

THE NATIVE VOICE IN LESLIE MORMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY* (THE TWENTIETH AMERICAN LITERATURE)

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Abstrak. Artikel ini mengupas suara penduduk asli Amerika yang tertuang dalam karya berjudul *Ceremony*. Novel ini menyampaikan kesaksian tentang komitmen pengarang pada gagasan mendongeng sebagai metafora dari aspek-aspek tradisi penduduk asli Amerika. Mendongeng yang diubah kedalam bentuk tulis (novel) merupakan adaptasi sastra barat. Kombinasi sastra lisan dan tulis yang terefleksikan dalam *Ceremony* menjadi sarana mempertahankan mitologi, sastra tradisional Asli Amerika, dan penggambaran kehidupan tradisional penduduk asli Amerika.

Kata kunci: Native-American tradition, oral literature, written literature

INTRODUCTION

The Native-American has an ironical literary history. As the eldest minority society in the United States of America, the Native-American literature rises significantly in the 1970's. It is discovered that in 20.000 B.C. the Native-American dwelt in the continent and had their oral literature. By the time the Whites came to the continent they recorded the oral tradition. It was only in 1823 that Elias Boudinot (from the Cherokee tribe) wrote *Poor Sarah*, a fictionalized conversion story, which was considered the first Native-American fiction. Then there is stagnancy of the Native-American literary works. The uprising of this literary works occurs only in 1970's (Weatherford, 1988: 56-57).

Michael Castro sees that the 1970's was the uprising era of the Native American writers. The active literary movement was reflected through the lists of national publishers, such as Harper & Row that involved the Native-American literary magazines and presses. These printing media had risen in response to a new interest in the sixties and seventies for ethnic literature. At first, in the sixties, this referred mainly to a few-American and Jewish writers, but it came gradually to include Native American, Asian- American, Chicanos, Poles, Italians, and other groups. (Castro, 1990; 150)

Although the reasons why Americans in the seventies were so attracted to the Native-Americans tend to be complex, there are several factors that could be categorized for the above reasons. The first factor is the historical pattern which is called "the cycles of interest" (Castro, 1990; 156). According to Vine Deloria Jr's observation there is a regular sequence of 20 years in the publishing of the publication Native-American books. This tendency is shown through the publication of some Native-American writers in every twenty years such as Charles Eastman and Paulene Johnson were popular around 1910's, Euthers Standing Bear around 1930's, D'Arcy McNichols around 1950's, and Ortiz, Silko, Momaday and Deloria himself

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around 1970. However this publishing cycle should not be considered as the only contributing factor.

The cultural condition of the 1970's is another factor why Americans have great interest in the Native-American. The Vietnam War experience contributed significantly to the raise of the Native-American literary works. The Vietnam War caused uneasiness to young Americans as they felt guilty for the unjust war. This guilty feeling led them to the hunger of spirituality, norms and values presented in these Native-American books. As a result, these young writers of the 1970's came to the realization that they should have helped the Native-American since they were indigenous people who had been long over-looked wronged. Repelled philosophically and politically by the Vietnam war experience, many Americans transferred their sympathy for the Vietnam people to the Native-American (Margot, 1972;101).

In addition to this self-realization, the new political force of the Native-American emergence in 1970's plays an important role to the reemergence of the Native-American writers. The American Indian population grew in the 1960's, but remained tiny try national standards, according to the 1968 census when the Native-American was about 800,000 in 1970's. Nevertheless, there were two conditions conspired to make Native-American rights a priority: first, white Americans felt a deep and centuries-old sense of guilt for the destructive policies of their ancestors toward a people who had, after all, been in the continent first; second the plight of the Native-American minority was more desperate than that of any other minority group in the country. Native-American unemployment was ten times the national rate, their life expectancy was twenty years a(Tindal, 1984; 1359) The civil-right struggled by the black inspired also the Native-American to claim their right. The non-violent strife of the black resulted in the compensation for the white's injustices towards the black. Learning this political effort, the Native-American followed the non-violent political movement in obtaining their rights. At first, the Native-American militants copied the tactics of civil rights done by the black power activists. In 1968 the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded. The leaders of AIM occupied Alcatraz Island in San Francisco in 1960, claiming the site "by right of discovery." And in 1972 an Indian "sit-in" at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington attracted national attention to their case. But the most celebrated protest occurred at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in January 1973. It dramatized the impoverished conditions of Native-Americans living on the reservations near Wounded Knee, which also happened to be the site of the infamous massacre of Sioux Indians by federal troops in 1890 (Orenstein, 1995; 5-6).

Soon Native-American protesters discovered a more effective tactic than direct action and "sit-ins." They went into the federal courts armed with copies of the treaties signed by nineteenth-century American government officials and demanded that the violations of these treaties became the basis for the restitution. In Alaska, Maine, and Massachusetts they won significant settlements that provided legal recognition of their tribal rights and financial compensation at levels that upgraded the standard of living on several reservations (Trndal, 1984: 1362).

This successful political movement encourages some Native-American writers to show their ability so that their existence can be accounted. In fact, their literary works expose not only the assimilation of the Native-American to the whites but also their traditions. Through their poems and novels the Native-American writers keep their mythologies or old ways in order to show their strongand rooted traditional culture.

The other factor fostering the emergence of these Native- American writers is the misconception of a melting-pot that endured for a long time which has then been changed into the concept of "Salad Bowl". This shifted concept is ensued from the fact that the minorities keep their tradition, although they assimilated to the white culture (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). Because of this, the multiculturalism gives away the concept of melting-pot. This metaphorical concept is no longer appropriate to the reality. On the otherhand, the "Salad Bowl" concept has the connotation of unity in diversity. This diversity reflects the various traditions of the minorities in American culture which is similar to salad which contains various vegetables with their original forms. On the contrary, the melt- ing-pot misses this connotation of originality. The American history has proved the undeniable multicultural society, including the Native-American whose novelists and poets maintain their traditions in written form.

One of the well-known Native - American writers in the twentieth century is Leslie Marmon Silko as she could be categorized as the first female Native-American novelist who is famous because of her novel *Ceremony* (1977). This novel leads her to obtain Mac. Arthur Foundation Fellowship. She was bombed in Albuquerque in 1948, of mixed ancestry-Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white. She grew up in the Laguna Pueblo Beseruation, where she lives with her husband and two children. She is the author of the novel *Almanac of The Dead*, and her stories have appeared in many magazines and collections (including *Writers of the Purple SaaeV Ceremony* tells the experience of Tajo who is a lost bibulous soul and with the help of a Navayo healer, eventually pulls his life together.

ANALYSIS

Story-telling, ceremony, mythology, and the belief in Nature are the important traditional aspects found in *Ceremony*. Those specific traditional aspects are significant to be noticed in order to obtain better understanding and appreciation on any Native-American literary works, especially their twentieth century literary works. In the previous years the Native-American literary works were not accepted as 'Warm'-ly as at the present time. Their works were judged only from the white's point of view. It was very rare to find American literary works written by Native-American. This was caused by the traumatic experience which occurred through the education of the young Indians. The Americanization process was aimed to abolish literacy of the Native-American children Furthermore, the process of literate to the Native-American was part of indoctrination perhaps better its accomplishment of which was obtained through humiliation, beatings, and isolation in huts, dark closets, and tiny prisons (Hoxie, 1988; 51). Further Paul Gunn Allen describes the brain-washing process as the following :

When students are force-taught, half-starved, dipped in sheep- dip, shorn, redressed, renamed, forbidden to see their families for years on end, given half-rotted and barely digestible alien food, shamed and humiliated publicly, forbidden to speak their language, and indoctrinated to believe that their loved ones are naked, murderous, shameful savages, hardly on a par with beasts (who used to be friends and allies), their reluctance to take up pen and write is hardly surprising (Wiget, 1990; 12).

This bitter experience hindered the Native-American to apply written literary

works. Yet, they have been able to survive and prosper without it. In fact, it is only the half-breeds like Silko, who writes some literary works and begin their oral-traditional, storytelling, to the pages.

The storytelling as oral tradition is the basic foundation of the Native-American literature. This storytelling has some important functions to the tribal people, such as Native-American. Storytelling keeps the spirit of togetherness which forms unity. When the Storyteller narrates his story the people gather together. This is also the event of giving and receiving personal experience. This sharing event unifies the people and enhances the sense of belonging to their tribe. Storytelling is also a medium of transferring formal information. It however, is informally put forth, to the people. This informal transformation could create circumstance in which the audience do not feel of being instructed by the storyteller's ideas. The audience is entertained while they are doing their, culture's craft, skill and means for survival, (Gunn, 1990; 33). Because of this benefits of story-telling, the oral literary tradition could survive for more than 520 centuries (Wiget, 1990;43). Thus it is seen here that storytelling is not only for entertainment but also moral teaching and even as media of survival. Because of these important roles of storytelling, Silko applies storytelling style in her successful fiction: *Ceremony*. It is worth applying since storytelling is an essential aspect of Native-American traditional literature.

Silko presents *Ceremony* in the form of storytelling which is put in written form-novel. This storytelling is told by Is' its' tsi' nako whose other name is Thought Woman. She narrates the *Ceremony* with a rich blend of two genres-fiction and poetry. It is seen here that Silko applies the traditional literature of the Native-American that shows no clear delinestation between poetry and fiction in the modes of storytelling as it is stated at the beginning of the novel:Ts'its'tsi' nako, Thought-Woman,

is sitting in her room
and whatever she thinks about
appears She thought of her sisters,
Naw' Ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.
Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.
She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now
I'm telling you the story
she is thinking.
Ceremony

In the above poem which opens the book Silko tells us that stories are origins, beginnings, thoughts are creative things of reality. Later, she says that:

I will tell you something about stories,
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 (Silko, 1977; 2)

The stories in *Ceremony* are not only an entertainment but also a survival process of life. This relates to the cure of Tayo's (the main character in *Ceremony* crisis of self-identity. Tayo as a man of mixed blood seeks purification in the ceremonies of tribal medicine man, who is also half-breed. Through the stories told by the healer man Tayo finds his own self-identity. Ceremony, the old man says in effect, is not ritual, not form. It is the conduct of life; ultimately the conduct of the earth and everything on it. Nevertheless, by means of visions and stories he lays out real Ceremony, a plan of action, for Tayo to follow so that he could obtain his self-identity. Thus it is shown here that the very act of storytelling is a part of psychological healing. Indeed, sometimes its purpose is medicinal, to cure an illness and also an act of discovery of self-identity.

In all the stories found in *Ceremony*, Silko emphasizes the need to return to the rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's culture identity. Only when this is done so he is prepared to deal with the problems of the present. This is the story of Tayo in *Ceremony*.

Another poem in this novel reveals also the specific traditional handicraft and the belief in nature of the people in the Laguna Pueblo as the verses states:

Hummingbird looked at all the skinny people.
He felt sorry for them.
He said, "You need a messenger.
Listen, I'll tell you what to do".
Bring a beautiful pottery jar
painted with parrots and big
flowers
Mix black mountain dirt
some sweet corn flour
and a little water.

Cover the jar with a
new buckskin
and say this over the jar
and sing this softly above the jar:
After four days
you will be alive
After four days
you will be alive
After four days
you will be alive. (Silko, 1977; 72)

The above poem describes the suggestion of a Hummingbird to the Laguna people

to survive during the long dry season. The Hummingbird is being personified as an advisor. Such treatment is very familiar for the traditional Native-American. They are very close to nature. This close relationship to the nature is clarified by Tessie Naranjo, the chairperson of Native-American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act as she says it in the following statement:

“We are part of an organic world in which interrelationships at all levels of life are honored. Our relationships to the place where we live, which includes the land, water, sky, mountains, rocks, animals, and plants is tangible and extremely important”. (Naranjo, 1994; 5)

This attitude towards nature is basically formed from the belief of the Native-Americans that their relationship to the Earth in the term of family. The Earth is not something to be bought and sold, something to be used and mistreated. It is the source of their lives. They believe that the Earth is their Mother, and the rest of creation, all around, shares in that family relationship. Thus, the sun is the Father, while the animals are their brothers and sisters. The Native- Americans see their role on this Earth, not as conqueror of nature, but as beings entrusted with a very special mission that is to maintain the natural balance, to take care of their Mother, to be keepers of the Earth.

Referring back to the verses, the Hummingbird as a brother guides the Laguna people some directions to bring a pottery jar filled with some sweet corn flour and a little water and have ritual songs so that the corn will grow. Corn is a very important plant for the Laguna people since this is the only plant that provides them sufficient food. As the Laguna area is a dry place pottery jar is also playing an important role in their life because the pottery is the place where they can keep water and dry seed corn during the rainy season.

This “Hummingbird” poem is a typical Native-American poem as it applies repetition, brevity and symbols. Those general features of the Native-American poems give the association of prayers or songs. This refrain could give hypnotic effect to the doer or listener as Allen Paul Gunn explains that the repetition:

“Has an entrancing effect. Its regular recurrence creates a state of consciousness best described as “Oceanic”. It is hypnotic. The individual’s attention must become diffused. The distraction of ordinary life must be put to rest, so that the longer awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. In this way the person is literally “one with the Universe”. (Gunn, 1992; 105)

The refrain of the sentence “After four days you will be alive” serves emphasis of the idea that the corn will grow so that people could harvest it and have better life. The repetition is chant which shows the hope of growing corn.

Concerning the structure of the length of lines applied in the poems, Silko alternates short and long lines. This alternation makes a form which is similar to the figure of a Totem. This huge wooden sculpture is also another Native-American’ traditional welcoming guard. Perhaps the irregular lines show another traditional pattern of the Native-American decorative designs.

CONCLUSION

Through this very brief paper on *Ceremony*, indeed, it is seen that the whole novel testifies the commitment of the author to the native-American's idea of storytelling as a metaphor for the Native-American traditional aspects. The storytelling which is forwarded into written form(novel) proves the adaption of western literature. The combination of oral and written literature found in *Ceremony* serves as media of maintaining the Native-American traditional literature, mythologies, and the description of the Native-American traditional life.

The novel is very rich not only in its style, as it applies poem and prose, but also content. It shows complex aspects of human life especially a young Native-American like Tayo. It also shows the present problems faced by the Native-Americans, such as poverty, unemployment, addiction to alcohol, and lost of self-identity. In general, social, as well as cultural and historical aspects faced by the Native-Americans are revealed beautifully in *Ceremony*.

It is a good novel to be introduced to the students so that they could have better understanding the Native-American's culture, history and social conditions. A deep appreciation on *Ceremony* might abolish the negative stereotype of the Native-American given by the white in the past. The novel is recommended to be appreciated holistically so that the richness of the novel is known and understood by the students.

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