

**Present Past and Absent
Future:
(Re)Creating a Lost
Identity and Native
Fiction***

**Punyashree Panda
Department of English,
Berhampur University,
India.**

Abstract

*The "Others of the World," as fashionable critical terminology puts the Native Communities of America and beyond are no more silent. Searching for a place beyond the Western concepts of theory and literary canon, Native American authors like Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko have brought the pride back to the tribes. This paper is an attempt to find out and foreground the use of community myths and legends by two very prominent exponents of Native Fiction in their masterpieces namely **Ceremony** by Leslie Marmon Silko and **House Made of Dawn** by N.Scott Momaday for the purpose of recreating an identity, personal as well as social which have been lost in the lanes of colonization. Using the genre of fiction, Silko and Momaday tell their own stories as it is in flesh and blood, the stories of their families and their communities. And writing in the language of the colonizer they want to set the record straight and rewrite history, the contaminated White history.*

ملخص

"آخرو العالم" (Others of the World) مصطلح نقدي حديث يوضح كيف أن المجتمعات المحلية في أمريكا وخارجها أصبح لها صوت يسمع، بحثا عن مكان خارج المفاهيم الغربية النظرية، و يساهم كتاب محليون من أمريكا مثل موماداي ولسلي مارمون سيلكو في إستعادة فخر القبائل. هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لإيجاد كيفية استعمال خرافات المجتمع وأساطيره وإبرازها من طرف كاتبين شهيرين , إذ بدا ذلك جليا في خيرة أعمالهما الأدبية خاصة "Ceremony" و "House Made of Dawn". الهدف المتوخى هو إعادة بعث هويتهم الاجتماعية التي أهدرها المستعمر، بإستعمالهما للرواية، يروي كل من سيلكو و موماداي قصصهم الشخصية كما هي على حقيقتها.

قصص تتعلق با لعائلة والمجتمع. باستعمالهما اللغة المستعمر، أرادا في كتابتهما
تصحيح التاريخ وإعادة كتابته أي التاريخ المسمم الذي هو نتاج الرجل الأبيض .

What makes a Text a landmark in the literary history of a Nation? Is it merely the repetition and continuation of a particular form or style? Does it function merely with the motif of documenting the contemporary times and trends? And what is it that would qualify a text to claim landmark position in the literary history of the United States? If we assume that a literary text acquires the position of a Landmark Text when it works at the dual levels of popular recognition and aesthetic innovation and all the while keeps with the tradition and values of the community it represents, then N.Scott Momaday started a new era and a new world order by winning the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The “Others of the World”, as fashionable critical terminology puts the Native Communities of the world, are no more silent. Searching for a place beyond the Western Concepts of theory and literary canon, Native American authors like Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko have brought the pride back to the tribes, by telling us their side of the story and thus reestablishing their own collective identities as a race and culture.

The rise of the Postcolonial Voices across the globe in hues and colours as varied as the communities and peoples who have raised them has redefined and unsettled all previous isms. The potent anti-colonial insurrections of the last hundred years have raised doubts and questions for the collective global future: What does Postcolonialism mean for the “colonizer” and the “colonized”? Is it used and misused merely with the motif of reproducing structures of domination (racism, sexism, homophobia etc) within the third world? Or does it on the other hand, signify the first world’s anxiety about its own decentred status? Why is it that the ‘marginal’ are trying to make their voices heard; voices, which range from the hyphenated communities of the First world to the lost tribes of the First Nations? The focus of my paper thus is the search for a national/cultural identity in such difficult times. I would like to argue here that any statement of identity is an assertion of difference and an exhibition of community pride, pride that lets these existing and conceived communities live with dignity.

Drawing heavily upon the Laguna tradition of storytelling and by her sensuous use of language, Silko, in her novel *Ceremony* explores the mindscapes of Tayo, the protagonist who as a World War II veteran, is desperately trying to reconnect with the land and its Peoples as well as the Lost World...the community, its life, and rituals included. N.Scott Momaday's ground-breaking novel *House Made of Dawn* as a multilayered text deals not merely with Abel's confused struggle to reappropriate his individual past but also with the Kiowa author's search for a collective history, the hunt for a 'home'. Rejecting the dual choices of assimilation or destruction offered to them by the colonizing powers, these authors, in their roles as representatives of their respective communities, also become aware of their own "ethnic consciousness" through the process of writing.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, along with being an authoritative text of the Land and the People, is also highly illustrative of the Native traditions of orality thanks to its fragmented memories, aural and oral qualities and the cyclical nature of family legacies. Silko's style in this novel is to repeat phrases, thoughts and actions over and over, wrapping one story unto the next. The stories are so unique to the culture and traditions of the Laguna that it foregrounds the pain within. Each of the stories has their own pain, their own lessons. Sometimes she lets us know the end of the story, sometimes one can only guess. She paints a picture of the White Man as a sadistic, self-centred and more importantly, self-destructive force who has crushed the spirits of her People. Even worse, the White Man has violated Mother Earth, because to hurt the Earth is to destroy oneself:

The people had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers. But they were wrong. It was the white people who were suffering, as thieves do, never able to forget that their pride was wrapped in something stolen, something that had never been, and could never be, theirs (204) .

The damage thus caused to those who have been colonized is platformed by Silko through her focus on how one individual has been affected, and just as the novel chooses to focus on certain effects and issues of colonization, so I choose to focus on those of a lost identity, language, history and culture. As David L.Moore suggests, in Silko's Novel *Ceremony*, Laguna myths weave allegorically through the

personal and cultural healing of Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna Pueblo veteran of World War II. America's perception of and relationship with Native Americans are detailed through the half-White, half-Native American protagonist of Silko's novel, Tayo and his experiences of the two cultures and two worlds he resides in.

Having returned from the horrific scenes of World War II, Tayo suffers from a strange illness and a terribly devastating memory. Torn between the White and the Native World, Tayo must come out of his nightmares to live a life of belonging. And his cure lies, as family and friends suggest, not in the "white walls" of the Army hospital, but in the age-old ceremonies of the community. He must witness the convergence of life and truly understand the cyclical nature of his emotions and the events that he has experienced. The history and the wisdom of the people are expressed through stories and beliefs: What she said: the only cure I know is a good ceremony, that's what she said (3).

Like the author, the protagonist, Tayo, is also a mixed-blood from an influential family in the community, which as Alan Velie has pointed out, "meant being different from, and not fully accepted by either the full-bloods or the whites"(106). Searching for the identity that has been long lost, Tayo seeks answers from the community and for the community. Tayo suffers because he does not 'know'. His illness results from the separation of the ancient unity of person, ceremony and land and he will be cured only when he recognizes this unity. Hereupon, I am reminded of Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in which he writes about the impact land can have on individual personality:

All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun (5).

Using the Native tradition of storytelling and oral tradition, Silko further emphasizes the role of land in her cultural lineage:

they had seen what the white people had made from the the stolen land. It was the story of the white shell beads all over again, the white shell beads, stolen from a grave and found by a man as he walked along a trail one day [...]

He could not eat, and he could not work. He lost touch with the life he had lived before the day he found the beads (169).

A very integral aspect of Silko's *Ceremony* is her belief in words and language as powerful weapons of time- past, present and future. She believes that English, the language of the colonizer, makes the People powerless. But, alternately it also gives the power of presenting the Native world view and thus reappropriating their way of life. Ceremonies are sacred and ceremonies use a language of their own. The Navajo and Laguna ceremonies, described in the novel, as other Native communities used words in the form of chants and songs to extract and utilize the power of these words:

He stood up. He knew the people had a song for the sunrise.

Sunrise !

We come at sunrise.

to greet you.

We call you

at sunrise.

Father of the clouds

You are beautiful

at sunrise.

Sunrise!

He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones. But feeling they were right, feeling the instant of the dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together- the last stars, the mountains tops, the clouds, and the winds celebrating this coming.... He ended the prayer with "Sunrise" because he knew the Dawn People began and ended all their words with sunrise (182).

The connection which Silko made between land and human identity is a crucial thread, prominent throughout her novel and in doing so fostered a sense of harmony with the Mother earth. The land, at the centre of the spider's web, thus came to be associated with human identity. Land, as a creation of the imagination of the Thought Woman is again connected with the explanation given by the old people to a consequence of the white people's destroying the earth for uranium mining. Critic Jim Ruppert quoted Silko in an interview with Suntracks:

That's how you know, that's how you belong, that's how you know you belong....if the stories manipulate you into them....In a sense, you are told who you are, or you know who you are by the stories that are told about you (242).

On a paradoxical level, in *Ceremony*, the blood "Cousin-brother" Tayo reenacts a contemporary variant of the old twin myths, reasserting the need for idiosyncratic pairing a full blood, Rocky, who imitates and dies for whites, a half-breed who gaps the two, accepted in neither, surviving.

Furthermore, the paradox is also established in the fact that these marginals, the neglected People of the land, are used up and thrown away after a time of crisis. They are drafted to fight for the country that stole their land, at the same time they are expected to be patriotic, loyal and ever willing to die for America. Such discrimination may lead one to doubt how just the "land of the free" is in terms of their treatment of Native Americans:

an old white woman rolled down her window and said
"God bless you, God bless you", but it was the uniform,
not them she blessed (41).

The trail of tears serves as a constant, historical reminder of the mistakes the American government has made. Conversely, as James Ruppert puts it, when Silko has Tayo realize that the path back to harmony with the Land and Laguna culture requires that Tayo live again in the multiple present moment and that he must rely on the Laguna language, whose grammar subtly implies a world where the past and future coexist(83). Linguistically always in the present, she voices a perception of time and linguistic distinctions that arise out of traditional Laguna culture:

He knew then why the old times could only speak of
yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment:
the only certainty: and this present sense of being was
qualified with bare hints of yesterday or tomorrow (192).

The celestial laughter Silko calls forth by her ceremony shows that the Native Indian civilization is living and has the potential to transform English culture. The path Tayo takes to return from his showdown with Emo to the Pueblo is apparently designed to

accommodate the further transformation of Tayo's individual life into a fuller representation of the life of the People. The consciousness that returns to the Pueblo after Tayo undergoes the ceremonies with the help of old Betonie, then, is a shared one. Tayo but also Ts'eh, Josiah, Rocky and others are in a sense, coming "home". As Lavonne Ruoff has argued, Silko emphasizes the need to return to the Keres rituals of and oral tradition of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's cultural identity. Only when this is done is one prepared to deal with the problems of the present Silko demonstrates that the rituals and traditions have survived all attempts to eradicate them and that the seeds for the resurgence of their power lie in the memories and creativeness of her people (15). In a striking metaphor, the text also speaks of Tayo's tongue having become "dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent" (15). A power of words as well as body seeks recovery, opines A. Robert Lee (279).

Using the half-Mexican, half Laguna Betonie's wisdom of the world and the age-old traditions of the land, Tayo comes to a path of recovery. Within the context of this larger pattern of redemptive/regenerative rediscovery of the People's power (when rightly and delicately aligned with the old ways) to make things happen, we can see Tayo functioning as a sort of eponymous representative of the People; his ceremony, when successfully completed, will bring the People, as well as himself as a delegate of the people, back into graceful circular balance with the external world. To do so, Tayo must go and actively seek out the force, align his own identity with it, and then bring his own renewed identity back to the community. To quote from David L Moore, "Relational identity is both the structure and the substance of his ceremonial role, whereby Tayo takes the responsibility for the relational dynamics of his own will, the rain, the land, the people. This mythic ecology, which revives Tayo and which Tayo revives, is not a static structure"(377). The half-breed Betonie's advocacy for changes in the ceremonies helps Tayo visualize and comprehend the boundarylessness that had so troubled him:

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing 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. He was not crazy; he had never been
crazy. He had only seen and heard then world as it

always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time (258).

An equally engrossing tale of a search for identity, N. Scott Momaday's widely appreciated novel *House Made of Dawn* is the story of a Kiowa Indian boy's search for self. Momaday has not merely appropriated the cause of his People through his writing in this novel but also presented and brought forth never-before known myths and legends of the Kiowa Community. On a deeper level, he has attempted to appropriate the follies of history, to resurrect the mutilated race and show the pride of the community to the world.

House made of Dawn, Momaday's masterpiece and one of the most appreciated novels in Native American Literature, is the story of Abel, an illegitimate son of a Tanoan Mother and an unknown father, probably a Navajo. On his return from World War II, Abel is already lost in the lanes of alcoholism and the path ahead does not at all seem easy. Abel, unlike some critics have argued, is not merely a Noble Red Victim of the heinous forces of America but a representative of the Native's search for identity and the community's search for the lost pride.

As Silko's *Ceremony* brings forth the solution in finding out the age-old witchery as the cause of all destruction and misunderstanding among the Natives and Whites, Momaday's *House made of Dawn*, while dependent on as well as inspired by the traditional sources of myths, legends and stories, also talks about the American ideals of life. A very close reference to another American text of great importance, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, is found in this novel:

But Milly believed in tests, questions and answers, words on paper. She was a lot like Ben. She believed in Honour, Industry, the Second Chance, The Brotherhood of Man, the American Dream, and him-Abel; she believed in him (107).

Is this the Ben of Miller's Salesman? The Ben who was an impersonification of the American Dream?

Coming back to the focal point of my discussion, Abel's mysterious ways are perhaps best explained by his sense of confusion...to be part of the White World or to go back to a life in the lap of the community, to quote a phrase from Theo D'haen's essay in his *Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures* "a

confrontation between the colonized and the colonizing culture”(12). Dealing with the history of a dislocated Kiowa, Abel, caught in the wake of World War II between a contemporary Los Angeles and tribal memories, Momaday’s *House made of Dawn* serves as a representative text of a shocked, hallucinatory, wordless individual on the surface and a community within.

According to Norman R.Cary, “the concept of “othering” comes into play when the Other’s cultural discourse is perceived as empty, valueless or inferior, a rationalization that facilitates the projection onto the Other of the discourse of one’s own culture and values. Indigenous religions were regarded as idolatrous, devilish or at best preparatory to the superior revelation of Christianity”(170). This serves as a great cause for rebellion against the colonizer for he was now trying to take away the People’s lifeline, their spirits, their stories and their traditions and thus all that was left with the community:

It was as if, conscious of having come so close to extinction, they had got a keener sense of humility than their benefactors, and paradoxically a greater sense of pride.... They had acquired a tragic sense, which gave to them as a race so much dignity and bearing (16).

Language and nationality are the central determinants of a living culture. And when language dies, it leads to the death of a Nation. Writing though in the colonizer’s language, i.e. English, Momaday is hence conscious of his own heritage and takes up his case in the novel by talking about patterns in the language:

They have a lot of words, and you know they mean something, but you don’t know what, and your own words are no good because they’re not the same; they are different, and they are the only words you’ve got. Everything is different, and you don’t know how to get used to it (158).

Again when Abel laments his distances from the Peoples, he is saddened by the thought that he is unable to understand his grandmother’s prayers:

I did not always understand her prayers; I believe they were made of an older language than of ordinary speech. There was something inherently sad in the sound, some slight hesitation upon the syllables of sorrow (133).

Despite all the tortures the community is subjected to by the whites, the author believes that as “In the Word there was the beginning”(98), so the White Man will “perish by the Word”(95) because he has disregarded the power of words.

House Made of Dawn can be termed as a sociological story in which Abel, the insider outsider, the returned war veteran, experiences a loss of whatever clear sense of identity he had as a young man and thus as per the standards of society, fails to come to terms with life. As observed by James Ruppert, he is torn between two worlds and defeated by the social forces that push him to war, to jail and to relocation in the city (82). The story is striking in its message as it works on the twin levels of reflecting on the Native American tradition in the context of both the social as well as the individual.

Momaday is of the view that “the Indian conceives of himself in terms of the land. His imagination of himself is also and at once an imagination of the physical world from which he proceeds and to which he returns in the journey of his life “(72). Land is an important element in Momaday’s novel as it is in Silko’s *Ceremony*. It is land, which gives some sense of, even though very fragmentary, identity to the war-returned and alienated Abel. As Barbara Strelke very aptly suggests, “While he walks the land, Abel recalls incidents from his past. These remembrances form fragment of Abel’s identity, fragments which he can not piece together to make a whole”(350).

The process of alienation takes place early in an Indian child’s life, half-breed or full blood, Tayo or Abel, when s/he is sent to school. They are taught little of their culture and history. All education does to the Indian child is to make her/him a loser, at home and at school. If the child does not behave, speak and think like a white, middle-class child or tries to resist it, s/he becomes a failure at school. And if the Indian pupil does assimilate, s/he is bound to become a failure as an Indian. Whatever the case, s/he loses. This problem is also dealt with much detail in *Ceremony* as well as *House Made of Dawn*. From the point of view of the narrator in Momaday’s novel:

But you know, Tosamah doesn’t understand either. He talks pretty big all the time, and he’s educated, but he does not understand (148).

The idea of a Native Consciousness to regenerate the lost pride among the Peoples is also an agenda in Momaday's work. And in doing so, he plays with words to foreground the 'reality' of his people, taking them out of the walls of fiction and making them more real. He does not claim his People, as much as he does not about Abel, to be uncontaminated creatures from a different and far-off world. While agreeing that the people have their own follies, Momaday makes it a point to ascertain the 'uniqueness' of his tribe and his Peoples and this is what Abel, the protagonist also searches for:

Their invaders were a long time in conquering them; and now, after four centuries of Christianity, they still pray in Tanoan to the old deities of the earth and sky and make their living from the things that are and have always been within their reach; while in the discrimination of pride they acquire from their conquerors only the luxury of example. They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls, and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting (58).

As noted by Singh and Schmidt, "the dialogue between the ethnic self and the dominant culture is a significant part of the process by which both the individual and the group confront the socio-political challenges in American life"(29). Almost all of the Native American characters in *House Made of Dawn* are headed towards spiritual suicide, though Abel serves as the primary example. His confusion about the White Man's world is symbolized by his view of the prison where he spends six years for killing the Albino:

The walls of his cells were white, on perhaps they were gray or green; he could not remember. After a while he could not imagine any thing beyond the walls except the yard outside, the lavatory and the dining hall or even the walls, really.

They were abstractions beyond the reach of his understanding; not in themselves confinement-but symbols of confinement. The essential character of the walls consisted not in their substance, but in their appearance, the bare one-dimensional surface that was white, perhaps or gray, or green (97) .

Even amidst all the chaos he finds a reason to live and get back his identity while he does the preburial rituals of his grandfather and that is what we call hope.

If Momaday's magic lies in his form and content interlock and in an end that is not entirely grim as Abel finds himself back in the center of the tribe, however difficultly, Silko's novel, with a beautiful intermingling of prose and poetry in a circular narrative fashion, tells us that the origin of evil is not the White race but an age-old witchery created by the tribes themselves.

Both the novels are connected in a sense that the protagonist in both these stories is a World War II veteran who comes back home to find no home and no sense of security. Tayo believes that his actions have had far-reaching effects for his community and hence he must regain his lost "home". Abel too, feels for his community and tries, even though very subtly, to gain the pride back. Contrary to the views expressed by earlier critics, I believe that though the solution provided at the end of both the novels may not be categorized as altogether bright and beautiful, there is a hope that the stories could continue, that the tradition is alive and would remain so.

I agree with A. Robert Lee when he says that "Tayo's Ceremony signifies a restoration, the self against odds reintegrated back into the curative wheel of his People's history, "the old dialect" of the Laguna as the novel calls it" (280). And I find it especially interesting to see where *House Made of Dawn* ends- Abel runs and as he runs, he sings the Navajo prayer song. He finds himself back in his own culture and is no more ashamed of his tribal ancestry.

Ultimately, using the genre of fiction to tell their own stories and writing in the language of the colonizer, i.e. English, Silko and Momaday work as the dual functionaries of mediators to the outside world, White or otherwise, and more importantly, as keepers of their own aboriginal traditions. Underneath all these serves another ideological objective: to set the record straight and rewrite history, the contaminated White history.... to overcome the injustices of the past, diffuse the damages done and salvage the pride of a demonized culture.

Works Cited

*A shorter version of this paper was presented in the MELUS-India 2005 conference at Chandigarh, India.

Cary, Norman R. "Comrade Jesus: Postcolonial Literature and the Story of Christ". *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice*. Ed. Susan VanZanten Gallagher. University Press of Mississippi. 1994. 169-182.

D'haen, Theo. "Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures". *Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures*. Ed. C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen. Rodopi: Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA, 1993. 9-16.

Lee, A. Robert. "Decolorizing America: The Ethnicity of Ernest Gaines, José Antonio Villarreal, Leslie Marmon Silko, And Shawn Wong." *Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures*. Ed. C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen. Rodopi: Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA, 1993. 269-282.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: The Viking Press, 1949.

Momaday, N. Scott. *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper and Row, 1998.

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

Momaday, N. Scott. "Man Made of Words". *Literature of the American Studies: Views and Interpretations; A Gathering of Indian Memories, Symbolic Contexts, and Literary Criticism*. Ed. Abraham Chapman. New York: New American Library, 1975. 96-110.

9) Moore, David L. "Myth, History and Identity in Silko and Young Bear: Postcolonial Praxis". *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*. Ed. Arnold Krupat. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1993. 370-395.

Ruppert, James. *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Ruoff, A. LaVonne. "Ritual and Renewal: Keres Traditions in the Short fiction of Leslie Silko", *MELUS* 5.4(1997): 2-17.

Quoted in Sharma, R. S. "Vision and Form in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*". *Indian Journal of American Studies*. 12.2(1982): 68-79.

Silko, Leslie M. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Singh, Amarjit, and Peter Schmidt. "On the Borders Between US Studies and Postcolonial Theory". *Post-colonial Theories and the United States*;

Race, Ethnicity, and Literature. Ed. Amarjit Singh and Peter Schmidt. Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 2000.3-69.

Strelke, Barbara. "N.Scott Momaday: Racial Memory and Individual Imagination." *Literature of the American Studies: Views and Interpretations: A Gathering of Indian Memories, Symbolic Contexts, and Literary Criticisms*. Ed. Abraham Chapmen. New York: New American Library, 1975.

Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.