



Land and resistance: Spiritual and cultural interventions in Almanac of the Dead

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Abstract

This paper examines Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as an attempt to show the spiritual qualities that govern both culture and nature. It attempts to show that spirituality is autonomous and spontaneous that it is present itself in nature and culture as an inherent value. *Almanac of the Dead* shows the intricate relationship through ecological healing motifs to critique colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist paradigms while advancing indigenous perspectives on land and environmental justice. This paper exposes how the different patterns of ecological conquest, such as the commoditisation of nature and the exploitation of tribal lands are interrelated.

Keywords: Land reclamation, Indigenous resistance, ecological healing, colonialism, social justice, interconnectedness, survival and ancestral wisdom

Introduction

Spiritual connection of the Almanac in Silko's writing

The *Almanac* has a spiritual connection with the sacred elements stemming from the past in the forms of narratives. As Stephen Crites finds in his essay on narrative as a sacred text that the sacred stories are fundamental narrative forms. They are sacred not because of the celebration of Gods and Goddesses but because "men's sense of self and world is created through them". Sacredness in the *Almanac* is not because of its capacity to create sense of the world, but because of its revelatory capacity present in the words and rhetoric. The memory narratives found in the *Almanac* substitute a considerably more adaptable method of preservation for the magisterium's guidance. The original level of revelation is not limited by the unchanging claims of a specific teaching authority; rather, it is amenable to modifications and interpretations. The stories and beliefs of the community are actually held by community members. While religious rituals of Christians, happen on special holy days, take place in a specified place like church, we find the Native American religious confessions, as portrayed in a collective memory narrative, are carried through time and space by both community members and outsiders. Some of the later acquire spiritual abilities, like Lecha developed spiritual connect by simply coming into contact with the sacred text.

Lecha is not only a promoter of spiritual knowledge through her work as a guardian and decoder of the notebooks; she also acts as an agent of spiritual power and wisdom by being an intellectual to whom police resorts in order to trace missing and dead people. She "is a special contact for the souls that still do not rest because their remainings are lost; somewhere fragments of bone burnt to ash, or long strands of hair, move in the ocean wind as it shifts the sand across the dunes." Lecha envisages through her spiritual power the memories of missing victims. In her graphic, revelatory memory, Lecha not only sees and feels the energy of natural elements, but also gives them with a particular interpretation that gives her the sense of what happened to the victims. The connection of natural phenomena with the revelatory discourse has been

established when Zeta remembers the way Yoeme and the old ones used to watch "the night skies relentlessly, translating sudden bursts and trails of light into lengthy messages concerning the future and the past." The spell exerted by the ancient *almanac* is not only confined to the physical but extended to the height of mystical. When the four children- three young girls and a young boy- were advised to save the old manuscripts by travelling to the deep North, they were also told that "the pages held many forces within them, countless physical and spiritual properties to guide the people and make them strong." Yoeme tells Lecha and Zeta that it was the *almanac* that "saved [the children]" from the dangers of the trip. Eventually, the *almanac* saved who helped it survive its journey through time and space.

The central notebooks are a source of power and revelation for anyone who deals with them, it is not just Native Americans. To those outside the community who believe in them, their performative power surpasses that of the members. Lecha hired Seese, a former prostitute and alcoholic who was also a drug addict and smuggler like Zeta and Lecha, to assist her in creating a digital replica of the notebooks. While working on the project Seese had a vision of her son whom she has never seen. Seese had turned to Lecha for assistance in finding her son, but due to Lecha's unstable mental state, she did not inform Seese that her son had passed away, instead choosing to focus on her own hopeless situation. Lecha hired Seese to work on Lecha's notebooks in addition to creating a digital copy of the transcribed ones. "Seese type up each and every letter or word fragment however illegible or strained," Lecha insisted. She had been working on a peculiar passage in Lecha's transcription of the notebooks, which had an almost narcotic effect on her, what the narrator mentions. After waking from a dream, Seese recorded her own account of her memories. Seese presents her passage as a poem with a boy-sacrifice as its theme and a concluding line that reads, "He only struggled a little." Seese gains insight into her situation through a dream, but it also gives her knowledge that only Lecha could have imparted. Seese's quest to find her son or learn what happened to him in the novel was made possible by her interactions with the old notebooks

and her skills as a reader and decoder of the community's and specific people's memory narratives, like that of Lecha. This happens through the spiritual connection of the Almanac for which things come in the form of revelation. The memory narratives develop as an extension of the almanac's body, entwining apocalyptic and prophetic discourses. Ricoeur argues that prophecy is inextricably linked to the literary form of the oracle, creating an almost unbreakable bond between the concept of prophecy and that of a future revelation. This association forces the notion that revelation's contents ought to be integrated into a design—that is, a scheme that would give history a direction. Native Americans were warned by the ancient almanac that they would fall prey to foreign forces' violence. The narrator clarifies, glossing over the Spirit Snake's message, that it foretells the annihilation of Native Americans. A narrative that follows the apocalyptic message will provide redemption. Lecha depends on her decoding abilities to enable the almanac's revelatory potential. Lecha responds to Zeta's inquiry regarding what will happen after they finish transcribing the almanac by saying, "Once the notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac." After that, we will witness the upcoming months and years, everything.

Nature in the cultural life of Native American People

Native American relationship with nature is as old as human civilization. Their relationship with nature is so intense that the inanimate nature finds human position in their lives. They regard nature by elevating it to the level of the divine. J Baird Callicott claims that all animals have special positions in the life of the native Americans. Callicott says, "the typical traditional American Indian attitude was to regard all features of the environment as inspirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and volition, no less intense and complete than a human being. The Earth itself, the sky, the winds, rocks, streams, trees, insects, birds and all other animals therefore had personalities and were thus as fully persons as other human beings" (Garrad, 121). It is found that the natural world is considered as the natural community; and all human beings are the essential part of that community. Native Americans, as Derek Bouse pointed out, "were the original" and "natural presence" in North America (77).

They are essentially the part of "the cultural landscape" rooted in the natural environment. What Bouse has pointed out is that the natural world for the native was not only a matter of beauty and tranquility, it is the basis of the sustenance for native American culture. Nature's importance in Native American culture is a widely noted fact gets exemplified not only in literature but also in religious practices, ritualistic performances, local ceremonies, mythological narratives, food, art, medicine etc. Their ways of life going harmony with the natural environment of the land and that harmonious relationship finds expressions in all forms of art they create, including literature and cultural expressions. In other words, nature shapes and defines the world of indigenous people.

It is an undeniable fact that the entire world for centuries suffered the complexities of European colonization and Native Americans are the victim of it like others. The Native American's opposition to the white Americans is a process of repudiating the colonial structure and accepting the native. For this purpose social and literary movements were

viewed as the possible methods to decolonize the Native American mind. At the same time the Native Americans oppose the white idea of exploitation of natural resources that possibly causes imbalance in the nature as well as in the native mind. Cree Prophecy of Native America once stated with deep sense of anguish by looking at the orientations of the white: "When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money." Similarly, there is another popular saying among the Native American people that the sacred space is the space between exhalation and inhalation. To walk in balance is to have Heaven (spirituality) and Earth (Physicality) in Harmony. Thus we can say that Native Americans have close association with nature.

With the onset of European colonization in the 15th and 16th centuries, Native American societies faced displacement, forced assimilation, and cultural genocide. Despite these challenges, indigenous peoples continued to maintain their spiritual connections to the land through oral traditions and ceremonial practices. However, the written tradition of Native American literature as we recognize it today began to emerge in the 19th and early 20th centuries, largely influenced by the efforts of Native intellectuals, activists, and writers. During this period, Native American authors such as Charles Eastman, Zitkala-Ša, and Gertrude Bonnin began to publish works that offered insights into indigenous perspectives on nature, culture, and identity. For example, Eastman's autobiographical writings like *Indian Boyhood* and *Wigwam Evenings* provide glimpses into traditional Dakota life and spirituality.

Cultural Traditions in navigating identity

The protagonist Tayo's cultural traditions play a crucial role in navigating his personal identity and healing from the trauma of war (Shafiq *et al.*, 2019). The narrative presents memory as a powerful force that not only preserves tribal heritage but also empowers Tayo to confront his past and reclaim his Laguna Pueblo identity. (Scarberry, 1979) Through the interweaving of Pueblo oral stories and modernist writing, the novel underscores how Tayo's reconnection with his cultural traditions allows him to transcend the fragmentation and alienation he experiences as a "mixed-blood" individual (Sarkowsky, 2007).

The text highlights how Tayo's condition of "tonguelessness" and feeling of invisibility in the white world stems from the disruption of his connection to Pueblo culture and ceremonies (Shafiq *et al.* 2019). As Tayo returns to his native town, his family recognizes the need for him to seek a medicine man, suggesting that "the boy needs a medicine man... Otherwise, he will have to go away" (Shafiq *et al.* 2019). This emphasizes the centrality of traditional practices and beliefs in Tayo's healing process. Through the guidance of the medicine man Betonie, Tayo begins to reclaim his memories and the stories that define his identity as a Laguna person.

The novel portrays memory as a "repository for the cultural traditions" that not only benefits Tayo individually but also the collective Laguna community (Scarberry, 1979). By confronting and making sense of his memories, Tayo assumes responsibility for preserving the "old ways" and restoring the cosmic balance that has been disrupted. The power of storytelling and alternative epistemological

frameworks are crucial in this journey, as Tayo navigates the hybridization of his identity and challenges the colonial worldviews that have alienated him.

Conclusion

It is true that Native American identity is deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of rituals and ceremonies that have been passed down through generations. In Leslie Marmon Silko's seminal novel *Ceremony*, the protagonist's journey explores the integral role that these cultural practices play in shaping and preserving the identity of Indigenous communities. As Silko eloquently states, "memory is a repository for the cultural traditions of a given people" and the "act of recollection benefits not only individual beings but the collective as well." By embracing the power of storytelling and reconnecting with the land, Tayo is able to heal himself and, in doing so, also contribute to the healing of his community. (Scarberry, 1979)

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