

Complementarity of Gendered Spaces in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Gendered concepts arise out of reflections on the experiences, prejudices or orientations of one sex over the other. There are stereotyped gender roles in every society for both male and female, which could differ according to societal norms. However, regarding gender aspects, there is no commonality among cultures. It is said that women were always considered inferior to men from days of yore. This generalisation may hold good for Western patriarchal societies where women were restricted to private spheres, but it does not essentially apply to women in Native American communities. Laguna Pueblo, a Native American community, for instance, is a matrilineal society whose cultural and religious traditions are strongly influenced by female figures and deities. Leslie Marmon Silko, one of the distinguished Native American writers instrumental in the revival of Native American literature, writes with a strong sense of affiliation with and allegiance to her native land and culture. Her novel *Ceremony* illustrates how native ideologies seek to balance a more nuanced relationship or complementarity of genders. There is even a persistent impulse to romanticize the feminine in opposition to the masculine. This paper explores the gendered spaces in the matrilineal society of Laguna as depicted in Silko's *Ceremony*.

In *Ceremony*, Silko seeks to create a cultural space in which Native Americans changing realities are rearticulated against hegemonic discourses. She presents the lives and histories of Native American culture and the intercultural relationship between Native Americans and other American ethnicities, highlighting the binary opposition of Native American's traditional nature-oriented existence and the objectifying western way of life. Tayo, the protagonist, is trapped between the contrasting ideas of the racial/ethnic binary thrust upon him as a mixed-blood Native man in Anglo/Western society. Mixed-blood serves more as

a motif than a biological or bicultural marker in the novel. Silko explores the male-female balance in Laguna culture and the gendered spaces generated by the gender roles in Native American communities.

The difference between Anglo-American and Native constructions of gender revolves around the physical embodiments, performances, and applications or uses of gender. Betty Bell explains that:

Even though gender is central to the organization of Indigenous nations as distinct social and cultural systems, it is often not closely related to power or biology... There is, however, no universal or necessary correlation between male and female descent and gendered positions of power and authority. Nor are gender and sex defined, necessarily, as culturally equivalent categories (308).

In Laguna culture, the women exert considerable authority in society and are accorded due recognition. Silko's *Ceremony* introduces a female narrator at the beginning through a poem even before the introduction of the central character, Tayo. It tells of how the universe was created by Ts'its'tsi'nako, the Thought Woman, the spider who is a feminine entity. Thought Woman is the supreme goddess of the Laguna people and the belief is that she created everything. According to the poem the Thought Woman is sitting in her room and "whatever she thinks about appears" (Silko 1). As a community that treasured women, Laguna Pueblo community has deep regard for its female deities such as Thought Woman, Spider Woman and Yellow Woman, who are brave and have command over creation and nature. In contrast to the version of the creation presented in the Genesis in Christian mythology where creation is a process attributed to masculine figures, the novel *Ceremony* introduces a female as the creator which shows the importance given to women in Native American tradition.

The gendering of roles in Laguna culture does not mirror the pattern in Euro-American culture. In Laguna culture, the aunt's duty is to sustain the family honour. Tayo's aunt bears this burden in a family disintegrating from a variety of insidious social forces. Western culture that does not understand this concept may be quick to brand her as an unkind woman in condemnation of her cruelty to Tayo. Grandma, Tayo's grandmother, as head of the family, asserts her decisions. Grandma calls the medicine man Ku'oosh to perform the scalp ceremony in order to cure Tayo, when he comes back from the Veterans' Hospital. These characters are the ones through whom the matrilineal aspect of Laguna society is emphasised in *Ceremony*.

Disregarding Native American traditions and choosing Anglo-American ideals results in the doom of the feminine characters, Tayo's mother and Helen Jean. Tayo's mother emulates western ways and falls prey to prostitution and alcoholism. As Rebecca Tsosie notes,

Tayo's mother seeks to establish her identity and importance through men; but eventually falls into a path of prostitution and alcoholism. She grows to feel marginal and inadequate both with the Indian people who feel disgraced for her promiscuity and alcoholism, and with the white men who feel contempt for her, and finally dies a lonely, alcoholic death (29).

Helen Jean, a girl Tayo's friends pick up in a bar, also shows deterioration of character on adopting Western American ideals. These two characters show how disregard of the Native American traditions causes them the loss of their power within the community and also results in objectification not only by white men but also by Native American men.

There is a constant urge to romanticize the feminine in opposition to the masculine in *Ceremony*. Many critics assume Ts'eh to be the incarnation of the Spider woman. The deep bond between the woman and the land is further manifested in the account of Tayo's physical intimacy with her. In *Ceremony*, Tayo's identification of the woman with the land is crucial. Silko also personifies Mother Earth and the Spider woman. The female character, Ts'eh makes love with Tayo, and escorts him to a new appreciation of the land, "she enables him to discover a new/renewed self through oneness with her, with Mother Earth, and with the stories," observes Robert M. Nelson (128). Further, "she opens her heart, body and spirit to help Tayo heal," just as Mother Earth nurtures and rejuvenates (129). Through her curative love, Tayo is given the powers to overcome witchery.

Corn Mother represented in *Ceremony* is a prominent deity in Pueblo mythology. She is identical with Mother Earth and is symbolic of life, growth, and the feminine aspects of the world. A ritual corn dance is performed for one or more of the following reasons: to bring rain, to increase fertility, or to assure an abundance of crops. In smaller corn dances, all of the participants are males, but in larger dances, both men and women participate. When women are involved they wear tablitas. This marking symbolizes the special connection that women have with Corn Mother because of their shared feminine attributes. Thus the significance of women is further reinforced through the character of the Corn Mother in *Ceremony*.

Sun Father, who stands in relation to Corn Mother, is symbolic of masculinity and light, and is represented in white which is regarded as the most sacred colour. Cornmeal, associated with Corn Mother, is offered to Sun Father which demonstrates the interdependent relationship between men and women, like between Tayo and Ts'eh. Corn Father is also connected with Thought Woman, as can be seen in another myth narrated in *Ceremony*. In this myth, Ck'o'yo, the magician takes storm clouds as prisoners with his magic. As the clouds are unable to release rain over the earth, the land begins to dry up, and the people and animals starve: "Sun Father took blue and yellow pollen,..to Thought Woman, asking for her help. She gave Sun Father a magic medicine that allowed him to trick the magician and free the clouds" (Silko 11). This myth shows the essence of Laguna culture that values women since even the Sun Father bows to the Thought Woman for help.

Laguna society treats women as the axis of all things, and nothing is considered holy without her blessing. She is the true Creatrix from which everything else takes birth. She is the necessary precondition for material creation which is hence fundamentally female. This feminine spirit and her power of intelligence appear on the plains, in the forests, in the great canyons, on the mesas, beneath the seas, and her variety and multiplicity testify to her complexity. Two characters that represent the strong nature of women in the novel are Ts'eh, the sacred woman who helps Tayo with the recovery of his uncle's cattle and Night Swan who is Josiah's lover. Ts'eh Montano is a surreal, semi-divine life force and consort of Mountain Lion Man, who becomes the creative force at the centre of the novel and the source of spiritual rejuvenation. Paula Gunn Allen, exploring the role of feminine principle in the novel comments that "while *Ceremony* is ostensibly a tale about a man, Tayo, it is as much and more a tale of two forces: the feminine life force of the universe and the mechanistic death force of witchery" (118-19). The story is generated by a woman, narrated by a woman, and is already known by another woman, that is, Tayo's grandmother, whose words conclude the story.

Night Swan is a strong, spiritual woman who questions established categories of culture, spirituality and gender. The episodes involving Tayo with the Night Swan are interpreted as divine interventions. Night Swan's vital role in Tayo's ceremony and her relation with the colour blue align her with the figure Ts'eh, who is the universal feminine principle in the formation of Laguna Keres theology. She is also associated with Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman or Grandmother Spider. Scholars have interpreted Night Swan as one of Spider Grandmother's daughters, who calls upon Tayo to repair Laguna community and even the broader world outside. Night Swan's sexuality is interpreted as symbolic of the cosmic female force.

Masculinity in Native American cultural concept stresses on kindness or benevolence, which is contrary to the image of masculinity in Euro-American culture. Uncle Josiah, who appears too calm and gentle for a man, is a father figure. According to Edith Swan “For a young Laguna boy, the most important adult male model within his social domain is his mother’s brother” (40). Not only does the uncle provide stability, but is a guide who is able to influence the behaviour of the young and thus helps to perpetuate the values of Laguna culture. Kristin Herzog remarks that “Tayo has been shown by his uncle Josiah - another male figure, who is gentle and caring - that violence is senseless” (29).

Tayo and Rocky are two men demolished by war, the former spiritually and latter physically. Robert plays a passive role, and his motion and space are curtailed. Even though he takes care of the ranch and the animals, he is not the one who takes important decisions, which is a facet of the matrilineal society. His place in the family is even more restricted. For instance, “Tayo realized then that as long as Josiah and Rocky had been alive, he had never known Rocky except as a quiet man in the house that belonged to old Grandma and Auntie” (32). Rocky does not believe in Native American science unlike Tayo who trusts in Native American science, which can be witnessed through the cattle raising episodes done by Tayo and Josiah. Critic Paula Gunn Allen compares Rocky with other (male) characters such as Emo, Pinkie, and Harley who “are not of the earth but of human mechanism; they live to [destroy the earth] spirit, to enclose and enwrap with machinations, condemning all to a living death” (118). Here Allen does not present Rocky as an innocent man, tragically destroyed by the war, but as an active force of destruction itself. Tayo is essentially different from Rocky.

Ku’oosh is another important male character: “...but the old man would not have believed white warfare killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died” (123). Ku’oosh has the minimal number of dialogues among all the male characters. Alexandra Ganser remarks that “Ku’oosh is much more traditional and conservative; he fails to transform his rituals to meet the demands of contemporary ethnic identity construction” (152). Betonie is the most important male figure that Tayo would come across in his journey to become whole. Betonie’s character also emphasizes the concept of change as a form of flexibility which is a relevant step for all Laguna men. According to Karem, “Betonie emphasizes to Tayo that the old ceremonies themselves must be revised, that change itself is a critical tool in his quest” (27). Unlike Ku’oosh, Betonie adapts himself to the changes and hence was able to survive. Emo represents the complete contrast of a

Laguna male. His world is distorted by the trauma of war along with belief in non-Laguna ideals.

Native women give a helping hand and guide Native men through the ideologically constructed gender maze. Similar to the Sun Father who sought the help of Thought Woman in search of the lost rain clouds, Tayo relies on Ts'eh, who instructs him how to get his cattle back. Tayo's journey begins with his visit to Night Swan. Unknowing to Tayo, she embodies the mountain spirit Ts'eh and when Tayo sleeps with her, his life becomes a retelling of an older story. Tayo's union with her hints at the ceremonial nature of man and woman, and embodies the meaning of the relation between the characters and the Thought Woman, which is the basis of Laguna life. Tayo embraces the feminine attributes that seek to nurture him and his community. In Silko's skillfully gendered narrative, the sexuality of native Laguna women releases and directs power in a manner that replicates the dynamism of the female deity, Spider Woman.

In Western ideologies, aspects such as nature and human, and male and female are categorized as binaries. Silko's protagonist, Tayo, represents the cross-cultural male identity trapped by Western ideologies. Tayo also encapsulates the internalized struggle against the pressures of conflicting social constructions. In Tayo's case, Anglo-American patriarchal and racist ideologies are further complicated by the binaries between gender and race.

Most Native ideologies try to maintain a symmetry regarding the complementarity of genders according to the changing requirements of communities and society. Healing amalgamates the binary concepts of femininity with masculinity through native feminist principles of complementarity and reciprocity. Due to the internalized conflict regarding opposing identities or ideologies imposed by colonial patriarchy, Tayo represents the degradation of a Laguna male. Tayo's illness occurs as a result of the Western constructions of masculinity in contrast to the Laguna ideologies. Tayo's illness stems from a history of colonial conflict and harmful neocolonial performances. While at war, he cannot disconnect himself and his community from the world around him, even when he is told that his sanity depends on maintaining separation.

Silko uses the medium of stories to bring Tayo back to health by reestablishing his gender-balanced role within his community. Through the traditional stories, Tayo is made to realise how gender roles function and are perceived based on the changing needs of Laguna people. In this manner, both the novel and Tayo maintain complementary and reciprocal

relationships as a form of curing ideological illness. The novel intends to balance relationships through storytelling while also asserting a sovereign communal identity for Laguna Pueblo people. Balanced relationships can be assessed through the gender and racial dynamics displayed in the novel. Tayo learns to accept and personify both genders as essential for individual and communal sovereignty. In fact, Tayo becomes a hero because of his complementary and reciprocal association with Ts'eh/Yellow Woman and the land culminating with the strength and courage necessary to overcome the witchery for both himself and his community. Tayo reconciles with conventional stories and his culture, and grasps the importance of non-violence and a more gender-balanced understanding of his communal role. By creating such balance between masculine and feminine powers, he transcends the dual pronged and hierarchical gender/racial binary imposed by colonial hierarchies at the core of his illness.

Silko frames colonial history's effect on both individuals and communities, and strives to resolve institutionalized neocolonial gender oppression in *Ceremony*. Without the fear of fragmentation or illness derived from differences, individuals and communities in an open system can sustain balanced relationships. Also gender is the conduit through which Tayo reorients his entire race and understands the neocolonial struggles he and his community face. In comparison with Western culture, the gendered spaces in Native American communities are different. Women are not dominated by men in Native American communities. While taking into account the historical impact of colonial dominance on Native male bodies, the gender and racial dynamics in the Laguna community become significant. Silko's male protagonist embraces the concept of both genders being vital for individual and communal sovereignty. The formal narration of the story blends binary opposites of both male and female voices and Western and Laguna literary traditions as necessary for understanding the complete story. Tayo must experience a blend of Laguna gender roles in order to understand the value and importance of complementarity and reciprocity regarding gender aspects.

Silko's *Ceremony* suggests that each gender should contribute to the welfare of the other for a strong foundational basis of society, as illustrated with the Laguna Native American community. Though certain common attributes regarding gender emerge in all societies in the modern era, basically due to the mixing of cultures, a close look at the Native cultures around the world reveals that each culture is unique and the gender aspects are different in each culture. As opposed to the mainstream patriarchal societies, in many marginalised Native communities, women enjoy great prominence. Women's steadiness combined with men's mobility allows for the Laguna folk to flourish. Silko proposes a new

masculine concept which embraces both feminine and masculine expressions and experiences. Thus, Silko's *Ceremony* underscores the need for a fine balance between men and women for the accomplishment of communal requirements: "No job was a man's job or a woman's job; the most able person did the work" (66).

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