

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* as A Viable Path of Resistance and Agency

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Abstract :

This paper studies Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) as a viable path of resistance and agency. It argues that resistance can be clearly seen in the character of Tayo, who opposes the evils of imperialism and racism by refusing to be deceived by their lies. To be able to confront these evils, Tayo first reconciles his anxiety about his own identity. Then, he begins to realize that it is this movement toward self-identification and agency which allows him to identify himself as a viable part of his environment and of the Laguna stories he comes to participate in. As a result of his resistance, Tayo becomes able to overcome his passivity and able to take action to improve his own life-style and his community as well.

Introduction :

The number of critical responses to Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (published in 1977) indicates that its readers have found something within the novel which warrants returning to. These responses have investigated everything from the characters to the landscape to the structure and form of the novel, but almost all of them discuss the degree to which the reader feels apart of its action. Critic Louis Owens, for example, explains that:

Rather than functioning from a merely rhetorical basis, to inform the reader, Silko creates an accretive and achonolgal experience for the reader, placing us in the center of the ceremonial cycles like the patient in a Navajo sand painting (p.17).

Similarly, In "The Reader's Lessons in *Ceremony*" James Ruppert notes that :

The title *Ceremony* refers not only to the ceremony that Tayo experiences, but also the harmony, healing and increased awareness that the reader acquires through the reading and understanding of the novel itself. It has produced meaning, identity, and understanding in

the reader. It has brought the reader into the story, brought him in touch with the unity of all that is, placed him at the center of the swirling sand painting of the world . It has brought him into harmony (p84 85) .

Perhaps what Mary Slowik says about Tayo best explains what happens to the reader. In her "Henry James, Meet Spider Woman: A Study of Narrative Form in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*", Slowik remarks that Betonie "changes Tayo's narrative position in the novel. No longer is Tayo an organizing consciousness. Rather, he becomes the protagonist of an adventure story resembling the Indian folktales (p11). Like Tayo, the reader becomes an actual participant in the action of the novel, which is the ultimate reading fantasy. But *Ceremony* does more than interpolate us into the book. Rather, if the reader has read the novel carefully, he will have gained from it a sensitivity to the way in which his own life comes into contact with the mythic or spiritual. Therefore, as James Ruppert notes, Night Swan's injunction to Tayo ("you have become a part of it now ") also extends to us.

Critic C.W. Truesdale calls attention to the fact that *Ceremony* offers what might be considered an antinomian message of sorts: that is, the experience of the divine is open to anyone who takes the initiative to discover it. Truesdale says that the book comes close to aligning itself with feminist project (p, 24). *Ceremony* does certainly seem to be involved in debunking what might be called a "patriarchal paradigm that reserves authority over spiritual matters for the medicine men alone. Characters like Tayo, Ts'eh , and Night Swan, for example, live their lives as mythical pursuits. But linking *Ceremony* to feminism or to post-colonial studies, similar in their concern for exposing patterns of domination and subjugation, seems to be fruitful in another way. *Ceremony* cautions us that what Silko calls "witchery, or the predilection toward hate and domination, is not reserved for white men alone, but threatens to seduce all of us, regardless of race or gender. In addition, the predilection for domination extends not only to other men, but also to the very land itself. In the face of all this darkness, the power of *Ceremony* lies in the fact that it offers us a means of resistance to the patriarchal and imperialistic "witchery" around us. Tayo works against the evils of imperialism and racism by refusing to be seduced by their lies. To be able to oppose these evils, Tayo must first

reconcile his own anxiety about identity. In this way he is able to overcome his passivity and is able to take action to better his own life and his community.

Resistance and Agency in Ceremony:

To read the novel as a viable path of resistance, we must read Tayo's quest as one of self-actualization. Tayo tells Betonie that he knows little about Native American ceremonies; he doubtless has this in common with many of his readers. Though Silko has said that she deliberately writes without a specific audience in mind ("Interview p, 47), her novel is friendly to the reader not familiar with the Native American ceremonies because it educates us along with Tayo whose own understanding grows and changes. Along with Tayo, we come to discover his ceremony to be interconnected and complex only after we have misunderstood it as something static, fixed, and one dimensional. Silko initially encourages us to think about Tayo's ceremony in at least three separate parts, as Tayo makes sense of his experience by reflecting upon it three separate times. First Betonie's ritual of sand painting and blood-letting echoes the old tradition of a "Scalp Society/ for warriors/ who killed/ or touched/ dead enemies (p, 37). Tayo remarks that this controlled ritual has allowed him to "lay to rest the Japanese souls in the green humid jungles (p.169). Second, recovering Josiah's cattle alleviates Tayo's feeling of culpability for Josiah's and Rocky's deaths because it both validates Josiah's dream and assists the family who looks to Rocky for making the family successful. Tayo also notes that his trekking up Mt. Taylor allows him to feel that the land taken from the Native Americans is not actually lost to them at all. Even after he reconciles these injuries, Tayo recognizes that there remains a third source of anxiety, which is more difficult to locate. This final anxiety "was everything they had seen--the cities, the tall buildings, the noise and the lights, the power of their weapons and machines. They were never the same after that: they had seen what the white people had made from the stolen land (p.169). These material trappings are not the only evidence of imperialism that troubles Tayo; he is also sickened by the ideological poison that encourages even the subjugated Indians to embrace racism, which ultimately leads to self-loathing and violence. Tayo reconciles this ill when he refuses to involve himself in the violence of Harley's "cruifixion.

Thus Silko walks us through Tayo's ceremony, but this orderly model is complicated as Tayo nears its completion. When Tayo finds himself at Jackpile Mine it becomes clear to him that each part of the ceremony has in fact been interconnected. In what Michael Hobbes has called "an apocalyptic convergence of both physical and psychic landscapes (p.309), the mine reminds Tayo of the bomb's victims, and he recognizes that the "witchery that caused the war is the same evil that prompts the hatred amongst the Lagunas.

He had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voice had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting.(p.246)

It is being forced to confront and consider the landscape in its entirety that allows Tayo to consider his own life holistically. He even imagines this life as sand painting- inscribed into the land. He had forgotten about the mine, but when he finds himself upon it, "its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest , and it allows him to articulate the connection that he now sees between the killing in the jungle and the endless degradation of his people by visualizing all the people of the world joined by a "circle of death . This circle of death destroys men and the land, which Tayo observes in the "fallen jungle trees and muddy craters of torn earth "caused by war, and in the daily exploitation of the land in places like Gallup and at the mine itself. Tayo's recognition that the land itself is exploited as his own people have been exploited marks a complete reversal for Tayo, who has blamed the very earth itself for killing Rocky in the war. Tayo's heightened sensitivity allows him to see that each seemingly incongruent and disparate aspect of his life is in fact closely related to each other seemingly incongruent and disparate part. Therefore, the action (or non-action) that he chooses to take at the mine, or at any time for that matter, will have ramifications for each part of his life. Because of his decision not to join Emo in violence, for example, Tayo gains a sense of personal satisfaction, which is socially accepted within the Laguna community, and he wins a political battle by refusing to fuel the violence of imperialism. In addition,

Tayo has gained a sense of spiritual harmony in seeing that his life is embedded in and an agreeable of a larger pursuit. What Tayo originally hopes to gain from the ceremony is a sort of metaphysical solace, but his own movement toward that goal has ramification not only for the community at large, but for the land itself.

Tayo's revelation connects the public and the private in a way that feminism has insisted upon: that the way in which people think about themselves is directly related to their social and political environment, which encourages people to adhere to certain roles. In fact Tayo's revelation goes even one step further in arguing that, as Sandra Cisneros has remarked in an interview: "the spiritual and political in some ways [are] the same thing (p468). In the same way that the Lagunas' position as a displaced people affects their sense of well being, so Laguna myth incorporates ways to reposition themselves. In order to imagine that the spiritual and the political or the social are two parts of the same endeavor, we must necessarily, then, imagine the spiritual to be about the actual, tangible world, which in turn makes it very close. In fact, it makes it tangible itself. Rather than being a system of abstracted and complex beliefs, Tayo finds himself in the center of a world in which mythical figures are very alive and walking among us. Tayo believes his Grandma when she tells him about "time immemorial, when "many magical things still happened (p94 , but by the end of the novel, Tayo has come to inhabit just such a place, in which the Mountain Lion's appearance is not just coincidence, but a spiritual incarnation. For his ceremony to be effective, Betonie can only be a first step. Tayo must come to experience spirituality without any kind of mediator.

Tayo can only come to recognize that his life is layered in this way only after he begins to see himself as having agency. Sickened and stultified by the horrors of war, the Tayo we meet at the beginning of the novel has abandoned his own ability to rectify his situation. He lies in bed, moving only to vomit consciousness away or to follow Harley into a drunken stupor. By the end of the novel, Tayo single-handedly rescues Josiah's cattle and falls in love. His ability to do these things depends upon his ability to identify himself as a viable part of his environment and of the Laguna stories he comes to participate in. And it is, ironically, this

movement toward self-identification and action, that allows him to choose non action as he faces Emo.

Tayo's self-identity begins to change after his meeting with Betonie. C.W. Truesdale likens the relationship between Betonie and Tayo to that of a therapist and his patient. I was initially uneasy with this comparison because I wanted to read Tayo's quest as something somehow more mystical than therapy seems to allow for. When Betonie tells Tayo that "They will try to stop you from completing the ceremony (p125), Tayo bristles, protesting that he needs "help. Their notions about what a ceremony is are fundamentally different: while Tayo expects to be cured by passively accepting ritual like a medicine, Betonie recognizes that Tayo himself must take action if he is to overcome his grief. He seems to sense that working to secure Josiah's cattle will present Tayo this opportunity to act, and he urges Tayo to break out of his tendency towards passivity: "we all have been waiting for help a long time. But it never has been easy. The people must do it. You must do it (p125). The formal Scalp Ceremony is, therefore, merely a first, symbolic step in an ongoing process of self actualization in which Tayo moves from objectifying as white smoke, to animating himself.

As Tayo sets out to find Josiah's cattle, he begins to think of himself as a hunter, and there are immediate results of his movement toward activity. As he journeys up Mount Taylor, for example, storm clouds appear. The coming of rain is significant, as we have seen Tayo's attempt to call the storm clouds before. The coming of the rain here parallels the other time Tayo successfully conjured rain. Before the war, Tayo had journeyed to the canyon pool where he re-enacted what he sensed might have been the way that holy men acted during dry spells.

The canyon was full of shadows when he reached the pool. He had picked flowers along the path, flowers with yellow long petals the color of the sunlight. He shook the pollen from them gently and sprinkled it over the water; he laid the blossoms beside the pool and waited. He heard the water, flowing into the pool, drop by drop from the big crack in the side of the cliff. The things he did seemed right, as he imagined with his heart rituals the cloud priests performed during a drought. Here the dust and heat began to recede; the short grass and stunted corn seemed distant.(p. 94

Tayo has no specific information about how to conjure rain, he only knows what Josiah has told him about praying: that it should come from inside himself. Yet he takes it upon himself, a mixed blood teenager, to help the entire community, and he is successful--he meets Spider Woman in the form of a mother spider. The rain arrives the next day. On Mt. Taylor too, doing what "feels right" from inside himself, Tayo acts to help not only himself, but his community. And again, as he has accepted his own agency, to help his family, the storm clouds return.

Once he has retrieved the cattle, Tayo's newfound agency is tested. As the Scalp Ceremony allowed Tayo the clarity to recognize that he wanted to recover Josiah's cattle, so confronting the witchery of the ranchers on Mt. Taylor prepares him to confront the witchery of his own people. Like the onset of the storm clouds, Tayo's confrontation with Emo's hatred is also prefigured in the novel. In a bar fight, Tayo imagines that if he were to kill Emo he would become well because Emo has so thoroughly internalized racism that he has become a grotesque reminder of how easy it would be to succumb to its lies. He recognizes here that hating the Japanese would be to adopt the role scripted for him by the hegemony of white dominance. Hating the Japanese would certainly be easier than resisting the overwhelming force of white hegemony, but it would also be to accept that whites should hate the Indians. When Tayo fights Emo in the bar, he accepts these roles in the social drama of racism and white supremacy that would keep him powerless. He later recognizes that even hating Emo merely attributes him more power.

Tayo's decision not to accept this role at the uranium mine represents his decision to reject those roles, which daily pressures contrive to condition him to accept. In fact, his environment encourages and rewards passivity. His buddies expect him to join them because:

Belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio. Tayo knew what they had been trying to do. They repeated the stories about good times in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums(p. 43)

When Tayo does not assimilate with this group, he is checked by Emo, who spreads the word that Tayo must be crazy. Tayo recognizes that an expression of agency is often interpreted as destructive: if he acts in any way other than acquiescent, he is just another maladjusted “drunk or “crazy Indian--not someone to be taken seriously. The only other prefigured role that the dominant ideology allows them is that of the violent Indian. When Tayo assaults Emo, for instance, the doctor dismisses his violence by noting that “since the Second World War a pattern of drinking and violence not previously seen before, is emerging among Indian veterans . What is striking about what the doctor cites for Tayo is that he offers only that which focuses on the behavior of the Indians, which is really an effect of a larger problem. What he offers establishes erratic and violent behavior as merely that which can be expected from an Indian. But Tayo works to keep himself from being persuaded by this false rhetoric and indicates that he doesn't give credence to the idea that the Indians' troubles began after the war: “It's more than that. I can feel it. It's been going on for a long time . (p. 53) Here, Tayo retains the ability to create his own identity by rejecting this information about himself. Tayo is painfully aware of the ideological battle that would take from him even his will over his own mind. Tayo's decision to reject these roles is part of his actualization.

Tayo's sensitivity to the tension between his own concept of selfhood and other construction of his identity is not surprising due to his own and other characters' unease about his mixed blood ancestry. But if Tayo's position as a mixed blood is a source of anxiety, it also allows him to critique and interpret both Indian and white cultures. Patricia Riley explains that the Lakota word that describes mixed blood means one who interprets between the two worlds--not only the red and white worlds, but the human world and the spirit world as well. (p. 23) Therefore, when Tayo tells his buddies that he can speak “for both sides , he reflects this Laguna notion that he occupies a position that considers him to speak from a position from which he has the clarity to see the situation for what it is. In fact the mixed blood characters of the novel are the ones who work toward that which allows for progressive adaptations of tradition that the Laguna people seem to need. They might become both a manifestation of change and the place from which change might come, because they find themselves, as Night Swan explains, exempt from a fear of change.

Tayo himself works to re-create tradition and constantly critique his experiences. When his bar buddies tell Army stories, for example, Tayo cannot participate. His story is not steeped in their language--it is not about getting white women or killing the Japanese. Instead, it is a critique of their situation--an explanation of how they've been exploited. While Tayo is the only of his peers who will address their situation directly, he is also the only one who is prone to see the similarity between the color of the Japanese soldiers' skin and his own, rather than the difference. But Tayo's sensitivity extends beyond racial boundaries. He also reveals an innate appreciation of the connection between man and nature, apparent even before his ceremony. For example, as he carries home a bag with the inner organs of the deer that Rocky killed, he feels the life and the heat of the deer being transferred to his own body to keep him alive and warm, as if it were the spirit of the deer that had passed into him. When Night Swan sends him off into the world, aware of his special place, like it carries with it special responsibilities: "you are a part of it now (p.100).

Because Tayo inhabits this space that exists between realms, Tayo consciously considers the ontologies of both cultural systems and often is unsure about which to believe. If he accepts the Christianity that his aunt practices, he is doomed to remain in a posture of self-sacrifice and submission. If he accepts white science, his world is stripped of magic, almost uninhabitable because his own position in the world is relatively insignificant. If he accepts the traditional Laguna stories and ceremonies in their most rigorous application, he is lost in nostalgia, as the modern world does not appear to be the same one that the stories engage. And the values of white and Laguna beliefs do not always mingle harmoniously. For example, Tayo thinks that the individualism of the white tradition clashes with the values of community in the Laguna tradition:

Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family. (p. 86)

Even within the Laguna culture itself, which is in the process of changing, Tayo finds tension. Encountering Harley and Leroy after leaving Ts'eh, Tayo is so conditioned to believe that drunken abandon is the best

way to make sense of the world he doubts the validity of the ceremony. Tayo finds that he must piece together what he finds resonant, or as Hobbes has called it, "internally persuasive, (p. 305) from these influences. What Tayo creates validates life itself, and infuses the world with vitality. In Tayo's worldview, each element is valuable, whether it be white, Indian, or non human.

In exactly this life-affirming spirit, Tayo faces Harley's sacrifice and refuses to take any action that would perpetuate the violence upon which Emo thrives. Choosing to resist is choosing not to be identified as a "crazy or "violent Indian. Choosing to resist is choosing not to be reduced to self-loathing. Choosing to resist is, in fact, choosing not to participate in a system which insists on subjugation.

If Tayo's journey is one that moves toward belonging, he comes to this point only after he has devoted himself to self-discovery. In this way it might appear that Tayo's quest resembles the traditional American white male story of heroic individualism, which champions the temporary sloughing off civilization for the sake of personal growth and self-discovery, but I do not think that this is the case. At the risk of oversimplifying, Tayo's misadventure in the wartime jungles more closely resembles this type of experience more so than his healing ceremony. When he goes off to war, Tayo truly leaves civilization behind for the sake of preserving Rocky's companionship. Once there, however, frightened and confused by the horrific violence, Tayo recoils from an environment that resists the order that civilization affords. Everything in the jungle is fragmental: the earth is "torn and bodies are "dismembered . (p. 37) Even space and human contact do not operate under any systematic order that Tayo has previously understood. He finds that men can kill "across great distances without knowing who or how many had died . Most threatening to Tayo is that there are no stories with which he might make sense of his disjointed environment. He thoroughly rejects his experience in the wartime jungle, attempting to vomit it from his consciousness entirely. While he learned a great deal there about the evil of the world, the experience ultimately damaged him. By contrast, Tayo embraces and learns from his ceremony within the somewhat more familiar Laguna landscape, in which both the land and the experiences are marked by civilization. Though, as Robert Nelson has outlined, both Mr. Taylor and Jackpile Mine are on the border of

Laguna land, and Tayo must travel out from the community to reach them, these spaces are accounted for in Laguna stories. The ceremony itself, though testing the limits of what a ceremony might be, is firmly a part of Laguna tradition. In this adventure, Tayo works within the stories of his culture, and his journey becomes one that moves inward rather than outward.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *Ceremony* suggests that a movement toward a secure sense of self-identity is the foundation for any social action. Or more accurately, that political or social action comes from personal and spiritual pursuits themselves. Or even more accurately, that these are all really the same. But what is most compelling about the book is that after the book presents us with the grisly spectacle of death in the jungle and the terrible violence and malevolence that festers within Tayo's own community, the book offers a genuine sense of hope. Tayo's ceremony is the story of the success of passive resistance, which secures him a secure place within his community. These successes have made the book indispensable to its readers. In a letter to Silko, James Wright, attempting to tell the author the importance of her work to him, wrote that: "I think I am trying to say that my very life means more to me than it would have meant if you hadn't written *Ceremony*. But [even] this sounds inadequate (*Delicacy*, 3). In a later letter, he appropriates the term ceremony to talk about his own life and trails. Wright's letters are a clear example of the way in which Silko's readers seem to need her *Ceremony* as Tayo needed his.

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دراسة فاعلية المقاومة في رواية "الاحتفال"

للكاتبة ليسلي سيلكو

ظافر يوسف صرايرة

جامعة مؤتة - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

الأردن

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة الى دراسة فاعلية المقاومة في رواية *Ceremony* للكاتبة ليسلي سيلكو. تؤكد هذه الدراسة على انه يمكن رؤية فاعلية المقاومة في شخصية تايو الذي يناوئ شرور الاستعمار والعنصرية برفضه الخضوع لخدع أكاذيبها. ولكي ينجح تايو في هذه المواجهة فإنه يقوم بالموائمة بين قلقه المتعلق بكينونته أولاً، ثم يبدأ بادراك أهمية هذه الخطوة التي تمكنه من تحديد هويته وتؤدي به الى ادراك ماهيته كعامل فاعل في بيئته وفي قصص لاجونا ثانياً، والتي قدر له المساهمة بها. ونتيجة لهذه المقاومة اصبح تايو قادراً على التخلص من سلبيته ثم العمل على ما يمكنه من احداث تغيير نحو الافضل على صعيد حياته الخاصة وعلى صعيد مجتمعه.