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## **Ceremonies of Culture a Study of Leslie Marmon Silko**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Leslie Marmon Silko Ceremony established with its depiction of life on the Indian reservation and its exploration of philosophical issues, Ceremony considered a powerful confirmation of cosmic order. The book is about the power of timeless, primal forms of seeing and knowing and relating to all of life. Silko observed that the Indian custom of communal story telling provided the novel with both theme and structure and added that Tayo, the protagonist, eventually perceive something of his responsibilities in shaping the story of what human beings mean to each other.*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Leslie Marmon Silko has earned acclaim for her writings about American Indians. She first received substantial critical attention in 1977 with her novel *Ceremony*, which tells a half-breed war Veteran's struggle for sanity after returning home from World War II. The Veteran, Tayo, has difficulties adjusting to civilian life on a New Mexico Indian reservation. He is haunted by his violent actions during the war and by the memory of his brother's death in the same conflict. Deranged and withdrawn, Tayo initially wastes away on the reservation while his fellow Indian Veterans drink excessively and rail against racism.

The novel mainly concerned with the concept of Tayo's alienation is a psychological and spiritual state similar to that of many characters in the works of contemporary American Indian novelists – stems originally from his mixed-blood status, a condition that isolates him from the mainstream Euramerican and Laguna cultures; he is a “breed” according to the terminology used by many Native Americans. The word half-breed has always had a negative connotation in American English, half-blood, it seems to connote bastardy. Mixed descent is not necessarily bad. The word half-breed or half-blood were breed but not the mixed decent. Native Americans suffer due to breakdown of traditional structure and mixed bloods suffer most. They are torn between two worlds. They are unwanted by the white or red. The mixed bloods are confused and isolated. They are not accepted and assimilated.

The text also deals with history, culture and society form an integral part of the Native American civilization. Socio-historical and socio-cultural matters stand at the forefront in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*. The title itself holds a symbolic significance when the meaning becomes unclear for the word ceremony. *Ceremony* may either stand for happy occasions like marriage ceremony, house-warming ceremony, it may even mean a ritualistic ceremony when one views it from an another angle one can find the subtle difference in the meaning which may symbolize a ritual cleansing, a removal of the evil, death ceremony. Ceremony as a ritual performed to remove the evil and holds good.

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The novel not only focuses on the meaning of Tayo on looking at the corpse of white men but also come to realize that after death there is no difference between a white man and a black man. He has been half cured and been relieved of his duties, and is at home trying to cure himself of the malady he has been affected with. It is here that the real story about love for the land and Native American identity crisscrosses with each other. It draws upon him that the whites that had thrown him, not only him but also the whole of the Native American community out of use have victimized him. This nature of use and throw policy of the American hurt Tayo and Tayo is bent upon finding a solution to all the suffering through a cleansing ceremony. It is now that cultural interference takes place. The novel also shows how notions of American Indianness are created.

Tayo is trapped in situations where the logic of action contradicts feeling. A World War II veteran supposedly suffering from shell shock, Tayo is really a victim of feeling severed from action, and his capacity to feel his way into appropriate action is turned painfully inward:

He shivered because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference anymore; he could hear Rocky's words, and he could follow the logic of what Rocky said, but he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat (P: 8-9).

On the whole characters tell the stories of several Native American families through tales they reveal quest for identity, influence of religion, oral tradition and influence of inter mixed blood relationship, marriages and divorces, life on reservation and off the reservation. Born of a now dead Laguna mother who had lived as a prostitute in Gallup, New Mexico, and a Euamerican father, he has grown up in the family of his mother's sister (Auntie), a self-righteous woman who will not let Tayo forget his mixed-blood genealogy. Others in the household include Tayo's grandmother, who still adheres to traditional Laguna ways; Josiah his uncle and Auntie's brother, whose dreams of wealth through raising range cattle also reflect a continuing commitment to tradition; and Rocky, his cousin and Auntie's son, who has become devoted to mainstream Euramerican values during his schooling in nearby Albuquerque. From Auntie's perspective Rocky represents the family's future, and she consistently stresses Tayo's subservient status to her own son. Silko shows this attitude through Auntie's allowing Tayo to become involved in Josiah's cattle-raising schemes, and old-fashioned pursuit that Auntie would deem inappropriate for the progressive Rocky.

Despite Auntie's attitudes Tayo and Rocky is devoted friend who join the military together and are ultimately sent to the Philippines. There Rocky dies, and Tayo returns to Laguna after the war with a load of guilt that stems from a variety of sources: his failure to protect Rocky, even though Auntie had admonished him that this was his responsibility; the death of Josiah, which occur while Tayo is away, and the loss of his cattle herd, which has wandered away; the sins of his mother, which Auntie will not let him forget; and the drought plaguing the New Mexico desert, a situation Tayo feels he has caused by trying to pray away the soaking, tropical precipitation of the Philippine rain forest. Moreover, Tayo suffers from his awareness of the loss of traditional values at Laguna, attributed to the apparent outside force of witchery.

Contrasting to Tayo's belief is his aunties. She believes in Christianity and holds firm the view that it is the individual suffering and the endurance through it makes a true christian and

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whom Jesus will save. Tayo cannot believe it for he thinks that according to Native American culture, it is clan worship and he believes in mass redemption, it is for the first time that Tayo hears of a God who tries to save individuals. “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 individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family”. The Aunt is against the clan idea of keeping the family together. The influence of Christianity and with the advent of the European the kinship of the Natives was changed. Tayo reminded of his childhood and he constantly keeps asking to his Aunt about his mother but his aunt who doesn’t like the ill reputation that his mother has caused to the clan constantly dislikes here as well as Tayo. For Tayo the only source of consolation is his uncle who has taught him horse riding and farming.

Silko’s identification of these of Tayo’s guilt suggests the complexity of contextual factors that inform the novel. Not only does the “survivor guilt” recognized by modern psychology contributed to Tayo’s condition, but traditional Laguna beliefs about the interrelatedness of all life and nature also effect his sense of responsibility for the ills that are afflicting his family and entire countryside. Silko also portrays some of the ways that American Indians have frequently dealt with guilt arising from such sources and with the alienation brought on by the loss of their traditional cultures and social movement from Euro-american influences. Tayo’s contemporaries, other Lagunas who have returned to the Pueblo after military service, react to these problems by engaging in a round of drinking, violence, promiscuity, and boasting about the martial and sexual conquests that they achieved while in uniform. Though Tayo is tempted to join them in using these means of escape from his guilt and alienation, he does not fully yield to them.

Why do cultures tell stories? Story telling personally brings people together; it engages them collectively in giving and receiving the events of their lives. In such storytelling times, people occupy space with focused attention; they enter their common world more fully. In the tribe, people share and pass on information, values, and beliefs through stories. They are entertained while learning their culture’s crafts, skills, and means of survival. They historically and socially mark and recount events worth remembering, so that culture extends history as a collective experience, across the spaces between people, over time that separates living and dead.

There is fine blend of history and social system in the fiction and the time moves to and fro in the narrative. The concept of a true, living story, the personal inflection embodied and embraced in communal history, bedrocks Leslie Marmon Silko’s fiction. Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, which makes extensive use of oral traditions, has a double purpose. It attempts to overcome the cultural alienation experience by many Native Americans. At the same time it is based on the belief that the native way of perceiving the world may help white society towards a restoration. The novel as a predominantly white art form carries with it the burden of its development in the Western world and the various ideologies with regard to its purpose, presentation of reality and so forth. It has always been firmly embedded in Western society and, to a greater or lesser extent, reflected a consciousness that is alien to native cultures. Silko attempts at integrating oral traditions into her novel is therefore a highly risky venture since the printed text means a removal of the oral material from the originally dramatic and

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performance –oriented context where the immediacy of the situation and the direct participation of the audience were of equal, if not greater importance than the message itself. Oral traditions in the original communication situation used to lose functions when transferred into writing. They served to strengthen inherited beliefs and practices, which had stood the test of time providing survival strategies for regularly recurring situations of need. As such, they were of utmost importance to the group since they helped to cement tribal cohesion. Thus the novel, as a chiefly subjective medium, is apparently diametrically opposed to the collective orientation of oral literature.

It could be seen as an acknowledgement of the completely altered social and cultural context characterized by the irretrievable loss of traditional modes of life, the decline of tribal unity, the encroachment of the individualist ideology of native society, and the gradual disappearance of oral culture. Although Silko has realized the need for the survival of what is left of oral traditions, she is conscious that the mixed character of her reading public (both native and whites) together with the radically changed social and cultural environment demands more than a simple recourse to, and reproduction of, oral traditions.

In such troubled times Tayo realizes that the Indians having been tied to one portion of land that is the reservation, they have been marginalized and are tamed and there has been a cross cultural influence and because of it the original culture seem to vanish and in a point of time the culture might fade away to its death.

They keep us on the north side of the railroad tracks, next to the river and their dump where none of them want to live (P: 117).

This sharp separation is what the Indians can never tolerate and it was at Gallup a small town where ritual cleansing takes place. This town has been branded as town, which is dangerous, and robbers and thieves used to live there and prostitution became common for the Indians have now money to have a decent living. Police used to ride these towns once in a month and they would destroy the entire dwelling and make them homeless once again. Tayo on seeing these facts slowly stops believing the whites. Tayo knows that as long as he believes the white (doctors) and their idea about themselves, life would get difficult and the chance of him being cured of his illness will become remote which Allen has interpreted Tayo’s illness as “a result of separation from the ancient unity of person, *Ceremony* and land and his healing is a result of his recognition of his unity.

He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things white doctors had yell -eat at him- that he had to think only of himself, and not about others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like “we” and “us”.(P:125).

These features may characterize *Ceremony* as a type of minority literature which tries to break away from the dominant culture emphasizes the notion of difference, and shuts itself off from the outside world in order to forge some kind of in-group identity. Minority cultures seeing themselves at bay easily run the risk of jealously guarding their own traditions as a kind of secret knowledge, hermetically barring outsiders from intruding, and thus contributing to a climate of mutual incomprehension and denial of cross-cultural communication. *Ceremony* could have been a book of this kind. Its half-Indian protagonist, Tayo, who on his return as a Veteran from World War II to his native reservation finds himself caught between two cultures, manages with the help of tradition to regain his identity

in the end. Tayo's quest would lend itself easily to a separatist message, magnifying native traditions out of proportion, enlarging the Indian self-image, nursing a feeling of ethnic superiority and dwarfing the dominant culture. As propaganda the novel would then have been built upon the exploitation of dichotomies with clear-cut distinctions between positive and negative, native and white, mythic and no mythic, good and bad, and so on. As such it would simply articulate the defiant, partisan and isolationist message of "Red is Beautiful", which would most certainly shock white readers and discourage them from crossing cultural frontiers.

At certain points in the novel Tayo becomes the spokesperson for the naturalist's lament of the separation between human being and nature; indeed, the novel revolves around this separation or alienation from nature. Tayo's illness results in part from his not being in touch with his surroundings, but his hatred also causes alienation. Tayo expresses his hatred of the destroyers and describes their destruction of the earth as emblematic of their destructive tendencies in general. Tayo lies awake one night contemplating this oppression:

he "hated" them "for what they did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns.... The destroyers had sent them to ruin this world, and day by day they were doing it (P: 203-04).

Continuing cultural chauvinism about her own Laguna heritage Leslie Marmon Silko has said, "the white men who came to the Laguna pueblo reservation and married Laguna women were the beginning of the half-breed. Laguna people like my family, the Marmon family. In Native American tradition the mother is not merely one's biological parent. She's all relations epitomizing male and female, human and animal, individual and tribal principle in reservations, societies and histories. She is connected to the earth. Tayo turns to Josiah, his uncle as his mother. Tayo is separated because of his mother and not accepted wholeheartedly by Auntie. Tayo, half-breed, orphan, finds love with Josiah. "He cried for it and Josiah came to comfort him, he asked Tayo why he was crying, but Just as he was ashamed to tell Josiah about the understanding between him and Auntie, he also could not tell him about the picture; he loved picture; he loved Josiah too much to admit the shame. So he held onto Josiah tightly" (71).

Tayo's major strength is his inquisitiveness, his refusal to accept a stereotyped role for himself, and his essentially loving nature – are turned mindlessly against himself by his family, his so-called friends examine and his hospital experiences and most of all by his own nightmares, his self-doubt, and his total lack of conviction in his ability to accomplish anything at all.....

Historically evolved, the theme of the novel is based on historical past, *Ceremony* becomes a race between two different cultures, one toward destruction and the other toward the cure. Tayo, in his journey to find a cure, becomes a part of this process. Tayo breaks open the boundaries of abstract territoriality and subjectivity through a dialectical relationship with the landscape in his wanderings. He crosses the borders of reservation (Laguna), national forest (Mt. Taylor), and municipality (Gallup). Each area is coded for different uses by the U.S. government, and we can see how his sense of identity changes as he passes in and out of these codes. Tayo, however, is following a different pattern, the pattern of his people, which once united this territory. His walk, therefore, strips governmental designations and embraces

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the patterns and land perceptions of the old people. Walking here functions as its own form of writing, a geographical inscription in which dialectic between land and feet sets the terms. Tayo's walk is a remembering, a self-remembering and a place-remembering, which is necessarily a violation of white legal landscapes. Prior to his meeting with Night Swan, Tayo had speculated about prayer:

He knew the holy men had their ways during the dry spells. People said they climbed the trails to the mountain tops to look west and southwest and to call the clouds and thunder. They studied the night skies from the mountain tops and listened to the winds at dawn. When they came back down they would tell the people it was time to dance for rain. Josiah never told him much about praying, except that it should be something he felt inside himself. (P:93).

Leslie Silko is herself part-white, part-Indian. Her dual sensibility has given her the strength to blend two forms of narrative into a single work of art. It may also have given her the perspective, as a woman, to write so movingly about her male characters. Her novel is one of the most realized works of fiction devoted to Indian life that it is a splendid achievement. The story that is capable of healing his mind is the story that cultural adaptation the land has always signified:

The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds with round heavy bellies had gathered for the dawn. It was not necessary, but it was right, even if the sky had been cloudless the end was the same. The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers... They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at Sun rise. (P : 255).

#### **CONCLUSION:**

This study derives, Silko's popular novel *Ceremony*, treat the concern for cultural, historical and subjective survival through a mythopoetic stream of consciousness, drawing on the tradition of Laguna storytelling to enter the experiences both persons and mythic powers and to make them mutual participants. Her fluid narrative of a Native American Veteran of World War II weaves a psychological landscape of intense and tightly knit language and imagery. Silko redistributes power across the oppositional categories of speech and silence, of modern and traditional, of white and Indian, of civilized and savage, of present and past, of active and passive.

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