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An Ecofeministic Reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, *Lullaby* and *Yellow Woman*

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Born in Albuquerque New Mexico, Leslie Marmon Silko is a prominent Native American writer who rose to prominence in the seventies. Novelist, short story writer, literary critic and essayist, Silko has contributed immensely in the establishment of Native American literature as a serious branch of literary studies in the American literature. What characterizes her writing is an unchanging allegiance to her indigenous worldview and understandings. Writing within her indigenous cultural framework, Silko provides valuable insights into the Native American perspectives regarding life and literature. Using her cultural narratives and indigenous discourse, Silko redefines the aesthetic premise of the fictional works she produces, simultaneously forcing the reader to undergo a shift in his/ her horizon of expectation. Interestingly, most of her works depict obvious undercurrents of ecofeminism although as her essays suggest, this characteristic trait is inherited by her as a legacy from the cultural narratives of the Laguna tribal community to which she belongs. Putting her cultural wisdom in the backdrop an ecofeministic analysis of three of the Silko's short stories from the collection titled *Storyteller* (1981) provides us with useful insights that would help the readers to engage in a cross cultural dialogue adding to the scope and validity of ecofeminism in a Native American context.

In the backdrop of Euro-American history, ecofeministic developed only recently as serious aspect of literary theory. What is noteworthy in the development of ecofeministic in America is the fact that it arose alongside many other new theoretical schools all enjoying an open minded reception and welcoming appraisal of American readership. This was in consequence to the fact that during the second half of the twentieth century the American academia had realized the arbitrariness of long held beliefs and principles regarding race gender and class that were seriously challenged by alternative perspectives. These alternative perspectives derived added impetus at national as well as international levels for they served as possible solutions to the devastation and destruction witnessed by humanity through the two world wars and different other wars that followed in the second half of the twentieth century. During the sixties which served as watershed, American academia reviewed its outlook upon the marginalized and deprived writers of colour. Minority and women writers started to gain added significance and consequent recognition. Writers from the past that had been ignored started to be unearthed from historical archives and read again as a measure to revitalize their writing in an altogether different world perspective. Native American writers emerged during the second half of the twentieth century by building a bridge between their cultural outlooks and the changed perspectives of the dominant white American academia. Moreover, Native American literature witnessed a renaissance which was in some ways triggered by the winning of Pulitzer Prize by a Native American writer N Scott Momaday for his novel *House Made of Dawn* published in 1968. He was followed by some more writers like Vine Deloria, jr, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko. Almost all these writers write with an unalterable loyalty to their indigenous world views and indigenous perspectives. Interestingly, these perspectives show a remarkable

difference from the white patriarchal assumptions regarding nature, environment and women. A cursory look at the principle themes and outlooks presented by these writers would evince obvious ecofeministic tendencies to any non native reader.

Regarding ecofeminism Greta Gaard observes:

Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature.

(1993:1)

As a call to end all oppressions, ecofeminism connects the oppression of women and all other oppressed groups with the oppression of nature arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Theoretically it aligns with a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other non dominant groups-a self that is interconnected with all life. Ecofeminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. Similarly ecofeminism argues that the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women. By means of this association, women are aligned with 'emotion', 'animals', 'nature', and the 'body', while simultaneously men are aligned with 'reason', 'humans', 'culture', and the 'mind' which are elevated in value by the nature of this association. Ecofeminists work to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth.

Acknowledging the ecofeministic concerns of Native American writers, Greta Gaard writes:

As a preface, it is worth noting that in the United States ecofeminist theory has been articulated largely from a white feminist viewpoint. Perhaps Native American women have not needed to build ecofeminist theory because their own cultures provide them with an ample understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and nature. But for those feminists who have no such heritage to rely upon, ecofeminism has much to offer.

(1993:295)

Most of the Native American writers in general and women writers in particular show a deep concern for the environment and lay stress upon living in harmony with the immediate as well as the world environment. Writers like N Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, and Allen Paula Gunn share these seminal concerns owing to some shared cultural perspectives. Native American world views and perspectives that emerge from their writings show the importance of harmonious relationship with both animate as well as inanimate aspects of our environment for both men as well as women. Long back since the emergence of Columbus the colonial view of conquering the American wilderness had been fictionalized and ingrained into the male white American racist psyche. Evidences of depicting the American as a Native American women in an Eden like setting welcoming the European immigrant had been fictionalized in many accounts like the story of Pocahontas (Bataille 2001: 2). It was against these colonial outlooks that native

writers stood putting forth their world views which primarily served as viable solutions for an American psyche that had been founded upon racist assumptions. Written at the onset of Native American Renaissance Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) especially share these thematic concerns. Silko continued to write and further elaborated her indigenous world views depicting clear ecofeministic undertones. She published a collection of short stories in 1981 titled *Storyteller* wherein she gives a fair expression to her cultural perspectives.

However, analyzing Silko's work from an ecofeministic perspective has to be undertaken within the context of her seminal concern for Native American sovereignty. Silko derives her perspectives from her indigenous cultural understanding and ecofeminism themes that are visible to a non native are cultural affirmations for the Native individual. Approaching Native American writers from ecofeministic theoretical premise cannot easily ignore their political concerns. Silko especially writes with strong political motives and a desire for political and literary sovereignty is clearly depicted in her writing. In this context, Silko's three short stories namely "Storyteller", "Lullaby" and "Yellow Woman" all can be read as anti-colonial documents wherein ecofeminism serves to resist the white male ideology that has been responsible for distorting Native American identity. The three short stories selected for the paper have a common unifying thematic concern and are therefore placed together in her collection *Storyteller*. All the three stories have a central woman character embodying the Native American feministic values. Silko creates powerful nature-women figures and illustrates that each of her natural characters has a real, wise, and strong presence. These characters are self-possessed, not to be dismissed by white, patriarchal society.

"Storyteller" is a story set in arctic Inuit country near Bethel, Alaska. The story tells of three Eskimos living in a shack, an old couple and a girl. After the death of the old woman, the younger one has sex with Gussucks (whites) in the village where the oil drillers live, and one day she tempts the store man, who had been responsible for her parents' death, but never taken to court, to run after her to the river where she lets him drown. The oil drillers represent the whites that don't belong to the place. Throughout the story their attitude towards nature is one of aggression and carelessness. The Yupik girl, on the other hand, knows the land and her culture through her Native American upbringing. She is connected to the land and the culture of her ancestors that inculcated in her values and attitudes different from the whites. Underlying the girl's perspectives towards land and harmony is Silko's understanding that asks for an organic relationship with the landscape. She tells us, "...there's a sense of familiarity almost like certain places being a parent or relative, in other words, being related to the land in a familiar way, and there is a kind of security there which I always feel" (Jaskoski 1998: 105). Unlike people who might pass away, land continues to be a constant presence infusing life and identity into a community by means of belongingness. Silko mentions the continuum of stories that pass as a legacy from generation to generation but the land acting as a central character in those stories continues to exist. In this context, stories about land and the telling of those stories, which continue to accommodate changing generations, are the principal means of identity formation and resistance. Accordingly in the story, the white perspective as depicted in the Gussucks conversations and attitude is one of callousness and insensitiveness. The Yupik girl learns from the old woman and the old man sensitiveness to nature and life. Unlike the myopic white colonizer that sees everything through white materialistic values, the girl learns to connect everything within her cosmic structure of understanding. However, initially the intrusion of the

whites and their values had caused a serious damage to the organic relationship between the natives and the nature. In the aftermath of the loss of her parents, the Yupik girl is left searching for meanings and unsolved mysteries throughout the narrative. She struggles to find her cultural wisdom because white culture had silenced the voices of her mother and her culture. She reclaims her wisdom and narrates her story by appreciating her symbiotic relationship with nature.

Charlene Spretnak states that many of the men and women in charge continually “remind everyone that the proper orientation of civilization is to advance itself in opposition to nature” because “we are entangled in the hubris of the patriarchal goal of dominating nature and female” (1990:9). While connecting the domination of women and nature in her works, Silko’s primary criticism stems from the oppression of the indigenous Native populations, which is consistent with eco feminists’ concern for “the liberation of all subordinated Others” (Gaard 1997:5). Silko binds the land, nature and the Natives in a harmonious whole inseparable despite the overwhelming white oppression. This perspective is further exemplified in the description of machinery that the Gussucks brought to drill holes in the arctic terrain. They brought structures; portable buildings that they thought would enable them to keep out the cold in the harsh weather. However, as the Yupik girl asserts, it was an effort deemed to fail. It had to fail owing to the fact that the white Gussucks had failed to form an organic connection with the land. The failures on part of the Gussucks to take control is recurrent throughout the narrative. They came well equipped with “big yellow machines”, but nature destroyed them all leaving only “imprints and graves of their machines” (Silko 1981:23). Right at the start of the narrative we learn about the diminishing of distinguishing boundaries. The Yupik girls fail to distinguish sky from the river ice. Such blurring of boundaries is repeatedly narrated with regard to distinguishing cultural and natural elements throughout the story. Silko targets this binary divide of nature against culture wherein the Eurocentric perspective imposes the white culture as a hegemonic entity discarding the Native worldview altogether. However, as the narrative proceeds we experience a shift in the centre of interpretation through which the narrative unfolds different meanings to us. The Yupik girls aligning with the old woman and with the natural forces turns the white perspective topsy-turvy to the extent that not even the white understanding of justice holds and their legal discourse is challenged. The resilient attitude of the Yupik girl in her interpretation of the death of the oil driller as a murder committed by her confuses the reader’s predefined understanding. Since the reader knows that the store man was a victim of nature’s rage and the very fact that the Yupik girl knew the landscape and was in organic union with it, she takes the responsibility of the murder. The Yupik girl is convinced that nature is something mysterious, beyond human domination, and yet a force to be met and spoken with rather than to be confronted. For the white people, it is alien, separate, objectified, and therefore conquerable.

Throughout the narrative the white male point of view is subordinated into failures and confusion paralleling the failure of white cultural structures used to subordinate nature. The old man in the narrative is not on the superior side as compared to the old woman. Although he performs an important part in the narrative, it is the old woman who knew the keys to survival. She left ample and proper provisions for both the Yupik girl and the old man to survive. Compared to this, the Gussucks brought with them provisions which don’t suffice owing to their wrong attitudes and motives. As the old man tells the girl: “they only come when there is something to steal. The fur animals are too difficult for them to get now, and the seals and fish

are hard to find. Now they come for oil deep in the earth” (Silko 1981:22). The greed and desire to conquer is ingrained into the Gussucks who want to exploit the Yupik girl too. Devoid of love, the white driller is shown to exhibit loveless animalistic tendency and despite his human conscience he lacks the character. His act is merely aimed at feeding his ego of domination. In contrast, the Yupik girl does not agree to an image of women defined as per the white Eurocentric binary division which places women as an antithesis of man. She exhibits characteristics that defy the reader’s assumptions of a woman. Instead of being timid, docile and emotional, she is portrayed as curious and willing to learn about the unresolved and untold mysteries. This desire to learn and understand serves as means to acquire wisdom that helps her to tell the stories correctly uncorrupted.

In the second story titled “Lullaby” we again confront a strong central figure of a woman whose wisdom is put against the white patriarchal values that disturb the sacred maternal relationship of Ayah with her children. Ayah is an old Navajo woman who has been a victim of colonialism, as she had to suffer the loss of all her three children who were taken away from her by the whites who tricked Ayah into signing a document giving her permission. Seyersted argues that, “even though the story is seen through Ayah’s eyes and painfully illustrates her loss, it does not condemn the whites, but presents a balanced picture”. He further observes that, although the disparity in the treatment meted out to the Navajos is obvious, but the most painful event of the story, that is taking away of Ayah’s children, is shown as a result of the concern of the white doctors for the children since they took them “to save them from the tuberculosis” (Seyersted 1980: 22). Although the white motive for taking away the children is apparently noble, however the patriarchal ideology that slights the maternal love and wisdom is targeted throughout the narrative. Ayah is depicted as a source of wisdom and understanding that is lacking in her husband Chato. Even though she resists the separation of her children from her, Chato seems less concerned and discourages her by falling prey to a belief in white legal procedures. Ayah’s presence and support is not only the vital element that helps Chato to survive, it is also the only source through which her Native American children could have received the cultural wisdom and understanding transmitted through stories. The whites are shown responsible for most of the suffering of both Ayah and her husband Chato. Her elder son Jimmie is lost in a war serving the US army. Chato is deprived of his job at a stage in his life when he needed it most. Weaned away from his traditional Native American lifestyle, he does not like to raise the sheep or live the traditional life of a Navajo. Similarly, Ayah’s children are kept away from learning their language and manners. It acquires significance in the context of Native American history wherein most of the policies were framed to remove the Indianness from the Indians. Undergoing complete transformation, Chato has become an alcoholic and an invalid. He wastes all the money received from the BIA on alcohol. However, in the face of all the hardships, Ayah remains steadfast by his side. She is reminded of his ideological corruption and unavailability and she comes to realize that eventually she could not connect; “for forty years she had smiled at him and cooked his food, but he remained a stranger.”(Silko 1981:48)

Ayah’s presence and her resilient character serve as a hope for the Native American survival and redemption. Both the morally corrupt white males as well as their Native American male servants are alienated in contrast to what appeared to them the strangeness of Ayah’s character and personality. Later in the narrative when Ayah enters the bar searching for Chato, we are told, the men in the bar feared her and could not tell her to get out owing to their fear. Portrayed as a strong maternal figure, Ayah provides the only warmth required for survival in

cold freezing conditions. Her support keeps Chato going. Put in a direct contrast to the dominating perspective of the white American males, Ayah is the only resistance. She resists the taking away of her children. She resists the Alcoholism of the Indigenous Native males and she resists the ideological oppression exerted by means of white educational practices. Leaving out the Native American cultural wisdom and world views, white education and language learning only leads to exploitation of the Natives as is depicted by Ayah's catastrophe. She would not have signed had not Chato taught her to do so. And later on she understood as to why "the old ones always cautioned her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you." Towards the end the Lullaby that Ayah sings depicts the essence of her character as she remembers it from memory having learned it from her mother. The lullaby depicts an essentially ecofeministic theme since it connects the earth, the sky, the Rainbow and the winds in different relationships to the humans. Celebrating these relationships it proclaims their immortality:

We are together always

There never was a time

When this

Was not so

(Silko 1981:58)

The next story wherein the matriarchal structure of Native American society is strongly stressed is the Yellow Woman story. Yellow Woman or "Kochininako" in Keres, is a generic female character in Laguna Pueblo stories who is abducted by a Ka'tsina, a supernatural being who usually lives in Mt. Taylor. Eventually she returns to her husband, in some versions bringing with her a pair of twins. Yellow Woman depicts a diversity of traits both positive as well as negative. All these essential traits are important in order to encompass the diverse possibilities in the behavior of women. Yellow Woman stories depict an act of defining the contemporary Native American experiences within the mythic, underlying indigenous characterizing. The contemporary roles of women within the Indian Pueblo societies influenced by the white American attitudes and ideologies are reclaimed within the cultural roles defined by myths. Regarding the Yellow Woman myths, Silko insists that such myths actually reflect our daily experiences. She says:

I realized that these kind of things that I was doing when I was fifteen are exactly the kinds of things out of which stories like the Yellow Woman story [came], I finally put the two together: the adolescent longings and the old stories, that plus the stories around Laguna at the time about people who did, in fact, just in recent times, use the river as a meeting place.

(Jaskoski 1998: 95)

The nameless female in the "Yellow Woman" story is accordingly shown as acting upon different levels of consciousness. Half believing herself to be the Yellow Woman of the myths about which she had heard from her grandfather, after her abduction by a lover named Silva, she wants to see him as a ka'tsina and goes with him to the mountains where he rustles cattle. Confronted by a rancher, she is ordered by Silva to return to his cabin with beef carcass, but instead, she returns to her husband and child. While returning, she decides to tell them that she

has been kidnapped by a Navajo and regrets the fact that her grandfather is not there anymore to support her story because “it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best” (Silko 1981: 62). The narrator’s placing of her experience into the already present Yellow Woman myth is an attempt at interpreting and thinking positively about her endeavors by erasing her individuality and by mingling with the generic figure of the Yellow Woman. However, the reader is left questioning the reliability of her perception as vagueness emerges from the first person narration of the unnamed narrator. She oscillates between fact and fiction questioning her identity and in the process inquires about the generic Yellow Woman as well. In the first place, the story does not reveal the details about the presumed abduction of the unnamed narrator, but from her willingness to accompany Silva and from her repeated introspections, it seems likely that there might not have been an abduction at all in the first place and she might have eloped of her own will. She poses questions about the generic Yellow Woman too and the reader can sense an inherent tension within her introspective questionings. The opposing forces that challenge her belief and her attempts of identifying with a mythic figure are obvious, as we know from her first person narration that only her “old grandpa” was likely to believe her.

In most of Silko’s stories there is a constant challenge to the ethics and aesthetics of Christian as well as other readers that subscribe to similar ethics. As Linda J Krumholz suggests, the appeal of the stories and the reception to the stories would vary considerably between the Indian readers and the non-Indian readers. She says, “What serves as an act of transformation for a non-Indian reader may serve as an affirmation for the Indian reader” (1994: 91) In her analysis of the Yellow Woman story, Jaskoski (1998: 33) suggests that we don’t find Silko authenticating adultery. Silko is not projecting a specific ethnic code but presenting before us different point of views to approach an Indian situation and broadly speaking women in general. Moreover, by means of highlighting the role of fiction in modeling identities, Silko simultaneously make us conscious about those models that are enforced upon us as unquestionable facts. Besides as Warren suggests, “the men in power present the masculine characteristics as superior to rationalize the domination and exploitation of the “inferior” halves of the binaries (1987: 7). In this story we have a reversal of the situation as the traditional matriarchal view would suggest a kidnapping of the women as domination of the weaker sex, in this case the kidnapping suggests that the male character was there just to play his part for it is the Yellow woman who is ultimately benefitted by undergoing mythic realization and change. She is the central character in the story and willingly decides her role for herself. The white patriarchal predefined assumptions about women are challenged through the actions and thoughts of the Yellow woman. Besides identifying with the Yellow woman, she goes on to construct the image of the kidnapper as noble and innocent. Despite the fact that he was a thief, she harbors affection for him. Although she returns home after being kidnapped, she is not concerned for the fact that Native American societies are matriarchal and women enjoy a broader intellectual and social freedom. Most ecofeminists argue that for men to understand the need for a “feminine,” relational identity they must challenge their autonomous, oppositional self-identity and value human interconnectedness to natural processes (Gaard 1997:14). Silko illustrates in her writing that the values of females and nature shouldn’t be imposed on by patriarchal culture or economic growth, and with their contributions to the well-being of the biosphere, they should no longer be treated as slaves to sex or matrices of production. She does not distance native cultures from the nature that has been used to denigrate them, but instead, represents nature from within her own traditions. She subverts the patriarchal convention of naturalizing the subaltern by showing that the oppressed has wisdom, strength, and a reciprocal

relationship with the earth. Silko's women find dynamic power in various acts including their sexuality – natural and spiritual power that the patriarchs fail to destroy. The sexuality of *Yellow Women* reconnects the Navajo man with the mythic interpretation of his self as the Ka'tsina kidnapper, and his appreciation revitalizes his resistance of the white oppressive culture.

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