

Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: Hybridity in Identity Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

Ceremony, written by a Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko, tells a story of an old veteran Tayo's journey to recover from after-war trauma and to reconstruct his identity. Due to the inherent hybridity existed in many aspects, including mix-blood identity, occupied land and assimilated culture, hybridity leads to Tayo's identity loss. However, because of its uniqueness and strength in combining heterogeneous cultures, hybridity has also contributed greatly to Tayo's identity reconstruction. Focusing on the vital role of hybridity played in reconstructing Tayo's identity, this essay analyzes how hybridity functions throughout the whole process from identity loss to identity quest, and finally to identity reconstruction. In this novel, the retrieval of the spotted cattle, the transformed ceremony developed from the traditional ones, as well as the changed attitude towards the existence of hybridity have all represented a new perspective of viewing hybridity. With the interwoven of modern culture, it requires us to realize that inheriting and developing Indian traditional culture should not be complacent or conservative. Instead, we should take great advantage of hybridity by absorbing beneficial factors from different cultures into traditional ones, thus enabling it to better develop in the constant changing world.

Keywords: Ceremony; Leslie Marmon Silko; hybridity; identity reconstruction

INTRODUCTION

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American writer, who has played an important role in the First Wave of the Native American Renaissance. Growing up in the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico, Silko is of mixed Laguna Pueblo, white, and Mexican ancestry. Due to her special identity, Silko focuses on the survival dilemma faced by the Indians in America. In her novel, *Ceremony*, which was first published in 1977, tells the story of a World War II veteran, Tayo, who is also of mixed blood, struggling to quest for his identity reconstruction with the help of ceremony.

However, the traditional Indian ceremony is of limited help for Tayo, who was suffering terribly from battle fatigue and being seriously marginalized^[1]. Under such circumstance, ceremony was transformed in an integrated way to cure Tayo. Actually, new forms of ceremony embody the interwoven of two different kinds of culture, that is, traditional Indian culture observed by Native

Americans and modern culture brought by white people. This interaction of diverse cultures corresponds with hybridity proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture*, he explains that living in the boundary of different cultures, the hybridity of culture enables to dissolve the cultural conflicts as well as harmonizing them^[2]. In *Ceremony*, not only does hybridity lead to the loss of identity for Tayo, but also it plays an essential role in guiding Tayo in his journey to reconstruct his own identity.

As Silko's *Ceremony* has aroused people's attention to the living situation of Native Americans, scholars at home and abroad have studied this novel from different perspectives. In Robert M. Nelson's monograph *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: the Recovery of Tradition*, he talks about the employment of traditional Indian elements. Also, some scholars tend to regard *Ceremony* as a bildungsroman of Indians, such as James Tarter, who comments Tayo's story as the growth process from a lost and abandoned person to a healthy and independent Indian representative in his essay^[3]. In those studies of *Ceremony* above, the relationship between hybridity and Indians' identity reconstruction have already been found out. In my opinion, the analysis of hybridity played in the whole process of identity reconstruction is of great importance.

In this essay, the vital role of hybridity functions differently in three different stages of reconstructing identity. Firstly, it accounts for the loss of identity for Tayo. Then, realizing the urgent need to face to hybridity, Tayo gained the motivation to quest for his lost identity. Finally, taking advantage of hybridity in many aspects, Tayo succeeded in regaining his identity and told his stories to other Native Americans. By understanding deeper about the function of hybridity during the journey of identity reconstruction, it enables us to regard hybridity in a newer and more rational way. In other words, it is a kind of active and new force rather than mere obstacles for marginal culture to move on.

HYBRIDITY: REASON FOR IDENTITY LOSS

In *Ceremony*, we can see Tayo's suffering from the beginning of the story. As "he had to sweat through those nights when thoughts became entangled and to think of something that wasn't unraveled or tied in knots to the past"^[5], he has gradually lost his identity, not knowing who he is and where he shall go. Due to his half-breed identity, this kind of hybridity is not accepted by his tribes, even some of his family members. As the original land belonged to Native Americans has been taken by the white people, Tayo, like other Indians living on that land generations by generations, feels a sense of helpless. At this moment, this kind of hybridity in land cannot provide belongingness to them anymore. What's more, the assimilation policy has fastened the hybridity of these two different cultures, deepening the degree of marginalization as well. In such cases, the sudden appearance of hybridity in all kinds of ways leads to identity loss in Native Americans' lives.

Half-Breed Identity

Due to Tayo's half-breed identity, he is faced with huge prejudice brought by this special identity. From the description in the story, we know that Tayo is a half-Pueblo, half-white Laguna Pueblo man who has different colors of eyes from others. Not knowing who his father is, Tayo was also deserted by his mother at the age of four. In Indian culture, it is mother who passes on cultural identity and ethnic wisdom to younger generations. Without the love of mother, the connection between Tayo and tribe's culture was cut off. Not being able to fit in his own group of tribe accounts for identity loss for Tayo^[1].

Not only does his tribes do not embrace his mixed blood identity, but also Tayo is excluded in his family. Since the left of his mother, Tayo's auntie raised him together with her own son, Rocky, but Auntie treated Tayo in a rather different way. In the story, as Tayo lies on the bed, Silko describes that "Auntie stared at him the way she always had.....Many years ago she had taken him to conceal the shame of her younger sister.....Now he would see her probing for new shame"^[5]. What's more, Auntie draws a clear line between Tayo and Rocky, even not allowing Rocky to call him brother. From Auntie's attitudes towards Tayo, we can see that from the bottom of Auntie's heart, she never admit Tayo to be her nephew, only regarding him as the shame brought to her family. Not being recognized by his family member, Tayo must have suffered tremendous pain and loneliness, thus finding no identity at home. On the other hand, being a mixed-blood Indian, Tayo has no way of being one of the members of white people's community. Therefore, having experiencing the exclusion of both sides of community, Tayo has gone through identity loss.

Loss Of Land

As land is the spiritual foundation for Indian people, the loss of land has cut off their connection to land, destroying their traditional views of value, thus forcing them losing their identity. In Indian culture, land is the root of ethnic culture, the core of people's identity and belief. Also, the ownership and belongingness of land becomes an essential part of Indian identity and culture. Just as Silko said that Laguna people ought to stay with the land, because each land tells stories and endow people with their culture and identity^[4]. As the land they have been living on for generations has been taken by the white people, their spiritual support gradually vanish. Even in the reservation zone left for them, Native Americans, like Tayo, still find it difficult to have the same sense of belongingness as they were before.

In *Ceremony*, as Tayo climbed in the halfway to the top of the hill, he stopped because he felt his belly was uncomfortable again, just like many times he has felt before. Silko depicts his feeling in this way: "He knew why he had felt weak and sick; he knew why he had lost the feeling Ts'eh had given him, and why he had doubted the ceremony: this was their place, and he was vulnerable"^[5]. From the inner activity of Tayo, it is not hard for us to feel the disappointment and hopelessness of Tayo, who has seen his own land being taken, his resources being largely exploited, and his living environment being seriously polluted. All of these damages not only have reminded Indians the fact that their land had been taken away, but also have aggravated their mental trauma. Therefore, as there exists a kind of hybridity on land, it leads to the deeper loss of identity for Native Americans.

Assimilation Policy

As the loss of land forces a group of Native Americans to get rid of their traditional culture, some of them are longing to fit in the mainstream culture--- white people's culture, fastening their loss of identity^[1]. Between the year 1790 and 1920, the United States employed culture assimilation policy to Native Americans, trying to transforming their culture to European-American's. The policy's advocators argued that it aims to meet the needs of development for America in all ways. However, during the process of culture assimilation, Native Americans' belongingness and spiritual connection to traditional culture were totally ignored. With the fast pace of assimilation, their traditional culture gradually vanish and Indians were marginalized seriously.

In order to better control the Native Americans, the United States implemented assimilation policy mainly from the aspect of education. Children were sent to the boarding school established by the white people. In schools, they were forbidden to use their own languages but to learn Standard English. What's more, these Indian children, as the new generations of Native Americans, were instilled with the ideas of white people's, gradually forgetting or even not believing in their own traditional culture. Take Tayo and Rocky as an example, who were two of the young generations influenced by assimilation policy. In *Ceremony*, he had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of "nonsense"^[5]. Therefore, it is clear that American schools at that time taught "new stories" to younger Indians. As the culture of Native Americans meet the culture of white people, culture differences and culture diversity have caused culture hybridity. While during the implement of assimilation policy, white people's culture were excluding and wiping out Indians' culture all the time, thus forcing Tayo's traditional culture inferior to other culture in some way. In that case, driven by the assimilation policy, the hybridity in culture at that time has resulted in identity loss for Native Americans like Tayo.

HYBRIDITY: DRIVE FOR IDENTITY QUEST

As hybridity has caused the loss of identity in some way, it has gradually transformed into a motive for Tayo to rethink his own identity, driving him to quest for his identity. In his journey to regain his identity, Tayo has gone through the efforts to seek for the lost speckle cattle of his uncle, Josiah, and to cure himself with Indian traditional ceremony, as well as trying to fit in the mainstream culture by joining the army for the United States. Actually, all these efforts are driven by the feature of hybridity, but as these methods cannot fully recognize and accept the significance of hybridity, they are of little help in the way to reconstruct Tayo's identity.

Seeking For The Lost Cattle

After the death of both Josiah and Rocky, who were regarded as the most important family for Tayo in his life, Tayo felt guilty and hopeless. As he wanted to step onto the path to quest for his lost identity, he remembered the Mexican cattle of Josiah, which was also lost. Before Tayo went to join the army with Rocky, he had promised to his uncle to help him with his cattle. In his mind, the loss of cattle is the reason which results in Josiah's death, thus the seeking for it can serve as a kind of relief for the trauma during his identity quest.

In Indian culture, the cattle is the guide of the soul, the messenger of wisdom^[6]. They are living together with Native Americans, which embodies their idea of cosmology, that is, human beings and every nature thing are inseparable, including living animals^[7]. Just as Josiah said in *Ceremony*, "Cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land for too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something.....They are scared because the land is unfamiliar, and they are lost"^[5]. In the way to find the cattle, Tayo has gone through many difficulties, failing to bring them back at the previous several attempts. However, these obstacles on the way enable Tayo to realize that hybridity has much more power than that he used to think. In this sense, overcoming the difficulties throughout the process contributes to Tayo's mind in better getting along with hybridity. Although he may encounter failures sometimes, the experience of seeking for cattle proved his progress in the journey to cure himself.

To conclude, it is evident that the loss of cattle symbolizes the loss of Tayo's identity. Therefore, the effort to seek for the lost cattle is exactly the process to quest for Tayo's lost identity.

Traditional Ceremony Cure

As ceremony is an effective way in settling one's root deep into his tribe community, traditional ceremony held by Native Americans seems to be the best way for Tayo to regain his Indian identity, getting rid of the dilemma that he is marginalized by the mainstream culture^[4]. In *Ceremony*, the first medicine man who was sent by Grandma is Ku'oosh. He held the ceremony for Tayo by chanting Indian songs, telling ancient stories of tribes, and introducing the landscape for him. In this way, Tayo remembered his childhood and realized that everything is connected with each other. As Tayo was guilt for his curse to rain which accounts for the drought in his homeland, Ku'oosh told him that the trauma can be cured if people still remember the stories of Indian.

With the help of Ku'oosh, Tayo's health condition gradually recovered to some degree, which helped him to find the connection back to Native Americans. However, when Tayo described the scene during the war, and his pain caused by white culture's assimilation, Ku'oosh, as a traditional medicine man, could not image the modern weapons and changeable world. Therefore, Tayo's trauma on the spiritual level still cannot be cured by traditional ceremony^[6].

From the failure of traditional ceremony cure, the conclusion can be drawn that there is no doubt that ceremony is an indispensable part in Native Americans' lives. However, with the change brought by the other cultures is shaping the lives of Indian people, traditional culture should recognize the inherent hybridity in itself so as to resolve new problems faced by modern people. In that case, hybridity drives the innovation of culture in the path to identity reconstruction.

Integration Into Mainstream Culture

As the culture assimilation has greatly shocked traditional Indian culture, some Native Americans began to find new ways to reconstruct their identity, that is, trying to fit in the white people's culture by joining the army. Just as the United States have advertised, joining the army means fighting for Americans, in this way, everyone is a part of Americans. Tayo, being one of them, joined the army and tried to gain a new identity in the mainstream culture. Emo, one of Indian friends of Tayo, had also joined the army at that time. He always boosts his experiences during the war time, which reflects the false fulfilling sense and false identity recognition for Indians. "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.....They never asked me if I was Indian; sold me as much beer as I could drink"^[5]. However, after the war, everything they had vanished as they took off that uniform, because what white people really blessed were the uniform, not the Indians.

It enables to explain why Tayo's illness worsens after he came back from the war. As the war has fasten the pace for them to receive the views of values and the ways of lives of the white, Native Americans indeed had an opportunity to fit in the American community. On the other hand, the quick assimilation process has fasten the vanish of Indian traditional culture, too. Even if those Native Americans had gone through the change in thinking and minds, they are still excluded by the mainstream culture, having no sense of belongingness in America^[7]. Therefore, the integration into mainstream culture without regarding traditional culture cannot meet the requirement of culture hybridity, thus failing to regain the identity.

HYBRIDITY: HELPER FOR IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

Although the journey to quest for identity has encountered many difficulties and failures, driven by hybridity, Tayo has made progress in identity reconstruction. In *Ceremony*, the spotted cattle symbolize the energy of mix-blood creature. Also, the transformed ceremony combines modern culture with Indian's traditional culture, showing culture hybridity. In addition, Tayo began to recognize, accept and make use of the hybridity in his identity, his land, and his own culture. This changed attitude has purified his spiritual world, assisting him to reconstruct his identity. In this way, hybridity serves as a helper for identity reconstruction.

Retrieval Of Spotted Cattle

In *Ceremony*, the retrieval of spotted cattle has played an vital role in reconstructing Tayo's identity. From Josiah's description, these spotted cattle were descendants of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite^[5]. Because of the mix-blood feature, this kind of cattle can endure drought and hard days, showing extremely strong and adaptable vitality. Besides, even these cattle were caught and enclosed by the white people in unfamiliar place, they persisted running towards south where their homeland situated. Tayo, who is of half-breed identity, just like the cattle. Having experienced a lot of sufferings and trauma, he still doesn't want to give up regaining his identity.

When Tayo finally found the lost cattle back, his goodness--- Ts'eh felt happy and said something like this: "It's almost completed; we are coming to the end soon"^[5]. Here, what Ts'eh refers, I think, is the completion of Tayo's identity reconstruction. By realizing the importance of hybrid cattle, Tayo has realized the unique function the hybridity has in recovering his identity. By trying to find back the cattle to homeland, Tayo has recognized that the ultimate destination to reconstruct his identity is to find way back to his own traditional culture.

In addition, in his way of finding spotted cattle, Tayo has a new understanding about hybridity. Not only does hybridity enable Indians to adapt to changes in environment, but also it can absorb beneficial factors from heterogeneous culture to better develop its own culture. Therefore, the identity loss caused by the hybridity is the excuse for being afraid of changing. Actually, taking advantage of hybridity in the community of Native American appropriately is able to gain continuous power from different cultures, promoting the development of Native American's culture^[6].

Transformed Ceremony Cure

As the traditional ceremony cannot cure Tayo's spiritual trauma, Silko has shaped another medicine man, Betonie, who is also a representative of hybrid identity, just like Tayo. Betonie seems to know better about Tayo's pain for they share the common hybridity in some way. As a large part of Tayo's sufferings came from the white people, Betonie told stories to Tayo that actually all the white people are the product of Indian witchery, so Indians are able to control them^[6]. Believing in this story, Tayo didn't feel afraid of them anymore, instead regaining confidence in his own identity.

During the ceremony, the four tasks which Betonie has given to Tayo are respectively finding the brightest star, seeking back the spotted cattle, climbing up the scared mountain and falling in love with a woman. Actually, the accomplishment of each task is a chance for Tayo to transform his own views. In the process of ceremony, Tayo is gradually open to new things. Especially when he met

Ts'eh, Tayo's inner trauma began to be cured by love and comfort^[7]. At last, after finishing all the procedures of ceremony, Tayo went back to Indian tribes, which means he has brought new factors to traditional ceremony.

In addition, during his treatment to Tayo, besides traditional things of Indian's, Betonie has also brought some modern things in ceremony, such as telephone book, casted cans and calendar. When Tayo felt confused about these things, Betonie explained that the transformation of the traditional ceremony is shaped to meet the need of time^[7]. At this time, Tayo has figured out the significance of changing in the hybridized culture, reconstructing his identity back to his tribes.

Acceptance Of Hybridity

In *Ceremony*, what helps Tayo to recover from spiritual trauma the most is his attitude towards hybridity in all aspects, including half-breed identity, industrialized land, assimilated culture, as well as transformed ceremony. As to the land occupied by the white people, Ts'eh said, "But as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together"^[5]. Actually, this kind of remembrance is the reminder of identity from the bottom of heart, which means that Tayo has accepted the hybridity identity, so does the changes to his tribes, land, and Native Americans. While at this moment, he doesn't feel at loss at all because he has seized new energy bursting inside, that is, the real recognition of his own identity.

At the end of the story, Tayo returned back to his tribes, and told his own story to Native Americans, which symbolizes the acceptance of Tayo by his tribe, and the completion of Tayo's journey to reconstruct his identity. There's one more thing which embodies the recognition of hybridity in Indian community. As Tayo sat on a chair telling his stories, the back of the chair was printed with "ST. JOSEPH MISSION", which made the chair not so fit in Indian culture. However, Tayo saw people were nodding at him, showing a kind of recognition. It seems that this kind of harmony is the mark that Native Americans have absorbed dialectically the modern culture of white people into their own culture^[6]. In this way, Tayo has succeeded in reconstructing his identity in the hybridity of multiple cultures.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, hybridity, though leads to identity loss sometimes, is able to exert its huge energy in the process of the identity reconstruction for Native Americans. First of all, it requires people to face the existed hybridity in all aspects of lives, including personal bloodline, residential land as well as external prejudice and temptation. Then, strong mind and great courage are needed to overcome difficulties and failures, moving forward relentlessly in this hybridized world. Last but not the least, the beneficial factor of hybridity should be taken advantage in the development of traditional ethnic culture. By analyzing Tayo's journey of identity reconstruction, the important role of hybridity played in the whole process is emphasized, leaving us to rethink the living condition of Native Americans.

In *Ceremony*, mix-blood characters are created to affirm their identities in face of the assimilation by the modern culture of white people, their mixed identities are employed as a powerful weapon to defend the western colonialism. As Tayo's story should never be confined in himself, he is the representative of many Native Americans who are confused about their own identity position in the convergence of multiple kinds of cultures, thus carrying enlightenment function in reality.

Tayo's experience of reconstructing his identity seeks a path of cultural development for Indians with hybridity troubles by reinventing themselves, there is no way to develop traditional culture by remaining still and stubborn at the point of cultural convergence. In other words, only do Native Americans absorb heterogeneous culture critically and dialectically can they properly handle the hybridity in their own culture. Therefore, faced with the strong crush of mainstream culture, Native Americans ought to handle the challenges bravely and wisely. At the meantime, the absorption of excellent factors from modern mainstream culture is of great help to find the equilibrium in hybridity, enabling Indian traditional culture develop in a better way.

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