

THE FEMININE LANDSCAPE IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S CEREMONY *

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* O presente texto, que agora se publica pela primeira vez, decorre de um discurso oral, proferido perante um professor catedrático americano, que não dominava a língua portuguesa. A fim de nos mantermos fiéis à concepção do texto original, optamos por publicá-lo em língua inglesa.

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Whenever one sets out to read or analyse a novel or tale by an Indian writer, one must bear in mind that the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples is not the same, and therefore Indian American literature will reflect basic assumptions and beliefs about the Universe which the western reader may not identify or be familiar with. As a matter of fact, western cultures tend to separate the material from the spiritual and supernatural, while for the American Indians the material and spiritual are different expressions of the same reality.

To put it more explicitly, in American Indian thought their god/goddess is the All Spirit, but other beings are also spirit, in fact more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind. Once the natural state of existence is whole, beauty, health and goodness are regarded as wholeness while disease is seen as a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the Whole. Therefore, the tribes seek - through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths) and tales- to embody, articulate and share reality, in order to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality.

The structure of American Indian literature reflects this egalitarian view of Nature/Life ,and for that reason does not rely on conflict, crisis and resolution for its organisation. Instead its significance is determined by its reflection of tribal understanding, and its relation to the unitary nature of reality.

The assumption that the Universe is Whole and unitary implies that all phenomena are perceived as intelligent manifestations of the intelligent universe from which they arise and is supported by the way most Indians believe Creation to have taken place.

In fact, according to Keres /Laguna religion - and for the purposes of this essay we will be concerned particularly with the worldview of the Keres Laguna Pueblo from New Mexico, once Silko is of Pueblo

descent - , in the beginning existed Thought Woman and her dormant sisters. Thought Woman thinks Creation and sings her dormant sisters (Uretsete and Naotsete) into life. After they are vital she instructs them to sing over the items in their baskets (medicine bundles) in such a way that those items will have life, and will take on the power of reproducing other creatures of their kind.

Thought Woman and her sisters are not related on account of having parents in common. Uretsete and Naotsete are in fact Thought Woman's equals, who have the power to vitalise the creatures who will inhabit the Earth. In short, the Indian goddess acknowledges her limited power (as well as a sense of proportion and respect for the other creatures).

Actually, this rejection of the idea of Omnipotence is common to most Indian cultures as it is suggested by the following passage from a Cheyenne tale:

"How beautiful their wings are in the light," Maheo said to his Power, as the birds wheeled and turned and became living patterns against the sky.

The loon was the first to drop back to the surface of the lake. "Maheo," he said, looking around, for he knew that Maheo was all about him " You have made us sky and light to fly in, and you have made us water to swim in. It sounds ungrateful to want something else, yet still we do. When we are tired of swimming and tired of flying, we should like a dry solid place where we could walk and rest. Give us a place to build our nests, please, Maheo."

"So be it," answered Maheo, "but to make such a place I must have your help, all of you. By myself, I have made four things...Now I must have your help if I am to create more, for my Power will only let me make four things by myself."

The American - Indian Universe is therefore based on dynamic self-esteem, whereas the Christian Universe is, on the other hand, based on a sense of separation and loss. It follows then that individuals brought up in a Christian environment are inclined to perceive events and phenomena in hierarchical and dualistic terms, while those reared in traditional American Indian societies tend to believe events and experiences are related to one another, in a process of reciprocal interdependence.

This way of perceiving reality implies that the American Indians view space as spherical and time as cyclical. The circular concept requires all "points" that make up the sphere of being to have a significant

identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some "points" are more significant than others.

At the centre of all is Woman, and no thing is sacred without her blessing and her thinking.

This spirit, this power of intelligence appears on the plains, in the forests, in the great canyons, on the mesas, beneath the seas, and her variety and multiplicity testify to her complexity. She is the true Creatix, for she is thought itself, from which all else is born. She is the necessary precondition for material creation, and she, like all of her creation, is fundamentally female.

It is within this framework that Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* acquires significance. As a matter of fact, in her novel there is not one single symbol that is not in one way or another connected with womanhood, and does not, in some way, relate back to Ts'eh and through her to the universal feminine principle of Creation. In this sense, it would not be inappropriate to assume that although *Ceremony* is ostensibly a tale about a man, Tayo, it is as much, (or even more), a tale about two forces: on the one hand the feminine life force of the Universe, represented by the female figures of Ts'eh, Laura, Night Swan, Grandmother, Betonie's grandmother, and by the male figures of Josiah, the Mountain Spirit, Betonie's grandfather, Betonie, Robert and Tayo, and on the other hand the mechanistic death force of witchery, symbolised by Auntie and Betonie's grandfather's wives, Rocky or Emo, to mention only a few.

While Rocky or Emo, who embody the forces of witchery (evil) appear to believe that the Earth is separate from themselves, a place (no more than a place) where they act out the drama of their isolate destinies, Betonie, in consonance with Josiah or the Mountain Spirit assume that the Earth is in fact being, and that it is aware, palpable, intelligent and alive as all other creatures are.

Thus, one might consider Tayo's illness as a result of the disruption of an ancient balance and unity of person, ceremony and land. Because he was a half - breed, Tayo had not been taught Laguna traditions, and did not share the arcane knowledge of his Laguna people.

Before the war, he had been treated as an outsider, mocked and despised on account of the circumstances of his birth. The only two people who in a certain way cared for him, had been his uncle Josiah and his cousin Rocky. Unfortunately, Josiah died while Tayo was in the Philippines, and Rocky was killed during the war. With Josiah and Rocky dead, Tayo's sense of where he fits in disappears, only to be recovered with the help of Betonie. Because he is comfortable with his integrated cultures and familiar with ceremonialism, Betonie is able to help Tayo find the mission he is supposed to undertake. Betonie's

magic propels Tayo along his ceremonial journey, which takes him to Ts'eh, the mountain spirit woman, whom Tayo had loved, without knowing, from "time immemorial". Before he knew her name, he had already pledged his love to her, and she had answered him with rain:

"So that last summer, before the war, he got up before dawn and rode the bay mare south to the spring in the narrow canyon. The water oozed out from the dark orange sandstone at the base of the long mesa. He waited for the sun to come over the hills... The canyon was full of shadows when he reached the pool. He had picked the flowers along the path, flowers with long yellow petals the color of the sunlight. He shook the pollen from them gently and sprinkled it over the water; he laid blossoms beside the pool and waited. He heard the water, flowing into the pool, drop by drop from the big crack in the side of the cliff. The things he did seemed right, as he imagined with his heart the rituals the cloud priests performed during the drought. Here the dust and heat began to recede; the short grass and stunted corn seemed distant. " (p.93)

As Tayo finishes his prayers and starts climbing down the mountain, he sees a bright green hummingbird and watches it as it disappears: "but it left something with him; as long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on." (p.96)

Forty eight hours after Tayo makes his prayer, heavy rains pour down upon the earth. The rain comes from the west, and the thunder which precedes it comes from Mount Taylor (a mountain that is blue against the sky)called Tse-pi'na in Laguna, which means Woman Veiled in Clouds.

Having prayed this rain in, Tayo must experience its power personally as the next step in the ceremony. The rain makes it necessary for Josiah to miss his date with Night Swan, so he sends Tayo to the nearby village of Cubero with a message for her.

Night Swan is a mysterious and powerful woman. We know that she is related to Ts'eh by her circumstances and the colours with which she surrounds herself. Many signs indicate that she is associated with the ceremony of which Tayo is an integral part: the colour of her eyes (hazel brown like Tayo's own) , her implication in the matter of the spotted (half-breed) cattle, Auntie's dislike of her, and her mysterious words to Tayo when he leaves her. Moreover, her room is filled with blue: a blue armchair, blue sheets, a cup made of blue pottery...she is dressed in a blue kimono when Tayo enters

her room, and she wears blue slippers .Most importantly, she is imbued with a mysterious power that Tayo relates with whatever lies beyond the white curtain:

"He could feel something back there, something of her life which he could not explain. The room pulsed with feeling, the feeling flowing with the music and the breeze from the curtains, feeling colored by the blue flowers painted in a border around the walls. He could feel it everywhere, even in the blue sheets that were stretched tightly across the bed." (p. 98)

Night Swan takes Tayo to bed, and through her body the love that Ts'eh bears for him is transmitted :

"She moved under him, her rhythm merging into the sound of the rain in the tree. And he was lost somewhere, deep beneath the surface of his own body and consciousness, swimming away from all his life before that hour." (p.99)

She is aware of the significance of her act and tells Tayo:" You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognise it later."

These passages tell of the ceremonial nature of man and woman, and embody the meaning of the relation between the characters and Thought Woman, that is the basis of Laguna life:

" In the beginning Tse che nako, Thought Woman, finished everything, thoughts, and the names of all things...and then our mothers,Uretsete and Naotsete, said they would make names and they would make thoughts. Thus they said. Thus they did."

After Tayo completes the first steps of the ceremony, he is ready to enter into the central rituals connected with a ceremony of cosmic significance, for only a cosmic ceremony can simultaneously heal a wounded man, a stricken landscape, and a disorganised, discouraged society.

Within a peace - centred culture, having been a warrior meant that Tayo would inevitably have to experience total separation from the tribe, a role he had been predestined to fulfil, on account of the very circumstances of his birth and upbringing. It is in fact his status as an outcast who, at the same time is one of the Laguna people in his heart, which enables him to suffer the ritual of war and dissolution,

the annihilation of the mundane self likely to produce a magic man of sufficient power to carry out the ceremony Tayo is embroiled in.

At the beginning of the story Tayo is still experiencing this stage of the ceremony. He is formless, an empty space, a mere outline. He has no voice : "He can't talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound " he tells the army psychiatrist.

Like rainless clouds, he seeks fulfilment - a story, a ceremony about his life that will make him whole. In fact, the purpose of the ceremony is to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds below this one . A raising or expansion of individual consciousness accompanies this process. The person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe. We are entitled to assume, then, that a ceremony such as Betonie performs with Tayo as the active participant is intended to restore (to Tayo as much as to his people) the sense of belonging, of being part of a harmonious Whole.

After Tayo walks through Betonie's ceremony, finds the cattle and puts them in a safe pasture, after he has confronted the witchery and abandoned all thought of retaliating against it, after he has been transformed by these efforts and his meeting with Ts'eh from isolated warrior to a spiritually integrated person, after he has taken on the aspect of unity termed naiya (mother) in Laguna, he is free to understand the whole thing:

" He would go back there now , where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills....The plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as stars." (p. 254)

" But you know, grandson, this world is fragile," old Ku'oosh had told Tayo, and having entered the ways of unification of a fragmented ego, Tayo is able to experience that fragility directly:

"He dreamed with his eyes open that he was wrapped in a blanket in the back of Josiah's wagon, crossing the sandy flat below Paguate Hill...the rumps of the two grey mules were twin moons in front of him. Josiah was driving the wagon, old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered « my brother » . They were taking him home." (p. 254)

The fragility of the world is a result of its nature as thought. Both land and human beings participate in the same kind of being, for both are thoughts in the mind of Thought Woman. Tayo's illness is a corollary of disordered thinking - his own, that of those around him, and that of the forces which thrust them all into the tragic circumstances of World War II. Witchery had put this disordered thinking into motion long ago and had distorted human beings' perceptions so that they believed that other creatures (insects and beasts and half - breeds and whites and Indians and Japanese) were enemies - rather than part of the one being we all share - , and thus should be destroyed. The cure for that misunderstanding, for Tayo, was a reorientation of perception so that he could realise that the proper duty of the creatures, the land and the human beings is to live in harmony with what is. For Tayo, wholeness consists of sowing plants and nurturing them, caring for the spotted cattle, and especially acknowledging that he belongs exactly where he is, that he is and always has been home. The story that is capable of healing his mind, is the story that the land has always had meaning attached to it :

The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds with round heavy bellies had gathered for the dawn. It was not necessary, but it was right, even if the sky had been cloudless the end was the same. The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers... they had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise." (p. 255)

Tayo bridges the distance between his isolated consciousness and the universe of being because he has loved the Spirit Woman who brings all things into being, and because he is aware at last that she has always loved them, his people as well as himself. He is finally able to take his normal place in the life of the Laguna. When he returns from the Paguete Hills, even Grandmother realises that he is no longer special that he has become a pattern of Laguna life. She comments : "these goings-on around Laguna don't excite me any more ." (p. 260) . Perhaps she is also implying that ordinariness can successfully replace the extraordinary nature of life. Tayo has come home, ordinary in his being, and they can get on with serious business, the day - to - day life of a village, which is what the land, the ceremony, the story and time immemorial are all about.

In conclusion, underlying its apparent complexity, Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Ceremony possesses a unity and harmony of symbol, structure and articulation that relates back to the American- Indian world. This harmony is based on the perceived harmony of the Universe and on thousands of years of

refinement. This essential sense of unity among all things flows like a clear stream through the songs and stories of the peoples of the western hemisphere, and is embodied in the words of an old man, Hiamove, at the close of this essay:

"There are birds of many colors - red, blue, green, yellow - yet it is all one bird. There are horses of many colors - brown, black, yellow, white - yet it is all one horse. So cattle, so all living things - animals, flowers trees. So men : in this land there once were only Indians are now men of every color - white, black, yellow, red - yet all one people. That this should come to pass was in the heart of the Great Mystery. It is right thus. And everywhere there shall be peace."

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