

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORK OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO

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Abstract

The paper discusses Leslie Marmon Silko's contribution as a writer born and bred in the Four-Corner Area of the United States (where the states of Utah, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico come together), a contact zone characterized by the meeting of three cultures: Pueblo, Chicano and Anglo-American. A mixed-race woman, Silko was perhaps the most suitable person, because of her family heritage and her life at the limits of the Laguna Pueblo, to explore multiculturalism from both a Native and a Euro-American perspective. She has become a bridge between cultures, writing for a Native American and a planet-wide audience. We explore Silko's best-known work, the novel *Ceremony* and the short story *Yellow Woman*, focusing on the new literary devices and philosophical perspectives that open up through intercultural mediation.

Keywords: *contact zone, ethnicity, multiculturalism, The South West, Pueblo culture, kachina spirit.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication refers to the communication between people from different cultures. It is a process in which cultures meet and exchange symbolic interpretations and values, attempting to understand and integrate the different

ways in which cultures behave, communicate and perceive the world around them. It is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional and contextual process in which people from different cultures interact and exchange cultural significance and value.

University courses and academic textbooks in Intercultural Communication began to appear in the 1970s in the USA, whereas in Europe, the first university courses in Intercultural Communication appeared in the 1980s. Intercultural Communication studies involve multisource data and a mixed methodology, to research the communication forms and codes specific to the cultures meeting in a contact zone.

Intercultural communication postulates the presence of different cultures in the same country or region, and the area where these cultures meet can be defined as a contact zone. Mary Louise Pratt defined the term "contact zone" in her 1991 address to the Modern Language Association entitled "Arts of the Contact Zone": "I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today" (34).

A contact zone is an area of colonization where there is contact between different populations and peoples. For example, when Christopher Columbus arrived to America, the European newcomers arrived with an already established cultural luggage. The newcomers introduced their set of perspectives, values and rules and their way of regarding the world, their way of determining what was valuable and what was without value. The newcomers arrived with the intention to conquer and colonize, and they introduced a system of social, economic and ideologic control of the population already existing in the territory. In the contact zones there are different cultures with different agendas and different values.

The European settlers arrived with a complex of superiority based on an advanced military and technological infrastructure. They believed that their philosophy, religion and ideology were better. European settlers had a "chosen people" ideology, which gave the right to settle and colonize. They regarded themselves as the bringers of progress and civilization, being endowed by God with a "Manifest Destiny" to subdue the continent. Manifest Destiny enabled the genocide of the people who already inhabited the lands that Euro-Americans claimed. In 1834 under President Andrew Jackson, Congress designated all lands west of the Mississippi to be Indian territory. However, as the white settlers travelled West, the "Indian Territory" grew smaller and smaller. To fulfill its Manifest Destiny, the United States Government made many treaties with various tribal nations and broke almost all of them.

European settlers regarded the Native Americans through the distorting lens of their European religious concepts, which masked an imperialistic attitude. In this context it was difficult for them to understand, accept and integrate the

values which characterized the Native American cultures. This attitude was characteristic for the Puritans who arrived in New England. They would have preferred to settle an empty territory, instead of a territory inhabited by Native Americans. They would have liked to settle a land which was "terra nullius", that is a land devoid of inhabitants. For the Puritans, the Native American population lacked a human value, because the natives were not Christian. The Puritans did not even make the effort of converting the natives to Christianity, because they considered them a lost cause. It was difficult enough for the Puritans themselves to make it into heaven, so for the "pagans" the chances to evolve were practically nonexistent.

2. SILKO'S HEROES AS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATORS

A product of two separate cultures, Leslie Marmon Silko grew up within the Pueblo Culture and on the fringes of white culture. Her house was at the edge of the Laguna Pueblo reservation. From a very early age, she was surrounded by the written word and by the oral tradition of the Pueblo culture. She was a mixed-race person – Laguna Pueblo Indian (a Keres speaking tribe), Anglo American and Mexican American, and because of her mixed blood, she was not permitted to participate in various tribal rituals or to join any of the pueblo's religious societies. As a schoolgirl, she was not permitted to join the children's games, being kept on the margin. Silko grew up listening to her father's legal jargon – her father and her uncle were lawyers who legally represented the reservation of Laguna Pueblo; her father, Lee Marmon, successfully sued the government of New Mexico over six million acres of stolen land. Silko wanted to follow on the footsteps of her father and began to study Law at the University of New Mexico, but she dropped out of Law School after one year to follow her intimate literary vocation.

Silko learned much of the traditional stories of the Laguna people from her grandmother, whom she called A'mooh, her aunt Susie, and her grandfather Hank during her childhood period. As a result, Silko identified most strongly with her Laguna Pueblo ancestry. "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna", she said in an interview with Nafeesa Nichols in 1997.

Multiculturalism, the quality of belonging to two different cultures at the same time, is not easy to negotiate and it has both positive and negative connotations, because it can be interpreted as either a new, original perspective that awaits investigation and research, or as a reason for estrangement and alienation. Through her blood origin and education, as well as through the fact that she adopts a white literary form and writes in English, Silko is situated between two cultures, and her work struggles to create a bridge of understanding between the two worlds in which she navigates.

In the novel *Ceremony* (1977), the protagonist is a mixed-blood Indian called Tayo. His mother was Pueblo and his father was white. His very existence is the undeniable proof of the threat posed to Laguna culture by contact with whites: the ultimate absorption of Native Americans into the larger American society. Tayo has his father's green eyes and light skin, so that his appearance serves as a constant reminder of the potential disappearance or assimilation of the Laguna people.

The novel tells us how Tayo was raised on the outskirts of Gallup, New Mexico by his alcoholic, prostitute mother, until she decided it would be best to take Tayo back to the pueblo to live with his aunt Thelma and Josiah. Tayo's mother had originally left the pueblo because she was attracted to the white world. Laura's rejection of Pueblo life is not just a personal loss, nor even a familial loss, but a loss for the entire community she used to belong to. Despite the fact that Tayo is allowed to return to Laguna to live with his grandmother and the rest of the family, he is never allowed to forget his status as an outsider. Auntie takes care to remind him that every step of the way.

Like Silko herself, Tayo is a product of two different worlds, holding in himself something new with the potential to bring about a change that most people in the pueblo fear. Ironically enough, though both Tayo and his cousin Rocky are sent to the local school where they are taught to reject the traditional pueblo lifestyle and become a part of the American society, it is Tayo, the half-breed, who attempts to cling to traditional beliefs, while Rocky desperately tries to be an A-student and become integrated into the white society.

If Tayo's mixed blood and his education in white schools made his return to a traditional life pretty difficult, then his participation in the war of the white people – by volunteering together with Rocky at the latter's suggestion – makes that return almost impossible. Ironically, it is Rocky who dies and Tayo who comes back home. He is then sent by his grandmother to old man Ku'oosh (a medicine man) to be healed, as he had returned from the war in a severe state of shock and completely alienated from his culture, but Ku'oosh finds himself unable to help Tayo by using the traditional methods he has long known. That is why he further sends Tayo to Betonie, a Navajo healer who lives outside Gallup, within sight of the dry riverbed where Tayo spent his early childhood. The differences between the approaches of Ku'oosh and Betonie illustrate the differences between attempting to live a traditional life in the face of change and adopting a nativist approach. Traditionalism simply avoids change, being therefore unable to deal with it.

Sent by Betonie to recover Josiah's cattle – as part of his healing ceremony – Tayo encounters Ts'eh, a Native American woman living a nomadic existence and functioning in the novel as a mythical, godlike character. She helps Tayo find the cattle and then spends the summer with him in the mountains. This

way Tayo experiences for a while the monocultural world that had existed before the white people arrived, but this peaceful existence cannot last long and he will be thrown again in a world of conflicts.

The problem of belonging to conflicting worlds is characteristic to the Native Americans, who feel they do not belong to either the traditional or the modern world, to the Anglo or the Native world. The sense of hopelessness and of loss of identity is common for those who have been thrust into a different culture. Part of the Native Americans, like Tayo's mother, have become hopelessly lost in the middle, unable to move out of this state of living in between worlds. Indeed, the Native American according to Silko suffers especially from a kind of general "drain" of cultural identity through contact with whites. At the beginning of the book, Tayo feels bereft of identity, and non-Native readers tend to follow the information presented about his mother, his upbringing, and the death of his brother to try to piece together a stereotypical, conventional image of the hero.

Despite his white schooling, Tayo has retained respect and love for the old stories – thanks to the influence of Grandma and his uncle Josiah. And although he has not been initiated into any of the men's societies because of his white paternity, Tayo has an instinctive sense for ritual. He performs ritual acts of love for the Earth that help bring life-restoring rain. Silko describes one such ritual: Tayo gets up before dawn and rides to a canyon spring. As he walks from the spring to the pool, he gathers yellow pollen, then sprinkles it on the pool because it seemed right, as he imagined with his heart the rituals the cloud priests performed during a drought. Finally, Tayo offers prayers to the sunrise.

Silko emphasises the need to return to the rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover cultural identity. Tayo realizes that his identity is bound up with Laguna identity, with something larger than his own psyche. It is this insight that leads him to the revelation of who he is, as a member of his traditional culture. Tayo realizes that he has an identity and a coherent self only insofar as he is an integral part of the Native American community. He refuses to confirm the Anglo-American stereotype of the drunken and defeated Indian, and instead he identifies with the archetype of the hero who brings healing and gifts to the community.

Extremely important in the ritual process of the hero's healing that Silko inscribes in her text are sandpaintings and chantways – ceremonial healing rites that invoke spiritual powers. Native American curing ceremonies require that the patient re-enact mythological events as a necessary means of identification. When the patient re-enacts the hero's adventure, his identification with the archetype of the hero is complete. Time is stilled – this world yields to that of myth and legend, the natural and the supernatural meld, and the individual becomes identified with

the archetype – and in this process all disharmonies are healed. As Tayo moves through the narrative and his awareness of the relationship between his experiences and those told of in the stories develops, he turns from an isolated, ill individual to a powerful, competent representative of his people. In short, he becomes a hero. Tayo must reenact the story of the Laguna Pueblo people if he is to feel once again culturally “at home”.

When Tayo returns from the mountains, the old men come to inquire what he has to tell them. Perhaps they recognize that Tayo's trip into the mountains follows the pattern of the traditional heroic journey. They listen to his story and recognize its value. Tayo is now an elder, a messenger, and a bringer of blessings, because he has met A'moo'oooh, the carrier of life. The people will now be blessed, healed, purified. He crosses the river and returns to the village like a katchina spirit or religious initiate. He is now a protector of Laguna and a caretaker of the rain plants. He is a carrier of knowledge and wisdom. He brings a new ceremony. The village people acknowledge him and he is welcomed in the sacred kiva, as a priest.

Tayo's healing happens as his individual identity disappears as he journeys toward the communal identity. In this process, he becomes a cultural hero for his whole community, to which he brings life and health. His journey brings him back home, to the center. As the Pueblo cultures conceive of their world, all orientation is centripetal, toward the sacred center, an imaginative construct evoked in the inward-spiraling form of a ceremonial sand painting. This conceptual orientation makes an interesting contrast to the centrifugal energies identified of modern and postmodern fiction. One could say that the novel *Ceremony* is a cure for us too... inhabitants of a Western world increasingly steeped into fragmentation, deracination, and inauthenticity – dangerously out of harmony with the world we inhabit.

Tayo's journey mediates between mentalities and worlds, creating a liminal space. As Paula Gunn Allen shows in her book *Song of the Turtle*, liminality is a threshold state in which one can access sacred reality through a process of transformation and initiation. The term "liminal" comes from "limen" in Latin, which means threshold. *Ceremony* is concerned with liminality, which is a state of being between two worlds or two states of existence. The protagonist of the novel finds himself between two worlds – that of his everyday life and that of the mythical world of the Katchina spirits. From the top of the sacred mountain, he can see both the Texan and the Mexican lands, a significant detail which underscores the fact that he lives, literally and figuratively, in a borderland region.

Native American fiction is dominated by liminality. The heroes' position in-between the Native and the white cultures allows access to traditional cultural and spiritual values, which help formulate an ethnic cultural identity, which, however, has been deteriorated throughout history by the conflicting relationship with white culture. In her novels and short stories, Leslie Marmon Silko constructs

a contact zone between different cultures, in which not only the characters find means of intercultural communication, but also the readers belonging to the white culture can access an archetypal and mythical world which functions on values that differ from the values that govern the Euro-American world.

Inspired by the writer's grandfather and the oral tradition, *Yellow Woman* is the story of a Native American woman living in the Laguna Pueblo reservation. She lives an ordinary life, is married and he has a baby. One evening on the bank of river at the border of her village, she meets a handsome stranger with whom she suddenly falls in love. She makes love with the stranger on the river bank, then crosses the river and elopes with him into the wilderness. They go to the top of the mountain, where the stranger lived. She lives with him for several days, until she discovers that he was stealing cattle from a ranch in the valley. She escapes unharmed from a shootout and finds her way back home, as if nothing happened. As she approaches her home, she can hear her mother, her husband and her baby. She decides to tell them that she was kidnapped by a Navajo Indian.

At first sight, the female protagonist is a person of dubious morality, but her acts could have a deeper meaning and interpretation. *Yellow Woman's* nonconforming and outrageous behavior by her community's standards often bring benefits to her people. *Yellow Woman* comes in a long tradition of Native American stories, in which a woman is kidnapped by a stranger or elopes with him. Women offer no resistance; in fact, they seem enthralled by the idea of being kidnapped. They are transformed by the sexual union with the stranger who kidnaps them, because the stranger is not a human being, but a spirit being from a supernatural world.

In the Southwest of the US, there is a rich collection of Katchina spirits which typically represent various aspects of nature, such as the Deer Katchina, the Eagle Katchina, the Snake Katchina, the Bear Katchina, the Cloud Katchina, etc. These beings are not gods and they are not worshipped like gods. They are a specialized interface that facilitates communication between the human world and the spirit world. The Katchinas are treated with great respect in ceremonies and rituals, therefore the women who are kidnapped by the Katchina spirits are honored and even enthusiastic at the idea of being carried away. There are different versions of the *Yellow Woman* stories, with different endings: some of the women return home safely, others die as a result of their adventure. When *Yellow Woman* and her children return to the Native American community, they bring gifts and blessings, offer numerous benefits and enrich the land. Her children are leaders endowed with special qualities. The yellow color symbolizes abundance and fertility; it suggests the golden yellow of the corn fields and the golden color of the Sun.

In Silko's story, the meeting of Yellow Woman with the stranger on the river bank symbolizes a journey into the depth of the subconscious, where many a dangerous and rebellious instincts and drives can be found. The river is a border which separates the domestic world of the village from the wilderness of the mountain and desert. The river bank is a liminal space which facilitates contact between the subconscious and conscious dimension, between night and day, between the world of man and the world of spirit. It is a contact zone between worlds governed by different values. In this context it is quite evident that Yellow Woman is not just an immoral woman who scandalously leaves her husband in order to have a sexual adventure with a stranger; Yellow Woman has a deeper symbolic function within the Pueblo culture to which she belongs. She is an agent of change, a messenger and an intermediary between worlds.

We could say that, from this perspective, Yellow Woman's transgression is an act of sacrifice undertaken to serve the others and to benefit the community. She journeys into the unknown, in a dangerous and risky undertaking. Oftentimes, the legends highlight her alienation from her people. In some of the stories she is punished for her difference, while other stories celebrate the ways in which her nonconformity helps her people. Yellow Woman is a heroine who risks everything in order to access new values which enrich her community. In her essay "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit", Silko comments:

Yellow Woman is my favourite, because she dares to cross traditional boundaries of ordinary behaviour during times of crises, in order to save the Pueblo. Her power lies in her courage and in her uninhibited sexuality, which the old-time Pueblo stories celebrate again and again, because fertility was so highly valued. [...] In each story, the beauty that Yellow Woman possesses is the beauty of her passion, her daring and her sheer strength to act when catastrophe is imminent. (Silko 1993)

She is a revolutionary character whose role is to renew her world by bringing home new gifts, without which the community would ossify and stagnate, it would decay and deteriorate. From this perspective it is quite evident that we could regard Silko herself as a Yellow Woman. It is her difference that makes her special adventure possible. A mixed-blood person born and raised at the outskirts of the Laguna Pueblo reservation, Silko travelled between worlds, returning home with gifts for the community of the reservation.

3. CONCLUSION

Through the oral tradition, each Native American generation passes down tribal history and myth in a ceremonial manner. Silko makes use of oral story-telling in

her writing and suggests that the oral tradition in which stories change with each storyteller in each new context is the lifeblood of community, because it preserves the Native American identity, connecting the past with the present. "Within one story there are many other stories. There is always, always, this dynamic of bringing things together, of interrelating things." (Silko 11)

Silko integrated the traditional oral stories of her people into the literary forms of the novel and short story. She created a hybrid form in which legend interacts and carries a dialogue with contemporary reality, in a complex postmodern form. Magical realism is interwoven with the spiritual world, in the mythical tradition of her cultural area.

The writer acknowledges previous cultural discourse and advances cultural dialogue and conversation. She uses the epistemological framework of two cultural traditions, to illuminate and enrich each other. Her intention in her work is mediational, as she attempts to translate the language of the Other, in order to allow the non-Native and the Native readers to understand each other's cultural codes. Her text encourages white readers to validate Native American epistemology, as well as to appreciate the new structures of meaning and expression that mediation creates.

Silko's foray in the territory of the Euro-American academia and civilization has enriched the Native American literature of the Southwest. Her work functions as a symbol of renewal through liaison with outside forces and creates a bridge of understanding between different cultures with different codes and different values.

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BIONOTE

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