

Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby": A Pantheistic View

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Abstract

This study highlights the pantheistic perspectives of the Native American society depicted in Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Lullaby". The protagonist's divine and strong attachment to the objects of the natural world emboldens her to face several dangers in her life. The dominant ways of the Western world lead the central character Ayah into complete chaos. But the superior power of nature forces her to face internal and external struggles. She never curses her fate but tries to move with the ways of the world, tells readers about her willingness to be assimilated into an alien culture and retains her faith in nature and its objects. Nature acts as a guiding light in her life. She lives her life by singing traditional songs. The ideas discussed in the study are socially significant in the current century because we can see how man tries to ignore power of nature and how his unnatural ways disrupt the balance of our natural world.

Keywords: Pantheism, Native American, Western world, Alien culture, Traditional songs, Nature

"The term 'pantheism' is a modern one, possibly first appearing in the writing of the Irish freethinker John Toland (1705) and constructed from the Greek roots pan (all) and theos (God)" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). It is an assumption that emphasises spirituality related to the universe and nature. The advocates of this belief confirm that the divinity we experience in this world enables us to live in harmony with the natural world. There has been unity between the natural world and man since time immemorial. Man feared and worshipped natural forces like fire, thunder, water, sun, and moon. "[It] also has had defenders in Western philosophy, including Heraclitus, Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Many Romantic poets, like Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth, were considered pantheists" (Pantheism). Oriental and Occidental cultures and holy texts talk about the concept of Pantheism. "It is in the Vedas that we find for the first time not merely traces or indications of Pantheism itself in its full growth and maturity" (Plumptre29).

Native Americans settled in the Southwest of the United States have unique lifestyles, cultures, social norms, and beliefs. "The elements and majestic forces in nature—lightning, wind, water, fire, and frost—are regarded with awe as spiritual powers . . ." (Nerburn 88). Indigenous culture has undergone drastic changes due to European colonisation and subsequent domination. The relationship with the colonial masters made many changes in their lives, and such encounters also led to severe traumatic experiences. When the natives faced the cruelties of colonial rule, they maintained faith in their own culture and adapted to new environments. The dominance of the colonial masters completely confused the aborigines of the country, who were torn between the two cultures. The compulsion from the dominant group was hard to resist. "Living in harmony with the world — and with other Navajos — is an important part of the Navajo culture" (Birchfield4).

Leslie Marmon Silko “an original voice of the Native American Renaissance” writer known for her ability to explore the subtleties of her homeland’s culture and traditions (Snodgrass 3). These realities are visible in the short story “Lullaby”, published in 1974. “[She] has earned her status as one of America’s premier storytellers” (Nelson11). Her works focus on the depiction of heritage, the tension between local culture and the culture propagated by white masters, and the verbal tradition of the Aboriginal American-Indian and Navajo people. “In pre-Columbian times, aboriginal values demanded the conservation of natural resources, which Amerindians considered sacred rather than exploitable” (Snodgrass 103). The natural objects depicted in the story reveal spiritual elements in their true sense. The Hogan, the blanket made with wool, the creek, the Arroyo tree, the brook, and snow, all of which represent God’s divine creations:

To the Navajo, Father Sky and Mother Earth, who represent the male and female equally, provide all needed to live and prosper on earth. Many Navajo ceremonies, prayers, and songs maintain balance and harmony between Father Sky and Mother Earth. (Utah State Office of Education; San Juan School District. Media Center and Silversmith)

Silko’s story depicts the plight of Ayah, an old Navajo woman who lives with her alcoholic husband Chato in New Mexico. Readers can see the old Ayah sitting under a tree when he looks for her husband in a bar at the beginning of the story. The author vividly describes the beautiful canopy that nature has set in Ayah’s world. The author says, “The Sun had gone down, but the snow in the wind gave off its light. It came in thick tufts like new wool—washed before the weaver spins it” (Silko, 1981, p. 111). The beauty of the night and the snowfall make the land more attractive. Her hometown taught her various ways to adapt to Western culture.

On her way to fetch her husband from the bar, Ayah sits “down with her back against the cottonwood tree” and recalls the birth and death of her son Jimmie (Silko, 1981, p. 111). Readers find Ayah in utter distress at times. She thinks about the birth and death of her son. But mother earth’s care, memories of adulthood, and traditional songs gently

caress her. The author highlights the relationship between nature and the protagonist, Ayah. Mother Earth acts as a beautiful blanket that protects her from perils and takes her back to good old memories. Silko says: “Ayah pulled the old Army blanket over her head like a shawl. Jimmie’s blanket—the one he had sent to her” (Silko, 1981, p. 111). The charm of her natural world, “the dark outline of the big arroyo”, the Cebolleta Creek, the springtime and the grazing cows, the creek, the “trickle of water flowed in the summer”, the new grass and “winding paths splashed with manure” force her to sing “a high-pitched Yeibechei song” even though she feels great pain (Silko, 1981, p. 111).

In winter, she sets out in search of her husband Chato, who finds comfort in bars. When she goes looking for her husband, the snow comes down and the author tells us how Ayah, a Navajo woman, lives her life in harmony with nature. She talks about the protagonist’s skill in cleaning the new wool. Her mother and grandmother were experts at making blankets. Mother nature made her strong enough to spend “cold windy nights . . . on the hogan’s sandy floor” (Silko, 1981, p. 111). From an early age, she followed the rhythm of nature, which gave her comfort, adored the fragrance of bee flowers, and enjoyed the beauty of dawn. Nature welcomed the birth of her first son, Jimmie, on a summer morning. She lost her beloved son in an accident, but her closeness to nature made her stronger. Silko has indirectly emphasised this traditional conception of unity between society and nature. She talks about the beauty of nature and its wonderful objects. For Navajo, unity with the universe is tremendous:

There is good in harmony – the harmony of the Navajo with the universe and all living creatures on earth. When he lives by the universe, he can expect the wealth of a clean soul that protects the whole being from the evil that preys upon his sacred dwellings. (“Navajo Culture | Discover Navajo”)

The Navajo community is torn between two cultures. Westernisation has completely weakened most of them, thus adopting the lifestyles of the majority. Their closeness to nature has shaped their lives. The socio-cultural and spiritual practices of Native Americans have been inherited by the Navajo

minds from their ancestors. Cultural unity and the divinity of the soul are the main qualities of all Native Americans:

The Navajo's have no collective centre for worship, no calendrical worship, and no word or phrase in their language, which could be translated as "religion." Religion is not a separate entity to be believed in or subscribed to; it is ever-present. It could no more be separated from the traditional Navajo's daily life than eating, breathing, sleeping, or the ground he walks on which gives him substance, the sun which gives him warmth or the summer lightening which gives him fear". (Locke 45)

Their culture taught them to unite with nature and worship her until the end of their lives. Ayah's cultural upbringing made her stronger when white doctors came to take her children away. Silko talks about the extraordinary courage shown by Ayah:

She ran south into the foothills of juniper trees and black lava rock. Behind her, she heard the doctors running, but they had been taken by surprise, and as the hills became steeper and the cholla cactus were thicker, they stopped. When she reached the top of the hill, she stopped to listen if they were circling her. (Silko, 1981, p. 112)

Her unspoken communication with the world and nurturing makes her stronger. It establishes her strong personality. Although language acts as a barrier, her natural relationship with the universe forces her to survive. Readers can see that there is a strong relationship between the protagonist and Mother Earth. The author talks about how Ayah enjoys nature's caress:

The sky was light blue and cloudless, and it was warm for late April. The sun's warmth relaxed her and took the fear and anger away. She lay back on the rock and watched the sky. It seemed to her that she could walk into the sky, stepping through clouds endlessly. (Silko, 1981, p. 113)

"American Indian lived in North America for thousands of years before European settlers arrived" (Musolf and Rohrbough 6). The White Masters' tyranny over the Navajo community made their lives so miserable. They tried to impose modern cultural values on the indigenous people. They experienced the terrible extremes of Western culture and tried to

inflame the spirit of the Navajo cultural diversity. Silko has depicted the great pain Ayah faces in her life. She had to go through painful and sleepless nights after the white doctors took her children with police:

She carried the pain in her belly and it was fed by everything she saw: the blue sky of their last day together and the dust and pebbles they played with; the swing in the elm tree and broomstick horse choked life from her. The pain filled her stomach and there was no room for food or her lungs to fill with air. (Silko, 1981, p. 114)

Readers experience the purification of emotions when they see the protagonist suffer. But the moment she goes looking for her husband to the bar reveals her strength, determination. Ayah's ignorance of the English language and the ways of the English world throw her into utter distress; however, she finds comfort in Mother Earth's lap, which cradles its creatures. Though she lives a miserable life with her husband, nature's cares bring her back to life. She detested her husband "because he had taught her to sign her name" (Silko, 1981, p. 114). The white masters destroyed the peace and comfort of the family. They were the ones who designed and determined the lives of these people. It is the divine power of nature that brings Ayah into her life, though not enjoyable. She succumbs to reality, takes the ways of the English world and begins to spend her life. However, we can see that Chato was not mentally satisfied in many ways. Chato found his life so miserable because of his emotional separation from his wife and his job loss. When Ayah tries to find comfort in nature, her husband finds comfort in drinking wine, and he visits the bar daily, which eventually ruins his life. But Ayah's mental strength takes her a long way to get her husband back home from the bar every day. The author says:

The rags made his feet look like little animals up to their ears in snow. She laughed at his feet; the snow muffled the sound of her laugh. He stopped and looked at her again. The wind had quit blowing and the snow was falling straight down; the southeast sky was beginning to clear and Ayah could see a star. (Silko, 1981, p. 117)

Even in old age, she appreciated the warmth of their relationship and knew that it was the warmth

of her body that could make him stable, so “[s] he offered half of the blanket to him and they sat wrapped together” (Silko, 1981, p. 117). In the story, nature plays an important role as Ayah’s protector and she becomes the protector of Chato. She enjoys the beauty of the sky, the snow, clouds and stars. The author says, “She breathed the clarity of the night sky; she smelled the purity of the half-moon and the stars” (Silko, 1981, p. 117). The charm of her depiction of the traditional Navajo characters and culture in Silko’s story is admirable. Members of the Navajo culture venerate the natural objects in the following way:

Thunderstorms represent the male rain. The female rain, on the other hand, is gentle, with a soothing effect. In Navajo belief, there is a male and female to all things above, below, and around us. To Navajos, rain is one of the four main elements of Earth; light, air, and pollen are the others. It is said by wise ones that if you have no respect for the rain and your thoughts and words are bad while it rains, the sacred forces will punish you. The Navajo have a ceremony that restores harmony and balance with nature. (The Navajo Nation: Division of Economic Development)

Cultural and spiritual values protect the lives of Ayah and her husband. Chato was very close to Mother Earth during his lifetime. It was the white rancher who stopped him from working in the field, which left him mentally exhausted and he began to find comfort in the bars offering wine. The connection of the Native American people to the earth is profound. They seem to be saying:

We are the land ... that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life... the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. The land is not the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolated destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs... It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is our self... (Booth 798)

The Navajo character, Ayah, silently worships nature and Mother Earth. Only at the end of the story can we see her admiration for these. She silently worships and enjoys the earth and the sky, which

have offered her shelter and courage throughout her dangerous and painful life. She sings a song for her husband to soothe his aching mind, which tells us about her respect for nature and how she watches divinity in all these natural settings:

*The earth is your mother,
she holds you.
The sky is your father,
he protects you.
Sleep,
sleep.
Rainbow is your sister; she loves you.
The winds are your brothers,
they sing to you.
Sleep,
sleep.
We are together always
We are together always
There never was a time
when this
was not so (Silko, 1981, p. 118)*

Silko’s “Lullaby” highlights socio-cultural contexts that shape the lives of native American people living close to the natural world that represents God. She is very descriptive when she talks about her society that elevates their culture, spirituality, and verbal traditions. Her accounts reveal much about the divine elements associated with indigenous culture. The author, through her portrayal of the characters of Ayah and Chato, tells us how her community sees all-natural objects as creatures of God. The eloquence of her language and style created magic in her readers because we see Ayah and her world in front of us. Readers are fascinated by the beautiful and spiritual aspects of the Native American world. The author takes us into her community to show the subtle aspects of nature and we feel content after reading the short story about a strong female character, Ayah. She is the true representative of the Navajo community, which relies on Mother Earth and Father Sky, the guardian of their lives. They know soil, air, fields, animals, flora, and fauna, water, fire, and all the other natural objects that make their lives so soothing and peaceful. The endless effects of Westernization have certainly taken away the glory of their magical and beautiful world. However, they try to appreciate and worship

the beauty of the natural world and the universe and secretly experience the divinity associated with it.

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