

SURFACING THE ODDITIES – AN ILLUMINATION ON LESLIE MARMON SILKO’S CEREMONY

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Abstract

The land of Native America is renowned for its oral tradition, ancestral heritage, rich civilization and mythical beliefs. Apart from them, the roles of the indigenous women in the land are also inevitable. The aboriginal people of the land have an emotional bonding with the land. Moreover, the Native American women who are primitive by nature, have been deeply associated with nature and her resources. They possess the strong notion that any living being which is born from nature, returns to the land after their death. The native women have many successive roles to be cast in the home, society and land. Such deeds of the indigenous women are not recognized and their views are oppressed by the colonizers and the Native American men. This paper aims to explore the roles of the various classes of women in the novel Ceremony. Each and every woman in the novel has contributed immensely to the development of the land, their families and they have established their identity over the White-stricken society. They have faced untold miseries and traumas throughout their lives. This paper gives a vivid and detailed analysis of the indigenous women involved in the famous Native American novel Ceremony and how their significance and invincible nature creates a positive influence over the land.

Keywords: Land of Native America, Indigenous women, Natural resources, Identity, White-stricken society, invincible nature.

INTRODUCTION

The aboriginal Native American women, who have been the marginalized sector of the community, have suffered societal, monetary problems in their family and society. The life of Laguna-Pueblo women can be understood through the third wave of feminism or the urban feminism that focuses mainly on Intersectionality. This revolves around the oppression and suppression caused to marginalised women under the criteria of race, gender and class. The women in Laguna tribe have been facing unforeseen suppression and oppression throughout their lives. They have developed a special fondness to story-telling. Their grandmothers recite the stories to them which are slowly passed on to the forthcoming generations.

The pragmatic lives of the Native American Women are at stake from the beginning. They do not have any hope or inspiration for living and surviving. They have built up their own identity to struggle and make a livelihood in the White-stricken society. Being a Native American Women writer, Silko has penned down the passion of the people. Silko’s grandmother has instilled the importance of the Laguna tribe and the women in their tribe through the way of narrating stories to her from her childhood. According to her, woman is an epitome of power, knowledge, sacrifice, kindness and affection. The Laguna tribal women without any support or any help from the opposite gender or the White women struggle unflinchingly hard to acquire a respectable position among their tribes. This could be firmly understood with the

words of Deborah L. Madsen in her reputed critical work, *Feminist Literary Theory and Literary Practice*, “Gender Identity is assumed to be the determinant of women’s lives and therefore their writing – society shapes women’s language, consciousness, education and careers through powerful conditioning (‘socialisation’).” (Madsen 16-17)

When the women start to face differences in equality, she witnesses through her work, that the other gender never gives them a space in the White-stricken and Men- stricken society. To avoid gender inequalities, the importance of family is to be instilled amongst the Laguna tribal men and women. Silko has stressed that equal status in all aspects and criteria should be provided to the women. Silko highlights on how tribal women are suppressed and wishes that the society paves way for her free will in marriage.

The Indigenous women in the novel can be broadly classified into three categories: domestic class, labour class and sex class. The women who fall under domestic class are those who are house-wives and home-makers. To them, their entire world is their family members, home and they do not think beyond their horizon. Their expectations cling onto the welfare of their family members. They live their life taking good care of the young ones in their homes.

In the novel, Ts’eh, the grandmother of Tayo and Aunt Thelma depict the domestic class of women. Ts’eh who is the female protagonist of the novel is shown as a domestic class woman; she is not married to Tayo, but her characteristic features are exemplifying a perfect portrayal of a domestic woman. She guides and inspires Tayo to take up the righteous path in his life. Aunt Thelma is shown to be a woman who takes extreme care of her family members – her husband, son and mother. Tayo’s grandmother is the aged woman of the story and is very much attached to the family. She binds her entire family to remain together.

The women belonging to the labour class in the Laguna tribe denote the working class women, who take care and support the family financially and economically. They physically work and face the evils in the outside world to safeguard their family. The sex class depicts the women who with their external beauty, physical looks and appearance use attraction as their tool and

use their bodies for earning money for their survival. They also serve as a breadwinner for their families. They are never forced to choose prostitution as their profession.

From introspecting the novel, the only woman character who falls under both labour and sex class is Helen Jean. Helen, at the initial stages of her life, wants to work in an honest way and earn money in the society. When her skills are considered to be futile and waste by the men, she does not have an option to have a career. She uses her beauty which other men prey upon to earn a livelihood. Next to Helen, it is Night Swan who is a dancer, with her skills captivates men, particularly Josiah. She also has her family to feed as Helen Jean. Laura, the mother of Tayo who without proper guidance has fallen into evil hands; she has become a prostitute and she is attracted to a White man and also bears a son through him. The lives of these three women who form the crux of the novel – Helen Jean, Night Swan and Laura belong to the sex class. Their lives are changed from a normal life to that of a traumatic one. These three women who are from a good traditional and cultural background and who have been brought up in families have taken an outrageous decision that has cast their lives, reputation and distress for the family.

Indigenous Feminism can be explored in the lives of Ts’eh, Night Swan, Laura, Aunt Thelma, Grandmother and Helen Jean. Ts’eh emerges to be the guardian for Tayo’s deeds in his adulthood. Through Ts’eh, the hope for living, the ultimate achievement after struggle is achieved for Tayo. The continuous hard work for establishing one’s identity and an optimistic approach towards life is seen through the incessant support of Ts’eh.

All the women characters have faced untold critical situations in their lives. Having possessed the feminine qualities of patience, motherhood, mercy, love, kindness, empathy and beauty, in them, they stand out to be undaunted in their endeavours throughout their lives. Native Americans have customs and norms to be followed by both the sexes. Native women play the primary role in educating the kids of Laguna about their civilization and its advantages. When a woman bears the baby in her womb, she cultivates rich values and virtues right from the birth. Even though the novel *Ceremony* has a male protagonist and his travel through the sustenance in acquiring his identity,

Silko puts forth the view that women necessitates the other gender. Laura completely believes her husband, discards her family and later ends up in her death-bed. Her beauty becomes a captive for the White men who takes charge of her completely.

Laura, an Indian by birth, but later has become the wife of a Mexican, the mother of Tayo, has been an influential woman, who is powerful but appears scarcely in the novel. Since her whereabouts have not been exactly mentioned after her elopement, it is unlikely to find out the father of Tayo. Her life is also not sensed to be in the virtuous path, which is depicted in: "... she had come after dark and wrapped him in a man's coat – it smelled like a man – and that there were men in the car with them: and she held him all the way... He clung to her because when she left him, he knew she would be gone for a long time." (Silko 60)

Her absence haunts her entire family members probing them to decide their own factors in life. The time - period when she has opted to marry a Mexican (against her culture, community and nation) is depicted in the novel. Having a clear contrast with her sister Thelma, she has led an awful life after her marriage. She has borne a son who stands as a bridge between two different cultures and traditions.

Though her death creates a devastating effect on her son, it is only after Laura's death that Tayo struggles and wants to break the clutches of Whites' impact on him. Laura cannot be blamed for marrying a non-native man; she is not accepted and respected among her family members or by her community, since she violated the Indian laws. The Indian act suggested that a native man can marry a non-native woman and still he will be accepted by his clan; whereas if a native woman marries a non-native man, she has to be secluded from her family and she loses her identity and status.

Following Laura, the next important woman in the novel is the Night Swan; as her name stands for swan, she dances as gracefully as she impresses the audience. The life of Night Swan, who has captivated the most diligent Josiah, is an equally powerful woman like Ts'eh. Night Swan is a woman who sells her body for the pleasure of men. The men of the tribal community and the Whites are hegemonic and they have always treated women not in par with

them. They assume that women need not possess any social strategies in the society.

Night Swan handles love as a device in luring Josiah and Tayo to attain her identity. Night Swan has an enduring charm and attitude that is not possessed by any of the women in the novel. She has got a bold, seductive charismatic attitude which makes all men become enchanted by her beauty and dance. It is referred that each and every woman in the household has been frightened whether their husbands have gone to visit her. The Night Swan is old and mature to help her daughter and grand-daughters who is in a distant place with her earnings. Night Swan is a professional dancer, who charms and entralls the entire crowd and gathering. Her dance will be so mesmerizing that men cannot take their eyes off her graceful style.

The role of Night Swan is more of challenging and her life is woven in a thin, silk thread where she turns out to be the justice-seeker for herself. It is astonishing to know that she desires Tayo and she expresses the same when they both are alone. It is seen from the novel that Night Swan is closely associated only to Josiah and later is also attracted to Tayo. The life led by her has not received any welcome among the tribal men and women. Almost all married women have cursed and abused her and their intention has been to protect their husbands from her. This leads her to live a life of her own, where she has Josiah to meet her often. It is evident where it is explained in the following lines: "Of course only that kind of woman, used to that kind of life, would tolerate such things." (Silko 81)

In the civilization, that prioritizes culture, tradition, discipline and decorum, the character of Night Swan is like a silver lining in the cloud. She is rare, brave, bold, smart, intelligent and witty. Night Swan is more of womanly, passive, selfless, an understanding person, complacent, not completely money-minded and has an inner beauty which makes her genuine.

Following Night Swan, it is Helen Jean who is a woman representing both labour and sex class. Helen Jean, a notable woman in the novel, too follows the principles of Radical Feminism as Night Swan. She has been oppressed and her views have been put down recklessly and only her physique has been considered important. The men presume that women form only the sex class and such radical feminists have written and

raised their voice against such remarks. Helen seems to be a living illustration for the same. Mitchell, has expressed her views on Radical Feminism in her significant work, 'The New York Radical Feminist Manifesto':

Radical Feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based on their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organize politically to destroy this sex-class system. As radical feminists, we recognize that we are engaged in a power struggle with men, and that the agent of our oppression is man in so far as he identifies with and carries out the supremacy privileges of the male role. (Madsen 153)

Helen being a bread-winner of her family has endured many sufferings in her life. She has arrived at the city for the notion of working in any organisation to earn money and help her family. Her service has not been observed by anyone, but her beauty has been notified greatly. This led her to choose a life that is not upright and not morally accepted. Her short and long term ambition has turned to be minting money from the men who exploit her. This also depicts the darker side of Hellen. She has remarked about the notorious attitude of Navajo men in more than two instances, moreover she insults them in public. This may be due to the reason that she has been accepted only for her physical appearance in all the work places not for her talent or skill.

Helen Jean, who plans to move to Gallup for job, has decided and planned that she will be acquiring a job sooner or later, which will bring a change in the lives of Emma and Helen's little sisters. She faces difficulty in getting her a square meal and a decent dress. When appearing for an interview, she also has dreamt of her new office and the job which she will be employed: "She looked at the doors marked PRIVATE and OFFICE and tried to imagine what the desks looked like and what kind of typewriter they had." (Silko 150)

Helen is not employed for her typewriting skills or working ability. She is employed only for her physical appearance. Her career of choosing prostitution is not justified, but when people reject qualified women for the jobs and when the women have a family to support and take care of, such women choose a path that provides

them ransom money. The employer could have suggested a better job for Helen, but it has happened the other way around. It is observed in these lines: "'You can start today", he said, "but you might want to change your clothes." She stood in front of him, afraid to ask what was wrong with her clothes. He turned and motioned for her to follow. At the end of the corridor he pulled open a door, and she saw a push broom, and a scrub bucket." (Silko 150) Helen is shown as a woman who is full of fury, revenge and outrageousness and a lady who attempts risks with her beauty for earning money. Helen is seen to be dominant, aggressive, selfish, inflexible, money-minded, a woman full of contempt and assumes her beauty lies only on her skin. This is exemplified from the words of Emma Goldman in her famous work 'The Traffic in Women and other essays':

Nowhere is woman treated according to the merit of her work, but rather as a sex. It is therefore almost inevitable that she should pay for her right to exist, to keep a position in whatever line, with sex favours. Thus it is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men. Whether our reformers admit it or not, the economic and social inferiority of woman is responsible for prostitution. (Madsen 68)

Ts'eh, the female protagonist of the novel is shown to be the representative of domestic class of women. In the journey of finding the cattle, the protagonist meets a woman who is a turning point of his life and she is the lost love and kindness that has been shown by Josiah and Rocky initially. Tayo is only filled with emotions like loss, death, isolation, abandonment, depression and frustration at the initial stage. Once Ts'eh assists his life, Tayo experiences love, kindness, passion, care, warmth, affection and lust. It is only through Ts'eh that the prosperity of land is regained.

Ts'eh is in close communion with nature; eventhough she seems to be alone, she has a sacred unification with nature. Through her words, it is evident that her family is of rich cultural background. Her clan has also been oppressed by the settlers. In the patriarchal society having been oppressed and suppressed and continuously having been dominated by the Whites, Ts'eh focuses on building up rational culture, identity and oneness with the nature.

Ts'eh is associated with rain, the Mexican cattle and the birds in the environment. Eco-feminists are more cautious of the ways to preserve nature for the future generations. Ts'eh conserves the nature, flora and fauna.

Ts'eh, a beautiful woman whom Tayo falls in love with, is very responsible, compassionate and loves Tayo at first sight. This woman from Montano changes the painful things in Tayo's life and brings glimpses of happiness in his world. She does not disclose much detail about her ancestry, family and culture. Like a guardian, she takes concern in directing Tayo to Floyd Lee's house to save the Mexican cattle that has been bought by Josiah. This could be witnessed from the critical acclaim of Madsen in her work, where she states that:

The purpose is to show how women are placed culturally within a scheme of male values. At the same time, she draws attention to the complexity of female characters, a complexity that is obscured by the overwhelming stress on the 'hero' and other male characters. (Madsen 16)

When Tayo returns from the rancher's place hoping that his cattle will be safe, it is Ts'eh's efforts to have carefully taken care of them by feeding them and providing them shelter. It is witnessed when Tayo witnesses the cows with their calves, Tayo can feel himself closer to Josiah and he believes that Josiah like a light follows him somewhere around always.

Her righteousness and love towards Tayo is portrayed. When she hears that his life is in danger, she cautions him. It is seen from the instances such as: her appearance in the novel, her help in seeking to find the cattle, her kindness in taking care of them are a few glimpses of her attachment to the land and Tayo. Her cautious words when advising Tayo, her eyes which dwell in love, care and concern towards Tayo are incidents that depict the selfless nature of Ts'eh. Since Tayo has acted as per the advice of Ts'eh, his life is also saved from Emo and Pinkie. It is evident that Ts'eh is the incarnation of all good elements in her; once Tayo gets acquainted with Ts'eh it is understood that she resembles the rain-god. It is found that after meeting her, Tayo has saved the cattle and the land has received rain after many years. In this manner, Tayo regains his identity through Ts'eh and establishes his lost tribal identity to the world.

The hero suffers since the land has been parched with dreariness and weariness. Only the dry land is visible all over without any life and greenery in it. There has been no rain in the land since the death of Rocky which results in the sufferings of the people. The protagonist prays for the rain to help the land and the people in it. Ts'eh has helped the protagonist to regain rain and prosperity to the land. Living a life of her own and on her own, she shows immeasurable kindness towards Tayo. Tayo, similar to a child lost in the woods, finds solace with her. It is through Ts'eh's affection and care that Tayo is completely cured and he saves Josiah's cattle too by establishing his identity.

Ts'eh is similar to Tayo in being emotionally involved with all the species of nature. She seems to be a keen observer of minute things and she has an in-depth knowledge of all the facts moving on around her and within her. Tayo loves her so deeply that he feels that the imprints of snake on the ground resembles to that of - the woman whom he loves - Ts'eh. She saves Tayo from emotional conflict by sharing her love to him. She later guides him with the directions to reach the White ranchers' place to save the Mexican cattle that have been bought by Josiah. Similar to Tayo, she has the noblest quality of not even disturbing the ants, when she steps on the ground. That deed of saving the cattle has seemed to his greatest feat and he has achieved the same only through her. She is with Tayo in his dire situations which has resulted him to seek, find and fulfil his identity. Ts'eh is the guardian angel of Tayo and she is his sole benefactor.

Next to Ts'eh, the important female domestic character of the novel is the aunt of Tayo - Thelma. As discussed as a prime element of indigenous feminism, motherhood and parenting goes hand in hand in producing a child and reproducing it with all good values and virtues. Social Feminists prioritize the human relationships rather than money or any other factors. The woman's role as a mother, sister, wife and daughter in home and as an employee in her work place and as a mistress in her prostitution denotes that a woman is prioritized more for her emotional bonding rather than her physical appearance and beauty. Thus, a woman's interests revolve around her family and the people whom she is associated with. Moreover, the indigenous feminist critic such as

Paula Gunn Allen suggests that being physically weak does not affect a woman but being emotionally, socially and psychologically weak is a woman's greatest fault and folly.

Thelma, being a determined woman is of traditional, well-cultured, established and conventional background is very cautious in saving the family's reputation. She could never forgive the betrayal done by her sister and brother. The responsibility of bringing up Tayo after the death of her own son, Rocky frustrates her much. She is strict in her behaviour, straightforward and frank in her speech and dedicated in her action towards the family members. Moreover she does not approve completely of Tayo, since his father is unknown. She is shown to be narrow-minded in not allowing her son to play and spend time with her sister's son. Thelma has always been afraid to face the world which accuses Josiah and Laura for their deeds. Her worries over her family's spoilt name are evident in: "They'll say"... "He's not full blood anyway" ... "It will start all over again. All that gossip about Josiah and about Little Sister. Girls around here have babies by white men all the time now, and nobody says anything. ...

But just let it happen with our family." (Silko 30-31)

Thelma shows undaunted love towards her son Rocky which is the duly responsible nature of a mother. Moreover she also has an authoritative control over her husband, Robert. She is a strict aunt to Tayo and he is also aware as not to expect any kind of kindness, care or even sympathy from her. She does not afford to lose Tayo in any circumstances and always keeps a close watch on him, since both of them have lost people close to their hearts. She seems to have lost half of the hope with the disgrace caused by her sister, Laura and the complete hope has been lost when she hears that her brother, Josiah is associated with a prostitute.

After the deaths of two of her siblings and her only son, Thelma has lost a stable path to live in the world. With so many disappointments in her life, she too strives to maintain her dignity and struggles for identity. Thelma is seen to be cautious as not to secure a bad name among the relatives and her community. It is noticed that Tayo's aunt has become a devout Christian; this is the impact of the colonizers and the emergence of Christianity into the soil of

Laguna. It is seen that she has baptized which marks the true change in her life. Her role is a typical stereotype one where she lives an ordinary life like a woman next door having basic expectations in life and fights back all her criticisms.

Another woman who is of primitive nature is Tayo's grandmother. Born decades ago, she represents a domestic background, where women are emotional and entirely dependent on men. Tayo's grandmother's part in the novel is a typical stereotype, where she is shown to be the guardian-angel in the house. She remains a faithful wife to her husband, takes care of her children very well and remains a perfect homemaker. She has undergone many critical situations in her entire life, lost her two children, where she still lives strongly to guide the future generations in a righteous path. Paula Gunn Allen in her prominent work, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition* has vividly explained the prominence of Native women and the nature. It is observed in these lines: "[w]oman is the sun and the earth; she is grandmother; she is mother; she is Thought, Wisdom, Dream, Reason, Tradition, Memory, Deity, and Life itself". (Allen 268)

The grandmother has always been a brave and courageous woman, in raising her children and teaching them all good values and virtues and she has carried the valour in her, which has made her strive even after the treachery of her daughter Laura and the loss of her son, Josiah. She has been patient and mature enough to accept Laura's son as her beloved grandson, which Thelma is hard to accept. It is witnessed in: "I've been thinking,"... "all this time, while I was sitting in my chair. Those white doctors haven't helped you at all." (Silko 30)

There is an instance where Thelma fears to take the help of a medicine man to cure Tayo that the neighbours and the White people may talk ill about the family, whereas Tayo's grandmother insists her to bring Ku'oosh to cure her grandson. The affection and care for his son is seen in: "He's my grandson. If I send for old Ku'oosh, he'll come. Let them talk if they want to. Why do you care what they say? Let them talk. By planting time they'll forget." (Silko 31)

Her role may be comparatively meagre than all the other characters but still she stands as a great significance for the older most generation of the

family that signifies the root and the origin of Laguna culture and tradition. Having lost Laura and Josiah, she spends her life brooding over what she has lost and what has been left over in her life. Her family has been shattered to pieces, but she emerges to be a single bond connecting the crippled family.

After analyzing the roles played by various women illustrated in the novel, all of them possess a special feature in common. They are not rich with money, but are rich in heart and in their deeds. They have had terrible experiences in their childhood, but all their negativities have been transformed into a new leaf. They indeed have fought and attained the liberation not to be freed from the Whites but to raise their voices as marginalised people. The women consider Laguna culture as a high esteem and even when they are oppressed and suppressed verbally, physically and psychologically they outwit the men of the same community.

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