

# Scripting Oratures, Generating Literature: Philosophical Explorations of Pueblo Spirituality in Select Texts of Leslie Marmon Silko

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## Abstract

*The Native American community has been the recipient of constant persecution and displacement- both geographically and culturally ever since the Europeans landed on the shores of America. It was as late as the 1960s that Native Americans started writing about their own experiences and history. This came to be known as the Native American Renaissance and proved to be a watershed moment in the history of Native American literature. One of the pioneers of this renaissance was Leslie Marmon Silko, who has tried to encapsulate and express the nuances of the Native American culture in her works. This paper seeks to understand and explore the component of spiritual and cultural wealth of the Pueblo Indians- a native American tribe as encapsulated in Silko's works.*

**Keywords:** *Native Americans, Spirituality, Ethnopoetics, Eco-criticism, Native American literature*

## **Introduction**

The Native American Renaissance, which took place in the 1960's was the period of prolific literary output by the writers who derived their lineage from the Native American societies. The literature was not only an outpouring of the trauma of their persecuted histories and agonizing memories, but also an example of the "empire writing back" in order to set the records straight. These narratives presented a worldview which was in stark contrast to the Eurocentric, Christian dogmatic perspective and was intent more upon the articulation of the sensibilities of communities which have been many times removed from their heritage due to the constant onslaught of colonizing forces and attempts at the eradication of their cultural norms.

The land of America since its discovery by the European nation was a hot bed for usurpation and dominance. America, soon after its discovery was made a penal colony where the surging numbers of convicts from England were sent to carve a life for their own. The brusqueness and temerity of the convicts was an advantage for the Europeans against the alien geographical and climactic conditions. However, what was a boon for the settlers turned out to be the bane for the natives of America.

The American subcontinent had sparsely been populated by Native American tribes who had been living on the land mass since ages. The spaces that they dwelled in were not mere geographical habitations rather these were the quintessential elements and aspects for their culture and their lifestyle itself. As he bemoans the divorce between nature and the Abrahamic religions that has always existed, Vine Deloria Jr. in his book, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* says:

In traveling around the country I now see revivals of ancient ceremonies in many tribes as if the people had been warned of the catastrophes that await us. It is time for the people to gather and perform their old ceremonies and make a final effort to renew the earth and its peoples—hoofed, winged, and others. Because many of these ceremonies are performed on behalf of the earth, all humans, and the other forms of life, it seems incomprehensible that they would be prohibited. But the prohibitions and the failure of the government to protect these traditions only highlights the nature of the conflict. Clearly the struggle is

between a religious view of life and the secularization that science and industry have brought.

It remains for us to learn once again that we are a part of nature, not a transcendent species with no responsibilities to the natural world. As we face the twenty-first century, the next decade will be the testing ground for this proposition. We may well become one of the few species in this vast universe that has permanently ruined our home. Future explorers from other planets will walk this earthly wasteland and marvel at our stupidity and wonder why we could not accept the reality of our own finitude. (Dloria Jr., 1992, "Introduction")

The term 'Pueblo' when written with a lower case 'p' refers to "village" and when used with an uppercase "P" to the specific tribe of Pueblo Indians. These tribes are recognizable due to the distinct architectural pattern of their dwellings. They mainly inhabit the Southwest Culture Area which lies on the Colorado Plateau. There are two major divisions of the tribe- the Hopi and the Zuni. The Hopi are the Western branch of the Pueblo Indians while the Zuni are the east branch. The four major sub-tribes of the Pueblo Indian tribe are the Tewa, Tiwa, Towa and the Keres tribe. They inhabit the 130 long mile stretch of Rio Grande. The different Pueblos are situated on plateaus called the "mesas" with their distinct tribal political leaders and cultures. This indigenous group traces its descent from the Mongols and Anasazi people including their skills at architecture, agriculture, pottery and basket weaving. 'Anasazi' refers to the Ancient ones and now it's a pejorative term for Pueblo Indians since they were believed to have been destroyed as they had abandoned their faith in the ways of the ancestors. The women also engage in coiled pottery making which is then painted with figures and patterns.

Since the architecture is the forte of this indigenous group, its salient features merit a much-detailed discussion. The Hopi and Zuni way of architecture included stones which had been mortared and plaster applied to their surfaces while the Rio Grande Indians made adobe bricks by mixing straw with sundried earth and used them. The raw material includes log beams to skeleton the roof which is then covered with brush, poles and plaster. The beam projections which escape the roof serve as contraption to hang food which is to be dried in the sun. The central plaza of Pueblo architecture has pits dug out which serve as the ceremonial chambers and are underground, commonly called as 'kiva'.

The agricultural activities of the Pueblo Indians included the cultivation of various types of corns, squash, beans, sunflower, cotton and tobacco. They domesticated turkeys and hunted wild deer, rabbit and antelope for food.

The dress of the Pueblo males includes kilts of cotton and sandals of leather while the women have cotton dresses, sandals and moccasin boots. The leather used is generally the skin of the deer or the rabbits.

The mythology of Pueblos like any other Indian tribe abounds in an interaction of animals and humans. These myths do not have a single version but many versions of the same plotline with minor changes. The folklore has some etymological tales and then other myths which exist in the oral tradition. However, the task of documenting and preserving the myths in the written form has been done by many modern archaeologists and ethnic writers.

One such text which is a collection of myths and vividly explains the Pueblo history and culture is Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today." In this work she talks about the various aspects of the Pueblo life, the life in reservations and how she was always made conscious of her mixed origins, not by the people of the tribe but by the whites who came visiting the reservation at times. Silko is part- Pueblo, part- Mexican and part- White- something that never bothers her tribe members.

The first section of the Yellow Woman is titled: "From a High Arid Plateau in New Mexico", which interestingly begins with the specifications of how the Pueblo bury their dead. This is significant because the Pueblo have high regard for their ancestors and thus it is fitting that they be commemorated first, when their history begins. Also the death is a return to the Mother Earth from whom all the world is supposed to have emerged. Silko says,

The dead become dust, and in this becoming they are once more joined with the Mother. The ancient Pueblo people called the Mother Creator of everything in this world. Her sister, the Corn Mother, occasionally merges with her because all succulent green life rises out of the depths of the earth. (Silko, "Yellow Woman", 1986, 1)

The second section, "From the Emergence Place" is a story of the evolution of humans on earth. It also talk about the Pueblo belief that Earth and Sky are sisters and

how they help and bless each other. This worldview of everything being related and in harmony is apparent in their art where artists like potters and painters derive the inspiration for their art from what they see around them. The human identity is interwoven with nature so much so that the clans are named after them- The Sun Clan, The Clay Clan, The Lizard Clan, The Corn Clan etc.

The third section talks of the importance of stories in Pueblo culture. These stories not only serve the psychological function but also fulfill their own role as important cohesive artefacts for the tribe. In "Through the Stories We Hear Who We Are" Silko talks of how storytelling is an important cultural activity as well as an indispensable responsibility of the elders to acquaint and initiate the younger generation in these stories. Silko says,

Communal storytelling was a self- correcting process in which listeners were encouraged to speak up if they noted an important fact or detail omitted. The people were happy to listen to two or three different versions of the same event of the same hummah- hah story. Even conflicting versions of an incident were welcomed for the entertainment they provided. Defenders of each version might joke and tease one another, but seldom were there any direct confrontations. ("Yellow Woman" 3)

This was due to the all- inclusive nature of the Pueblo worldview where dissent was as important as acceptance. The Pueblo's believed in collective memory so that the loss of one member did not mean the loss of all knowledge that he had. Their folklore abounds in stories for everything has a story attached to it be it an important landmark or an artifact. This story gives the rationale behind the importance and indispensability of that object to the tribe/ culture.

The fourth section, "The Migration Story: An Interior Journey" does not refer to the migrations that have taken place post- colonization, rather it is a story of the coming into existence of the tribe i.e. their emergence into the fifth world. Thus it is a section that deals with another evolutionary myth and how this myth demarcates a patch of geographical terrain as sacred due to the latter being considered the spot from which human burst into this world.

The succeeding section, "Out under the Sky" is a personal narration of the author's own childhood spent among the forests. She says that this was the time when she learned and internalized the harmony that she shared with the other creatures of the earth. She highlights that fact that despite her mixed lineage she was accepted into

the fold by the tribal family completely, but such was not the case with the racist white side of her family. She further deplores the devastating effect that the commercial activities have on the landscape and the mindscape of the Pueblo people. This appropriation of the land of the indigenous groups has not only hurt their ecology but also their emotions, thereby provoking them to give strong reactions against the mainstream population.

In “Landscape As A Character in Fiction” Silko anthropomorphizes the geographical terrain as a formidable ally of the Native Americans as is depicted in the story of the Yupik woman who sends a man to his death with the help of the river where the white oppressor freezes to his death. This story follows the section where the landscape is being exploited by the whites. Thus, this story serves as a cautionary tale more than anything else to warn the whites against dabbling and interfering with nature.

The section “Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit” is the concluding section of the collection and the most incisive on the culture of the Pueblo tribes. It is an autobiographical account of the author about her experiences of being a Pueblo. She begins with a discussion of her mixed parentage of being part- Pueblo, part- Mexican and part- white. She fondly remembers her grandmother and the beautiful relationship they shared. Silko expresses her gratitude towards her Grandma A’mooh who taught her the wisdom and manner of living in sync with nature and how sheltered a life she had led till she was made aware of her distinct lineage by the whites. She also explains the completely different idea of beauty in Native American culture, where the beauty lies within not without. The telling is interwoven with native myths of the origin stories, mythic folklore etc.

She then bemoans the fact that the original character of Pueblo Indians which was non- discriminatory and non- judgmental changed post the arrival of the Christian missionaries. Earlier the community preceded individualism through thick and thin and women enjoyed far more freedom and empowerment so much so that men dressed up as women in sacred ‘kiva’ ceremonies. The feminine side of nature was celebrated and femininity was not considered a weakness. She culminates this telling by invoking the myth of the Yellow Woman Kochininako who ensures food and sustenance for her tribe for eternity and thus, Kochininako is beautiful because she has the courage to act in times of great peril, and her triumph is achieved by her sensuality, not through violence and destruction. For these qualities of the spirit, Yellow Woman and all women are beautiful. (“Yellow Woman” 14)

The Pueblo myths are beautifully enmeshed in *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko which has many autobiographical hints about the life of the author. The *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* serves as a key of the myths which are knotted in the narrative of *Ceremony*. Sherman Alexie renders the highest possible appreciation for the novel when he says,

*Ceremony* is the greatest novel in Native American Literature. It is the greatest novel of any time and place. I have read this book so many times that I probably have it memorized. I teach it and I learn from it and I am continually in awe of its power, beauty, rage, vision and violence. (10th Gifted World)

At the outset of the novel the mixed lineage of Tayo the protagonist is of mixed blood, a war veteran is revealed, something that is common with Silko too. Tayo, like most war veterans is a troubled person haunted by the memories and loss that has been experienced due to serving in the World War II. He has come back to the Laguna Pueblo reservation- his dwelling but not home. He has nightmares and experiences which do not let him be at peace. He must reconnect with his history and his roots through a ceremony which initiates him as a member of the tribe and exorcise the demons with the modern world.

*Ceremony* is a work which highlights the difference between the white world and indigenous tribal worldview regarding the environment, the idea of time, materialism, sense of community, ownership of property etc. It also speaks of the life of these people who are forced to live on reservations. The myths are the recurring patterns in the life of Tayo- they are as realistic or unrealistic as the beholder's belief. Hence forth the discussion would be centered on how the myth and cultural heritage can be documented, preserved and circulated by interspersing it into literature.

*Ceremony* begins with a kind of invocation, a poem to the "Thought Woman, a spider" who is believed to have created the world along with her sisters. Silko has detailed the myth in her *The Yellow Woman* as: As the old story tells us, Tse'itsi'nako, Thought Woman, the Spider, thought of her three sisters, and as she thought of them, they came into being. Together with the Thought Woman, they thought of the sun and the stars and the moon. The Mother Creators imagined the earth and the oceans, the animals and the people, and the ka'tisna spirits that reside in the mountains. The Mother Creators imagined all the plants that flower and the trees that bear fruit. As Thought Woman and her sisters thought of it. The whole universe came into being. (Yellow Woman 11)

Another reason for invoking the myth is to set the thematic ball of the novel rolling. Tayo is troubled because of his thoughts and tormented because of his memories. The inaugural poem emphasizes the inevitability of a ceremony to heal Tayo,

The only cure  
I know  
is a good ceremony,  
that's what she said. (*Ceremony* Loc. 35)

The second important aspect of the Pueblo culture is of the importance of "storytelling." It does not merely serve the purpose of entertainment or passing down history, rather these mythic stories form a bridge which connects the mythical elements with the tribe as the latter's life revolves around these myths. One of the works of Silko is titled *The Story keeper* and she also enumerates on it extensively in "The Yellow Woman",

...the ancient Pueblo people depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a world view complete with proven strategies for survival. The oral narrative, or story became the medium through which the complex of Pueblo knowledge and belief was maintained. Whatever the event or the subject, the ancient people perceived the world and themselves within that world as part of ancient, continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories. (Silko, 1986, "Yellow Woman" 3)

The ceremony that is performed in the novel is of vital importance to understand the religious fabric of the rituals. Tayo is only atypical representative figure of what the World War did to its soldiers, particularly those hailing from the Native American Reservations. These veterans spent most of their post-war life reliving the trauma and trying to overcome it through alcohol consumption or drugs. A similar environment is shown but Tayo is a peculiar case because unlike his co-veterans he is not able to depend on alcohol nor is he able to overcome the nightmares. He has always been a keeper of the stories and thus connected to his Pueblo lineage. The war has only severed that connection, hence it is his job to retrieve it. He takes the help of Betonie- a new kind of medicine man who is able to cure Tayo, where the old medicine man was unsuccessful. The idea of medicine man needs to be understood. Another word for the medicine man is the "shaman." A shaman is a combination of physician, mystic leader, spiritual guide, witch doctor etc. He is responsible for curing the sick, interpreting



messages of the gods and spirits and also acquaint the tribe with mystical knowledge. In Tayo's case the old shaman Ku'oosh is unable to cure Tayo and admits so, because in the new world the old ways would not work. Betonie, however represents the need of the modern world. He is of a mixed lineage like Tayo i.e. half- Mexican. He retains the traditional apparatus of the medicine man but also clubs them with modern requirements. He represents the contemporary reality where the contact with the whites has seeped in all aspects of Pueblo culture, hence the new ways of healing show more promise than the old ways. Silko does a similar thing- by transcribing the stories as written narratives and interweaving them with her literary works, she transforms and preserves the oral narratives as Betonie does with Tayo through his ceremony.

The ritual planned by Betonie includes undergoing all the religious rites of purification. They demand Tayo to confront his tribe members and later to sacrifice himself for the cause of the creatures of the world. It is only when he is ready to do that he gets assimilated into the nature and then

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid... 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 and painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate of the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter..., the pattern of the ceremony was completed there. (*Ceremony* Loc 472.7)

Post this ceremony Tayo feels a new life that has been breathed into him and refurbishes the relationship he shares with the tribe.

Apart from Betonie, the other person who was responsible for transformation and healing of Tayo was Montana, a woman who has a solitary existence on rim rock. The figure of a godly mother who is non- ethereal being is common in Native American literature. Here she is considered an incarnation of the Corn Mother. Tayo has sorely lacked and wished for the affection of a mother figure since his own mother is a sore memory and unpleasant reminder of his illegitimate birth. But this lacuna is filled by Montana who prepares him for the rigorous ceremony he has to undergo by

strengthening him with the experience of being loved. She also educates and initiates him into the knowledge of the surrounding nature so he is able to synchronize with their energy and feel united with them. The Corn Mother is a very important deity in Pueblo mythology and synonymous with the Mother earth. Corn is the staple diet of the Pueblo's hence the Corn Mother represents growth, nourishment, rejuvenation and the feminine aspect of Pueblo culture.

Leslie Marmon Silko through her poetry provides a commendable specimen of ethnopoetics. Written in free verse the poem starts and pauses and re- starts as a story told by a narrator during a ceremony. The poem was a part of Silko's collection of poems, photographs, letter fragments etc. titled *Storyteller* which was composed in the autobiographical vein. Through the symbol of the bear boy, Silko bemoans the fate of the Indians who have so transformed that try as they might they can never be the same as they were before. The other indication may be to the lost Native American culture which has been tainted by the touch of the whites and although some traditional elements remain, the old world charm cannot be completely recreated.

A very formative yet often ignored aspect of the culture of the Pueblo Indians is presented in Silko's poem "Lullaby"

The earth is your mother,  
she holds you.  
The sky is your father,  
he protects you.  
Sleep,  
sleep.  
Rainbow is your sister,  
she loves you.  
The winds are your brothers,  
they sing to you.  
Sleep,  
sleep.  
We are together always  
We are together always  
There never was a time  
when this  
was not so. (Silko, "Lullaby")

The poem is ample evidence of the acculturation process of the Pueblo's and how a love for nature and recognition of natural elements is inculcated right from the childhood in their psyche. The poem also shows the ancient and deep connection that the tribe retains with the ecology. They internalize the pleasures and the pain of their surrounding nature. They may hunt and consume animals but it is not for the thrill of the hunt or for the fame of the skill of hunting, rather it is more as a part of the natural food cycle where the creatures depend on each other for their survival in the Great Chain of Being. Every living, non- living, human, animal, natural, supernatural being is a part of the family and thus dwell in harmony.

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