The Use of Land in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract: Both Natachee Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko are American Indian storytellers. Their stories involve a narrative based on the people and place that exist in the archetypal consciousness of the American southwest. On the surface, these stories are concerned with spiritual, hence apolitical, atonement. The recognition and accolades from the mainstream for these two writers of ethnic origins are tinged with possibilities of patronization: Momaday is the first male and Silko is the first female American Indian authors to receive Pultizer Prizes. Their recognition in the late sixties and early seventies can be justified in terms of the general swinging mood after the Civil Rights Movement. However, without taking any credit from these two authors, it can be argued that the strength of these two authors lie in identifying the evil in the white encroachment and the violation of the land. The spiritual healings of the protagonists of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Silko's *Ceremony* come through their return to the traditional ways that are ultimately rooted in the land. At a deeper level, these narratives engage critically with the political treaties that reduce the first nation and the rightful owners of the land as mere ethnic minorities. Hence, the stories offered by these two authors are alternative discourses in which the ownership of land assumes new meaning, which demands a redefinition of morality. The purpose of this paper is to explore the political dimension of the treatment of land in two pioneering Native American texts, and understand as to why spiritual healing features so prominently in these two authors with their supposed apolitical and pseudo-religious overtone.

The Kiowa Indian Natachee Scott Momaday and the Acoma Pueblo Leslie Marmon Silko are two of the most celebrated contemporary Native American writers. Momaday received the Pulitzer Prize for his maiden novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1969—one year after the US federal government had passed the Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) giving self-determination to its indigenous people. It was also in 1969 that Silko published her first short story in the *New Mexican Quarterly*. Her recognition as a poet came in 1974 when she received an award from *Chicago Review* for her first collection of poems, *Laguna Woman.* Silko's maiden novel, *Ceremony*, came out in 1977—following the adoption of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. Without

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taking any credit away from these two writers, it can be said that the reception and recognition of these two authors by the mainstream audience signals a changing attitude towards the Native Americans that was taking place during the 60's and 70's—both at political and social levels.

Traditional American Indian literature was primarily oral, and the American reading public had historically ignored and, to a great extent, preferred to remain ignorant about different cultural facets of its native community. There are sporadic moments in which mainstream writers offered compassionate look for their native other, but only from a safe distance to add to the stereotypical 'noble savage'. Mark Twain's *Roughing It* is a case in point where the author can feel sorry for the "treacherous, filthy and repulsive" tribes people only when he is far removed from their actual presence (Berkhoffer 106). In the nineteenth century, traditional American Indian literature remained solely concerns of salvage anthropologists (e.g. Alfred Kroeber) for their ethnographic interests or museum curators for their patronizing attitude towards a supposed "Vanishing Americans." The first generation of Native American writers in English was all educated in boarding schools and was forced to forget their cultural past in favor of the great Melting Pot. Those who were writing fashioned their writings after western model (e.g. Mourning Dove) or were simply assisting the ethnographers such as Alfred Phinney, Franz Boas and the like. Indeed, with the change in political scenario in the 1960s, the attitude towards the original inhabitants of the continent was changing. And, I suppose, the tribes were also changing their positions regarding the white.

These changes, however, came after centuries of struggle against white persecution. Momaday and Silko were writing at a time when Indian activism was at its height. According to Vine Deloria, one of the most prominent legal activists for the native cause, the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1960s brought fresh popularity for "traditionalism" (Deloria et al. 1983: 153). A group of Indian lawyers probed into their land claims based on the "frozen" treaties that the federal government made with various tribes during its settlement years. These treaties guaranteed rights of the Indian people, albeit in hyperbolic rhetoric and exaggerated time frame (e.g. "as long the grasses grow and the rivers flow"). After completing her BA from the University of Albuquerque, Silko went to attend law school with the intentions of giving legal assistance to Native Americans. However, she gave up that pursuit and began to teach and write instead. But her interest in land claims, as is evident in *Ceremony*, never faded away.

Momaday, on the other hand, inspired by his mentor Yfor Winters, was honing her skills to become a poet in the '60s. He left his seventh-grade-teaching job at Dulce School at Jicarilla reservation, New Mexico, in order to avail a poetry fellowship at Stanford University. He ended up publishing the novel *House Made*

of Dawn, followed by his quasi-mythical memoir *The Way to the Rainy Mountain*. In both of these works, Momaday refers to the Kiowa emergence myth that tells of his people coming out of the wooden log in the pre-contact age. There is a strong sense of spirituality that ties the people with the land. Almost all groups of the native people identify themselves as the people, who belong to the land. It is the land that gives their tribal identity. But the political upheaval of the 60's brought the tribes to a common platform as they launched a pan-Indian movement and floated "Red Power" as a parallel force of "Black Power." In an interview, Momaday recalled the time, and said:

> When I was little, people didn't think of themselves as Indians. They thought of themselves as Kiowas, or Comanches, or Crees, or whatever. But in the last 50 years or so, the tribal distinctions have broken down. But the sense of Indianness has remained as strong as ever, and maybe it has become stronger.

A sense of pan-Indianness and traditionalism, therefore, define the writings of Momaday and Silko. Hence the ceremonial dawn running that manifests Abel's Kiowa identity in *House Made of Dawn* comes in a Walotowa (Jemes-Pueblo) and Navajo ritual framework while in *Ceremony* the Acoma Pueblo Tayo's healing involves rituals related to Navajo sand-paintings as well as the unorthodox treatment of the medicine man Old Betonie.

Momaday and Silko made their protagonists transcend their tribal identity in order to address a larger audience. In a native voice they assert that the intricate worldview of native people was not inferior but different. They uphold the earth as a spiritual being whose dynamics depends on the communion with its inhabitants. Such view earlier was shelved as mythologies, folklore, or primitive religions or idealistic dreams of romantic visionary. But Momaday and Silko locate their narrative in contemporary America, making the problem of the native individual as a problem of internalized racism and colonization. Their fictive protagonists as world war veterans have trod both the White and the native worlds. This shared experience allows the mainstream audience to see its other from a comfort zone of shared reality.

As readers, we sense that it is the native attitude towards the land as a space that separates the American Indians from other ethnic groups, especially in their attitude towards 'land'. While the mainstream view, predominantly White Male Protestant, holds the vast land of the continent as the Promised Land where they can materialize their 'American Dream', the native community harbors a different sacred purpose for the land. The land is dynamic and alive, and human being must participate in its movement to give its momentum and contribute to its wholeness. The momentum comes through engaging in a story, thereby bringing an enactment of the past into present while the wholeness comes through the

understanding of the beauty of the relationship between the people and the land. Paula Gunn Allen explains it in her celebrated *The Sacred Hoop*:

> The tribes seek through song, ceremony, legends, sacred stories (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverberant mystery of all things, and actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity. To a large extent, ceremonial literature serves to redirect private emotion and integrate the energy generated by emotion within a cosmic framework. (1986:55)

Momaday and Silko have chosen ceremonial narrative to find a niche for their private emotions in a larger framework. Their writings are replete with references to the land. The land is a source of healing for both Abel and Tayo whose lives have been dislocated by the Second World War and also by the loss of their alter egos. Abel in *House Made of Dawn* has lost his brother Vidal and Tayo in *Ceremony* lost his cousin Rocky. Both the protagonists try to find solace in alcohol, albeit in vain, and finally find healing through participating in ceremonial rituals. Momaday does it in his characteristic symbolic fashion while Silko moves a step further by accusing the white of stealing their land and by tracing evil on earth in general. We are caught in the cobweb of fact and fiction as we identify her symbols against realistic background. For example, she identifies the killed Japanese soldiers with the Indians.

It appears that Silko is deliberately both accepting and rejecting Momaday. The resemblance between *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* is striking. So are their differences. Abel is sent to a relocation center after killing an Albino (white man) while Tayo attempts to kill his adversary Emo and ends up in VA hospital. Both Abel and Tayo are war veterans who receive traditional ceremonial healing for their 'battle fatigue'; both of them are addicted to alcohol. They indulge into sex with white women as a gesture of protest or even revenge. But most importantly, these two have finally returned home.

On the surface, land for both Abel and Tayo is primarily the home place, at least before they begin to understand its larger spiritual significance. When Abel returns to Canon de San Diego, "He could see his grandfather, others, working below in the sunlit fields. The breeze was very faint, and it bore the scent of earth and grain; and for a moment everything was all right with him, He was at home" (1989 [1966]: 30). And in *Ceremony*, Tayo is welcomed in the Mesa by Robert, who said, "I am glad you are home...I sure am" (32).

At a deeper level, land for both Momaday and Silko are source of stories that need to be told and retold in order to keep things alive. So, Tayo observes:

> Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if he knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of the sky. (1977: 95)

Momaday is a firm believer in the power of words. According to a Navajo belief, the world came into being as a product of union between the male "thought" and the female "thought put into action." The word is an analogous term for the world. The Priest of the Sun, an LA based clergy of the peyote church, refers to the Genesis to say how "a single sound, a word....broken off the darkest center of the night, and let go the awful night forever and forever.... and everything began" (91). The Priest Old John in his sermon also mentions his grandmas who used to treat words as medicine. But the syncretic religion gets a political dimension when Old John describes words as "beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. And she never threw her words away" (96). We begin to understand how word has become a symbol of the land, which is far from a commodity.

This symbolic view of the land is upheld by the fact that Momaday has characterized the land as a silent and lonely entity before Abel makes the ceremonial run and sings: "House made of dawn..." (191). The very utterance of these words adds momentum to the land, breaking off the silence that used to "lay like water on the land" (10). Only through understanding the wholesomeness and beauty of the land, Abel could find congruence with his surrounding. The priest said: "To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun" (127-8).

Momaday's symbolic use of the land/world as words gets a possible political dimension in the courtroom where Abel is prosecuted for killing a white man. Abel introspects:

> The white man takes such things and literatures for granted. ...He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language-for the word itself-as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word. (95)

The evil of corrupting the land and its aftermath is also present in Silko's *Ceremony*. The medicine man Old Betonie explains the evil design of witchcraft:

> They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white

> people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people (1977:132).

Silko's narrative conveniently switches back and forth between prose and poetry. In verse of the supernatural figure like the Thought Woman, who, we are told, is actually rendering the story of Tayo. Thought Woman at the very beginning of the story announces, "You don't have anything/If you don't have the stories" (1977: 2)

According to southwestern myths, 'Thought Woman' is considered a spider woman who is actually a trickster figure that "travels through the lower worlds during the emergence journey [of the people]. She consistently plays duel roles of helper and one who is dangerous" (Gill et al. 1992: 282). Thought Woman informs that the witchcraft has been set loose, and once set free it cannot be called off. Witchery can only be confronted with ceremonial rituals. So it is no surprise that Tayo's cursing away of the rain causes a six-year-long drought and demands extensive ritual to bring back the frogs—the children of rain.

The poetry of the spider woman that runs parallel to the prose of *Ceremony* further adds that the white men are "set in motion by our witchery." The white men:

> [s]ee no life
> When they look they see only objects.
> The world is a dead thing for them
> The trees and rivers are not alive
> The mountains and stones are not alive.
> The deer and bear are objects
> They see no life.
> They fear
> They fear the world.
> They destroy what they fear.
> They fear themselves. (135)

Silko decodes the omen of the witch and finds a connection between the cheating of the Indian people and the Great War. Unlike Momaday, Silko dares to point at the white people and doesn't shield the white man with the figure of an albino Indian. She has no hesitation in pointing out that the white people have cheated the people of Tayo's reservation people to collect uranium from their soil. The same uranium found in New Mexico was used to create the atomic bomb which killed the Japanese in the World War II. Somehow, such networking of evil could make Tayo hallucinate and equate the Japanese soldiers with his own relatives. He could not shoot the Japanese because Uncle Josiah's face replaced those muddy faces in the pacific islands.

But it is more than identification with a victim of evil. Slko is keenly aware how evil has crept into Tayo's own people, and how they themselves have become the perpetrators of evil. So the main antagonist of Tayo is not only the white people but also people of his own tribe like Emo, Harley, and Pinkie. And the main agenda of Tayo is not to fight against the white but to understand who he really is in terms of (hi)story, in terms of time and space. He must connect himself with the past heritage of his culture and also with the spherical land. For that, he must bring back the rain that he himself has cursed away. He must defy the white doctors who wanted him to avoid Indian Medicine. He must find the right person to conduct the ceremony that would eventually heal him.

Only Old Man Betonie could serve his purpose because this unorthodox medicine man believed in changes. The songs and stories used in the ceremony must adopt and adapt to the changed scenario. Traditionally, an orthodox medicine man is unlikely to bring changes in the songs and performance. But Old Betonie argues that each performance is different, and thereby changes are inevitable. Thus Silko uses Betonie to break the stereotype that Indian culture is a fossilized one, and to send a message to her people that their culture must tailor itself to the demand of the context.

According to the feminist critique Paula Gunn Allen, Silko has broken the stereotype at a gender level as well. Allen maintains that Tayo's reintegration with the land is like becoming a mother who must learn to nurture and care for his surroundings. The process began with Tayo's physical union with Night Swan, a mysterious Mexican woman and a consort of his Uncle Josiah. After the coupling, Night Swan tells Tayo, "You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize later. You are part of it now." Somehow the feminine vitality transmits into Tayo's body, and in course of time he begins to care for plants and animals. Thus, Tayo becomes a symbol of a maternal figure. Since in Acoma belief the land is feminine, Allen thinks, Abel has finally found his atonement with the land.

Seen from this view, Abel's journey breaks another stereotype of Indians being dumb and stoic. The Kiowa Indians are warriors of the plain. Like Tayo, Abel's problem is also of finding a place in the universe. After being beaten by police on the beaches of LA, Abel returned home. But he was also haunted by a family curse. Because, Abel's grandfather Francisco one time had sex with the witch Nicolas's daughter. The result was a stillborn child. Nicolas' curse made Able near dumb, and he remained as silent as the land itself. The Night Chant rituals finally helped him to sing, "House made of dawn" and break the silence.

Another stigma that is attached to native community is that Indians are witches and evils. By identifying evil, an aspect of the land only, as a consequence of the evil of humanity, Momaday and Silko have taken up a counter canonical project. They are fighting against the stereotype that tribal religions are sorcery and witchcraft. At least from the experience of Tayo and Abel, we understand that the

people of the land have the power to resist evils. This they can do only through understanding evil. Since in native view, good and evil are not diametrically opposite but complementary state of things, only good ceremonies can put evil in its due place and make the cycle of life complete.

To sum up, both Momaday and Silko have assigned special purpose to the land in their ceremonial novels *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*. They have used it to identify it as home places. They have further used it as the location of stories and located stories in it as well. They have also viewed the main challenge for the tribal people to find congruence with the earth, which is corrupted by evils. And evils can be meted out only through participating in traditional ceremonies, believing in wholeness and beauty.

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