

The Native American Women: A Glimpse From Leslie Marmon Silko Selected Texts

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Abstract: *The Native Americans are the indigenous tribes of American. Prior to Columbus visit America was already inhabited by the Native Americans. The Native Americans have long established their society, lived as hunter gatherer and practice matrilineal sytem. But with the arrivals of the Whites things started to change drastically and thereby penetrating into the Native Americans matriarchal cycle of life. Their long silences have given the Whites the opportunity to paint the Native women according to their imagination. Some portray them as savage, some whores or prostitute, and some see them as squaw, doing menial job. In every field whether it is academic, political, or popular the whites attempt to paint Native American cultures as patriarchal when they are not. So, Leslie Marmon Silko has taken up writings to reconstruct and redefine their lives from an insider's point of view and reclaim their lost identities. This paper aims to study the true status of the Native American women in lights to Silko's three texts – Ceremony, Storyteller, and Garden in the Dunes and thereby constrasting it with that of the status of the Whites Women and the Status of Native American men.*

Keywords: *Native American, matriachal, Yellow woman, Kochininako, Reservation.*

Woman since ancient time is defined differently by different person. Some argues women are half being, some sees them as the Other and some says Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. Aristotle once said, "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities." "We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness" (Beauvoir, 5). The Native Americans who are the indigenous people of America, have long established their society when Columbus landed to this part of the land. They have lived as hunter gatherer, practice matrilineal system, and have their own religious belief. But with the arrivals of the Whites things started to change drastically and thereby penetrating into the Native Americans matriarchal cycle of life. Their long silences have given the Whites the opportunity to paint the Native women according to their imagination. Some portray them as savage, some whores or prostitute, and some see them as squaw, doing menial job. Whatever it is the status or position of the Native

American women has declined ever since the arrival of the Whites. Paula Gunn Allen in her Sacred Hoops writes "Since the first attempts at colonization in the early 1500s, the invaders have exerted every effort to remove Indian women from every position of authority, to obliterate all records pertaining to gynocratic social systems, and to ensure that no American and few American Indians would remember that gynocracy was the primary social order of Indian America prior to 1800" (Allen,3). She further argues that western studies of American Indian tribal systems are erroneous at base because they view tribalism from the cultural bias of patriarchy and thus either discount, degrade, or conceal gynocratic features or recontextualize those features so that they will appear patriarchal. In every field whether it is academic, political, or popular the whites attempt to paint Native American cultures as patriarchal when they are not. In Contemporary times they view them as hostile savages and in the modern times they are represented as worthless, alcoholic, and lazy people who mistreat their women brutally. The status

of Native American women have declined ever since the arrivals of the Whites, making them voiceless.

No matter how much the Whites have tried to blur the true status of women, the Native women have outlived every attempt made by them. Paula Gunn Allen writes in her *Sacred Hoop* “*We survive war, colonization, acculturation, assimilation; we survive beating, rape, starvation, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children and our loved ones, destruction of land, our homes, our past and our future. We survive and we do more than just survive. We band, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there no matter what*” (Allen,190). To have a better understanding of the position of women I would like to discuss here the Status of Native American women in lights to Silko three texts – *Ceremony*, *Storyteller*, and *Garden in the Dunes* and thereby contrasting it with that of the Status of the White Woman and the Status of Native American Men.

THE STATUS OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN

Leslie Marmon Silko being a woman writer chooses to write to reconstruct and redefine their lives from an insider's point of view. In her writings most of her main protagonists are women and in one of her interview she says, “The women are tougher and rougher and live longer, so chances are we will leave to tell our version last . . .” Silko's *Ceremony* reflects the matriarchal and matrilineal clan structure of Laguna however the novel has a male protagonist. She explains that though the novel has a male protagonist, it is a story created by a woman, told by a woman already known by another woman. The novel begins thus –

Ts'its'tsinako, Thought – Woman
Is sitting in her room
And whatever she about
appears.
She thought of her sisters,
Nau'ts'ity'I and I'tcts'ity'I,
And together they created the Universe
This world
And the four worlds below.
Thought – Woman, the spider,
Named things and
As she named them
They appeared.
She is sitting in her room
Thinking of a story now
I'm telling you the story
She is thinking.

In this way it is a story of a woman told by a woman. Throughout the novel Tayo, the main protagonist in *Ceremony* is moulded, guided, and taken care of by women. We have important women playing an important role in the life of Tayo like – Auntie, Grandma, Night Swan, T'seh etc. After the death of Tayo's mother Auntie accepted him in her family in spite of having her own son Rocky of the same age. However, she kept distance between the boys and also maintain distance with him. But after the death of her son she took great care of Tayo when he was really sick because now she only has Tayo to care for, to look forward to and to rely on. She is both his

biological and adoptive mother. On the Other hand we have Grandma who helps Tayo realize his roots. When Tayo was really sick it is Grandma who suggested that Tayo needs a medicine man and not a white doctor. Grandma knows that the treatment for Tayo sickness lies within the community and not outside it. So she insisted on the calling of medicine man, the old Ku'oosh.

“I've been thinking, she said, wiping her eyes on the edge of her apron, all this time, while I was sitting in my chair. Those White doctors haven't helped you at all. Maybe we had better send for someone else. . . That boy needs a medicine man.” P-(Silko, 33)

Grandma always has been concerned and protective of Tayo. She strongly asserted – *“He's my grandson . . . Let them talk if they want to. Why do you care what they say? Let them talk. By planting time they'll forget.”* (Silko,33-34) when Auntie shows her reluctance in calling the medicine man for she is concerned of what the neighbor might say as Tayo is not full blood.

Night Swan is another woman that moulds Tayo's life. It is she who told Tayo about the meaning of the color of his hazel eyes. Like Tayo she is also of mixed blood and this is reflected in the color of one's eyes. She holds this idea that people are afraid of change, and blame the ones who are different. But when they are blaming others they are actually defying the change within themselves. She says –

“They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites – most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing . . . They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves” [Silko, 99-100].

Night Swan stands as both a lover and nurturer who define the meaning of change to him. Next we have T'seh Montano who also has helped him in gaining success to his purpose in life. T'seh is a medicine woman and through her Tayo achieves complete recovery. T'seh's love works as a medicine for his mental problems. Her love has a therapeutic effect on Tayo, it change his life, recovers his love, and recaptures cattle. She is also representative of earthly mother.

Ceremony truly represents the matriarchal clan structure of Laguna. This is reflected in Auntie Words –

I spent all my life defending this family, 'our family', Old Grandma's family was so highly regarded at one time she is used to being respected by people. (Silko, 88)

It's not a Grandpa's family but Grandma's family. (Silko, 80)

The house, the land, the cattle all belongs to women. In the novel, Tayo's grandmother and Auntie own the house and the cattle. Men have no say in this matter rather they are there to care and protect for the things women owned. So, Robert and Josiah are present in the house to care and protect the things Grandma and Auntie own.

Women enjoy a high status, besides house they make the important decisions and the old ones are looked to by all for advice. In the novel it is Auntie and Grandma who decides all matters on the contrary Robert and Josiah are very passive. When Tayo was really sick, it is Grandma who suggested

Tayo's need for a medicine man, though Auntie hesitated for Tayo being half blooded. However, he is taken in as in the Native American society mother's identity is important than father's identity. One does not asked who your father is instead asked who's your mother? So in this way a child belongs to a mother, to his/her mother's clan. Dr. Navalekar in the introduction of his book writes – "*Mother's identity is one's identity and clan membership is dependent on matrilineal decent. It is necessary to know one's right relationship with the earth and society.*"

Marriages in most of the Native Americans society are not the kind of marriages practiced in the West. The concept of marriage is very different in the Native American society. Most women marry many times and men are allowed to marry many times and keep marital relations with all wives. Actually women are not serious about marriages till the Christian influence. Besides, women adultery is not treated alarming as it is taken amongst the Whites. Moreover, sexual freedom is permitted to both sexes outside marriage. Paula Gunn Allen in her Sacred Hoop confirms that –

"Most women married, perhaps, several times, it is important to remember that tribal marriages often bore little resemblance to western concepts of that institution. Much that has been written about marriage as practiced among American Indians is wrong" (Allen, 56).

In Storyteller of Storyteller a woman belonging to some Yupik tribes is portrays as a strong will woman ready to engulf the world whatever comes its way. She is the main protagonist. Like any ordinary girls she grew up listening to stories. She is not given a particular name in the story. She can be any Indian woman of the Yupik tribes. But she is portrayed as a strong and independent woman. She goes all the way to bring the store man down to destruction – the destruction that cost him with his life, and who is in fact the cause to the dead of her parents. When the authority questioned her about the incident she answered thus -

"He lied to them. He told them it was safe to drink. But I will not lie."

"I Killed him," she said," but I don't lie" (Silko,29).

The attorney not satisfied with her answer came back to know why she has told the state trooper that she had killed the store man when many of the village children had seen it happened and it was an accident. And that's all she has to say in the court and she will be set free. But the woman chooses not to change the story not even at the cost of her freedom. She believes that the story must be told as it is as 'lies could not stop what was coming'.

In another story of Storyteller – The Yellow Woman, Silko does not care to give this Yellow Woman a name. Yet she is another woman whose independence, free will, her decision are not questioned and seen alarming as it is amongst the whites patriarchal society. She defies all the norms set for a woman in any patriarchal society. She goes beyond her marriage bond to live with Silva, portrayed as a Ka'tsina spirit, thereby leaving her husband and children behind. She knows in her absence her children would be tented to by her mother and grandmother like they did to her and her husband would find someone; things would be normalized like before.

"There are enough of them to handle things. My mother and grandmother will raise the baby like they raised me. Al

will find someone else, and they will go on like before, except that there will be a story about the day I disappeared while I was walking along the river. Silva had come for me; he said he had. I did not decide to go. I just went." P- 57

Her statement proves her independence, freedom, and her free will. But she is no Yellow Woman who is abducted by a Ka'tsina, a mountain spirit and later comes back home. Yellow woman is a woman from the past, back in time immemorial. Unlike the Yellow woman she has been to school and she has seen the highways and the pickup trucks that the Yellow woman has not seen.

"I am not Yellow woman. Because she is from out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow woman never saw" (Silko, 54).

Even Silva is not a Ka'tsina spirit who abducted the Yellow woman. She is quite certain that he is just a man from the nearby village. Besides, she is not stolen or abducted by any Ka'tsina or Silva. It is her will, her decision to go with Silva.

In the Native American society this kind of abduction is never taken seriously for they always return back home. If alive the woman's Grandpa would have laugh when he hears another story of abduction, and would have said – 'Stolen by a Ka'tsina, a mountain spirit. She'll come home – they usually do.' Like the Yellow woman she indeed comes back home after a short stay with Silva. But she regrets that her Grandpa is no longer alive to hear her story which he liked to tell best the Yellow Woman story.

In one of the story of Kochininako, the Yellow woman, Silko Aunt Alice told them how good she is at hunting. She is a fine hunter like any boys and men. She is not only good as a hunter but also knows how to outsmart any being if threaten with life. Once when she sets out for hunting she encountered a giant Estrucuyu who seeing Kochininako with four or five rabbits hanging from her belt asked for one. She throws one rabbit but gobbled it up in a second and asked for another until he ate up all the rabbits hunted by her. Knowing the danger she is into she goes into the cave pretending to change her clothes so that she can give it to the giant, for that is the only thing she has got to offer this giant. Once inside the cave the giant could not get hold of her. She then calls her twin brothers who later killed the giant Estrucuyu.

In another story of Kochininako, the Yellow Woman, she is the source of food for her people. Back then one day she goes out searching for water, not getting nearby she goes further east to look for water but is kidnapped by a beautiful looking Buffalo Man. On getting the news of Kochininako kidnapped her husband with the help of the Spider Woman kills the Buffalo Man and his entire troops. While killing him, a drop of tear rolls down the face of the Yellow woman. Upon inquiry she says – because you killed them. And when her husband enquires if she loves them and wants to be with them, she nodded her head. So, he kills her too so that she can joined them after death. People found dead buffalo scattered all around the cotton wood tree. They took the meat and dried it up thereby feeding the starve people. So, in this way Yellow Woman is the source of meat that provided all her needy people.

Kochininako or Yellow Woman is not just one particular woman. She is any woman representing the Pueblo clan capable of anything. Sometimes she is portrayed as an independent woman, a vengeful woman, sometimes a hunter, and sometimes as a provider. A. LaVonne Ruoff in his *Ritual and Renewal: Keres Traditions in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman"*, writes –

"Yellow Woman becomes a symbol of renewal through liaison with outside forces. In addition to bringing new life to the Pueblo, Yellow woman renews it in other ways . . . as a result of her abduction and pursuit by Buffalo Man, the Pueblo is provided with much-needed meat" (Silko, 73).

Leslie Marmon Silko has not just limited herself to the portrayal of Pueblo and Yupik women but also has portrayed the status of Navajo's woman. Like the Laguna Pueblo and Yupik women the Navajos women are strong, independent and they too practice the matrilineal form of society. In the portrayal of Ayah in Lullaby of Storyteller Silko represents the entire Navajo woman. Silko in this story presents how women fare better than men and are more flexible to adaptability. In Lullaby Ayah fares better than Chato. Ayah has gone through many losses; she has endured the death of Jimmie (her son), the pain of separation, and the ill treatment of the whites. Chato no doubt also has suffered in the face of racism but at the end it is Ayah who survived while Chato drown himself in the river of alcohol where death is obvious. If Chato leashes out his pain, his suffering, his anger by taking refuge in alcoholism, Ayah endures her pain, her suffering by remembering the past, remembering her roots, remembering the day Jimmie was born, and remembering the days when her children - Ella and Danny, was with her.

"She did not want to think about Jimmie. So she thought about the weaving and the way her mother had done it . . . her grandma gave her the wooden combs to pull the twigs and burrs from the raw, freshly washed wool . . . Ayah remembered sleeping warm on cold windy nights, wrapped in her mother's blankets on the hogan's sandy floor. (Silko, 41).

"She felt peaceful remembering. She didn't feel cold any more . . . And she could remember the morning he was born. She could remember whispering to her mother, who was sleeping on the other side of the Hogan, to tell her it was time now Silko, 42)

" . . . remembering how it was when Ella had been with her; and she felt the rush so big inside her heart for the babies" (Silko, 48).

Ayah loses her elder son Jimmie in the white's war. It is not that he died but he is not coming back. Moreover, her other two children are also taken from her for the white doctors believe that they are infected with the disease that led their grandmother died. Ayah has not completely recovered from the loss of Jimmie she also had to endure the pain of separation at the same time. She hates Chato for this, not because he led the whites take her children but because he taught her how to sign her name. By learning how to sign her name she signs away her children. She just wants them to go and to take their eyes away from her children. It is at this time she mourns more of Jimmie. If he is alive he would have read the paper and would have told her mother not to sign. She mourns him when Chato fell with a horse and broke his leg, and the white rancher told them he wouldn't pay until he could

work again. She mourns Jimmie because if alive he would have worked for his father. Ayah though could not forgive him however took care of him when he was sick.

Garden in the Dunes is also a female/woman centered fiction. The main protagonists are two sisters – Sister Salt and Indigo representing the Sand Lizard clan, a clan at the verge of extinction. In the novel Silko portrays them as strong and determined woman/ females outliving every odd that came their way. Others female/woman characters like Grandma Fleet and Indigo and Sister Salt's mother are no less than any other Indian woman. Their mother, who escapes kidnapped twice, holds her family together working in the motel washing dirty linens and at times of the arrivals of the train rush to the station to sell her basket made of Yucca roots to the passengers. While Grandma Fleet looks after the children, telling them stories and teaching them how to row and reap plants and crops, thus keeping the tradition/culture alive.

They are separated from their mother as she is arrested for participating in Ghost dance. Their Grandmother also died early thus leaving the girls behind to live on their own. And to make things worse the two sisters are also separated when they came down to Needle to look for their mother. Indigo is sent to the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California while Sister Salt after departing from Indigo remains in the custody of the Indian agency at Parker. In the name of educating the girls they are treated badly. In the case of Indigo she had to go through certain punishment for refusing to obey the rules of the school in stripping her Indianess from her. Sister Salt is made to wash dirty linen cloths of the superintendent and also of the workers who have come to work at the construction site which the superintendent has made his money making business.

STATUS OF THE WHITE WOMAN

Though Silko has not emphasized much on the status of the White woman in her writing however throws some light in the character of Hattie in *Garden in the Dunes*. In the white man's world where patriarchal system precedes the matriarchal system, it is predictable of women silences. Hattie is a confident woman who gives her priority to studies. But her failed thesis on 'The female principle in the early churches', made her lose her self esteem. The thesis proposal is rejected because it had no reliable documents to authenticate the proposal. Besides, the scholars of early Church history are conservative people so it was bound to be rejected. Actually Hattie's thesis is rejected because she chooses to work on something that is not acceptable in the patriarchal white society. But this is not it; Hattie faces many other gender biasness. Hattie after her thesis failed she drowns herself in the realms of depression and is taken to the doctor. But the doctor comments shocked her more which determines his male patriarchal thought and also reflects white men notion of woman as weaker sex and inferior being.

STATUS OF NATIVE AMERICAN MEN

Though a Native American man lives in a matriarchal society he is no less than any woman. They are treated equally. If woman take cares of the house man go hunting

thereby providing food. Woman taking care of the house includes – taking care of the children, enhancing the art of weaving, repairing, and mending of the house apart from doing the household chores. The role one's performed does not determine his or her superiority over the other in the Native American society. Both men and women are treated equal beings. But with the arrivals of the Whites things changed. Men began to identify themselves much like the white man and began to believe that the only route to be successful, to be good, to be right is to be like them. But in an attempt to be like the Whites they end up destroying their own lives. In *Ceremony*, Rocky always wants to be away from home after his studies. He dreams of living in cities where opportunity prevails and reservation is definitely not one among them. This zeal to be at places the whites live has made him to enroll his name in the army and died fighting for the whites in the war. Emo, Leroy, Harley, and others after they return back home to the Reservation from the war spent much of their time doing nothing. Having nothing much to do they spend much of their time raising hell in the Reservation, as Tayo's Aunt says. They spend time drinking alcohol and telling each other stories of their past deeds. They believe that in doing so they are trying to bring back their good times. They blame themselves for losing the feelings they have for their country while serving in the army. According to them – “*Belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies*” (Silko, 43). Tayo who is half breed justify that

“*Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats*” (Silko, 40).

In *Lullaby of Storyteller* Chato is also seen drown in alcohol after he is replaced from his work. Chato who has worked for the Whites rancher for several years is asked to move out when he broke his leg and could no longer worked for them. All years he has been loyal to them but they repaid his loyalty by terminating him as they find him old enough to work for them. Chato however finds himself wandering on the road that lead to the white man's ranch, and if asked why he is going that way he would laugh and say – “You know they can't run that ranch without me” (Silko, 47). Chato's dash hope has led him to take refuge in alcohol. He always has lives his life in a false hopes and could never overcome this false hope.

In the story of Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand of Storyteller Silko has portrayed a Pueblo man, name not mention, as lazy fellow, drunkard, and good for nothing. However this man thinks that the people at Laguna don't understand him. They don't understand what kind of person he is. He says –

“*All along that had been the trouble at Laguna, nobody understood just what kind of man he was. They thought he was sort of good for nothing, he knew that, but for a long time he kept telling himself to keep on trying and trying*” (Silko, 250).

He wants to portray himself as a struggler rather than a fellow who is good for nothing. He thinks that he can be a good lawyer because he is good at making up stories to justify why things happen that way. But he never realizes the hardship one has to go through to be successful. Though old enough he is still dependent on his old mother for anything and everything. He made his mother pay the bills for the things he orders.

“*All they could talk about was the big C.O.D that came to the post office in his name and she cashed her pension check to pay for it*” (Silko, 250).

To sum up, Native American culture truly represents the matriarchal society. Leslie Marmon Silko through her writing represents the true status of the Native American women who are often misrepresented. Native American women are strong, courages, independent and free. It is not that Native Americans men are not strong and courages but women fares better than men in adaptability. If men try to overcome his frustration, injustice, bitterness and alienation by drinking alcohol, women overcome her pain, suffering, and separation by remembering, remembering its past and its rootedness. Paula Gunn Allen writes “*We are doing all we can : as mothers and grandmothers; as family members and tribal members; as professionals, workers, artists, shamans, leaders, chiefs, writers, and organizers, we daily demonstrate that we have no intention of disappearing, of being silent, or of quietly acquiescing in our extinction*” (Allen, 193).

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