
MAGIC REALISM AND TRUTH VALUE OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE: A THICK DESCRIPTION OF SILKO’S CEREMONY

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Abstract

This study thick descriptively revisits the technique of magic realism in the fiction of margin – American Indian / women – to define the American Indian view of using a western term magical realism hence argue the terminology of magic realism per se. With Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (1977), the study explains that American Indian women writers adapt, not adopt, the western concept of magical realism to enlighten their traditional oral belief system in positivist societies. This realistic presentation of magical or supernatural elements in American Indian women's writings is indifferent to the western expression of magical realism that presents the unreal elements in artistic ways just to appeal to the readers. The modern writers’ artistic manipulation of the unreal or supernatural elements is a way to replace the mythologies that have no cultural place in modern literature. With the thick description of Silko’s magical realism technique, this study defines how she reconstructs her cultural myths to explore the individuality of American Indian traditional ways of being that have been considered nonsense, culturally, in modern academia.

Keywords: American Indian, magic realism, myth, traditional oral belief system, Silko

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1. Introduction

It is an interesting fact that Greek mythology, which was qualified equally in classicism (Sophocles and Homer) and romanticism (John Keats), was explored as the Greeks' cultural predominance. In contrast, the myths and the oral stories of American Indian tribes are downplayed as proof of their primitivism. Contemporary American Indian writers are accused of using magic realism to express the unreal elements of their culture. However, what is mythical, magic, unreal, or supernatural for the Euro-American scholars concerning American Indian culture is the truth or factual statement for the American Indian people. Understanding American Indian oral tradition or mythology gives rise to conflict between American Indian and Euro-American scholarship. American Indian writers conceive mythology as inscribed-cultural-facts that "license fusions of categories and identities normally held discrete" (Goodman, 1993, p. 56) that "hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes, 2000, p. 124).

In comparison, Euro-American scholarship ignores this cultural significance of American Indian oral tradition or mythology and admits American Indian myths as a magical realistic technique of expression. With a thick description, which is exercised as a qualitative method, this study explores its veracity. Gilbert Ryle (1971) holds 'thick description' as an epistemology that not only gives details of a culture which gives a sense, information, and theoretical forms (p. 305) but also refers "to the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit patterns of [culture] ... and puts them in context" (Holloway, 1997, p. 154). This study replaces the word 'culture' with 'text' because the text is the embodiment of the culture in which it is written (Montrose, 1989, p. 24).

2. Literature Review

According to Michael Dorris (1979), American Indian literature, written and oral, has always been a rich source of a multicultural range of imagery of the native values of America whereas "there is no such thing as American Indian literature though it may yet, someday, come into being" (p. 147). The statement highlights the conflict and confusion among the scholars about the representation of American Indian literature. The conflict among those who claim the canonship of American Indian scholarship and who do not acknowledge the validity of American Indian writings revolves around the following questions:

Does [American Indian literature] refer ... to the sum total of all oral literary traditions in each of more than three hundred mutually unintelligible languages?

If so, does such a category make any academic or even common sense? ... Can such a genre, spuriously based on assumed, but non-existent, inherent similarities, yield any meaningful depth of insight? Would such a category stimulate the study of a single American Indian language or aesthetic? Is it a helpful tool of scholarship or simply an excuse not to study, a rationale for dismissal on the grounds of over-complexity or inaccessibility? (Dorris, 1979, p. 149)

These issues question the cultural presentation, literary style, language, oral traditions, and storytelling in American Indian writers' literary works. The oral tradition for Native Americans is their cultural history, whereas Euro-American researchers are indifferent to traditional oral values. The modern scholars who admit the cultural representation of American Indian literature frame it into modern techniques. For instance, Rawdon Wilson (1985) relates the traditional oral concept of time and space with magic realism, a modern writing technique. According to him, American Indian writers, through their magical tales, construct the reality beyond the textual space that raises the improbability of possibility (Wilson, 1985, p. 220). However, what Wilson calls magical realism is a literary technique for American Indian scholars to express their reality. Louise Erdrich (1994), *Ojibwa*, argues that the myths in American Indian stories influenced by American Indian oral tradition are the truths of the American Indian natural world:

The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable. I think the term [magical realism] is one applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world. (Chavkin & Chavkin, 1994, p. 221)

This study's primary stance is that myths, magic, tricks, or supernatural for the Euro-American scholars are the truth for the American Indian people. However, this study does not deny American Indian writers' modern strategy as there is an interweaving of the real and fictional episodes in American Indian fiction.

3. Research Methodology

This descriptive and qualitative research follows 'thick description', the epistemology that not only gives the sense, theoretical forms, and information to the given cultural patterns (Ryle, 1971, p. 305) but also mentions the comprehensive interpretation of experiences wherein a scholar fashions "explicit patterns of [culture] ... and puts them in context" (Holloway, 1997, p. 154). This study substitutes the word 'culture' with 'text', which represents the culture wherein the text is embedded. The in-depth study

of American Indian fiction interprets the cultural patterns embedded in them. This ‘thick description’ of Silko’s *Ceremony* “gives the context of [the texts and] states the intentions and meanings that organize the [texts]” (Denzin, 1989, p. 33), hence effectively interprets and comprehends the cultural impact of American Indian mythical or unreal happenings.

4. A Thick Description of Silko’s *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) describes the duality of American Indian culture. Silko (1977) juxtaposes two different periods: she textualizes the pre-Columbian past through the oral tradition myths and the post-second World War period through the fragmented tribal narratives of 1949-Laguna Pueblo. The post-second World War narrative tells a ceremony – a traditional rite performed to heal or make the individual or community prosperous – that describes the ‘homecoming’ of a young native Tayo to find his identity by staying native (Bevis, 1987, p. 580). The rite in the *Ceremony* explains how Tayo searched for his inner peace by realizing his connection with his surrounding world wherein he exists. The Laguna myths promote the pattern of Tayo’s homecoming. Silko presents Tayo’s prose narrative and mythical poetic narratives at the same level as both describe the ceremonies for the retrieval of the rain clouds to heal the American Indian lands. To explain the cultural and social impacts of ceremonies from past to present, Silko uses magic realism. This study, fixing Silko’s technique of magical realism, explores how she inscribes American Indian cultural history through fictional and mythical stories.

Using magical realism, Silko links the American Indian present with the past: the accultured American Indian community of 1949 with the traditional pre-Columbian oral world. To respond to the American Indian cultural complexity, Silko uses two different levels of magic realism: the first level of the story synchronically juxtaposes unreal and factual happenings of Tayo’s ceremony, whereas the other level explains the American Indian world diachronically with the juxtaposition of Tayo’s ceremonies and the contemporary Laguna myths: juxtaposing the American Indian mythical past and present. In fixing these two magical realist methods, Silko presents the American Indian social and cultural embedment.

The first level of magic realism explains how Silko, in *Ceremony* (1977), knits the Pueblo community in a cultural web with the threads of routine happenings and the magical powers of medicine persons and places. The main story unfolds Laguna’s drought in the Pueblo, where the people could not settle how to manage during the six-

year-drought. They lost their cattle and the fertility of their lands; that was everything for them. "And all this time they had watched the sky expectantly for the rainclouds to come" (Silko, 1977, p. 10). Tayo himself takes the Laguna-drought responsibility: he relates it with the curse he addresses to the rain in the Japanese jungles. When Rocky was injured in the forest, Tayo tried hard to retrieve his wounded body despite the heavy rain. He crawled in the mud to find Rocky's dead body until the Japanese discovered him. He dragged the corpse by the arm and lifted him to his knees, "and all the time he could hear his own voice praying against the rain" (Silko, 1977, p. 12). Since then, there has been no rain in Laguna: April, usually perceived as the month of rain has been dry; the April-wind unusually blew throughout the month and rainclouds did not stay in the Laguna sky. People "said it had been that way for the past six years while he was gone" (Silko, 1977, pp. 9, 10). Drought is a natural phenomenon, frequent in different parts of the world, including America, but Tayo, understandably in his condition, believes that the six-year drought is the result of his curse in Japan, and the native people are not surprised at Tayo's statement as such magical happenings are a routine. On the other hand, Silko sets the events in such a chronological pattern that the reality of magical happenings cannot be denied.

The concept of a magical ceremony is also strengthened with the realistic expression of alienation. Tayo's ailment gradually makes him feel alienated in the white world. Although the war was ended, it made him sick and upset, and the condition was strange even for western doctors. Lying in the hospital, he felt invisible, tongueless and alienated (Allen, 1986, p. 138). Hence, he comes back to Laguna, and to cure his wretchedness his family recommends "[t]hat the boy needs a medicine man ... Otherwise, he will have to go away" (Silko, 1977, p. 30). In this manner, before Tayo's ceremony actually begins, Silko prepares the readers' minds about the spiritual journey with a realistic description of his coming home. Tayo travels to the Navajo medicine man, Betonie, who tells him that the proper cure is a ceremony. Instead of an immediate journey, which may raise many questions on Tayo's ceremony, Silko gradually builds the story. "[O]ld Betonie telling him to get on his way, telling him that ... there were the cattle to find, and the stars, the mountain, and the woman" to find (Silko, 1977, p. 155) so that he and Laguna might be recovered to prosperity. There is no magic in finding stars, cattle, a woman, and a mountain but the connection of all these patterns of ceremony with the cure of Tayo and Laguna is magical/spiritual. Betonie also predicts to Tayo about his ceremony's upcoming magical happenings and guides him on how to deal with them.

On his way to the retrieval of the magical patterns of his ceremony, Tayo goes through the whole Pueblo community, making it clear how Silko combines supernatural elements with the reality of Pueblo's daily life. She throws light on the people's sicknesses, alcoholism, gambling, and other social evils, before revealing the ceremony's healing impact. She describes the cultural invasion by explaining the life of Highway 66: "[G]oing up the line, bars were built one after the other alongside 66" (Silko, 1977, p. 22). Tayo's meeting with his friends, Leroy, Harley, and Helen, on Highway 66, in their truck, also reveals the condition of American Indian youth in and around the reservation. The fascination of the young generation in bars and trucks explains the transition of the native identity, resulting from the prolonging of evil forces. Through this situation, Silko justifies the demand for a ceremony for the retrieval of the traditional values lost during colonization.

Betonie did not tell Tayo the exact direction of his journey to find out ceremony patterns, but he knew their sequence: i) stars, ii) lost cattle of Josiah, iii) the mountain, iii) and the woman. The nature of this ceremony's patterns is real; however, the prescribed result after completing the pattern is magical as it is related to the prosperity of an individual and the whole community. Besides, Silko places the events in a non-chronological pattern that makes the ceremony magical. For instance, to find Josiah's lost cattle, the second finding of the pattern clues the pre-settlement of Tayo's ceremony before World War II. When, as his family referred him, Tayo met Betonie and unfolded his background – his parentage, his attachment with Josiah, his uncle, and the Josiah's Mistress Night Swan of Tse-pi'na, the divine highland, and the Mexican cattle that Josiah purchased on the advice of Night Swan – the medicine man instantly sensed the pre-settled ceremony that "has been going on for a long time" (Silko, 1977, p. 115). This description suggests that Tayo was chosen a long time ago when he was a boy but Silko does not disclose the pre-settled plan of the ceremony.

A memory of late September stars made Tayo travel to the north and several days' journey led him to the Montano, Ts'eh where he stayed for a night. After taking a meal "[h]e got up from the table and walked back through the rooms. He pushed the porch screen door wide open and looked up at the sky: Old Betonie's stars were there" (Silko, 1977, p. 167). The journey to the north, meeting with a woman, and finding the stars are all real, but this reality relates to Betonie's prediction, practically magical/spiritual. This journey, however, led him to another mysterious woman, Ts'eh. She is a medicine woman of mixed ancestry and belongs to Tse-pi'na, the sacred mountain. Both her names Ts'eh and Montano woman, reflect her belonging to

the mountain as in Spanish, the meaning of her name is 'mountain'. Hence, Ts'eh, becomes a believable link with the other patterns of Tayo's ceremony.

Ts'eh taught Tayo the significance of natural harmony for all living beings that helped him reach the lost cattle, the second finding of ceremony pattern. The quest also led him to the sacred mountain, the third finding of the pattern. During his way to the mountain for the cattle, a mountain lion appeared, and in chasing him, he reached "the spotted cattle, grazing in a dry lake flat below the ridge" (Silko, 1977, p. 182). The ceremony's result at the individual level is evident as the safe drive of lost cattle back home would benefit him and his family that is facing a crisis. This benefit of the ceremony makes it valid even though it is spiritual.

Tayo, in Ts'eh's company, is completed and succeeds in retrieving the rainclouds and fertility to his lands as "[h]e was dreaming of her arms around him strong when the rain on the tin roof woke him up" (Silko, 1977, p. 202). The last part of *Ceremony* (1977) explains how Silko validates the suspension as after Tayo's coming home the rain makes the whole land wet. The spirituality of the rain hints that the community believes in the validity of his curse in Japan's jungle at the start of the novel. The Japanese jungle's setting cursed by Tayo is very similar to Laguna's setting when he completes his ceremony. In Japan, he was in a canyon with all the symbolic colors – blue (Mountain, dragonflies, sky), yellow (pollen, yellow sand, sunlight and sunflower); in the Laguna, when he completes the loop of his ceremonial patterns "[t]here were blue-bellied clouds ... and he could hear thunder faintly in the distance" (Silko, 1977, p. 204).

Also, the predicted result of the ceremony validates all the magical happenings. Tayo feels good, and his travelling into different parts of Pueblo helps him retrieve his health, but, according to Laguna Community, it was "old Betonie [who] did some good after all, [as Tayo is] "all right now" (Silko, 1977, p. 200). However, like Laguna's traditional stories, Tayo's story ends with another beginning: Tayo's homecoming experience may help others in the future and remember through storytelling for the coming generations; hence it will continue the Laguna Pueblo beliefs in ceremonies for social ways of living. Various supernatural happenings in *Ceremony* (1977) are a daily routine of the Laguna community, but Tayo represents the modern beliefs as he is educated in a Christian school and has served in the army. However, he does not raise any questions about the nature of magical characters and

happenings that show that he will become native again and completes his homecoming.

Through *Ceremony's* narrative (1977), Silko performs a ceremony to retrieve the ceremony's reality in American Indian culture. She explains the ceremonies incorporated in Laguna myths concerning the ceremony of 1949. The stories in *Ceremony* (1977) are different regarding time and place but similar regarding their impact on American Indian society. Laguna myths' poetic narratives enlighten the past ceremonies whereas Tayo's prose narrative journey explains the ceremonies' current scenario. The juxtaposition of past and present ceremonies retrieves the thematic similarity of rituals as both the narratives define efforts to retrieve the rainclouds for the fertility of barren land and its people.

[I]n many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing ... At one time the ceremonies as had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements [for native people] in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies ... this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (Silko, 1977, p. 116)

The ceremonies in *Ceremony* (1977), unlike the traditional ceremonies in a tipi or at a sacred place, are based on a journey that is another thematic similarity among the ceremonies. Silko, explaining the social and cultural impact of ceremonies, also describes the power of these cultural rites in the Pueblo society.

The prose narrative of *Ceremony* (1977) unfolds Tayo's suffering as a war victim who is disillusioned during the war and comes home to Laguna, Pueblo. The story simultaneously defines Laguna-drought and its impact on the native community. Hence, the protagonist travels for his own inner-peace, lost in World War II, and for the benefit of the Laguna tribe suffering from a dead-drought for six years. The sufferings of an individual and the community are realistic but gradually interact with magical happenings as Tayo himself takes the responsibility for the Laguna-drought. He cursed the rain in Japan's jungle while pulling Rocky's dead body in the heavy rain. "So he had prayed the rain away, and for sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow [and w]herever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying" (Silko, 1977, p. 13). The story is not written or told as an ultimate reality but as convenient possible incorporation from the unbelievable to a believable discussion. The local myth of Corn Woman and Reed Woman nourished Tayo's narrative in Laguna Pueblo. Like Tayo's story, the myth also describes a timeless drought when Corn Woman rebuked Reed Woman, the custodian of rain clouds, for

bathing and not works with her. The taunting made the sister sad enough to drive away with her rainclouds. "And there was no more rain then. / Everything dried up (Silko, 1977, pp. 13-14). This chronological description of various aspects of the same story of the Laguna drought makes the description dialogic. Both the stories describe a factual drought and, at the same time, confirm each other – the 1949-drought and the timeless drought.

The myth of Corn Woman and the other Laguna myths gradually grow with the narrative of Tayo's ceremony. The causative incidents in all the stories describe the same reality of dead drought that convinces the readers about the validity of American Indian myths and traditional oral ceremonies. Because, it depends on the readers to decide the nature of the happenings, magical or real (Todorov, 1975, p. 33). In *Ceremony* (1977), several ceremonies strengthen each other to persuade the reader about the cultural impact of ceremony – different stories of a similar drought highlight the fact that the drought and the ceremonies are chronic. Likewise, the myth of Corn Woman and Reed Woman, the myth of Ck'o'yo medicine man Pac'caya'nyi also tells a-long-time-ago-drought that confirms not only Tayo's story but also the myth of Corn Woman and Reed Woman. The myth describes the coming of Pac'caya'nyi from Reed Leaf Town to trap Nau'ts'ity'i, the Corn Mother. He engaged the people with tricks and made them avoid the care of Corn Mother's altar that annoyed her and "[s]he took the / rainclouds with her" (Silko, 1977, pp. 42, 44, 45). Corn Mother like Reed Woman feeling disrespected drove away from the rainclouds that caused drought. Another myth of Gambler Ck'o'yo Kaup'ata also tells the tale of the lost rainclouds and how he "captured the storm clouds" at the Zuni mountains (Silko, 1977, p. 160). The thematic similarity of the myths and the 1949-drought influences readers' minds who are bound to believe them, given the evidence.

Silko interconnects different parts of Tayo's ceremony with the rest of the Laguna myths that convince readers not only about Tayo's ceremony but unconsciously about the Laguna mythical ceremonies. Tayo's travelling to regain the prosperity of his health, family and Laguna interconnects with the traditional oral myths. For instance, the Laguna myths of the messengers, Hummingbird and Fly, and Sun Man, also describe the rainclouds retrieval. Silko connects Tayo's sickness to his quest. He is already chosen for the rite. He came to Betonie, the Navajo medicine man, for the cure and not for the ceremony. The medicine man prescribed him to find the pattern of stars, the cattle, a woman, and a mountain to retrieve his health and Laguna's prosperity. By the same token, Hummingbird and Fly, like Tayo's ceremony had to

travel a long distance for their prosperity. When Nau'ts'ity'i, the Corn Mother, left away, the townspeople became worried and decided to send "someone / to ask [their] forgiveness" (Silko, 1977, p. 49). Hence, the Hummingbird and Fly had to find out the prescribed patterns of their ceremony the town people chose them for: they, according to their patterns of the ceremony, "took more pollen/more beads, and more prayer sticks ... *the tobacco*" for old Buzzard to clean their town (Silko, 1977, p. 104, emphasis added). So, "[e]verything was set straight again / ... / and *the people were happy again*" (Silko, 1977, pp. 140, 167, 237, emphasis added). The placement of the arranged fragmentation of the Laguna myth with Tayo's ceremony confirms the factuality of both and reading about Tayo's ceremony the readers unconsciously accepted the spiritual ceremony of Hummingbird as both results the prosperity. With another traditional oral tale of Sun Man, Silko explains the commonality of homecoming ceremonies in Pueblo. The quest of Sun Man, like Tayo's ceremony, is based on different patterns that the Spiderwoman told him to follow to free "the rainclouds" (Silko, 1977, p. 162). Silko's consecutive placement of Sun Man and Tayo's ceremonies define the permanence of homecoming rites in Laguna Pueblo.

[A]s readers, we no longer follow the stories sequentially that is as the Indian tales interrupt the realist story. We now read contrapuntally; that is, as the weave of one story crosses the weave of another ... Such contrapuntal reading changes our sense of narrative as a self-contained form and our sense of what ontology is as well. (Slowik, 1989, p. 115)

The prose story and the organized fragmentation of the mythical tales integrate different nuances. Regardless of their time and place, the poetic and prose ceremonies equally: (i) initiate after disruption of nature and human; (ii) as the disruption outcomes a drought; (iii) the condition wants a ceremony; (iv) henceforth, chosen saver(s) has a journey; (v) under the guidance of medicine wo/men; (vi) complete(s) the prescribed patterns; (vii) and recover(s) the prosperity of the land and its people. Besides, Silko presents similar objects in different ceremonies to describe the alliance between American Indian oral traditional past, present and future. For example, during his journey, Tayo met the hummingbird and fly and spider that recall the ceremonies of traditional oral timelessness that runs parallel in fragments to Tayo's ceremony. Besides similar characters, the sacred objects – yellow pollen, blue pollen, tobacco and coral beads – in all poetic-prose ceremonies describe the social alliance of different times, confirming the cultural validity of Laguna myths. This social alliance makes the magical tales real as the mythic characters of Reed Woman, Corn Woman, Sun Man, are parallel to Tayo who is a modern equivalent of these mythical characters.

5. Conclusion

The fusion of natural and supernatural elements in the American Indian society cannot be perceived separately due to their strong correlation. Silko uses the modern technique of magical realism to describe the coexistence of natural and supernatural elements to explain the supernatural aspect of American Indian society and make up the modern reader's mind in conceiving spiritual society. The realistic expression of various happenings proves that the concept of the entire American Indian community being supernatural is wrong. Non-natives focus on the supernatural elements and ignore the natural ones and are unable to understand the American Indian realm. The strong imagery and presentation of the natural and supernatural world's correlation make the natural world supernatural. However, the natives, regardless of their tribal affiliation, perceive everything natural because of the strong belief system and their daily involvement in such mythical practices. The characters' presentation and the way Silko textualizes them and the settings of the novels are normal things for the native community, for the native readers and even for Silko, because they "believe in the stories" (Silko, 1977, p. 18).

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