their souls. To deceive the people by his clothes, Kaup'a'ta dresses himself in kingly robes. He resides in the mountains and waits anxiously for the wanderers or voyagers and when they witness Kaup'a'ta, they are lured by his magic. He uses charming words to captivate the voyagers to play gambling with him. Before he starts to play with them, he offers blue corn meal (that has the blood of the other dead wanderers) to the voyagers and the latter consumes the same. The Blue Corn meal is served as an offering to the Corn Mother and Sun Father, whereas Kaup'a'ta uses the same to trickily cheat the innocent people.

Kaup'a'ta trickily cheats the wanderers through the Navajo Witchery and loots all the possessions of those whom he plays with and after they lose completely, he questions them as what has been possessed by Kaup'a'ta in his own bag. If their answers are apt, then they are released by Kaup'a'ta. To everyone's dismay, they provide with wrong answers and the act of punishing the travellers is the cruellest deed by Kaup'a'ta. Kaup'a'ta punishes them by tying their bodies upside down from the roof in his store-room and killing them by slitting open their hearts and make their blood fall down on the corn-meal (that needs to be served to the next traveller). In this manner, he cheats and kills many people; Kaup'a'ta becomes more powerful that he imprisons even the storm clouds for three years. The Spider-Woman guides his grandson, the Sun Man to play gambling with Kaup'a'ta in an equal tricky style. Finally, the Sun Man wins over him, kills him and releases the storm clouds.

This story is narrated in the novel as Navajo Witchery or Navajo Witchcraft and through this method, Tayo has been targeted to be killed by Emo; whereas Harley is caught in the trap and he is being killed brutally by Emo and his other friends. Emo has built this vengeance over Tayo, since the latter is much skilled and talented in the warfield and Emo hates Tayo bitterly and ignores him saying that he is a 'half-breed'. The role of Kaup'a'ta is compared to the White people who cheat and deceive the innocent natives that they need food and shelter whilst the entire nation is being completely eroded away by the European Settlers.

The Laguna Pueblo people are staunch followers of their tribal culture. Cultural practices of the Laguna Pueblo people are considered to be holy, sacred and spiritual to them. Similar to the mythical beliefs, the cultural practices are also mocked at and scorned by the White people. For an instance, the act of killing frogs for a sport is considered to be illegal for Laguna people. They trust that if the frogs are killed, the land should be affected by floods. Laguna tribes hold the natural resources as their highest reward and benediction. It is referred in the novel, that people are attached to trees such as Juniper, hard oak and scrub oak. They are concerned about the welfare of the animals in the land. Maximum care is provided to Mexican spotted cattle, bony mules, insects such as yellow fly and more. It is referred that Tayo played with grasshopper when he was a child. This could imply the attachment and connection of Laguna people with their land. Holding onto their land and preserving it has always been their prime element of culture.

Another instance that can be highlighted is the kind and modest way of Laguna tribe's treatment of animals; they spare more amount of time in taking care of animals unlike the

Whites. It is found in the novel, where Rodeo-breed bull is abandoned in the streets, after the Whites understood that it had a broken ankle. Laguna tribes consider sheep as their ancestors and to pay tribute to deer, they dress in the form of the animal and dance for their tribal songs.

The novelist has highlighted the significance of Laguna-Pueblo culture in her novel *Ceremony*. Being a ‘mixed-breed’ herself, Leslie Marmon Silko has elucidated the two diverse cultures: Laguna culture and White people’s culture. The novelist has involved her personal experiences while narrating about the protagonist. Tayo is also depicted as a ‘half-breed’ and he is made fun of and ridiculed at public places and also when rendering his service at Civil War. Tayo takes measures in establishing his cultural identity to his opponents in many circumstances.

Through Tayo, the cultural values of Laguna tribe are learnt; it is studied that the tribal people always live together as a whole family. Tayo has been found living with his uncle Josiah, aunt, Rocky and grandmother. When Tayo and Rocky have been forcibly sent to serve the nation as soldiers, Tayo becomes dull and affected. The death of Rocky and Uncle Josiah has deadly struck him. This has resulted in ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ and he becomes mentally ill. From this, it is evident that Laguna people always live in communities; separation and death of beloved ones leads to a complete disastrous effect on an individual.

Tayo’s treatment by listening to myths from the medicine man is also a vital cultural practice. This is how the myths are correlated to take the form of cultural practices. Tayo, having born from a mixed parentage and having lived by the norms of Laguna culture, has rendered his service in Civil war and World War –II. Having suffered terribly from ‘battle fatigue’ he approaches the medicine man to cure his illness. The medicine man after chanting myths and offering prayers finally cuts a piece of flesh from the scalp of Tayo, which partially cures him of his sickness.

The partial ailment of Tayo provokes him to find out the lost cattle that have been imprisoned by the White men in their ranch. The cultural identity of Tayo is achieved when he finds out the cattle, allows them to be free and finds the woman whom he had eternally loved. This woman turns out to be Ts’eh through whom the land is blessed with rain. Myth and Culture are linked to each other. The novelist has projected Tayo to be the oppressed representative of Laguna tribe. When Tayo voices for his rights and struggles to become recognized in the White-domineered society, his ancestry, personal life and cultural values are put to question. It is evident that when Tayo becomes completely cured of his illness, when he finds his lost cattle and secures them safely at home, when he brings rain-showers to the land

through Ts'eh and when he safeguards himself from his tricky enemies, the culture followed by him is justified.

CONCLUSION

The novelist has used enormous myths to support her ideals in preserving the land (that has been abducted by the Whites) and the natural resources (that have been exploited by the settlers). Each mythical story is woven and strung together in Laguna Culture, Oral tradition, heritage and identity crisis. Leslie Marmon Silko has emphasized that the native land always belong to the native people and the forceful seizure of their land is unlawful. The oneness and the emotional attachment of the tribal people with their land are explicitly illustrated through Tayo, the protagonist.

Myths are narrated in order to legalise the path of the younger generation. In the novel, it is seen that Tayo, the protagonist has been suffering from 'Battle Fatigue' (i.e.) post-traumatic stress disorder ever since the World War-II. As per the advice of Tayo's grandmother, Ku'oosh, a medicine man is summoned to cure Tayo. According to the Laguna Culture, if the tribal people are not cured by the treatment given by the White doctors, then the medicine men are called upon. The role of the Medicine Man is to narrate stories or tales related to the pain and suffering of the natives and slowly make their soul, body and mind relieved from the excruciating pain. The Medicine Man along with narrating the stories, paves way for the betterment of lives of the affected people.

In the novel, it is found that Ku'oosh tries to treat the illness of Tayo. As he fails, Tayo is compelled to find Betonie, another medicine man who is well-known to cure psychotic disorders. Through Betonie, Tayo is cured completely of his illness and he takes up the ambition of his Uncle Josiah to save the cattle from a White man's ranch. It is also observed that he unknowingly falls in love with Ts'eh, the woman who saves her from downfall and who brings prosperity and fertility to the land in the form of rain. Tayo proves his identity to the outer world by strictly adhering to the mythical beliefs and traditional customs.

Thus, in this way the Laguna-Pueblo tribal culture can be appropriately analysed and examined after learning the mythical perspectives and associating them with the tribal culture. A land becomes civilized and traditional, if the myths are narrated to instruct the people who impart the stories to the younger generations. Myths are elucidated to imbibe the culture of a particular community to the world.

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