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Celebrating the Indigenous Cultural Narratives: A Study of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*

Mohd Mohsin

Research Scholar

Aligarh Muslim University

After the advent of Europeans the indigenous populations of America were subjected to severe hardships. Colonized and almost annihilated by the European immigrants, they struggled to survive. Although their numbers were immensely reduced and their identity strictly stereotyped through different forms of (mis)representations, different Native American tribal communities were able to continue and carry forward cultural legacies from their past. In most of the cases, these cultural legacies were preserved and transmitted through oral narration. However, the native oral tradition was for the most part denied the status of literature in the white American Eurocentric literary circles. Throughout their long history many indigenous writers belonging to different ethnicities and tribes emerged and made their presence felt from time to time. However, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that Native American writers were able to express their indigenous aesthetics through a written form. The ensuing literature produced has both challenged and modified the meaning of literature as seen through a predominantly white Eurocentric perspective.

Writing within this context, Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko has produced a wealth of fiction and nonfiction writings. However, her writing demands a modification of our literary perspectives that are based upon Eurocentric aesthetics. Silko writing shows a distinct character as she uses the storytelling technique in order to retain the feeling of an oral narrative. This leads her to produce challenging texts that survive the Native oral tradition despite its transformation. Her collection of short stories titled *Storyteller*, in particular, demands thorough analysis in order to understand the artistic skill she uses to “reach out” to a reader ignorant of her indigenous wisdom and cultural practices.

The present paper analyses the short stories contained in *Storyteller* in the backdrop of Native perspectives that colour her imagination and creative process which is based upon indigenous principles. Besides it explores as to how her experimental artistic endeavours successfully enable her to resist a White American discourse and carve out a space in the Eurocentric literary circles. Native Americans are the indigenous peoples of the Americas that have survived in the American Continent as distinct heterogeneous tribal communities despite the presence of an overwhelming European white immigrant population. For more than four centuries the existence and identity of the indigenous peoples of America was in extreme danger primarily due to intrusion of European white race into their continent. In the first place their number was considerably reduced by the European disease that spread among them by coming in contact with European immigrants. Joy Porter, a Native American scholar observes, “Recurrent epidemics of smallpox, measles, pneumonia, scarlet fever, typhus, and, after 1840, cholera, alongside loss of livelihood and land coupled with the effects of alcohol were what principally reduced tribal populations...” (Porter & Roemer 2005: 48). Besides disease, violent engagements with white immigrants further reduced their numbers. White American settlers removed entire colonies in the process of clearing the land for settlement. Owing to superior artillery and due to advancements in warfare, the Native populations failed to stand before the uncontrolled rush of

the immigrants. The first contact between the indigenous populations and the white immigrants was the first of its nature in the history of humankind. Two entirely different and varied human races cut off from each other for centuries came face to face at a moment when the European man had almost exhausted the European continent on different fronts. European man had seen huge scale bloodshed and was used to completely annihilate enemies in the warfare. Looking for more land and resources, the European immigrants knew the importance of forest wealth and land for cultivation. On the other hand the Indigenous population of the America had enough land and resources to prevent internal clashes. They were mostly peaceful and lived in harmony with the nature and their land. These conditions gave rise to metaphysical beliefs and world views that corresponded with their physical being. These Beliefs and worldviews helped the Natives to survive and live peacefully in the American landscape. Indigenous myths and cultural narratives were transmitted by means of oral narratives that were performed by the experienced elderly members of the community. Besides oral narratives, different ceremonies and rituals were part and parcel of the indigenous life. However, driven by their material desire the European immigrants displaced a large number of the Native American population from their lands. Constant onslaughts upon indigenous tribes led to massive bloodshed. It was nothing less than a holocaust with Europeans sparing not even women or children. In fact Professor David E. Stannard argues in his book "*American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World (1993)*" that the word holocaust was initially used by Padre Bartolomé de Las Casas (b. 1484), friend and contemporary of Columbus and a rare sympathizer of the Native Americans, in describing the brutal annihilation of the Native populations by the European immigrants. Besides massive killing and bloodshed, the immigrant started a process of laying an ideal platform for laying foundations for a new nation where the dreams of the old world could be realized. Starting with Columbus, many other early explorers gave a very subjective account of the indigenous populations. And having predefined objectives, the accounts given about the Native populations were often biased and prejudiced. The native was defined as savage and inhuman lacking any religion and morality. Besides early explorer accounts, many other fiction and nonfiction writers started exploiting the idea of an uncivilized immoral human race to further these stereotypical images of the Native American populations. In Germany we had Karl May, in France Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil (1751-1785) writing and creating such fictional characters like Old Shatterhead and his sidekick Winnetou. People in Europe came to know about the Native American people through these fictional subjective accounts rather than any authentic sources. Stereotypical images of the Native populations spread rapidly to other parts of the world. This was primarily due to the contribution of the printing press, and more importantly due to the fact that Europe had colonized most of the world populations of the time. With no alternative accounts on their part and very few sympathizers, the Native was caught up into an identity that obscured the real Indian rather than defining him. An identity that was primarily created to facilitate the expansion of the white immigrants in the American continent unhampered. Defining the Native as inhuman and savage was meant to serve the purpose of justifying their annihilation at the hands of the European Christian who in killing the Indian was therefore doing religious service rather than breaking moral law. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian populations had reached their lowest. However, despite all odds, some two million indigenous inhabitants of America still live in America and during the second half of the Twentieth century they were able to make a strong impact upon the dominant white American people and people all around the world. With Native American writing emerging as an influential field in American literature, a myriad number of writers belonging to multiple ethnicities and tribes, united by

some seminal concerns and shared world views emerged and forced the Stereotypical images of the Native into revision and cross examination.

Emerging during the high time of Native American writing, Leslie Marmon Silko writes with serious indigenous cultural undertones regarding Native American identity and their World views. Having a mixed blood origin, Leslie Marmon Silko identifies with her Laguna Pueblo origins. Laguna Pueblo is a tribal community located in New-Mexico. Having migrated from the American North way back, Laguna pueblo Indians settled in the American south and have remained there for the past 12,000 years. “They have lived in more or less the same locations in the Southwest, most of them in the northwestern part of present-day New Mexico” (Syersted 1980: 6). Owing to a long history of settlement and survival, the Laguna Pueblo have developed a complex cultural understanding. Laguna pueblos share with other Native communities some central beliefs and mythic understandings. In many of her interviews and writings, Silko reiterates the importance of placing her writing in her indigenous Laguna context. It is in the backdrop of her Laguna belonging that we are able to understand the importance she associates with her storytelling technique. She says: I think of even my technical skill as a storyteller as a birthright”. Storytelling around Laguna comes naturally to the people as it is “a part of the way of life”. Silko talks of storytelling as a “resource” that the Laguna people possess (Jaskoski 1998:107). Storytelling tradition receives added significance for it allowed the Native peoples to transmit mythic understanding and cultural perspective from generation to generation. Instead of relying upon writing as an institutionalized form of transmitting knowledge contained within the written sources, the storytelling served multiple purposes in the Indian societies. Silko deals extensively with the importance of this tradition in her indigenous cultural context. She wrote many essays and gave many interviews explaining the nuances of storytelling. Her writing is markedly influenced by her personalized understanding of the tradition of storytelling. The best source for understanding her views about storytelling is her own collection of essays titled *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (1993). It becomes necessary for the readers to understand Silko’s writing with the framework of her own views and understandings in order to prevent misappropriation of her writing.

Writer of novels, essays poetry and short stories, Silko came to prominence in the seventies with the publication of her short story titled “The Man to Send Rainclouds”. She followed it with her most acclaimed novel *Ceremony* that went on to gain her international acclaim and recognition. Silko has written different short stories from time to time. She went on to collect many of her most important short stories in a collection titled *Storyteller* which was published in 1981. Besides eight short stories, the book contains photographs, poems and autobiographical and family history vignettes, redactions of Pueblo myths and tales fragments of letters and local gossip. There is a vast division of opinion regarding the placement of *Storyteller* in the Eurocentric genres of writing. Some view it as an autobiographical work while as others have treated it as a novel. The division of opinion arises due to the fact that Silko deliberately designed the book in defiance of Eurocentric artistic forms as a means to facilitate her Indian storytelling technique to function in a written form. Besides, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out:

The interaction of english writing with the older traditions of orature or literature in post-colonial societies, and the emergence of a writing which has as a major aim the assertion of social and cultural difference, have radically questioned easy assumptions about the characteristics of the genres we usually employ as structuring and categorizing definitives (novel, lyric, epic, play, etc.).

(2004: 179)

Regarding the structure of *Storyteller* Silko remarks, “*Storyteller’s* layout is real deliberate. I did that. We went round and round. I did all the layout on that because a lot of *Storyteller* was published in other places. The key to *Storyteller* is the way it’s all put together” (Silko 1992: 29). Despite the fact that different stories collected in the work had been published elsewhere prior to their appearing in *Storyteller*, all the stories have been placed in an organic unity with the surrounding textual sections. Any approach to *Storyteller* has to be grounded upon an understanding of the organic unity of the work as a whole. Silko has on various occasions, dealt with the question of arriving at meaning after a study of her texts. The image of a spider web underlies the structure of *Storyteller* as well. Many studies of *Storyteller* have stressed upon its structural unity. Bernard Hirsch a Native American scholar comments that in *Storyteller*, “successive narrative episodes cast long shadows both forward and back, lending different or complementary shades of meaning to those preceding them and offering perspectives from which to consider those that follow” (1988: 3). Information and understanding regarding the reading of the stories are present within the book itself. *Storyteller* is a book about stories and about storytelling and the different dynamics involved in rendering into written form stories rooted in an oral tradition. Within the epistemological and aesthetic boundaries of the tribal insights, Silko indulges in a participatory project wherein different points of view cooperate with her personal insights to put forth an alternate definition of an Indian while simultaneously resisting the white colonial projections. Cynthia Carsten states that, “in order to resist the narrative emplotment of their histories and identities as dictated and controlled by Euro-American worldviews, American Indian writers have had to devise strategies to challenge the ideologies inherent in the dominant culture's conventions of knowledge and truth” (2006:107). *Storyteller*, in particular, breaks away from impositions of the colonizers’ discourse regarding art and literature by perpetually indulging in a communal participatory quality and thereby doing away with individualistic and Eurocentric notions regarding the functioning of a text. Many Native American critics object to the application of only mainstream literary theory and assessment tools to Native literature. On a similar note, Larry Evers offers a useful insight regarding the reading of any Native American text. He insists that reading be based upon indigenous critical insights that are found in the stories themselves. Accordingly, he states:

Performance of traditional stories and the criticism of those stories is really the same thing. Each time a storyteller tells a story he tells his own version of it. He gives his interpretation of it; he recreates it. If it works for others, they repeat it. Through his critical act it survives (1979:73)

In order to appreciate *Storyteller*, understanding requires to be grounded, not only upon Eurocentric literary conventions, but also upon those contexts which Silko repeatedly stresses upon in all her writings and interviews. *Storyteller* offers us multiple insights regarding the means to approach the stories and texts provided in the book.

As mentioned earlier, *Storyteller* comprises of eight short stories besides other materials that enrich the reading of these short stories. She even relies upon local gossip as an authentic source and says, “I don’t look upon them [gossip stories] as gossip. The connotation is all wrong. These stories about goings-on, about what people are up to, give identity to a place” (Silko 1998: 95). *Storyteller* is full of these ‘gossip stories’ which help the readers to put other, more conventional stories into a proper perspective. Silko uses her art to propagate the stories and in the process, she builds upon them. She explains the constructive tendencies as part of the overall method in the storytelling tradition. As a child, she listened to stories from her Aunt Alice and Aunt Susie and noticed the changes they would make with each retelling:

I know Aunt Susie and Aunt Alice would tell me stories they had told me before but with changes in details or descriptions. The story was the important thing and little changes here and there were really part of the story. There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these different versions came to be.

(Silko 1981: 227)

Besides relying upon living, communal storytelling and gossip stories, Silko adds photographs of land and people to provide a visual aspect to the stories. Silko writes in the acknowledgement of *Storyteller* that the photographs “are themselves part of the stories” (Silko 1981). In her essays on photography published in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, she explains her critical views regarding the use of photographs alongside the text and the bearing photographs have upon the overall meaning. Her use of photographs in *Storyteller* is meant to change the ways in which we look at the imaginative landscape and mindscape forged in the stories. Silko states regarding the Indian photographers: “Euroamericans desperately need to believe that the indigenous people and cultures that were destroyed were somehow less than human; Indian photographers are proof to the contrary” (Silko 1997: 177). She attempts to undermine the contemporary white views about Indians by retrieving photographs of her ancestors and the landscape and harmonizing the contemporary experiences in continuity with the past. With the help of photographs capturing land and culture of the past, Silko challenges the white claims over Indian images, people and land. Regarding the photo collection they had in their family, Silko remarks that almost all the photographs had a story associated with it which qualified and put additional meaning and significance to the photo and vice-versa, the stories got intermingled with the photographic images (Silko 1997: 176). Stories are inseparable from the people and the places. Therefore, these photographs are vital to the stories; Aunt Susie, Great Grandmother A'mooh (Marie Anaya) and Grandfather Hank are necessary and are organically connected with the stories Silko is narrating. By combining multiple voices and narratives in the *Storyteller*, Silko makes storytelling an all-encompassing community work. Silko's storytelling is open to varied voices as her language in the stories is always bound up with tribal memories. The storyteller is not an authoritative authorial voice but a transmitter whose retelling gives birth to a new voice by retelling stories that are part of a big story and therefore cannot be exhausted. Silko says, “As with any generation / the oral tradition depends upon each person / listening and remembering a portion / and it is together- / all of us remembering what we have heard together- / that creates the whole story / the long story of the people” (Silko 1981: 6-7).

Remembrance by means of memory and imagination as the means to survival are the underlying concerns of the stories. N Scott Momaday a prominent Native American Writer in *Man Made of Words* (1979) expresses the faith in the power of language to create identity. Man, he says, tells “stories in order to understand his experience Only when he is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself.” (qtd. in Gelfant 2000: 513). Silko indulges in an enterprise to adapt the colonizer's language to meet the needs of the Laguna community. The quest for identity is central to all the stories in *Storyteller*.

Another Native American scholar Alanna Kathleen Brown (1995: 173) suggests that Silko constantly evades the Eurocentric methods of approach forcing the readers into an awareness of their deficiencies, thereby making them shift their approaches and modes of cognition. Thus she creates the need for a hermeneutic approach, by involving the readers in a process of change and forces them to adapt to Native American approaches to literature. In the initial stories in *Storyteller*, Silko leaves gaps within the narrative suggesting the problems inherent in transition from oral mode of narration to written mode. Thereby, she makes textual

statements that rely equally upon absence and lack in communication besides formulations that convey meaning. Eurocentric perspective imposes the superiority of the written word over the spoken but Silko shows the limitations of the written text and instead produces a text that constantly points towards failure in conveying complete meanings. An instance of these voids is a brief anecdote at the center of the book wherein Silko recalls stopping to chat with Nora, a neighbor in the village. As a reaction to Nora's observation regarding the difference between the spoken and the written version of a story, Silko remarks, "...that's the trouble with writing,' I said, / 'You can't go on and on the way we do / when we tell stories around here. / People who aren't used to it get tired'" (Silko 1981: 110). Jaskoski adds an important observation: "This vignette brings the Laguna audience into the text, acknowledging the intertextuality of Silko's written and oral materials— even as it suggests to the non-Laguna reader how much is silent in the book" (Jaskoski 1998: 9). In this context, land assumes importance as a means capable of conveying what the colonizers restrictive discourse tries to silence. Fanon writes, "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 1963: 44). Silko contextualizes the Laguna land and geography to qualify her meanings and, importantly, the inclusion of these elements places her writing within an indomitable history of Laguna people. Karen Piper states, "In contrast to the notion of a fictional landscape as being separate from any territory, Silko describes the way in which Laguna stories also functioned as maps" (Piper 1997: 486). Most of the stories treat the land as a living character. Meanings are infused into land by relating different geographical locations with specific stories. Such characterization of land creates an alternate history of the Native peoples as it shifts focus from Eurocentric point of view to indigenous means of looking at the past. Besides, Silko explains that these stories perform multiple and diverse roles; she says, "Pueblo narratives are not bedtime stories or light entertainment. Through the narratives Pueblo people have for thousands of years maintained and transmitted their entire culture..." (Silko 1997: 178). Further, she says that stories help the Laguna Pueblos to put things in perspective:

The storytelling had the effect of placing an incident in wider context of Pueblo history so that individual loss or failure was less personalized and became part of the village's eternal narratives about loss and failure, narratives that identify the village and that tell the people who they are.

(Silko 1997: 91)

Thus, individual loss is minimised and belonging to the community becomes a means to resist the psychological as well as physical oppression and colonization. Stories like the original Yellow Woman stories and the hummah-ha stories that Silko heard from her aunts in her childhood serve as the underlying models upon which Silko structures her stories which depict day-to-day events in the Laguna community. By these fusions, Silko erases the boundaries between fact and fiction. Such an erasing characterizes Silko's art, denoting a shift towards oral discourse and asserts the superimposed prototypic models as means of identifying and belonging. The dynamic tendency in orally transmitted stories and their independence from written form renders them vulnerable to being forgotten and lost. However, Silko tells us that the Laguna storytelling tradition does not insist upon preserving the stories for the sake of their intrinsic value (Arnold 2000: 72). Stories have their meaning and importance within the context of the social situation and besides the textual transcriptional part, the storyteller and the audience are organically involved in a story and its performance. Therefore, Silko believes that the purpose of the *Storyteller* is not merely to forward the text as an end in itself but to "make accessible certain ways of seeing things" (Arnold 2000: 26). Silko further explains the beauty of storytelling for in

it “you can stop the storyteller and ask questions and have things explained” and it leads to “an experience or perception being made accessible to those people” (Arnold 2000: 26). An instance of this is the verbal asides Silko inserts into the written text in order to explain words or situations. Accordingly, her aim is to make accessible what has been inaccessible “depending on how familiar [one is] with the context” (Arnold 2000: 26).

Although *Storyteller* did not enjoy much popularity and success as compared to Silko’s earlier novel *Ceremony*, however in this work Silko uses all her resources to make a ceremonial impact upon the readers. Many scholars have analysed this ceremonial functioning of *Storyteller* providing incredible insights about its structure. Linda J. Krumholz’s work is worth mentioning here for it served as an insightful analysis for many other scholars to construct upon it. In light of different research articles and works published upon Silko, her writing emerges as an ever greater force in the American literary circles.

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