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## **BORDERLANDS OF THE IDENTITY: CULTURAL DUALITY AND NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY***

### **Introduction**

The condition of in-betweenness has usually been imputed on migrants. This condition is most obvious on migrants by virtue of the two worlds a majority of them “naturally” occupy. It is therefore easy to imagine this as these migrants usually find themselves caught between the world of their departure and that of arrival. This is however not to say that the non-migrants or indigenes do not sometimes find themselves at the cross-roads of identity, experiencing as it were, the condition of in-betweenness. The colonial experience has shown ways in which indigenes who remain at home can find themselves within this space of in-betweenness. This is due in part to the cultural displacement through the imposition of a foreign culture on dominated groups. Colonial and other forms of domination are characterised by coercion through various institutions of the dominated into the culture of the dominant class. The result of this is the dominated groups finding themselves in the discomfiting condition of straddling two usually diametrically opposed worlds provoking a crisis of identity. Native American literature besides other questions relevant to the Native American experience, also gives ample place to the question of identity of the Native Americans; who are found straddling the world of their ancestry and that of the invading whites. They experience this by virtue of the unequal interactions they had with the invading white Americans. Their apparent rootedness, that is, being located in their original homes has not exempted them from the identity crisis of unbelonging. Their encounter with the immigrant white population has proved challenging to their sense of identity. This is the situation underscored by Madsen (2016) as follows:

The tribes of Native North America continue to constitute distinct social and cultural communities, each of which has been shaped in particular ways by the impact of European colonization. The interplay between the indigenous cultures that endure and these colonial impacts form a framework of allusions and references that characterize native American literary texts. (2)

This is the argument this paper intends to expand; to underline that by virtue of the cultural encounters between the colonizing white Americans and the dominated Native Americans, the latter was subjected to a profound cultural violence. This cultural violence pushed them from a place of rootedness and its accompanying certainty to one of rootlessness and unease. This argument is developed in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* which is arguably "one of the first indigenous novels to gain national celebrity" (Madsen, 23). I read this novel as exploring the dynamics of cultural contact and racism and its ensuing dismembering of the Native American personality who finds himself caught in a cultural flux. The protagonist is read as existing in a borderland of identity and struggling to find his way back to a place of cultural rootedness and identity stability.

### **White hegemony as vector of cultural displacement**

The novel *Ceremony* follows the struggles of Tayo a mixed-blooded Laguna Indian who has his feet in two worlds: the indigenous and the white worlds. The opening line of the novel "Tayo didn't sleep well that night" (1) bespeaks the restlessness of in-betweenness. Tayo is a returning war veteran suffering of PTSD. However, a much closer appraisal of his condition indicates that his trauma goes beyond the war experiences. It is a deep-seated discontentment and unease occasioned by the unnatural space he is forced to occupy, caught as it were between two worlds and serving the needs of the white masters whose actions have placed him and his community in an unsettling cultural condition.

The condition of Native Americans as captured in fiction cannot be understood independently of Native American history. This history is amongst many things a history of white conquest subjugation of the Natives. This contact between the Native Americans and the white invaders has played a huge role in placing them in the uncomfortable circumstances in which they find themselves. Reading Tayo's plight against this historical background, Charkin (2002) intimates as follows:

Certainly, the problem of Tayo's alienation has complex roots. The novel implies that if one is to understand properly Tayo's problem, one must see it in its historical context; that is, one must see it against the background of the tragic story of Native Americans after the arrival of the Europeans. Whole tribes became extinct without any natural resistance to the diseases of the whites; millions of American Indians perished. But *Ceremony* implies that no matter how terrible the deaths from disease and other causes associated with the European colonization were, the most destructive disease the Native Americans suffered as a consequence of European arrival on American shores was despair. (5)

This despair Charkin introduces here is what I extend to tag cultural despair. The Native Americans did not only suffer the physical damage from this encounter but the frag-

mentation of their culture had far-reaching psychic consequences. This pushed them into the traumatic position of in-betweenness puncturing their indigenous identity. Placed within this historical framework, it is not hard to see how whiteness acts as that deforming force that defaces indigenous identity.

The overriding presence of whiteness is captured by the old man Ku'ooosh, a medicine man who tries to expunge Tayo's malaise. He notes that "there are some things we can't cure like we used to [...] not since the white people came" (31). Ku'ooosh here indicates that important aspects of their culture have been lost by virtue of their forced interaction with whites. The whites have overturned the cultural world of the indigenes such that some of their healing rites and rituals have lost their power.

Even though these Indians are the indigenes of America, the intrusion of whites has produced different levels of displacement for these Indians that they have to constantly seek acceptance into the society. For the Indians to be accepted as Americans, they must show proof that they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice; which is laying down their lives for America by joining the war effort. This is the situation Tayo recounts as follows:

One time there were these Indians, see. They put on uniforms, cut their hair. They went off to a big war. They had a real good time too. Bars served them booze, remember that, because that's all they were, Indians. These Indians fucked white women, they had as much as they wanted too [...] These Indians got treated as anyone. (59)

This is what the marine uniform represents. It is their badge and marker of acceptability within America. The rejection constitutes part of white hegemony whereby Indians are considered and treated as sub-humans by virtue of their racial and cultural difference. Whiteness is positioned as the standard and Indians have to strive to attain this. Tayo's plight is worsened by this rejection and he notes that not until he makes himself available to serve in the war is he recognised "white women never looked at me until I put on that uniform, and then by God I was a U.S. Marine and they came crowding around" (33). So, unknown to them, the attention they receive, is for the duration of the time they have the uniform on. There is a wide divide between being Indian and being American which the Indians have to bridge by proving they are American through joining the Marines and going off to war. The only Indian worthy of recognition is one in a Marine uniform.

The end of the war strips them of this acceptance and once again they find themselves as outcasts. This has a traumatic effect on them and the result is their indulging in heavy drinking and merry-making in an attempt to recreate those foregone moments of belonging. But Tayo is quick to observe the futility of these acts when he notes "here we trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way

they felt during to war” (36). For these Indians, belonging to America is not a given. Tayo underscores this in these words:

I'm half-breed. I'll be the first to say it. I'll speak for both sides. First time you walked down the street in Gallup or Albuquerque, you knew. Don't lie. You knew right away. The war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she's real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change. (35)

Even though they are the first inhabitants of the land, they now have to earn belonging and acceptance and even so, it is not on a permanent basis. The contrast between the two circumstances - during and after the war - cannot be overemphasized. But it is noteworthy that Indians are made to occupy a subaltern position in their own country. For the duration that they are adorned in the U.S. Marine uniform, they are accepted, because of the uniform which symbolizes readiness to sacrifice one's life for the nation. It is only at the point of self-sacrifice that Indians receive some measure of temporary acceptance. After the war, they are subjected to the same forms of racial violence and microaggressions denying them their full personhood within American society.

Most minority American literature underscores the ways groups are maligned and marginalized within America because they do not fit into some racialized standards set by the dominant white America. For many of them, the result is an acute sense of unbelonging which for some leads to the undertaking of self-negating rituals with the aim to adopt aspects acceptable to what has been positioned as mainstream America. This causes these members of these minority groups to lose aspects of their cultural identities and consequently finding themselves neither fully in nor fully out. This is what constitutes the borderlands of identities which is the space occupied by Tayo and the other Indians.

These self-negating rituals are sometimes aided by the racist education system which downgrades the culture of the minority group, creating in them nothing but disdain for their indigenous culture and awe for the culture of the white America. This propels them to seek to become more like the whites. A good case in point is Rocky in *Ceremony* of whom it is noted:

He was an A-student and all-state in football and track. He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So, he listened to his teachers and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him, they told him, “nothing can stop you now except one thing: don't let the people at home hold you back”. Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world. After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque, Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition, and he opened his textbooks to show her. He was embarrassed at what they did. (38)

This exemplifies the extent to which the Indians are led to hate and reject themselves and culture by immersing in the culture of whiteness. Rocky here stands as a metaphor for the Indians who are subjected to the brainwashing of the white system to the extent of feeling embarrassed at their indigenous ways. Many critics of Native American literature have underlined the role white education plays in severing the Natives from their culture. Akins (2012) notes that education features as a colonizing force used by white American power structure to coerce and assimilate American Indians. She further cites Peter Kerry Powers who highlights the novel's depiction of the fragmentation of Pueblo traditions and culture as a result of the "story of enlightenment propagated by the educational system" (3). Powers pursues that "the educational system embodies this active forgetting by disengaging Native Americans from traditional views of the landscape and the wildlife around them. In school, cultural aggression wears the thin disguise of useful knowledge" (cited in Akins, 2012:3). It is therefore not difficult to see how in the example of Rocky above, the world of his textbooks has supplanted the world of his traditions and culture. Bhabha (1994) has elaborated adeptly on the power of the book to engender cultural displacement. He observes as follows:

Written as they are in the name of the father and the author, these texts of the civilizing mission immediately suggest the triumph of the colonialist moment in early English literature. The discovery of the book installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative. But the institution of the Word in the wilds is also an *Enstellung*, a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation and repetitions. (105)

Bhabha's observation is an effective appraisal of the consequent displacement of native encounter with the world of whiteness through books. These books need not be of English literature as Bhabha notes, but of the hegemonic group that seeks to impose its values on the dominated. The books translate into viable weapons in the hands of the colonizing force in the subtle subjugation of the oppressed. It acts as a method of separation of the indigenes from their roots.

Besides, the brainwashing in the white school, white religion is also a hegemonic structure that negates indigenous Indian identity. This is explicitly detailed in these lines:

Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul: Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family. (Silko, 50)

Christian doctrine goes contrary to the indigenous belief system and by imposing Christianity on them, Indians are led to embrace what is most foreign to them. This cultural violence unleashed by white hegemony engenders cultural displacement which the Indians experience. The citation above equally notes the important ways white

culture is made to marginalize and eventually supplant indigenous ways. Christianity here represents the mechanism by which Native American way of life and belief system is overhauled. The Native American culture of solidarity and collective salvation is replaced by individualism through Christian dogmas. Consequently, the Indian subjected to such doctrines loses aspects of his/her cultural identity. Christianity is seen here as a means of cultural displacement and contamination. This draws the Indians into the white cultural experience, naturally obliterating aspects of their own culture and identity. These Native Americans are seen coerced through different structures of the white power system to abandon their indigenous ways and adopt the imported ways. Feuton (2018) underscores that

Government policies designed to eradicate indigenous culture also worked to convince Native Americans themselves that they must surrender their traditional lives to survive as North American Moderns. (24)

It is against such a backdrop that a character like Rocky becomes embarrassed of his culture and takes a distance from it. Such a move usually places individuals at the crossroads of different cultures because they can hardly ever completely shed their cultural past nor fully adopt the foreign culture projected to them.

White hegemony is presented in *Ceremony* as an oppressive force and this is evident when Tayo is in hospital in Los Angeles after the war. It is noted thus:

He recognized it then: the thick white skin that had enclosed him, silencing the sensations of living, the love as well as the grief; and he had been left with only the hem of the tissues that enclosed him. He never knew how long he had been lost there, in that hospital in Los Angeles. (135)

The use of phrases and words such as ‘thick white skin’, ‘enclosed him’, ‘silencing’, ‘lost’ all underlie white hegemony and its oppressive effects. The idea of loss in the white enclosure points to white hegemony as a channel of cultural displacement. So overwhelmed is he by the force of whiteness that he feels all that is left of him is the ‘hem of tissues’. Tayo appears to have lost his essence and is merely attempting to reconstruct himself culturally from pieces drawn from the white and Indian worlds respectively. Tayo’s plight represents that of the Native Indians who come in contact with the oppressive white culture. This culture does not leave the Indians untouched as expressed by the medicine man Betonie:

But there was something else now, as Betonie said; it was everything they had seen – the cities, the tall buildings, the noise and the lights, the power of their weapons and the machines. They were never the same after that: they had seen what the white people had made from the stolen land. (96)

The war constituted an arena for the full display of white power through the exhibition of sophisticated weaponry. This impressed the Indians, imprinting feelings of inferiority in them. So, even though the Indians live with the conviction that whites are thieves who grabbed their lands from them, their encounter with white power, especially during the war begins to puncture this conviction, leading them to perceive whites differently as expressed thus: “the people had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers” (110). The intrusive force of whiteness disturbs the cultural stability of the Native Indians. This leads them to cultural appropriation with the result of them living in two incompatible worlds. This self-hate which whiteness has implanted in the minds of the Indians is well captured when Tayo goes in search for the lost cattle of his uncle. His reaction on finding the cattle on white owned land is illuminating:

If he had seen the cattle on land-grant land or in some Acoma's carrol, he wouldn't have hesitated to say “stolen”. But something inside of him made him hesitate to say it now that the cattle were on a white man's ranch. [...]. Why did he hesitate to accuse a white man of stealing but not a Mexican or Indian? (105)

Tayo, like the other Indians, has internalized the racist discourse of whites towards non-whites to the extent that it becomes difficult for him to call out the whites for the thieves that they are. His proceeding thoughts throw more light on this dynamic as expressed “He knew then he had learned by heart the lie which they wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn't steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted”. (105)

The glorification of whiteness which goes hand in hand with the denigration of non-whiteness has created such a situation where the Indians now perceive themselves through the biased racist lens of whites. White wealth is also an aspect of hegemony because it gives them the power of acquisition. These are different aspects of white hegemony which create a racist matrix. Caught in this racist matrix, the Indians consider their marginalization at different levels as normal and indeed participate in uplifting whiteness. This denigrates every aspect of Indian life and creates in them the adverse desire to be accepted and absorbed into the white world. This explains why, when the rejection they had experienced prior to the war resurfaces after the war, they attempt to dispel their feelings of disillusionment by creating a make-belief world through excessive drinking and merry-making.

### **Cultural duality and Native American contradictory identities**

This paper draws its title from Larry McMurty's introduction to *Ceremony* where he underlines that most of Silko's works “could be said to explore those borderlands of

the identity experienced by mixed-blood people – individuals who, in a sense, find themselves stuck between cultures, neither wholly in nor wholly out of what may be their native society”. This situation is what I describe as the restlessness that accompanies the contradictory identities of the Native Americans. Contradictory because their indigenous culture which serves as source of a main facet of their identity stands in opposition to the colonizing white culture yet they have been brought to take on aspects of this culture which is not only alien but alienating. It is equally troubling that the cultural racism of the whites is responsible for the denigration and displacement of indigenous identity, yet the indigenes are made to bear aspects of their colonizer’s cultural identity which fails to consider or recognise the full personhood of the Native Americans. It is from this unseemly condition of embodying two conflictual cultural identities that ensues this restlessness.

Besides, the trope of mix-bloodedness underscores Tayo’s cultural melange. I read this as a metaphor for the cultural in-betweenness which Tayo exemplifies. When Auntie says of Tayo that “He’s not full-blooded anyway” (25), it emphasizes his unbelonging or his incomplete belonging to the Native American culture and consequently foregrounds his sense of restlessness. This inhibits Tayo’s total allegiance to his indigenous culture and compounds his feelings of outsideness. Unfortunately, this alienation is at both the front of his indigenous culture as well as the invading white culture. His cultural duality places him in a cultural-no-man’s-land and accentuates his cultural and identity trauma of being neither here nor there. The search for healing of Tayo foregrounds the tension between the “white doctors” and the “medicine men” with the two representing the two contradictory worlds of the text. This tension foreshadows the cultural encounter and clash which in turn produces cultural duality. This cultural duality ties in with the theory of cultural duality developed by Leon Chestang in 1976 but extended by Dubois and Miley (2013) who define it as “living in two worlds – the white dominant world and the black immediate culture” (86). Even though both Chestang’s initial studies and that of Dubois and Miley focused on the cultural interactions between the dominant white and subjugated black cultures in America, we find the same forces at work in the Native American encounter and experience with white culture. This cultural duality of the Native Americans is well elucidated as follows: “But the fifth world had become entangled with European names: the names of rivers, the hills, the names of animals and plants – all of creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name” (50). This indicates how enmeshed the Native Indian world had become with the white world.

This intricate intermingling of cultures has been well conceptualized by Anzaldua (1987) who underscores that a new space is born of this meeting as elucidated below:



The U.S -Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. [...]. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by an unnatural boundary. (2)

Even though Anzaldua here evokes a physical border in her comment here, it is the same dynamic which is at work in the cultural sphere. Tayo and the other Native Americans do not occupy physical borders but are culturally located at borders. They exist at a cultural crossroads and Anzaldua has equally elaborated on this aspect of borders in these terms “borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrink with intimacy” (2).

This is not a case of multiculturalism or mutual cultural exchanges, but rather a blatant situation of cultural imperialism. This has produced a world caught between two cultures and instilling restlessness in the characters who have to juggle multiple and conflictual identities. Tayo as mentioned above stands as the overriding metaphor of in-betweenness. His experiences stand as representative of those of Indians struggling to come to carve out an identity faced with the overwhelming force of whiteness. Tayo recounts his plight after the war as follows “They sent me to this place after the war. It was white. Everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible. [...]. Maybe I belong back in that place” (87). At the height of Tayo’s trauma, he thinks that maybe he belongs in the white world. Yet, he seems blind to the fact that in that white world, he is “invisible”. Invisibility is an important trope in African American literature in which blacks are rid of their personhood by the dominant racist white system to the point of not being considered as fully human – not recognized and not seen. Sellen (2009) underscores that “the metaphor of invisibility thus is a reminder of the long history of a thorough exclusion of blackness from culture, politics and social life” (11). This same metaphor is seen at play here as Native Americans because they too are victims of white racism. Tayo is drawn into a world that ironically only victimizes him by failing to consider him as fully human. At a closer look, this is an expression the cultural confusion he is experiencing having his feet in two worlds, both unable to fully accommodate him. This line of thought is pursued when Tayo notes thus: “He knew why he had felt weak and sick; he knew why he had lost the feeling Tseh had given him, and why he had doubted the ceremony: this was their place, and he was vulnerable” (159).

The reference to “their place” bespeaks unbelonging. Tayo is invisible in the white world and vulnerable in the indigenous world. He is therefore caught between the hegemonic white world and the victimized indigenous world: not fully belonging to

either. This situation is equally captured by Anzaldua whose condition of in-betweenness parallels that of Tayo:

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas* – Mexican border and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. (2)

This landscape of in-betweenness is a place of cultural and identity tumult. Tayo's inner conflict is born of this state of in-betweenness and worsened by the fact that he like the other Indians, realize that they had been co-opted into a war in which they had nothing to gain and everything to lose. The following dialogue between the war returnees is telling:

“we fought their war for them”

“yeah, that's right”

“yeah, we did”

“But they've got *everything*. And we don't get shit, do we huh?” (96).

It would appear that the Indians were tricked by a passing acceptance and recognition to participate in a war in which they had no direct stakes and which once ended, lost the fleeting privilege and even their rights to full citizenship. They returned from the war empty-handed or worse even full of trauma compounded by the realization that the losses and gory war experiences have done nothing to alleviate their position as underdogs in the society. Roemer (2005) in providing the timeline of Native American literature, justifies the inclusion of wars in these terms:

Wars are listed, not only because Indian participation in the Revolutionary and 1812 wars was significant, but also because of the high enlistment rate among Native Americans in the twentieth century wars and the impact war experiences had on Indian communities. (25)

The war then appears as part of the white power apparatus that served to empower the white community while disempowering the Native American community. The Native Americans returned from the war embittered, psychologically disintegrated and all of this is worsened by the realization that their participation all along was to serve not theirs but white interests. The status quo did not change in spite of their enormous sacrifices. This leaves them in even greater cultural confusion and consternation as to where they actually belong in the American society.

## Conclusion

Silko's *Ceremony* highlights what happens when individuals are unable to locate a stable cultural home. The trauma that Native American characters experience, when closely

appraised, is not just the trauma of the war they took part in, but that of the internal war – the war of unbelonging – raging within them. This internal war is consequent upon their pained existence as outcasts within America. As indigenous people, they had to undergo the pain and indignity of witnessing their lands usurped and their cultures contaminated and dismembered by the invading whites. Their encounter with white hegemony has taught them to adopt the white racist posture towards themselves and culture while at the same time not being accepted into that world of whiteness. It is this discomfiting state of unbelonging that victimizes and ultimately traumatizes the Indians. Tayo, standing as metaphor for this in-betweenness is in a quest for a stable sense of selfhood. His ambivalence constitutes the confusion of individuals suffering from a split personality. Thus, it can be said that the narrative in *Ceremony* constitutes two ceremonies: one of self-disavowal for the Indians as a result of the violent cultural encounter with whiteness and the other; a ceremony of the search for a genuine self-born of the traumatic realization of unbelonging. This dual ceremony in a way connotes the cultural duality of the Native Americans once their cultures met with the hegemonic white culture. Thus, the trauma which undercuts the narrative is the trauma of a people caught between conflicting cultures.

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**Abstract:** Cultural displacement constitutes one of the main features of colonial encounters. This is due to the different control mechanisms employed by the forces of colonialism to subjugate

the dominated groups. This paper looks at one of the consequences of this cultural displacement which is the condition of in-betweenness in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*. The argument around which the discussions are built holds that the encounter between Native Americans and the colonizing whites, resulted in the cultural displacement of the Natives with different aspects of the white power structure serving to separate indigenes from their native culture. Drawing from cultural duality theory as propounded by Dubois and Miley (1992), Borderland theory of Anzaldua (1987) and aspects of Bhabha's (1994) cultural studies, this paper observes that whiteness acts as a force of cultural oppression in *Ceremony* which places the Native Indians in the discomfiting condition of in-betweenness, located as it were in a cultural-no-man's-land. This produces a sense of restlessness and ambivalence as the Indians become bearers of contradictory identities. From this perspective, in-betweenness is read as a location of trauma for the Native Indians who find themselves not fully belonging to the indigenous culture, they have been brainwashed to repudiate nor to the white culture which they are in the process of embracing.

**Keywords:** identity, cultural duality, white hegemony, in-betweenness, Native Americans