

## THE SURVIVAL OF NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE WRITINGS OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO

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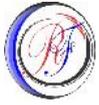
Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American writer of the Laguna Pueblo tribe. She was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico and grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. Her career includes an association with the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona; and Professor of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson, where she is currently employed. She is widely acclaimed for her novels: *Ceremony* (1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), *Gardens in the Dunes* (2000) and her poetry and short story collections: *Laguna Women: Poems* (1974), *Western Stories* (1980), *Storyteller* (1981), *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1993), *Sacred Water* (1993), *Rain* (1996), *Love Poem and Slim Canyon* (1996), *Ocean Story* (2011) and her memoir *Turquoise Ledge* (2010). Her works in progress also include a screenplay for public television.

The paper will explore what Native American identity is, and the potential it at what makes it going up to the survival even today. The study also explores some of the narrative strategies of Silko that enables Native American survival. Silko believes that storytelling is the primary way, perhaps the only way, to preserve and maintain Native American identity.

Native Americans are a group of special minorities in the United States of America in that they predate the arrival of Columbus, the so-called “discoverer” of the continent of America. Neither Columbus and his crew, nor the people who supported and welcomed his discovery, realized what were to be waiting for the European invaders; what kind of human beings lived and how they lived on this vast stretch of land. It was an extraordinary, almost impulsive challenge to occupy it in any way possible in the name of discovery, or in the name of God’s will. Silko’s novel is not a discourse she narrates the stories through her own experiences.

Leslie Marmon Silko is dedicated to the cause of reviving Native American culture and literature, and her reputation stands tall as one of the most prominent contemporary Native American writers. She has integrated a strong Native American color to her works by perfectly mixing diversified genres into varied literary pieces, by connecting the writing closely to nature, and by implementing oral tradition, and storytelling. Her writings reflect a profound understanding of Native American cultural heritage and an intense awareness of Indianness. Her writings reflect the complex nature of Native American identity formation. Silko’s writings explicate harmonious coexistence and syncretism as best way towards the survival of Native American identity and the maintenance of cultural continuity. The analysis should help to contribute some insights into a reciprocity and smooth communication among different cultures in the context of globalization, and should be useful to the study of Native American culture.

The Native Americans have survived and continued to maintain their individual identities and spiritual traditions. Out of more than ten million Native Americans who lived



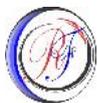
in America at this time, about two million of their descendants still live in the United States and in North America, and as many as two hundred languages are still spoken by these indigenous groups. Believed to have migrated from Asia more than thirty two thousand years back, these Native tribes have survived by adapting to American land and climate, and incorporating into their lives the metaphysical beliefs and cultural understandings that sustained their existence.

Her mixed ancestry has influenced her works in many ways; she also acknowledges the influence of her own family's storytelling on her manner and the way of their revelation. Growing up on the edge of the Laguna Pueblo Reservation, Silko's earliest experiences were to be found between culture and traditions. Right from her early schooling, she had witnessed strange treatment from those that had fallen into the binary division of Native American and white identity. Her works primarily focus on the alienation of Native Americans in a white society and the importance of native traditions and community in helping them to manage with modern life.

Silko writes with a strong sense of affiliation with her native land and culture. She belongs to Laguna tribe of Pueblo people in the west-central New Mexico, USA. The Pueblos of New-Mexico first confronted the Europeans some four centuries ago when the Spaniards came with Coronado expedition in 1540. Later on, the Spanish invaders used power and in 1598 made the Pueblos a commitment to the King of Spain. Silko's writing imbibes all these ancestral experiences and as a result, her writing is enriched by indigenous and white influences.

Silko might not be the first Native American woman writer writing in English, but she certainly is the first Native American woman writer to make accessible the rich reservoir of oral literature that sustained Native Americans for a long period. Her attempt is fusing the oral tradition with the written form that makes her writing an institution serving as a link between the Native American past and present and between the Native American and the outsider. Her loyalty to the oral mode and restoration of its essential characteristics and its essence even in the writing mode is an expression of the Native American spirit of flexibility and sustenance. The same is revealed by her structuring the premise of her writings upon tribal demands for sovereignty and equality. An important underlying prerequisite for her literary endeavours that serves as a thrust to her writings is the significance and need for truth to be explored and understood in an unbiased manner. Accordingly, she writes about her personal self and uses her writings as an expression of her quest for identity within the Native American prevailing conditions that nourishes and sustains her writing.

In order to understand contemporary Native American literature like the works written by Leslie Marmon Silko, one must have sufficient knowledge of the Native American worldview expressed in their oral stories that have been handed down for unremembered generations. The study has to include what the oral tradition has meant to the indigenous people and their communities, how it has been kept and passed down, and what it can do to the tribal peoples for securing their identity and power to survive with contemporary issues. Indigenous people have different worldviews from other cultural groups. This study examines how Silko combines tradition of oral storytelling and worldview in her writing to pass invaluable messages across the boundaries of culture. Silko is blessed with a skill and



practical knowledge in her blood for writing her own tradition. Her works are not only compatible with the worldviews of the Native Americans but also she ingeniously expresses her messages in her works, including *Ceremony*. Silko makes her efforts to communicate it to a wider readership. This makes *Ceremony* one of the most significant novels written in the twentieth century.

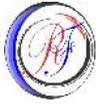
Leslie Marmon Silko's first novel, *Ceremony* (1977) is widely acclaimed as the most important Native American novel that has had a huge impact upon the reading community in America and the overseas. Native American writers show division of opinions as regards the critical literary assessment and methods to be applied to Native American Literature. Many critics insist upon using mainstream assessment tools and literary models for an analysis of this text while others demand literary assessment to be based upon tribal literary perspectives and understandings.

Silko's works artistically infuse indigenous perspectives into a Eurocentric form of writing resulting in the making of politically charged texts. *Ceremony* served as the first step in forwarding her indigenous perspectives and epistemologies and later on when the reader was prepared, she gave it a more free play in *Storyteller*. *Ceremony* emphasizes the important role that storytelling plays within the Pueblo culture. It also accurately summarizes the repeated attempts of white groups to demolish the Pueblo culture by destroying its ceremonies. Despite these attempts, which began in 1540 and continued until the 1930s, the basic elements of Pueblo myth and ritual managed to survive.

As Silko reveals in *Ceremony*, however, the years from the World War II to the present have presented new threats to the Pueblos, which, although more subtle than the early Spanish conquests, are even more dangerous, and must be fought if the Pueblo culture is to continue. In order to explain fully the threats of the modern world poses to the ceremonial life of the Pueblos. It is the first necessity to present a background of the Pueblo geography, basic mythology, and its corresponding ritual.

The novel reveals the story of Tayo, an experienced person of Laguna and white ancestry returning from fighting against Japan in The World War II. Upon returning to the poverty-stricken Laguna Reservation after a period at a Los Angeles VA hospital recovering from injuries sustained in the World War II, Tayo continues to suffer from "battle fatigue" (shell-shock), and is haunted by memories of his cousin Rocky who died in the conflict during the Bataan Death March of 1942. Seeking an escape from his pain, Tayo initially takes refuge in alcoholism. However, with the support of Old Grandma, he is helped by ceremonies conducted by the mixed-blood Navajo Shaman Betonie. As a result, Tayo comes to a greater understanding of the world and his own place within it as a Laguna man.

One of the major themes presented in Silko's *Ceremony*: the issue of Native American identity. I have briefly introduced the characters of Tayo and Rocky, two Native Americans for the Laguna Pueblo in Mexico after that I have examined the similarities between these two young men who both take part in The Second World War and make horrible experience. Thus, the novel reveals the difference between Tayo and Rocky, in order to explain their different ways of searching their own identity. The study shows that how the white culture influences these characters.



*Ceremony* has been called a “grail fiction”, wherein the hero overcomes a series of challenges to reach a specified goal; but this point of view has been criticized as Eurocentric, since it involves a Native American contextualizing backdrop, and not one based on European-American myths. Silko’s skill as a writer is evident in the way in which the novel is deeply rooted in traditional stories for instance; there are several retellings of old stories. Fellow Pueblo poet Paula Gunn Allen criticized the novel on this account, saying that, “Silko was exposing tribal secrets she did not have the right to reveal” (Wikipedia). These claims have been contested noting the public circulation and availability of the oral narratives from anthropological texts published in the early twentieth century.

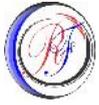
However, the protagonist, Tayo finds his cure and salvation within a Native American context. Silko’s novel is a literary reminder for Americans to acknowledge Native American heritage as first true national heritage and remember that the Native American heritage is still alive and well today. Per Seyersted has given seven approaches to Silko’s novel *Ceremony* which is a literary reminder for Americans to acknowledge Native American heritage as first true national heritage and remember that the Native American heritage is still alive and well today.

Silko’s works depict the white Americans to some extent as abusers of the earth and its inhabitants. Moreover, her works heavily emphasize the role and importance of women in society, though *Ceremony* only addresses the importance of Pueblo women while her subsequent novels include women of other nationalities as well. However, despite many similarities in her novels and non-fictional works that reflects a progressively evolving use of language, cultural and environmental locations. Silko’s increasing development to her culture as an author she explores the progression of time, and the Laguna influences with their oral tradition and circular nature of existence remain at the center of her writing because they are at the center of her existence and that of her people as well.

Silko’s works characterised by the natural space, social and cultural identity to represent cultures and the universal human instinct to shape and control nature. Silko’s use of the language and relationship to natural environments has continued to change throughout her writing career. Two immediately apparent differences between *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes* include their overarching messages and the language used to establish them. *Ceremony* is relatively short, personal, and focuses intimately on one man’s struggle to reclaim himself by reconnecting with his land and his culture. In *Ceremony*, Silko reveals the importance of remaining in harmony with one’s natural surroundings, and of performing ceremonies as a way to journey back to one’s roots.

However, in a striking change of direction, *Almanac of the Dead* differs from *Ceremony* in nearly every way: it is several times longer, boasts enormous characters. It is extremely more descriptive concerns whole populations rather than a single person, offers a global perspective. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko uses unprecedented levels of dark, violent and often awful language to illustrate her many controversial characters and their attempts to control their natural environment and the other humans with whom they share it.

Silko’s works present a discourse on the Native American identity beyond the fixed binary divisions of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ implying the necessity of arriving at conclusions without a *priori* positions. For instance, *Ceremony* offers a strong resistance against the



United States nationalistic discourse by means of offering an indigenist perspective that identifies earth and life in all forms as being of primary importance.

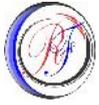
Silko's use of storytelling as a technique in her writing enables her to maintain continuity between oral mode of narration and the written form of expression. It also helps her in decolonizing her writing from the Eurocentric literary obligations. Silko uses artistic insights and fuses tribal cultural understandings with modern understandings to come up with valid and useful means of 'interpreting' cultural content into a written form. Interpretation carried thus, is based upon principles that maintain the essence of the interpreted cultural narratives and practices. Silko does not merely translate tribal cultural Laguna narratives into English written form; she also uses her cultural insights to transfer the essence of these narratives into a written form. Therefore, her role as a Laguna insider becomes very significant. Her mixed genre work *Storyteller* helps her Indianise the writing of short fiction.

Silko's experiment with a dialogic narrative present in *Storyteller* prioritizes the importance of community in the creation as well as interpretation of her writing. Both *Ceremony* and *Storyteller* act upon the reader and do away with the appropriating tendency of the white Americans by teaching the readers to look beyond Eurocentric literary preoccupations in order to understand the importance of culture specific insights regarding art and literature. *Storyteller* enacts a ritual for the reader and by means of innovative language; Silko carves a space in the reader's constricted possibility of Eurocentric expectations by placing a Native American perspective before him. *Storyteller* is an attempt to reappropriate the designation of 'Native American' identity.

In complex world it is considered that technology has shattered the peace and tranquility of modern man leading to psychic disturbance and imbalance. Silko's writing offers useful insights to heal such ruptures. In *Ceremony*, the ritual that Betonie devises for Tayo is a hybrid. In *Almanac of the Dead*, the People's Army crosses borders and redraws the map of the western hemisphere. Breaking down national borders, they form new coalitions of marginalized people who gain strength from their affiliation and move the margins to the center. The voiceless and the powerless gain the power to change the world.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Indigo's transcultural travels allow her to create hybrid gardens. Though Edward dismissed her as unable to learn the process for hybridizing gladiolus, she not only masters that process but also creates hybrid gardens that blend her Sand Lizard aesthetic and traditional plants with the exotic imports that she collected on her travels. She uses her ingenuity to adapt the decorative plants to practical use. Moreover, the hybridization *Gardens in the Dunes* is a two-way street. Hattie winds up as affected by Indigo, Bronwyn, and Laura as they are by her. Her encounters with ancient sacred sites bring about a spiritual awakening that completely changes the direction of her life.

Silko's stories are mending the web of self and community. The Yellow Woman figure is central to the Yellow Woman section, in which mythic figures reappear and merge with present-day identities and environments, directly affecting the natural cycles. Such timelessness in Silko's stories points to her organic use of myth, which she does not uphold above and isolate from all else, but fully integrates into the modern-day contact zone of Native and Anglo- America.



Through re-telling stories of the past, and bringing traditional mythic figures back into existence in her stories. Silko provides structure and meaning and the pattern of a relation between the self or Native American identity and the world both past and present. Silko imagines a connection of Native American life and tradition, wholeness, and timelessness, as myth and fiction, past and present, interlink in the circularity of the narratives. By combining the oral tradition or storytelling into her writing, Silko reconciles past and present, myth and reality, myth and fiction, and de-marginalizes the Native American perspective. Traditional storytelling and myth participate in the circular structure of the short stories, which run parallel to the circular patterns in the content of the stories.

The circular designs present in such themes, along with an awareness of the symbolism of the circle in Native American beliefs, lead Silko's reader to a greater understanding of the Native American perceptions of the notions of time, ceremony, ritual communal healing, and cosmic order.

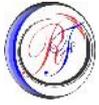
Silko's position on the edge of things, her mixed-blood identity, fully places her within the contact zone previously described. Silko is not only repeating traditional stories and myths, but also reinventing them within day-to-day's contact zone so as to reclaim power and identity that have been lost through colonialism: power over one's body. Through stories of Native American survival, of Native American mythic occurrences within the present, and of Native American subversion Silko is opposing the dominant order of mainstream America.

An analysis of Silko's short stories expose the associative, synchronistic, and mythic prevailing conditions of storytelling, and makes it a tool, or weapon, for Native American survival, healing, identification, and subversion, through the eternal recurrence of the past and myth, within the contact zone of Native and Anglo America.

In her novels Silko illustrates the apparently hopeless plight of the Native American who has been displaced by white society. However, her novels also leave the reader with an element of hope because all the protagonists are eventually shown as victorious in overcoming their adversity. In *Ceremony*, Tayo is the male protagonist who must find himself in the feminine principle. It is not until Tayo begins the long journey help towards his cultural past that he experiences healing. Even then, his healing is not complete until he meets and makes love to the mountain spirit.

However, unlike Tayo, sterling realizes from the outset that his problems stop from his separation from his tribe. But, also unlike Tayo, Sterling is never successful in effecting a healing so that he can never return to his tribe. He remains isolated from his culture with no hope of reconciliation. The women of the novel ultimately survive because they remain connected, even if only in their memories, to their cultural heritage. Lecha and Zeta Cazador have learned about their Native American roots from their old grandmother, Yoeme. This was something that their parents had tried to prevent. Their parents felt the only way to be successful was to assimilate into the white culture. When Yoeme returned, she frustrated.

Thus, she assumed the role of culture bearer and passed this role down to her granddaughters. It is due to her teaching that Lecha and Zeta are aware of the things and occurrences that might have destroyed them and are able to survive the destruction that overcomes the characters who continue to deny their heritage and the land. Throughout this novel, most of the men are painted as tragic figures who seemingly spend their entire lives



trying unsuccessfully to become white. The medicine man Betonie in *Ceremony* would have told them that this is exactly what the witchery wanted to happen.

In *Storyteller*, Silko also continues the theme of remaining loyal to preserving heritage, culture and to the land. Even though she does not centre the book on one particular character, she does devote a great deal of the work to the stories about Yellow Woman and her importance to the preservation of her people. Silko includes many variations on the story to illustrate the many ways Yellow Woman helped her people, but they also serve to illustrate that many times great personal sacrifice is necessary.

Finally, most Native American literatures tend to incorporate circularity so that the characters who have strayed from their native routes will have a path of return. Thus, the alienation that is present in Silko and so many Native American works is alleviated because they consolidate the function and responsibility of the traditional storytellers. Frequently, Silko infuses four colors and four directions into her writings in *Storyteller*. Many times throughout the book there are a direct connection to certain seasons, solstices, direction, or sacred entities is also indicated in the choice of color. Through our analysis of her collection of poems and short stories, an understanding of this author's repeated insertion of the same four colors is made clear. These four colors are: white, red, blue, and yellow, flow honestly from her Laguna Pueblo traditions and culture.

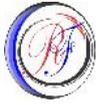
Rituals, customs, stories, and words intermingle throughout *Storyteller* to convey the levels of expression and details of what Silko brings in her writings. She weaves elements of Laguna expression and literary complexity that allows understanding and interpretation on several levels. A reader with little or no contact with Laguna culture may enjoy a story like "Yellow Woman" as a contemporary story about a woman's charm away from her everyday life to adventure into the mountains with a mysterious man.

Thus, Silko's use of Laguna sacred colors symbolically throughout her collection of poems and stories in *Storyteller* paints an image for the reader that infuses four colors, four directions, four seasons, creating an intricate design that encapsulates the emergence story, Grandmother Spider, the mountain and mesa landscape, the ancestral Katcinas, and the ceremonial calendar within one collage of color.

The paper draws the conclusion that it is the art of Leslie Marmon Silko that her novels stand apart its authentic cultural documents on writer among cultural anthropology, and other new disciplines of human societies. Her method of storytelling is elaborately upon the plot of the novel concerned draws the attention of the readers for a deeper probe into the text. Silko's origin from the Native American community itself provides a deeper affinity. Her literature therefore shapes into fiction at par with being excellent literary novels.

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