

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*: Story as a Means of Healing

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Introduction

Healing rituals and spiritual ceremonies represent a crucial part of the Native American culture, and have been included in various literary works of authors coming from indigenous communities with a rich oral culture-based tradition. Leslie Marmon Silko, as one of the most eminent Native American writers, has created literary works significantly related to the world of the Native Americans. What makes her works more than just remarkable is her strong affiliation to the tradition of storytelling and influence of the Pueblo and the Navajo people on her endeavour to incorporate that into her writing. The novel *Ceremony* presents a personal story of Tayo, a war veteran of the mix-blood Mexican and the Pueblo origin. As a young man, he is pushed on the fringe of the society by his own people and the white society what caused by his physical and mental collapse based on experiences from the Second World War, and growing up under the racial tensions. Through the traditional stories and ceremonies he is reunited with the world of the Pueblo people, and reconnection between his world and the world of his ancestors uncovers the means of healing of what Eppert defines as not only "personal" but also "communal and collective trauma" (2004, p.727). In order to understand the oral tradition present in the works of various contemporary Native American writers it is important to take into account approaches offering different view on the world, as it is for example *conversive* approach, that deals with means of interconnecting the native but also non-native audience with the traditional issues. Silko's novel *Ceremony* represents a spellbinding reading offering an insight on the traditional culture of the Pueblo and the Navajo people surviving in the contemporary world, where the individuals have to struggle with the consequences of losing own cultural identity and searching for the ways how to find it again in order to survive. Silko through an analogical structure of the novel, where the traditional stories rooting in Pueblo and Navajo mythology are precisely wedged among the parts of the contemporary personal story of the main character, points at the negative aspects affecting the indigenous communities and their struggle to recover their cultural identity of the community in the modern world.

1. Oral tradition in the contemporary Native American literature

Ceremony reflects a historical experience of the Native Americans, a power of traditional storytelling, a quest in order to restore the healing balance in an individual and a whole community, as it carefully interweaves the old traditional stories and Tayo's personal story together. Silko presents a highly critical view on the subject, yet, at the same time she offers gentle beauty and power hidden in the ceremonies representing parts of the cultural heritage and cultural identity that have their place in the indigenous communities even nowadays. In order to understand the novel, it is necessary to come across the theories dealing with the oral tradition as well as new approaches, which consider the all the aspects of differences and specifics of the indigenous cultures.

From the point of view of some scholars, Ortiz (1992), Grant (in Ramirez 1999) or Bleaser (1996), the oral tradition and storytelling are more than just a repeating or the study, for they cover the principles of the existence of the Native Americans in a deeper sense the most of the Western scholars are not able to fully understand if they follow the traditional frameworks and theories of the Western literary traditions. Therefore, endeavour of many contemporary Native American writers to introduce the oral traditions incorporated in their works not only to the native but also non-native audience has been calling for a new approach or strategy to create a bridge interconnecting both of them.

One of the principles of the oral tradition in the Native American literature is its transformative power, where according to *conversive* approach, where “the listener is an active participant whose presence is necessary to the telling-creation of the story. The storyteller and listener interact throughout the process in a conversation that reflects the inherent interrelationality of storytelling.”(Ramirez, 1999, p.6) Leslie Marmon Silko represents such an example, where her predetermination to become a “storyteller” has been given through her first-hand experience of the long line of people within her own family who used to tell the traditional stories during her youth and were accompanying, influencing her also during her academic years, and later when she has started with writing. Her novel *Ceremony* has not become only the story of the spiritual and clearing transformation of her main character, but also her personal healing ceremony during the harsh times she spent during her stay in Alaska, as she was writing about the land of her ancestors that was far, far away from her. As one of the most significant contemporary Native American novelists, she is well known for her unique style and inspiring from the cultural and oral traditions related mostly to Laguna Pueblo people and the Navajo.

2. Silko's *Ceremony* ... more than a novel

The title of the novel is for Silko not only a sentimental creation. The term itself covers a definition of the set of rituals practiced for certain reasons, which in the cultural environment of the Native Americans have a sacred character. While Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, juxtaposes ritual and language as both organised and based on the meaning resulting from experience, Allen's definition of ceremonial ritual very closely expresses Silko's intention hidden behind the title and meaning of the novel itself: “Ritual can be defined as a procedure whose purpose is to transform someone or something from one condition or state to another.” (in Krumholz, 2001, p. 68) Following the pages of the novel, the transformative rituals and ceremonial process are slowly revealed. Eppert distinguishes that as Silko's aim in the way, that “Tayo must become an integral part of the story that is being told, a participant with the power to create it and change the world.” (2004, p. 733) The principle of two lines of stories present in most of the healing ceremonies is possible to distinguish also in Silko's *Ceremony*. In the traditional healing ceremonies an individual is usually confronted with the analogic traditional stories in order to identify him/herself with the characters in the stories, and through that way they are enabled to find the answers how to achieve their personal healing. The old traditional stories have a cyclic character, therefore, the same or similar events repeat regardless of time and space, and that represents a base of the traditional healing in many Native American communities. The reading of the novel may seem confusing at the beginning as the narrative has a quite chaotic structure. The first chapters in *Ceremony* contain the scenes that move suddenly from past to present and vice versa irrespective of their position within the text. The extracts of the traditional stories mix with the parts focused on the main character having no or very little interrelation. Eppert characterizes the novel's structure of the narrative as partially written “in a stream-of-consciousness hallucinogenic and fragmentary fashion.” (2004, p.734) Breaking the boundaries between time and space is a typical feature of many indigenous cultures, as their

notion of time follows the principle of cycle rather than the linear one. Still, readers may get lost at first for the text obviously lacks some order; however, the feeling of such disorder in the arrangement of the text itself interconnects them with the main character and his feelings of being trapped in his chaotic nightmares. At the beginning the traditional stories have hardly any connection to Tayo's story, but slowly with the progress in his quest to find the cure and heal himself, the non-linear stories and poems are bound into a larger story, which like an umbrella covers all the stories together giving them a more complex and global meaning. The core of the indigenous notion of the world follows a cyclical character of existence where the events happened, happen and will happen in very similar manner, so the cures in form of ceremonies and rituals which worked once, could be used also during another occasion. Bell confirms the importance of the ceremonial rituals in the way that some:

“[...] certain rituals associated with the Native American curing ceremonies we are concerned with here require that the patient re-enact mythological events as a necessary means of identification. When the patient re-enacts the hero's adventure, identification is complete [...]” (Bell, 2002, p. 26)

Witherspoon presents that in the Navajo culture the “ritual identification with [deities] neutralizes the contaminating effect of dangerous things or evil deeds and restores one to the good and harmony of *hózhó*”. (1977, p. 25) Eppert adds: “Alteration is the outcome of Tayo's remembrance-learning. His journey does not consist of the idle reenactment of a ceremony. Rather, it demands commemorative implication and agency.” (2004, p.732) Silko skillfully applies that on her novel, as her hero's quest follows the ceremonial procedures of the old traditional healing ceremonies to some extent but with unsatisfactory effect. In her novel, she emphasises the importance of an adaptation to the changing conditions of the world and the environment, for the world the original ceremonies and rituals were supposed for has changed, therefore, their final effect is insufficient and asks for inevitable changes. Purdy appreciates Silko's following the tradition of the Pueblo and the Navajo storytelling in order to “clarify the changes in their world and dramatize how old ways may be adapted to accommodate those changes.” (2002, p.63) New concepts of ceremonies depicted in the indigenous literature are contrasting to those performed in the traditional way, what is presented even in Silko's novel, however, their value is in the fact that they still follow what Dasenbrock defines as “the spirit of old ceremonies.”(2002, p. 79)

3. Listen to someone else's story ... and understand that of yours

Ceremony contains about thirty traditional stories carefully chosen and positioned in the novel. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Silko confronts her main character with the individual stories in order to present the similar structures in causes, reasons, procedures and solutions the old traditional stories could offer to restore a disconcerted soul and body of the individual as well as the whole indigenous community living in the modern world. Even though there is obvious analogic depiction of the traditional stories and the story depicting Tayo's story, there is Silko's effort to engage motif of change contrasting to the original and traditional issues present in the novel in their various forms. Silko is conscious about the fact that her character occurs in the situations of the modern world, where he cannot count on the old traditions and ceremonies anymore, for the world has been changing.

Tayo's self-awareness that he differs from his own community as well as from the white community in many aspects, where not only his physical appearance but also his way of thinking are in contrast to the others, making him an outcast trapped in his state of mind reminding his personal limbo full of hallucinations. Realisation and acceptance of difference become missing essentials enabling the changes. Lincoln points at the fact that Tayo just

being the mixblood is predestined to create the new procedures in the ceremonies that should help his people for “the mixed breed is living testimony to the transitions, the changes, the old ways evolving constantly into new variables. (2002, p.58) Therefore, the main character’s own life experiences are juxtaposed to those of the characters presented in the traditional stories. Through them, Tayo slowly reveals the principles of balance within the never-ending cycle of life, necessary for a source of healing he is looking for. Silko employs guides, such as Betonie, Ts’eh or Night Swan directing Tayo into realising the necessity of changing the process of ceremonies, for only then he “is finally able to see ‘the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told’ - a pattern the reader, too, must come to see and understand.”(Bell, 2002, p. 26)

Employing the flashbacks, Silko returns Tayo back to the parts of his own story such as his stay in the hospital with a diagnosed post-war trauma depression, where he feels invisible and disabled to speak: “*The voice was saying, ‘He can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound.’ He reached into his mouth and felt his own tongue; it was dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent.*” (2006, p.14) His story is confronted with the story about the man who had been turned into coyote by a mischievous trickster. A hunter’s human form is hidden under an animal skin blanket and his voice is limited only into howling: “*A coyote whine was the only sound he made. [...] The man tried to speak but only a coyote sound was heard [...].*” (2006, p.130) The confronting points where the stories meet in similar moments emphasise the circular character of the Native American storytelling with its typical element of repetition. The young man as a victim of the trickster’s deceitfulness, his family and the members of his community who discover the truth, the Bear People who can offer help through performed rituals they all can be recognized to some extent even in Tayo’s story, where Tayo becomes the victim of the white doctors’ medicine blunting his senses reaching the level of depressions, until his grandmother in order to help him involves the traditional medicine man Ku’oosh, the unorthodox medicine man Betonie with his helper Sush, the Bear Boy, who realise the cause of Tayo’s problems. The stories meet in the moment breaking the boundaries of time and space during the performing the Hoop ritual serving for the retransformation of both men.

Even though Tayo remembers a little about the power of the traditional stories known from his childhood at first, it is enough to kindle his feeling of responsibility for the conditions his people have to live in, such as draught troubling the area of the Pueblo reservation. Silko reflects such knowledge through the traditional story about the sisters where she presents that words once pronounced in anger may be so powerful to cause disappearance of rain and suffering the people on the earth. As Corn Woman gets angry seeing her sister Reed Woman who spends most of the day bathing and “*splashing down the summer rain*”(Silko, 2006, p. 12), their argument turns into Iktoa’ak’o’ya’s – Reed Woman walkout affecting the earth in the way that “*there was no more rain then. Everything dried up [...]*” (Silko, 2006, p. 12) Tayo’s awareness of the power of the words is tested as the story is “reborn” in the cycle, repeats again in the form of draught striking the Pueblo community. Tayo blames himself and feels responsibility for that as he “*wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun pressing across wide and empty horizons. [...] all the time he could hear his own voice praying against the rain,*” (Silko, 2006, p.11) . Through the cyclic pattern of events in the traditional stories and the events that occur also in Tayo’s story, the novel emphasises the importance of the traditional sources of relief and healing hidden in the knowledge characterised by Nelson as a liberating knowledge about the events which have a cyclic character mingling past, present and future together over and over again. (2005)

Silko introduces a story about Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'wi, in order to show how easy is to get lost on one's way because of being tricked and to see consequences of such situation influencing the others. The twin brothers are fooled by the trickster's magic:

*"They thought they didn't have to worry
about anything.*

*They thought this magic
could give life to plants
and animals.*

They didn't know it was all just a trick." (Silko, 2006, p.44)

They lose their way and leave all their duties behind for the fake belief in the magic tricks resulting into the punishment for them and the rest of their community in form of famine and suffering. Trickster's magic is retransformed and adapted to conditions of the contemporary world of the main character. Silko employs the glister of the uniforms or the white men's medicine, alcohol, to show how the sight of the individuals, the indigenous and the dominant white community, blinds everyone's vision of the reality, which is in fact only a product of the "witchery trick." The reality where the indigenous veterans of war are just violent drunks rejected by both camps, who have been deprived of their cultural identity, what is in Tayo's case accented by the fact that he is a mix-blood. The story told by Tayo's friends reflects how distorted their view of reality is: *"The night progressed according to that ritual: from cursing the barren dry land the white men had left them, to talking about San Diego and the cities where the white women were still waiting for them to come back to give them another taste of what white woman never got enough of."* (Silko, 2006, p.56) Silko juxtaposes a stereotypical, twisted, macho-looking picture of Native American soldiers who drink, have sex with white women, revel in killing and torturing the Japanese soldiers, and Tayo's view slowly revealing the modern version of the witchcraft affecting the people around him.

Another analogy can be found in *Ceremony* (2006) in the story depicting the quest of Sun Man who has to search for the lost rainclouds, as he relies on the Thought Woman's advices, he finds them captured by the trickster Kau'pa'ta, where he has to gamble with him in order to set them free and stop the draughts torturing the earth. Tayo has to play his own version of that game, but this time it is the Texan Floyd Lee, who has captured his precious spotted cattle. He has his helper, his own thought woman, embodied into Tse'h, who instructs him how to get his cattle back, and instead of playing a game with the sticks he tries to overplay the guards along the fences to get to his cattle and make it free, that all completes his quest, his own procedure of healing ceremony he is creating as his story is being told.

Jahner emphasises the importance of the perfect timing and the specific factors as they are included in the healing process. "Betonie explains to Tayo that he must watch for the right mountain, the right stars, and the right woman before he will be able to finish the Ceremony. When he finds the right conjunction of all, he is able to sing the sunrise song [...] Once he comes to this intersection of time, place, and story, Betonie's teachings become 'a story he could feel happening - from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come'" (2002, p. 173). As she continues, the knowledge that the person is not a passive agent within the story, but has a power to influence the story as well as the life of the person for merging of the boundaries that used to limit the space and time, people and events is not there anymore. (2002, p. 48) She refers to the traditional stories of past and their possibility to relate to events of present in order to provide the precedential experience.

In his book *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: The Recovery of Tradition*, Robert Nelson describes an influence of taking part in the ceremony called the Hoop ritual, one of the most important Pueblo and Navajo rituals, introduced in Silko's novel. According to that the

hoops take over a function of the land and a line of tracks, which Tayo must in reality to achieve “the final, fifth hoop nearest the door leading out of ritual space. [...] The ritual motion through the hoops thus connects pre-ritual time/space with post-ritual time/space. Through the hoop ritual, in other words, these two zones become part of the ceremony.”(Nelson, 2008, p. 53-54) The ritual presented in the novel *Ceremony* follows a similar procedure as the hoop ritual characteristic for both, the Navajo and Pueblo cultures, for example “by passing through a hoop made of five kinds of wood, Tayo passes *out of* one color-coded state of being *into* another.”(Nelson,2008, p.53)

Even though the old traditional stories contain the procedures necessary for the healing, Bell points also at the changes in the ceremonies as an element that “keeps the ceremonies strong, which characterizes life itself, is forever working through order, balancing opposites, restoring itself, ‘enclosing this totality.’” (2002, p. 28) His interpretation of the changes questions the relationship of merging past and present heading to why the things are the way they are, and why the old ceremonies, like those practised by the medicine man Ku’oo’sh’s, are not working the same way they used to, Silko offers an explanation through the words of other character of in her novel *Betonie*, the unorthodox medicine man,

“At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.”(Silko,2006, p. 116)

The change is therefore an inevitable part of the world order aiming to preserve the balance among living creatures and non-living things altogether participating on the world’s existence. The change is that element heading to improvement, to development of the individual or even the whole community. On the other hand, the passive stance or its contrary a radical attitude towards the reality only lead to destruction outreaching its impact on the individual.

Conclusion

In *Ceremony*, Silko integrates the oral tradition of storytelling, as a significant feature of the cultural world of the Native Americans, the Pueblo and the Navajo people. She presents enchanting and at the same time realistic interpretation of the story about the war veteran of mix-blood origin struggling to regain his place within the own world, a way to defeat personal demons as well as the demons of past torturing the people he belongs to through passing the ceremonies adjusted to the needs for existence in the contemporary world and its evils.

Silko’s stories and her characters reflect the struggle in order to return to and accept the core principles, thoughts and ideology enabling the Pueblo and Navajo community to survive the negative aspects caused by the changes coming from the space outside their community. Silko’s perception of the importance of cultural traditions, storytelling and their influence on the indigenous communities and the individuals within, depicted in her works includes the awareness how the tribal ceremonial knowledge as the means of healing may be applied to cure an individual and his community from negative effect of the historical oppressions from the white but also the own indigenous world. The novel itself is not primarily designated for the indigenous readers, even though it reflects a lot of traditional procedures some of which are supposed to be used only within the indigenous community. However, Silko’s attempt, as she employs elements of the Native American and the Western literary tradition, is to introduce not only the point of view of Native Americans facing the remains of the historical oppressions in their various forms, but also to show how the

tradition, process of searching the indigenous self-identity of the individuals and to help to restore some kind of balance in contemporary society.

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Resumé

Príbeh ako prostriedok uzdravovania v románe *Ceremony* od Leslie Marmon Silko

Rituály a ceremónie reprezentujú dôležitú a neodmysliteľnú súčasť kultúrnej tradície pôvodných obyvateľov Ameriky. Príbeh je dôležitou súčasťou týchto kultúrnych procesov a je čoraz viac zakomponovaný do tvorby súčasných autorov pochádzajúcich z radov

pôvodného obyvateľstva Severnej Ameriky, ako napríklad spisovateľka Leslie Marmon Silko. Časť článku približuje význam ústnej tradície a rozprávačstva pre pôvodné obyvateľstvo Severnej Ameriky s bližším pohľadom na tvorbu Leslie Marmon Silko a zakomponovanie rozprávačstva do jej románu *Ceremony*. Článok približuje paralelné zobrazenie viacerých navzájom sa prelínajúcich príbehov, ktoré z hľadiska rozprávačskej tradície do značnej miery prezentujú úsilie jednotlivca potrebné na zvládnutie negatívnych zmien zasahujúcich nielen jeho, ale aj komunitu pôvodných obyvateľov. Silko pozdvihuje podvedomie širokého spektra čitateľov prostredníctvom návratu k tradíciám, zahŕňajúcim rituály a ceremónie vo svojej tvorbe, kde s citlivou dávkou kriticizmu poukazuje na dôsledky historického útlaku pôvodných obyvateľov, no zároveň vyzdvihuje dôležitosť poznania vlastných tradícií ako prostriedkov kultúrneho uzdravovania nielen pre jednotlivcov, ale pre celé komunity.