



Ecofeminist approaches in leslie marmon silko's ceremony: Indigenous feminism and environmental justice

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Abstract

This paper examines Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* through an ecofeminist lens, exploring how the novel intricately weaves all together environmental, cultural, and gendered forms of oppression and resistance. Silko critiques patriarchal and colonial domination while offering a vision of resilience and healing rooted in Indigenous ecofeminist values. *Ceremony* articulates a model for environmental justice and cultural survival through the roles of Indigenous women, the significance of land and storytelling, and the necessity of adaptation that is both transformative and intersectional.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, indigenous feminism, environmental justice, leslie marmon silko, ceremony, storytelling, decolonization, cultural survival, land, gender

Introduction

Ecofeminism, as an activist and theoretical framework, investigates the connections between the degradation of the environment and oppression of women, by often critiquing patriarchal and colonial systems that exploits both. Mainstream ecofeminism has sometimes been critiqued for simplifying women's relationship with nature or for generalizing the experiences of Western women. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* offers different ecofeminist themes in the specific histories, cosmologies, and lived realities of Indigenous peoples of the American Southwest.

In *Ceremony*, the central character Tayo, a mixed-race Laguna Pueblo man was traumatized by his own experiences in World War II. His journey of healing is deeply integrated with the re-establishment of his community and the land. Silko's narrative structure blends both prose and poetry while reflecting the interconnectedness at the heart of Laguna cosmology as a view of the world that sees no separation between nature, humans and the spiritual realm. This paper proclaims that Silko's ecofeminism is rooted in Indigenous tradition and that the women characters, land, and stories are all vital agents of renewal and stagnation.

Interconnectedness of Women, Land, and Healing

In *Ceremony*, Silko never represents the land as a passive backdrop but as a living, breathing agency and spirit. By death, drought, rain, sickness and healing, the landscapes are personified and deeply connected to the life cycles. Particularly, Ts'eh and Tayo's grandmother, the two women characters in the novel, are represented as mediators between the human and nonhuman worlds. They possess deep knowledge of the land's rhythms about different medicinal plants, and the ceremonies needed for healing after the war.

Ts'eh who is deeply connected with the land and seasons guides Tayo in identifying the interconnectedness of all beings like both in between the living being as well as the non-living beings. Her presence is refreshing that she teaches Tayo to adhere to the signs of nature, to gather

herbs, and to give respect to the cycles of renewal and growth. The following passage encapsulates Silko's critique of the Western as well as colonial mindset that causes the division between humans and nature: "Then they grow away from the earth then they grow away from the sun then they grow away from the plants and the animals. They see no life. When they look they see only objects? The world is a dead thing for them the trees and the rivers are not alive. the mountains and stones are not alive. The deer and bear are objects. They see no life. They fear. They fear the world. They destroy what they fear. They fear themselves."

Above passage is a powerful allegation of the objectification and destruction of nature under patriarchy and colonialism appealing ecofeminist critiques of the dual domination of women and the nature (Silko, 57).

Colonialism's Dual Exploitation: Land and Women

Silko throws light on the explicit parallels between the exploitation of Indigenous women and the exploitation of the land. Laura, Tayo's mother is a tragic figure who is leading towards marginalization because of the exploitation by white men and because of her alienation from her cultural roots. Her story is representative of the broader historical violence imposing upon Indigenous women through displacement, colonization, and cultural elimination. The land is subjected to violence through overgrazing, uranium mining, and the introduction of destructive technologies:

"He lay there and hated them. Not for what they wanted to do with him, but for what they did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns. It happened again and again, and the people had to watch, unable to save or to protect any of the things that were so important to them." (Silko, 63)

Both the exploitation of women and land lies at the heart of ecofeminist critique which shows the future of women and nature as interwoven under the systems of domination. Silko's narrative representations make clear that the assault done to Indigenous bodies and communities and the violence done to the land is inseparable.

Indigenous Feminism as Resistance and Adaptation

Silko's ecofeminism is not essentialist or static rather this is rooted in resistance, adaptability and Indigenous women's agencies. In *Ceremony*, all the women characters are not mere victims. For example, Grandmother is the keeper of herbal knowledge and oral traditions simultaneously takes care of the community's memory and resilience. Ts'eh, who may be a manifestation of the spirit of the land itself, guides Tayo through rituals that re-impose harmony and balance. Night Swan is considered as another notable female figure that subverts stereotypes about Indigenous women's sexuality and encourages Tayo's self-acceptance by using her power to challenge social norms.

Silko's vision of tradition is vigorous, dynamic and expeditious. The Navajo healer Betonie, asserts that ceremonies must evolve to address new forms of suffering which was brought by war and colonialism. This adaptability is enunciated in the following passage:

"She taught me this above all else: things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more."

Here, Silko critiques the dangers of rigidity and the necessity of adaptation for both ecological and cultural survival which is the core of ecofeminist principles.

Tayo's journey in the novel is marked by a profound existential crisis, where his sense of self erodes amidst a fragmented and disjointed reality. The cumulative weight of his traumatic experiences, particularly those stemming from war and cultural alienation, leads to a dissolution of his identity, leaving him feeling insubstantial and disconnected—an effect Silko powerfully conveys through the metaphor of "white smoke". Conventional medical interventions prove ineffective in addressing the depth of his psychological wounds, as both Tayo and his doctors are left bewildered and powerless to bridge the gap between his internal turmoil and outward existence. This pervasive sense of emptiness highlights the profound separation between his physical presence and his inner life, underscoring the novel's exploration of trauma's capacity to sever the individual from a coherent sense of self.

Silko reveals the fragmented status of Tayo's existence:

For a long time, he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke. He had seen outlines of gray steel tables, outlines of the food they pushed into his mouth, which was only an outline too, like all the outlines he saw. They saw his outline but they did not realize it was hollow inside. He walked down floors that smelled of old wax and disinfectant, watching the outlines of his feet; as he walked, the days and seasons disappeared into a twilight at the corner of his eyes, a twilight he could catch only with a sudden motion, jerking his head to one side for a glimpse of green leaves pressed against the bars on the window. He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries. (p. 14-15)

Storytelling, Memory, and Survival

In *Ceremony*, storytelling is considered as a central motif, functioning as both a form of resistance and a means of survival. It is believed that women are often the keepers and transmitters of these stories, which contains the wisdom needed for healing and renewal. Silko writes:

"I will tell you something about stories. They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death." (210)

This assertion uplifts storytelling from mere narrative to an essential force in the struggle against death, illness and cultural abolition. The act of remembering or keeping the stories alive is itself an act of noncompliance:

"But as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together." (225)

Land and memory are interconnected; remembering is an act of survival and resistance, especially for women who preserve communal knowledge. The novel's structure weaves together prose and poetry while reflects the oral traditions of the Laguna Pueblo and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Healing as Ecofeminist Praxis

Ceremony visualizes the healing as a process that needs the restoration of relationships between land, people and spirit. Silko rejects Western medical and psychological models that strongly match the individual from their environment rather than advocating for a holistic approach rooted in Indigenous cosmology. The structure of the novel is itself circular, interwoven with myth and poetry which reflects this worldview highlighting the cyclical nature of time and the interconnectedness of all beings that is human beings as well as Mother Nature. The healing ceremony is not just for Tayo but for the land itself which has been injured by colonization, war and environmental degradation. The roles of women in this process are vital as their rituals, stories and ecological knowledge are the means by which the wholeness is restored.

Environmental Justice and Cultural Survival

Ceremony strongly matches with the principles of environmental justice which connects ecological well-being to social and cultural equity. The drought afflicting Tayo's community is both a metaphorical and literal consequence of colonial disruption. Healing the people requires healing the land and vice versa. The restoration of rain and fertility at the novel's end signifies not only environmental renewal but also the possibility of cultural regeneration:

"As long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on."

This line personifies hope and the resilience of culture and nature, echoing ecofeminist calls for environmental and communal resumption. Women are considered as the central one in this process. Their roles as healers, storytellers, and mediators position them at the heart of both communal and ecological survival.

Silko also articulates the importance of relationships between earth and human beings:

"Relationships. That's all there really is. There's your relationship with the dust that just blew in your face, or with the person who just kicked you end over end. You have to come to terms, to some kind of equilibrium, with those

people around you, those people who care for you, your environment.”

This passage outlines the ecofeminist idea that healing and justice depend on rejuvenating relationships and equilibrium.

Women, Land, and Colonial Violence

Silko identifies the explicit parallels between the subjugation of Indigenous women and the colonization of land. The novel throws light on how European settler's arrival not only brought environmental devastation through mining, overgrazing, and water diversion but also at the same hand affected the systematic erasure of women's roles as knowledge keepers and healers (Silko, 7-9). As Farooq and Awan writes, Silko “pays equal respect to the nature and female as she knows that both females and nature have great contribution to the survival of tribal community”. (Silko, 7)

The expulsion of Indigenous women from their traditional roles shows the displacement of the community from lands of its ancestral. The trauma experienced by Tayo is inseparable from the trauma inflicted on the land and on women both of which are treated as objects by colonial powers.

Beyond Mainstream Ecofeminism: Cultural Specificity and Intersectionality

While mainstream ecofeminism sometimes falls into the trap of generalizing women's connection to Mother Nature, Silko's approach is historically grounded and culturally specific. The land's importance in *Ceremony* is structured by Laguna cosmology, history, and lived experiences. Tayo's healing is achieved through participation in ceremonies and storytelling not through abstract communion with nature. It affirms his place within a web of relationships those are past and present and between human and nonhuman.

Silko's ecofeminism is intersectional, comprehending that environmental justice cannot be separated from cultural survival nor can the experiences of Indigenous women be comprehended under a generalized category of woman. Her work challenges ecofeminists to attend to cultural specificity, colonial history, and to the different unique forms of knowledge and resilience found in Indigenous communities.

Women as custodians of Culture and Land

Silko's female characters demonstrate ecological wisdom and resistance. Tayo's grandmother and Auntie are custodians of cultural memory. They also maintain oral traditions that link survival to respectful engagement with the land. Ts'eh, the mountain spirit, is a particularly powerful character. She is both a healer and a manifestation of the land itself, guiding Tayo toward a holistic approach of health that encompasses both body and environment.

The Feminine Principle

This study delves into Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony* (1977), utilizing Joni Adamson's frameworks of Environmental Justice and Indigenous Feminism as analytical tools. Adamson's eco-critical lens highlights how both the environment and women are subjected to manipulation and control. Historically, indigenous women have maintained a profound and enduring connection with

the natural world, rooted in their cultural traditions. Their bond with nature is characterized by mutual reliance, leading them to see themselves as inherently linked to the land. The arrival of European settlers profoundly disrupted the lives of indigenous women, forcibly removing them from their ancestral landscapes. Since colonization, both women and natural resources have suffered relentless exploitation, resulting in ongoing marginalization for indigenous women. Despite the environmental devastation bringing about poverty and disease, women are frequently blamed for these societal and ecological crises. The degradation of the natural world has caused indigenous women immense anguish, stripping away not only their sense of self but also their spiritual beliefs. Colonial actions have deeply impacted indigenous communities by severing their connection to the land, leading to the erosion of their cultural and psychological well-being. This loss has left them not only economically disadvantaged but also deprived of their inner peace and collective identity.

This paper draws upon the ecocritical perspective articulated by Joni Adamson. In its early stages, ecocriticism often adopted the Euro-American worldview, which separates humans from the rest of the natural world. Within this framework, Euro-Americans assert that humanity stands apart from, and above, the natural order—treating nature as something to be dominated and exploited at will (Adamson, 12). Adamson challenges this anthropocentric ideology, which diminishes the value of non-human life and denies the interconnectedness of people and the environment. Her theoretical approach advocates for an equitable relationship between humans, nature, and women. Adamson defines the environment as a shared space where both humans and non-human beings coexist and contribute freely. She maintains that the right to access and benefit from natural resources belongs to all living creatures, without discrimination. In her 2002 work, Adamson criticizes the tendency to hold the world's most impoverished populations—especially women—the accountable for climate change: She points out that targeting poor women's fertility as a global threat has led to creation and enforcement of harsh population control policies and contraceptive measures, which undermine women's autonomy and put their health at risk (p. 209).

The very existence of the poor population is demolished by the discriminatory distribution of the natural resources. “The conditions, under which the poor and marginalized live and work in toxically contaminated regions, are both socially and environmentally unjust” (Adamson, 69). The poor indigenous females are linked to nature in a negative way. On the other hand, they suffer deprivation of their natural landscape. They are compelled to stay at reservations that were the polluted areas where they suffered from severe diseases and depression.

At reservation areas, they are unable to lead peaceful and healthy life, besides losing their mutual relationship with nature. Indigenous females' alienation from the natural landscape target their marginalization. European colonizers consider it their moral and social privilege to victimize the females by occupying their homeland. Their motherland and tribal identity are snatched away from them. The colonizers declare indigenous females' inferior beings and feel pleasure in exploiting them and their natural world. As Tayo's mother, Laura is looked down upon because of her affiliation with a Euro-American and giving birth to a mixed blooded child. Tayo feels shame for his mixed breed

because whenever Euro-Americans look at him “they remember things that happened” (Silko, 92). European colonizers exploit indigenous females for their lust on the other hand look at them contemptuously for giving birth to mixed blooded children. The colonizing approach “relies on keeping out of sight and out of mind the harm being done to the bodies of poor women and children’s bodies and the poisoning of their environments”. (Adamson,13)

The colonizers’ actions devastated the lives of indigenous women by forcibly removing them from their ancestral lands and the environments to which they were deeply connected. This displacement not only led to severe economic hardship for these women but also shattered their psychological well-being. As Silko describes, “The destroyers are working for drought to sear the land, to kill the livestock, to stunt the corn plants and squash in the gardens, leaving the people more and more vulnerable” (Silko, 231). The severing of ties with nature has caused indigenous women profound suffering, stripping away their sense of identity and undermining their spiritual foundations. Silko recognizes that “The roots of poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation lie at the heart of western culture’s favorite story about itself” (Adamson, 21). Driven by self-interest, colonizers have treated both the earth and women as commodities to be exploited for profit and pleasure. Silko notes the catastrophic impact of the atomic bomb: “They exploded the first atomic bomb. it knew no boundaries” (Silko, 228). The bomb’s devastation extended across vast regions, disregarding any natural or human boundaries. The colonizers failed to appreciate that “land was a living thing that had to be nursed. the sun; moon and stars influenced both the human body and the earth body” (Adamson, 143). Both the land and indigenous women were exploited to satisfy colonial greed and material ambitions. Indigenous women became aware of these motives, recognizing the insincerity and exploitation in the colonizers’ “greedy feeble love-making” (Silko, 63). They understood they were being used for fleeting pleasure. Silko asserts that the earth is a shared home for all living beings, and that everyone has an equal claim to its resources.

The systematic deprivation of natural resources has destroyed the livelihoods of marginalized communities. “The conditions, under which the poor and marginalized live and work in toxically contaminated regions, are both socially and environmentally unjust” (Adamson, 69). Indigenous women, in particular, are negatively impacted by their forced separation from the land, often confined to reservations that are polluted and hazardous, leading to illness and despair. Life on these reservations is marked by poor health, loss of peace, and a broken bond with nature. This alienation is a deliberate tactic to further marginalize indigenous women. European colonizers justified their domination by claiming a moral right to occupy indigenous lands and oppress their women, stripping them of their homeland and tribal identity. Indigenous women were labeled as inferior and subjected to exploitation, both physically and environmentally. The character Laura, Tayo’s mother, is stigmatized for her relationship with a Euro-American and for having a mixed-race child, leading Tayo to experience shame and alienation: “they remember things that happened” (Silko, 92). Colonizers not only exploited indigenous women but also looked down upon them for bearing children of mixed heritage. Colonial systems intentionally obscure the suffering inflicted on poor

women and children, as well as the environmental harm in their communities.

Nature's Role in Trauma Recovery through Indigenous Perspectives

Indigenous cultures provide profound examples of how a close relationship with nature can foster healing, particularly in the context of trauma. For many Indigenous communities, the natural world is integral to spirituality, identity, and recovery, offering a holistic approach to overcoming adversity and psychological distress.

Land-Based Healing and Cultural Connection

Indigenous practices often involve land-based healing, where the environment is not just a backdrop but an active participant in the recovery process. Living in harmony with the land, Indigenous peoples develop a deep awareness of natural rhythms and resources, which supports their resilience in the face of trauma and existential challenges. Despite enduring physical and psychological hardships, these communities have cultivated unique survival strategies rooted in their understanding of trauma and healing.

The Role of Nature in Native American Trauma Recovery

For Native Americans, particularly the Laguna Pueblo, the land is considered sacred and essential for finding solace and comfort. Nature serves as a refuge from the alienation and suffering imposed by dominant cultures. This perspective is vividly depicted in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel "Ceremony," where the protagonist's journey toward healing is intimately tied to his reconnection with his homeland. The narrative contrasts Indigenous approaches to trauma with those of Western societies, highlighting the unique role of the environment in the healing process.

Narrative Structure and Healing in "Ceremony"

Silko's "Ceremony" employs a non-linear narrative to reflect the complexities of trauma and healing. The protagonist, Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo war veteran, returns home deeply scarred by his experiences. Conventional medical interventions fail to help him, prompting a return to traditional healing practices. Through ceremonies guided by medicine men, Tayo reconnects with his cultural heritage and the land, gradually moving from disintegration to wholeness. The novel underscores the importance of ancient traditions and the natural world in overcoming the effects of trauma.

Trauma and Memory

Tayo's struggles are compounded by memories of war, family abandonment, and cultural dislocation. He exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including insomnia, anxiety, and recurring nightmares. The narrative uses imagery such as tangled threads to symbolize the chaotic state of his mind, illustrating how trauma disrupts personal and collective memory and resists integration into coherent narratives.

Rituals, Nature, and Community

Healing in "Ceremony" is depicted as a communal and ecological process. Tayo's recovery involves reconnecting with the land, participating in rituals, and embracing ancestral knowledge. Sand paintings and other traditional

practices serve as visual and symbolic representations of the fragmented self and the world. These ceremonies aim to restore harmony and balance, both within the individual and the broader community.

The Significance of Ancestral Guidance

Memories of Tayo's uncle, Josiah, play a crucial role in his healing journey. Through Josiah's teachings, Tayo learns to value the earth and recognize the importance of respecting and cherishing the natural world. This process of remembering and relearning ancestral wisdom is central to Tayo's recovery and the restoration of his sense of self.

Integration of Traditional and Innovative Healing

The character Betonie, a medicine man, exemplifies a flexible approach to healing that incorporates elements from various traditions, including Navajo and Mexican practices. This holistic methodology addresses the spiritual and psychological wounds caused by colonization and war, emphasizing the need for adaptive and inclusive healing strategies.

Conclusion

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* offers a powerful ecofeminist vision which is deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge and experiences. The novel critiques the intertwined oppressions of colonialism, patriarchy, and environmental exploitation at the same hand it is celebrating the resilience and agency of Indigenous women. Silko articulates a model of healing through storytelling, ceremony, and a profound respect for the land, that is flexible, comprehensive, and justice-oriented.

Ecofeminism, as articulated in *Ceremony*, is inseparable from historical context and cultural specificity. Silko's work demonstrates that environmental justice cannot be separated from cultural survival and from Indigenous women, who are considered as the bearers of tradition and ecological wisdom. The novel challenges ecofeminists to embrace intersectionality and cultural specificity while offering a model for resilience that honors adaptability, storytelling, and the sacredness of all life.

The current research underscores the vital role that nature plays in the lives of Native Americans and highlights the distinctive qualities of indigenous women in relation to their environment. It demonstrates that the experiences of indigenous women are mirrored in the state of the natural world, and explores how reclaiming their lost identity involves resisting the subjugation and destruction of both women and nature.

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