

Double Consciousness of the Native Americans in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract: *Double consciousness, a term originally introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1897 essay The Strivings of the Negro People, and later more famously, in The Souls of Black Folk, is a complicated identity doubleness that Du Bois defined for African Americans. Although Du Bois defines his term as an African American complexity, it is believed that double consciousness is applicable to other minority groups in the United States, including American Indians. Leslie Marmon Silko, a prolific contemporary Native American novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer, explores double consciousness within her American Indian characters in her novel Ceremony. The coming of change and meshing of cultures has brought an impending threat of ruin to Native American traditions. The novel, set on an Indian reservation just after World War II, concerns the return home of Tayo, a young Native American, who has been a prisoner of the Japanese during the war as the horrors and captivity have almost eroded his will to survive. His return to the Laguna Pueblo reservation only increases his feeling of estrangement and alienation. Having risked his life for an America that fundamentally disowns him, Tayo confronts difficult and painful questions about the society he has been fighting for. Tayo's quest for resolution leads him back to the Indian past and its traditions. This quest itself becomes a ritual, a curative ceremony that defeats his double consciousness and despair. The paper attempts to focus on a hybrid style of literature producing bicultural awareness in Silko's writing.*

Keywords: Conflict tradition, double consciousness, alienation, acculturation

1. Double Consciousness – Its meaning:

Double consciousness is a term describing the internal conflict experienced by subordinated groups in an oppressive society. It was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1897 essay *The Strivings of the Negro People*, and later more famously, in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois' idea of "double consciousness" was formulated in relation to African American people, living in Euro-American society. The same concept can be applied appropriately to other ethnic minority populations in the United States, including American Indians. Adopting DuBois' description of the situation facing African Americans to that facing Indigenous people, we can say this society was:

A world which yields [them, the non-dominant people] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels [this] two-ness, ...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 2).

In literary works of the Native American authors, there is a consciousness of self-identity as a member of an ethnic group other than that of the dominant culture. This is what DuBois refers to in his passage. There are two views for Native writers: their view of themselves as dominant people, and their understanding, as participants in the larger culture, of how they are perceived by the dominant Euro-American audience. Bicultural knowledge is necessary for a complete understanding of *Ceremony*. Native writers like Silko are writing from the position of living within two societies: a Native and a dominant, from which they both retain

knowledge and use their bicultural knowledge in their writing. Silko creatively adapts the stories of oral traditions from the past to fit with the current situation within her novel. In this manner she extends her storytelling tradition from an oral to a written mode.

2. Leslie Marmon Silko(1948-)

Leslie Marmon Silko is a renowned Native American poet and novelist whose work often centres on the dissonance between American Indian and white cultures. She grew up on the Laguna Reservation in New Mexico and is of Pueblo, white and Mexican mixed ancestry. Contemporary Native American poetry and fiction generally relate to the oral traditions from which they derive. Silko also reflects her diverse heritage in her writing. In Rosen's 1974 anthology, Silko wrote about herself asserting, "I am of mixed -breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being." Her famous works such as *Laguna Woman* (1974), *Ceremony* (1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Garden of the Dunes* (1999), describes her rich Laguna culture, the challenges she faced growing up as a mixed blood appear often as autobiographical elements in much of her writing. She also explains that "the core of my writing is to attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or a mixed-blooded person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian".

3. The Concept of Double Consciousness in *Ceremony*:

Leslie Marmon Silko explores double-consciousness within her Native American characters in her novel *Ceremony*. Her first novel *Ceremony*, tells about Tayo, a half-breed war Veteran's struggle for sanity after returning home from World War II. He has difficulties adjusting to civilian life on a New Mexico Indian reservation. He is haunted by his

violence during the war and by the memory of his cousin brother's death in the same conflict. Tayo's own story is entwined with his mixed-blood ancestry, his service in WWII and his post war deprivation. Tayo represents both cultures – whites and natives, he was brought up by his aunt of Native American descent on Indian reservation; and even attended American boarding school as many other Indian children. Throughout the novel, he struggles with the post war problems connected to his memory, alcohol, lack of self-confidence and his inability to identify himself with other members of either society. Tayo is burdened with mixed ancestry; he is neither fully acknowledged as a member of the tribe by other Native American characters nor is he regarded an equal member of the mainstream American community: he is fragmented, confused and disowned, alienated from self, family, land and tribal traditions (Ronnaw, 70).

The novel mainly concerned with the concept of Tayo's alienation is a psychological and spiritual state similar to that of many characters in the works of contemporary Native American novelists - stems originally from his mixed-blooded status, a condition that isolates him from the mainstream Euro-American and Laguna cultures; he is a "breed" according to the terminology used by many Native Americans. The word 'half-breed' or 'mixed breed' has always had a negative connotation in American English as 'bastard'. Native Americans suffer due to breakdown of traditional structure and mixed bloods suffer most. They are torn between two worlds. They are unwanted by the white or red. The mixed bloods are confused and isolated. They are not accepted and assimilated. In such situations, they suffer from double consciousness and are left nowhere.

Tayo is alienated by the experiences of his childhood as well as the war experience. As he is a Veteran of mixed white and Laguna heritage, he has to deal with the cultural pressures of biculturalism. He is a half-breed who has difficulties adjusting to civilian life on a New Mexican Indian reservation. Though the action of the novel deals with the Second World War, it involves rituals and stories from myths that are of ages old. Silko's projection of Tayo's anger, that he feels at the whites for their exploitation of the land and animals and for using Native people to fight in the war and then treating them as second-class citizens when they returned home also defines the sense of double consciousness. With Tayo return to Laguna after the war with a load of guilt that stems from a variety of sources: his failure to protect Rocky, even though Auntie had admonished him that this was his responsibility; the death of Josiah, which occur while Tayo is away, and the loss of his cattle herd, which had wandered away; the sins of his mother, which Auntie will not let him forget; and the drought plaguing the New Mexico desert, a situation Tayo feels he has caused it by praying away in the soaking, tropical precipitation of the Philippine rain forest and Tayo's suffering from his awareness of the loss of traditional values of Laguna.

The clash of two cultures is in *Ceremony* represented mainly through Native American perspective. Although they are original inhabitants, they are minority excluded from the public life of mainstream American society. They may live

on the land of their ancestors but the land was granted by the U.S. government with the borders strictly marked off. Tiffany Anderson claims that in *Ceremony*, unlike Dubois' concept, some Natives choose only one identity and completely refuse the other one as in the case of Tayo's mother who was attracted to white men and lives as a prostitute rather than a normal Native American woman; Rocky, Tayo's cousin also chooses the American identity and refuses old habits and privileges all he has learnt at a boarding school. He was even ashamed and embarrassed of celebrating the old rituals of the deer "to be laid out of Navajo blanket, and Old Grandma would put a string of turquoise around its neck" (Silko,52).

Silko also portrays some of the ways that American Indians have frequently dealt with guilt arising from such sources and with the alienation brought on by the loss of their traditional cultures and social movement from Euro-American influences. The Native Americans were respected when they were required to maintain national security and when they conformed to American standards discriminations lead one to doubt just how fair and just the "land of the free" is in terms of their treatments which is quite paradoxical: "... 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" (Silko, 41). Thus, Silko portrays her characters who suffer from rejection and double consciousness.

Another group of Natives in the novel who feel excluded from the public life are the war veterans, Tayo's contemporaries - Harley, Emo, Lorey and Pinky who have returned to the Pueblo after military service, react to these problems by engaging in a round of drinking, violence, promiscuity, and boasting about the martial and sexual conquests that they achieved while in uniform. Native American war veterans would drown their sorrows in alcohol and blame themselves for both their exclusion and old injustice, the loss of the soil "they blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took...they wanted white people for their friends" (Silko,43). Blaming themselves instead of the Americans may be a result of the Western culture and identity which may hint that this identity is the only right one.

Anderson admits that the application of DuBois' concept to Native Americans might face some difficulties. She suggests that in the case African Americans, double-consciousness stems from American land (Anderson,31), whereas the Native Americans were born in America and inhabited the land long before the Europeans came. Anderson asks herself a question: isn't American Indian consciousness the true American consciousness? (Anderson,31). Indeed, it is, since it is rooted in land. Unlike the Americans, the Native Americans did not perceive the land as an asset, once it is purchased; the owner has every right upon it. In *Ceremony*, the point is made that the land is fenced in order to keep Indians and Mexicans out; "a thousand dollars a mile lock the mountain in steel wire, to make the land his" (Silko, 188).

4. Conclusion

Double consciousness of the Native Americans is connected to lifestyle, culture and values. Anderson argues that “there is no resolution for Native Americans or for any minority group attempting to gain an American identity without loss of its own identity” (Anderson, 33). The clash of two cultures lead, in Tayo’s case, to motivation and purpose, to discard the dominant culture entirely and return fully to Laguna practices and traditions. Furthermore, the characters that turn away from Laguna practices and embrace American perspectives are doomed to destruction as in the case of Tayo’s mother, Rocky and the two ex-soldiers Harley and Emo. The characters who do not choose the white American consciousness over the Native American one includes Grandma, Betonie and Ku oosh as they represent people of an advanced age; they have experienced life which they want to pass to the next generation.

Thus, Silko reflects the loss of traditional Native American consciousness in the novel. The loss of identity is depicted on the characters as well. However, according to Anderson, the developing of double-consciousness may occur since the Native Americans are minor group that is exposed to the mainstream American identity. Tayo’s choice of Native American identity is a result of his life long fight for acknowledgement of the tribal community and his own family. His choice of identity is also supported by the medicine man Betonie who nevertheless does not condemn the mainstream American identity at all. Betonie’s living and ceremony prove that he makes use of both communities.

Although the two cultures in *Ceremony* are considerably diverse, the best idea is supported by the medicine man Betonie’s speech:

Nothing is that simple, you don’t write off all the white people, just like you don’t trust all the Indians (Silko, 128).

This is understood as an attempt for reconciliation. The medicine man’s ceremony is not designed only for the Natives but also for everyone who has confidence in the curative effects of ceremony. Similarly to Tayo, Betonie himself is of mixed ancestry, he is connected to both communities and helps Tayo recover of his illness. Thus, the two communities can and in fact have to live in harmony because they inhabit the same land. The necessary presumption for their common living in harmony and peace is a mutual respect and consideration. One of Tayo’s goal of finishing the ceremony is to realize that he cannot label people only based on their skin color or origin.

References

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Author Profile

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