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Paranoia of Loss: An Ecocritical Study of Environmental Injustice against Native Americans in Silko's Ceremony

Abstract:

The paper analyzes Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony (1977) from Buell's theoretical perspective of eco-cosmopolitanism. In Native American worldview, nature holds a special place. The Natives not only identify themselves with nature but also have a life sharing bond of interdependence with it. European colonization displaced Native Americans from their homeland. Their natural resources have been mercilessly exploited since contact resulting in fatal diseases and poverty. The colonial exploitation of nature reached its climax during the WWII. The colonial insensitivity to the environment renders them callously indifferent to non-human life. The earth as a source of life is sacred for American Indians but it was commodified by Euro-Americans who dug up uranium mines for war which destroyed human habitat. The findings of the study reveal that European colonizers wreaked havoc in the Native Americans' life by destroying their environment and mental peace.

Key Words:

World War II, Nature, Mental Trauma, European Colonization, Native American Literature

Introduction

In Native American worldview, life and nature are delicately interwoven. For them, Mother Earth, two legged beings, four legged beings, winged beings and plants are in a brotherhood (Neihardt, 2000, p. 55). Earth for them is the Mother and as the progeny of one Mother, humans and non-humans all make an interdependent family. Before contact, millions of people – as first people (Waldman, 2006, p. 66) – had long been living in and with nature. For millennia, Nature has played an active role for the Native Americans as food, medicine and a sacred agent in religious rituals and ceremonies. Merchant observes that Don Juan de Onate was the first colonizer who undertook an expedition in the north of Mexico for two purposes: locating the mines and Christianizing the Indians. He with his colonists, missionaries, and cattle founded the first Spanish colony in New Mexico (2002, p. 10). The unbridled colonial adventures resulted in poverty, starvation and fatal diseases (McAvoy, 2002, p. 392). Adamson finds a close relationship between impoverishment of humans and degradation of their environment (2001, p. 16). During the WWII, the Native Americans were displaced from their natural habitat to the reservations, deserted areas where firstly they fail to perform their ceremonies and rituals resulting in spiritual sterility and secondly they suffer "higher rates of disease and illness" (U.S. Commission, 2003, p. ix). Their harmony with nature being lost, they are exposed to social as well as environmental injustice that is sustained by blurring the destruction of the poor Indian children, women and environment (Adamson et al, 2002, p. 208).

Euro-Americans 'compete' with nature, misuse all forms of life and destroy both fauna and flora who for Whites are no more than a commodity: this attitude gave the Natives losses after losses day after Day (Silko, 1977, p. 169). The losses include displacement, diseases, poverty and the loss of the tribal identity and their environment. Colonization of America followed small pox, malaria, diphtheria, measles and dengue, says Alan Bewell (1999, p. 7). The diseases were allies and instruments of the colonial mission of the annihilation

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of the indigenous culture and people. Erasure of the natural surroundings “led to a sudden appearance of diabetes, heart disease and obesity, maladies unknown in Cite communities until the 1980s” ([Churchill, 1998](#), p. 306), the diseases as strange and frightening for the Native Americans as the colonizers because the Native people had no protection system and immunity against “the imported diseases” ([Byrd, 2011, p. 25](#)). Destruction of the nature and the consequent diseases seriously affected the human and animal populations as well ([Johansen & Pritzker, 2008](#), p. 24). This article attempts to analyze the crisis of Native Americans’ loss of the natural world and its consequences in *Ceremony* (1977), a novel by Leslie Marmon Silko (March 5, 1948), a novelist of the early Native American renaissance. Her work is a significant contribution to the “revitalization of Native American culture” ([Ames, 2006](#), p. 74). The focus of the paper is devastation of the Native American life and environment during WWII and Silko's solution to this ecological crisis in *Ceremony*.

Literature Review

European colonization resulted in very serious environmental problems for Native Americans who were “distilled, dissuaded, disbanded, dug up ...” ([Howe & Gordon, 1999](#), p. 117) and their forefathers’ land had been seized. Their natural lifestyle is rendered as “backward and primitive” ([Adamson and Ruffin, 2013](#), p. 178). The colonizers were bent on erasing the Native Americans’ tribal identity. To fulfil their nefarious purposes they used “nature instrumentally” ([Stoll & Adam, 2014](#), p. 87). The colonizers were well aware that the Native Americans lived on the basis of the principle that all living beings and the environment had equal ‘right’ to live ([Bullard, 2005](#), p. 34). Because of such strong relationship with nature they kept on reviving cultural values of their ancestors who founded the tenet of all living beings as a part of a single whole and set the culture for their progeny. The Native Americans’ life was based on the principle that “there is no line between nature and human. People, animals, plants, and landscapes are equally valued” (Temple and Velie, 2007, p. 109). They were in direct contact with nature (Boyd, 1974, p. 222), responded to animals and plants who were their relatives and symbolized life for them ([Boyd 1994](#), 50). Similarly, the devastation of nature was the “rape of the Earth” (Boyd, 1994, pp. 152-153). Joni Adamson defines environment as lived spaces where groups of people work and live with non-human surroundings. For Native Americans nature has great significance: it is their source of survival, religion and the very identity. In order to colonize Native Americans, European colonizers created rift between the Red Indians and their habitat. Isolation of Native Americans from nature means the extinction of their tribal identity. During the World War II the Native Americans were fortified to fight for the development of the country through handsome packages and delusive appreciation. This development, connected with technological resources in state service, exploits many for a few ([Huggan and Tiffin, 2010](#), p. 45). The war is a major issue that exploits the whole atmosphere in minimum time. Particularly, the Second World War put on fire the sky and earth ([Momaday, 1968](#), p. 23). Native American writers and scholars have raised this issue of the World War II from the ecological perspective.

Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) revives history of the colonizers’ war policies by presenting the U.S. government’s atomic testing near Laguna Pueblo. From the horrendous effects of the nuclear testing, the future Native Americans generations would realize why old folk bewailed when the American government had started work on the mines (Silko, p. 759). Sterling, the central character of the novel, is surrounded by nuclear weapons and uranium mines that spread harmful gases everywhere. At the end of *Almanac*, on the way to Maahastryu, he observes: “Here was where life ended” (Silko, 1991, p. 760). He attempts to shun out from his mind all these destructive scenes and terrible memories of the war but it is not possible for him to slip these horrific memories from his mind. Time and again it comes to his mind that something horrible has been done to Earth ([Silko, 1977](#), p. 34). The devastating consequences of the nuclear weapons eventually deprive the Native Americans of their means of existence.

N. Scott Momaday in *House Made of the Dawn* also highlights the issue of war that has smashed the tribal people's peace of mind. Abel, the protagonist of the novel, is a war veteran. On his coming back from

the World War II “he was restless, full of excitement” (p. 21). His experience of the war results in anxiety and depression. His contact with “representational vehicle” (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013, p. 80) and nuclear weapons annoys him. On coming back from war, Abel fails to re-collect his past (Momaday, 1968, p. 21). He is confused to think about the fields and natural landscape. While setting among his people on reservation whenever he thinks about the war, his heart beat increases. Rabbits were remorsefully still and strewn around (p. 18). His mind is baffled to such an extent that “he didn’t know where he was” (Momaday, 1968, p. 21). His body beats with pain, when he thinks of his own helplessness; even he prefers to die instead of living in pain and anxiety. The present research work is the analysis of Silko’s *Ceremony* from the perspective of the presentation of the significance of nature in Amerindians’ lives and European colonizers’ imperialistic tactics in the form of war and their adverse consequences on the Native Americans very existence.

Theoretical Framework and Research Method

Eco-cosmopolitanism places human-environment relationship into ecological networks transcending local determination because rapid deterioration of the environment goes beyond “national and cultural boundaries” (qtd. in [Buell, 2005, pp. 81-82](#)). This approach transcends man-made boundaries because man is regarded as a part of the whole ecosystem. Lawrence Buell thinks that ecocriticism developed over the last two decades through various phases to address the contemporary ecological situation: “First-wave nature-writing-oriented ecocriticism and the second-wave urban and ecojustice revisionists” (Buell, p. 30). Eco-cosmopolitanism is till now the last phase of ecocriticism that shares the issues with and “builds upon earlier ecocritical practice” (qtd. in Buell, 2005, p. 138). Its central value is cooperation with environment ([Berry, 2002](#), p. 252) as it sees the natural environment and humans as mutually constitutive and interdependent. This mutuality erases the cultural boundaries for humans who are considered citizens of the world ecosystem. This planetary perspective with a holistic view takes all living beings, mother earth and the cosmos into a single fold to develop eco-global environmental awareness because “the planet earth his our home” (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013, p. 206). The bedrock of this ecological consciousness is mutual respectful sharing among all the earthly creatures as world’s citizens. Lawrence Buell’s planetary ecological awareness and environmental ethics raise consciousness about ecological planetary crises (2005, p. 56). Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) deplores that the world soaked in chemical poisons is “betrayed Eden” (p. 37).

This qualitative research employs content analysis to decode the text. Belsey considers textual analysis indispensable for researches in all disciplines that focus on text or “seek to understand the inscription of culture in its artifacts” ([Griffin, 1988](#), p. 157). A text has no unified meaning of its own: it is connected to ongoing cultural and social practices. This article uses two grounds for text analysis theorized by Belsey: historical background and specific culture.

Belsey addresses “a question posed by the text. Where are its sympathies? What historical differences does it present?” (Griffin 170). In portrayal of the perspectives of the World War II, the present research work is an eco-critical study that “leads outwards into ... cultural and political history” (Griffin, 1988, p. 169), Native Americans’ environmental concern, the history of their reciprocity with nature and western exploitation and domination.

Data Analysis

The World War II sucked the financial, ethical and environmental assets of humanity (Johansen & Pritzker, 2008, p. 118) and *Ceremony* mourns this grave loss of the Native communities. Tayo, the central character of the novel, is a war veteran; he suffers from trauma on his return from the war. The nuclear weapons used in the war caused mass annihilation of nature. Consequently, the time immemorial relationship between Native Americans and their environment has been disturbed. Tayo fails to lead normal life as the war has snatched his intimacy with natural tribal life. The war has devastated him and he feels as like a stranger on his

ancestors' land. "Haunted by the war's violence" (Temple and Velie, 2007, p. 321) he vomits and wants to die. The dismaying experience of the war frequently reminds him his past. The brutal business of mining for the production of nuclear weapons on the reservations makes him aware of the European divisive colonization. Tayo's grandmother warns him against the terrible bomb blast: "I never thought I would ever see anything so bright again ... Biggest explosion that ever happened" (Silko, 1977, pp. 227-28). The war memories weaken Tayo's body and finally he loses his consciousness.

According to Roy, nuclear war is an ecological war: countries do not fight against countries; people do not fight against people; Earth herself is our ultimate foe (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 50). The exploitation of the earth means genocide of the fellow human beings.

Exploitation of the earth through uranium mining and injurious chemicals used in the war turns the natural world into a dangerous region. The war destroys the whole ecosystem, resulting in "acid rain ... ozone depletion, and global warming" (Buell, 2005, p. 98). The destructive chemicals and injurious ammunition have a catastrophic effect on Tayo's mind. As a result, Tayo is disappointed and confused; he has lost mental peace and even contact with his community members. He is completely broken due to terrible war experience. Being a war veteran Tayo feels that uranium waste has polluted the rivers, air and springs. The uranium mines that are conveniently "located in poorer communities, and toxic wastes ... shipped to low-income nations" (Massey, 2004, p. 1) have intensified the problems of the unprivileged communities of Native Americans. In pursuit of their own interests, European colonizers ignore the fundamental needs as well as sufferings of the poor native communities. Walking across the mountains, Tayo notices that the miners rushed to the surrounding hills for gold (Lewis, 1994, p. 85). The European colonizers extract the natural resources from the earth and they leave the earth as a hazardous prison for the poor inhabitants. For the time being Tayo gets relief from the devastating influence of the war among the leaves; he sleeps on leaves and takes a sigh of relief. But the effect is transitory, as soon as he opens his eyes, he finds nothing except exploitation and destruction everywhere.

The nuclear chemicals and uranium mining cause diseases and substantially decreases the indigenous population. Euroamericanism consists in exploitation of the nature, fauna, flora and human beings, with total indifference to the irreversible damage to the whole system. The disappointing situation pushed the Natives into drinking (Silko, 1977, p. 231). The war snatched their natural resources, farming and livestock. Nuclear weapons showed a malignant "civilization turning upon itself" (as cited in Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 48), engulfing the whole world into its destructive fold. War brings for Tayo trauma; he cannot explain his war experience to Ku'oosh because the big guns and mortars were too alien for him to comprehend (Silko, 1977, p. 33). The war was so catastrophic in its expanse even if the old man had seen it with his own eyes, he would not have believed the monstrosity of this affair (p. 33).

Euro-American divisive model resulted in the atomic bombing in the WWII that worsened the pollution issue because it knew no bounds (Silko, 1977, p. 228). Uranium is dumped in the reservation areas. Almost all uranium American government uses for nuclear weapons is extracted from Indian lands, says Owens (1998, p. 230). Uranium mines make industrialized development at the cost of the sanctity of Earth. Uranium mining spreads radioactive dust, deadly gases and destroys the "Mother Earth, the air, the water and all living beings" (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013, p. 204) regardless of boundaries. The result is the extinction of the indigenous population. Tayo, a war veteran, is shocked to see in the hills that the nuclear weapons have destroyed the natural environment everywhere, leaving behind death, drought and sterility for earth and its inhabitants. This environmental crisis causes depletion of ozone, increases the frequency of acid rain and jeopardizes the earth's atmosphere. During the World War II the horrible nuclear weapons "devoured the people in cities twelve thousands miles away" (Silko, 1977, p. 228). The Natives are tied into a new tribe in the face of the terror of WWII.

Tayo feels in the breeze, rivers and springs the effect of uranium waste; it pervades everywhere as "arthritis or cancer" (Boyd, 1974, p. 51) spreads in body. The Natives are compelled to work in polluted areas and mines leading to their death by disease (Adamson, 1958, p. 142). Tayo understands the causes and consequences of industrial development and recognizes "the destroyers... working for drought to sear the

land, to kill the livestock, to stunt the corn plants and squash in the gardens" (Silko, 1977, p. 201). These are terrorist activities for Silko because Euro-American uranium mining "poison's our water with radioactive wastes ... (and) our air with military weapons' wastes" (1992. p. 734). Ironically, Euroamericans incentivize Native Americans for their services and land for war and the results are industrial development for the whites and poisoning of resources [water, air and land] for the Red; victory for the whites and trauma for the Red. The Natives, therefore, "never trusted the water downstream from a white man" (Boyd, 1974, p. 49). Misuse of the Native Americans' natural assets and their lives resulted in "climate change and perpetuate(d) structural discrimination against indigenous or ethnic minority groups" (Adamson, 1958, p. 159). But Indians in uniform were respected for the purposes of war; out of uniform they were treated as second class citizens. Tayo, when he has doffed his military uniform, is publically humiliated. Euroamericans' appreciation for their soldiering and white ladies' smile for them is not genuine because they are considered sub-human. A white lady looks at Tayo and Rocky in military uniform and applauds them: "God bless you!" but, Silko comments that "it was the uniform, not them, she blessed" (1977, p. 38) because after war the white women do not even like to talk to them. The end of the war means the end of social acceptance of the Native Americans.

Destruction of war and Tayo's isolation from his home, family and natural habitat causes depression shell shock because of the white "destroyers", as Betonie, the traditional medicine man, terms them (Silko, 1977, p. 128). War stricken schizophrenic Tayo has dual trauma intensified by the "large-scale environmental problems" (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013, p. 207). Alienation from the nature causes Tayo's mental breakdown and makes him an invisible ghost with inaudible voice (Silko, 1977, p. 14). Incoherently babbling Tayo with disjointed ideas needs ceremonial cure. He resorts to indigenous redeeming ceremony for salvation. Betonie treats him, listens to him, advises him to search the lost cattle and climbs the hills where Tayo's forefathers have for centuries been performing their ceremonies: "I will bring you back ... return to a long life of happiness again" (Silko, 1977, p. 133). He recites prayers to bring Tayo back to his ancestral heritage and strengthen his exhausted spirit. He guides Tayo back home, to his ancestral natural world, his belonging, his roots and life because the traditional Native 'all-inclusive' culture alone will cure him (Silko, 1977, p. 116). Betonie understands that it is only Native American ancestral tradition which takes within its loving embrace both humans and non-humans.

The invisible and 'dead' Tayo is first treated by a white doctor in Los Angeles Veterans' Administration Hospital where his tongue is "dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent" (Silko, 1977, p. 14) and where he is even afraid of white fog. The doctors suggest him to think of himself, of "competition ... and extinction of life forms" (Buell, 2005. p. 100) but white doctoring further deteriorates his illness. The two medical approaches reflect two incommensurable worlds. Tayo cries all the time and sometimes vomits but foreign medicine and food intensify his "post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of the death of his cousin and the horrors of war and finds consolation in drinking" (Temple and Velie, 2007, p. 8). Amongst European environment and European ghost doctors and disgusting medicines, Tayo is invisible like smoke, unable to recollect his past. The doctor questions whether he was ever visible (Silko, 1977, p. 14), a veiled comment on the erasure of rich Native American history. Vulnerable to colonial forces, he is sad at the natural resources walled off "only for the rich and privileged" (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013, p. 158). Native Americans have been losing their tribal culture, livestock and crops and WWII put finishing touches to this "immense loss to Native families and cultures" (p. 109) causing psychological breakdown of the Natives in competition with the "strange insinuation of the machine" (Momaday, 1968, p. 22). Their interaction with "representational vehicle for the new petroleum age" (Adamson and Ruffin, 2013, p. 80) annoys the Native Americans who considered the ownership of land profane: it is the land that owns you, not the other way round: "The deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain" (Silko, 1977, p. 128). The colonizers' policies have, in the name of civilization, placed at risk their ancestral homelands, snatched their fertile hunting lands and pushed them into unwanted reservation lands of no agricultural value.

Under Euro-American influence and having absorbed white hurtful instinct, Tayo grows averse to plants and animals (Silko, 1977, p. 130) whom he now considers not “worth anything anyway” (Silko, 1977, p.23) and “slapped at the insects mechanically” (p. 7). He mercilessly kills the flies crawling over Rocky's dead body: “He had smashed them between his hands” (Silko, 1977, p. 94). He has even lost love for life: “He didn't care anymore if he died” (p. 36) because he feels, all humans and non-humans are “dead and everything is dying” (Silko, 1977, p. 14). In the destructive environment, Tayo feels he dies “the way smoke dies, drifting away in the currents of air” (Silko, 1977, p. 15).

Conclusion

Native Americans' miseries have inspired Silko to raise her voice against “the abuse of the environment, both fauna and flora for the benefit of the settler” (Huggan and Tiffin, p. 169). She also calls for the need to restore the Native Americans' healthy-living-environment where they can lead peaceful life. Tayo, the protagonist, fails to identify himself with natural habitat and his tribal traditional culture because of mental stress caused by the World War II. At the devastation of his ancestral home, he is mentally shattered and alien to himself. Excessive vomiting results from this trauma. The most important question for him is to save and practice his strong beliefs in nature in reaction to Euro-American individualism. He disapproves the doctors' teachings of individuality and competition and comes to realize that nothing is lost if love survives (Silko, 1977, p. 220). Silko's solution to Tayo's illness is the recovery of his connection with his ancestral land and man-nature mutuality. After the restoration of his belief in nature, Tayo grows so compassionate that he is careful while walking lest grasshoppers should be crushed under his feet. And Ts'eh, Tayo's friend, spreads her shawl to pave the way for ants to ensure that ants are not disturbed (Silko, 1977, p. 224). Eco-cosmopolitanism presents individual humans as part of the natural environment, bound in inalienable embrace between human culture and nature. Eco-cosmopolitan awareness goes beyond the local/national boundaries. The present eco-critical study helps in recognizing Native Americans' belief in nature, their environmental crises and exposes Euro-American war policies, a “disguised form of neocolonialism” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 27). In response to the Euroamerican violence leading to diseases and death, the present study critiques militarism, toxicity and economic exploitation, and calls for the protection of “every place on earth” (Buell, 2005, p. 68).

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