

Native American Female Power and Authority

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My great grandmother told my mother: Never forget you are Indian. And my mother told me the same thing. This, then, is how I have gone about remembering, so that my children will remember too. (Quoted in CLC, Vol.84)

This quotation very clearly depicts that Native American descent was matrilineal. The children belonged first to their mothers and then to their fathers. In such society women owned the houses, and the major deities were female. Among many Native American groups, women in traditional narratives were granted both Power and Authority. They had political, spiritual, medicinal power, along with autonomy and equality. They were considered to be the backbone of tribal life. Native women of the past were respected and valued for their contribution to the survival of their families. Their knowledge of plants, their ability to cure and preserve food and their opinion in political matters was all valued. The tribal life was centered on women. However, in contemporary America, Native American women are marginalized by traditional patriarchal structures not only because they are women but also because they are Native American. They are twice suppressed. Hence it is often the case that the texts they produce portrayed women of Power, though not necessarily of Authority. Native American female characters thus are quiet opposite to the stereotype of the clinging, submissive, and self-sacrificing woman. These powerful women were depicted as courageous, independent of judgment and as intelligent as any man, without becoming egocentric or losing their sense of interpersonal relationships. In novels by other Native American women writers, we can encounter similar portrayals of Indian women as figures of strength and power. Some of the most fascinating examples of this phenomenon can be found in the texts of Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich and Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko. In contemporary Native American fiction increasing numbers of female characters who exercise both Power and Authority have begun to emerge. The female protagonists manage not only to survive but also to prevail and prosper. These characteristics of Native American female characters is discussed in this paper at the back drop of Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* and Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*.

Myriad Roles of Native American Women

In Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, different important roles are attributed to women. Three women important in the novel are Night Swan, Ts'eh and Betonies's grandmother. The women in the novel own land and they have magical power, and it is they who are largely responsible for

the cure of the male protagonist, Tayo. The beautiful woman Ts'eh Montano ("water Mountain") is mysterious mythical figure of regeneration and love who appears at three moments in Tayo's journey to help him with the cattle and to teach him about wild herbs, love, and evading his pursuers. She teaches him the traditional ceremonies of ritual offering and the healing power of many plants and other natural objects. She is a symbol of Corn Mother herself, and loves Tayo as he has never been loved, and gives him the power. Through Tayo's connections to Night Swan, Ts'eh and the Mexican woman who begins the ceremony, with their mythic powers he is able to complete the ceremony. He is healed and takes his rightful place in the community. Silko's narrative *Ceremony* is focused through a female deity, Ts'its'tsi'nako, Spider Woman, who is the weaver of ideas and source of discursive authority. This shows clearly how Native American society attributed important position to their women.

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman
Is sitting in her room
And whatever she thinks about
Appears.
She thought of her sisters
Nau'ts'ity'I and I'tcts'ity'I
And together they created the Universe
This world
And the four worlds below. (Silko 1986: 1)

Thought Woman is attributed with creation of the universe, and the Pueblo believe that it consists of the world we live in, earth, and the four worlds below where the spirits of the dead go. Corn Mother, like Mother Earth, represents growth, life, and the feminine aspects of the world. She reflects the importance of corn as the staple crop of the Pueblo. Ritual corn dances are performed to bring rain, increase fertility, and assure abundant corn crops. Finally we learn the fact that *Ceremony* is a story which is written by a woman. She has created it and it is told by a woman. This story is already known by a woman who is Tayo's grandmother. Tayo's grandmother comments at the end of the ceremony, "I guess I must be getting old... because these goings- on around Laguna don't get me excited anymore. It seems like I already heard these stories before... Only thing is, the names sound different" (Silko 1986 272). Thus Silko's *Ceremony* is a novel which stresses woman's role depicting their strength and importance in the Pueblo society.

Silko's another novel *Almanac of the Dead* too attributes important roles to female characters. Though both Zeta and Lecha are 60 year old they are very active. Lecha has mystical powers to locate the dead. She helps police locate the bodies of murder victims through her power. Her power helps her to have connection with the dead. The power of ability to foretell things is the gift given to her by Yoeme, a Yaqui Indian who is her grandmother and the caretaker of the Almanac. The old Almanac was very powerful. It was the document full of prophesies. It was the traditional history of the Indians in their movement from Mexico. Yoeme believed that she will always be protected by the spirits as she was the caretaker of Almanac. Lecha's twin sister Zeta is also very powerful. She had good business running drugs and stocking alms. She murders her business partner Greenlee in the end. The domestic scene in *Almanac of the Dead* is horrifying: a kitchen where an 'old woman stands at the stove stirring...simmering brown liquid' (Silko, 1991:19). This scene shows how the nurturing and nourishing role of

women has been changed. The old woman Zeta is dyeing clothing to ‘the color of old blood’ for use in her business of gun and drug running, while her nephew Ferro is cleaning his arsenal of weapons at the kitchen table and her Lecha is being helped by her nurse to inject illegal drugs. This shows how powerful their roles are.

Angelita is another powerful character of *Almanac of the Dead*. She is the best student of Bartholomeo, a communist working with Indians in the mountains. She knows that communism does not hold the secrets for Indians. The communists rewrite history and do not want the Indians to remember their own uprisings their own resistance. Angelita La Escapia, Yaqui, Lecha and Zeta are powerful forces for political and social change. La Escapia is a Mayan woman who is part of a secret army of poor villagers all over Chiapas preparing for an armed rebellion. Angelita is a dangerous, crazy woman from the coast. There are rumors that she had seduced El Feo. She laughs and makes fun of everything including uprisings. She sends El Feo to Tacho to get reports about General J and the “Security Forces”, including the Police Chief and other in El Group. Angelita says about the forthcoming changes: “A great ‘change’ is approaching; soon the signs of the change will appear on the horizon” (Silko, 1991:468). Her changes inspire Native Americans to unite against the destroyers.

Powerful Role of Fluor

Louis Erdrich has created a fearful female character named Fluor in her fiction *Tracks*. Fleur Pillager is most closely associated with the power of the Bear Spirit: She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. (Erdrich 1988: 12). When a girl, Fleur nearly drowns twice, and both times, according to local legend, she causes the men who either did or did not rescue her to take her place in the world of the dead (Erdrich 1988: 10-11). Fleur Pillager is an exemplification of traditional Chippewa power, and she owes her power to her spirit guardian, Misshepeshu, the water spirit man. Pauline/Leopolda notes: Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person. (Erdrich 1988: 31). Fleur is a powerful medicine woman whose bear power enables her to affect wonderful cures. Men fear Fleur because early in her life every man she came into contact with would die. Erdrich here depicts the magical power of Native American women through the character Fluor.

Lulu Fluor’s daughter is a powerful, independent woman, who through her children ties herself to a majority of tribal families, which in turn bestows to her the potency to control situations and events to her liking. Nector signs papers to remove Lulu’s family from ancestral lands to build a factory that manufactures, “things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs. A load of foolishness that was” (Erdrich 1993: 283), Lulu refuses the tribe’s decision to relocate her family and any financial restitution to her property she saves herself, her boys, her land by threatening that she will reveal the paternity of each one of her boys. Lulu even does a good job raising her sons to be strong people despite not having strong father figures. She uses her boys’

paternity as a weapon of knowledge and the law against the tribe: Before I'd move the Lamartine household I'd hit the tribe with a fistful of paternity suits that would make their heads spin. Some of them had forgotten until then that I'd even had their son. Still others must have wondered. I could see the back neck hair on the wives all over that room prickle. So it was (Erdrich 1993: 285). Lulu and Marie are the dominant women in the book. Lulu is acutely aware of her sexual power and she uses it to get what she wants.

Pauline Pulayat is an important character in Erdrich's novel *Tracks*. Pauline tries to assimilate into mainstream America and hence she uses her immense power towards negative and often self-destructive ends. Marie is the daughter of Napoleon Morrissey who is also very powerful character. But mainstream America doesn't give Pauline and Marie any authority though they are powerful. As Marie cannot become authoritative she makes her husband Tribal chairman, a man of authority. Understanding of the land as feminine itself gives female strength, courage, and sexuality in Native American culture. No doubt the Chippewa tribe seems to be male dominated, as it is the men who run the tribal council, but in the *Love Medicine* Marie and Lulu are strong matriarchal figures. One of the two mothers, Marie Kashpaw, is married to the chairman of the tribe, and she proudly says that she has made her husband what he is and her children know that it is true. The other mother, Lulu Lamartine, runs her family with equal strength though she doesn't maintain good relation with any of her husbands. Despite the fact that they have lived very different lives, Marie and Lulu have a great deal in common. They are both very prideful women who are strong matriarchal figure. Marie feels pride in her position as Nector's wife and the respected mother of many children and foster children. Lulu brings up her eight sons without any help from the men in her life. Thus these two women are strong matriarchal figures in *Love Medicine*.

A vision of herself as powerful gives Marie courage: 'I was rippling gold. And now this man has left her, just as she has been bragging to her daughter that he could not keep away from her, and remembering with pride how she had 'snared him' at fourteen. This time she does not get her strength from a vision of herself as capable of miracles, but from her own self-confident view: They would say Marie Kashpaw was down in the dirt. They would say how her husband had left her for dirt. They would say I got all that was coming, head so proud. But I would not care if Marie Kashpaw had to wear an old shroud. I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ended up the wife of the chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I'd still be Marie. Marie. Star of the Sea! I'd shine when they stripped off the wax! I could walk through windows' (Erdrich 1993: 165).

Marie decides to use her *power*, however, to propel Nector into a position of *authority*: I had plans, and there was no use him trying to get out of them. I'd known from the beginning I had married a man with brains. But the brains wouldn't matter unless I kept him from the bottle. He would pour them down the drain, where his liquor went, unless I stopped the holes, wore him out, dragged him back each time he drank, and tied him to the bed with strong ropes. I had decided I was going to make him into something big on the reservation. (Erdrich 1993:66) Indeed she does: Nector ends up as tribal chairman. Significantly, though Marie is by far the stronger figure of the two, she does not aspire to a position of authority on her own behalf. Marie yearns to become a saint because she associates martyrdom with power. Rather than remaining an abstract concept, her yearning results in the specific visualization of herself as St. Marie. She

envisions herself becoming a saint's statue, yet the picture combines the gold of a Catholic statue with the ocean shells of native religions: "And I'd be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells ..." (Erdrich 1993:43).

Mrs. Kashpaw, wife of the tribal chairman. But because female power is no longer viable in the Native American culture, Marie's new identity comes not through herself, but through Nector. Although we see Marie seek and lose power throughout the novel, she does not remain powerless; the narrative shows her to be a powerful survivor. It is this identity as a strong survivor which finally gives Marie her clear sense of subjectivity and allows her to achieve a healthy, balanced identity. As a young girl, she attempts to gain power and subjectivity through Catholicism; as a young woman, she uses her position as wife and mother to empower herself.

Thus through the characters discussed above we can very clearly get an idea about Native American female characters who are very powerful. They play the main role in the creation of the earth and the people. They have magical, political spiritual and healing power. The women characters are very good examples of the female American strength. These characters represent power and glory.

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