

AN ETHNOPOETIC READING OF THE POETRY OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO

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Abstract: The necessity of classification of poetry created by ethnic minority writers to the category of Ethno-poetry stands as a living proof of deliberate attempts to exclude a part of the worldviews of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority poetry is relegated to the zone of that which is 'lesser poetry' and not poetry-proper. However, ethno-poetic elements as traced in the poetic works of Leslie Marmon Silko in *Storyteller* reveal a complexity that is not necessarily an element of all mainstream poems. This paper is an attempt at presenting an ethnopoetic reading of Silko's verses in her work *Storyteller* published in 1981.

Keywords: Ethno-poetry, Politics, Marginalized voices, Mythic origins, Stylistic elements, Obscure symbolism.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper aims at tracing the ways and means that Leslie Marmon Silko's poetry can be understood in the right context, owing to the fact that she borrows heavily from her native Laguna Pueblo culture which is one of the several Native American cultures.

METHODOLOGY

A close study of the poems in Leslie Marmon Silko's text *Storyteller* has been undertaken.

Secondary sources dealing with Ethnopoetry collected from various journals and books have been referred to.

Attempts have been made to analyze the Ethnopoetic features Silko incorporates in her poetry in *Storyteller*.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world scenario is such that it is engulfed in white supremacist ideas across economic, social, cultural and literary spheres of life. Phenomena initiated in the largely white western world, such as Capitalism and Industrialization have, to a large extent, been responsible for harming nature as well as ethnic populations and less 'developed' peoples in the strife towards realizing the goal of a 'developed' world. The result is the gradual elimination of non-human nature and of social, moral, literary and economic outlook of marginalized races. Of this two-fold erasure arising out of a common cause, the erasure of non-human nature is dealt with by ecocritics in literature, and attempts to preserve the disappearing and marginalized poetic art of ethnic minorities is taken up by ethno-poetry.

1.1 Of Ethnopoetics

There is a "unidirectional flow of theory, of literature, and of cultural capital"(Estok, 86) from economically advanced countries abroad, and from privileged cultures towards the less privileged. Therefore, comes the necessity of undertaking an ethno-poetic study of the poetry of Silko. The "unidirectionality of cultural capital"(ibid., 91) prevents a proper understanding of texts originating from ethnic minorities, who may have revolutionary ways of perceiving literature. The scope of studying these texts impartially is nullified by this very politics, which has also necessitated the study termed Ethno-poetics.

Literature by ethnic minorities is also suppressed by use of force. "The fact that American literature of Native origin is sometimes *excluded* from North American anthologies dealing with "American literature" is symptomatic of the degree of intellectual colonialism existing in the United States"(Forbes, 17). Thus, the recognition and flourishing of literature is a political matter as much as it is a matter of culture or intellect.

Based on the various kinds of content, sources, and form, poems are classified to: the epic, the narrative, the sonnet, the free verse poetry, the pastoral, the elegy, the ode, the lyric, the ballad, among many others. Along with the themes and ways of interpretation of events portrayed Ethnopoetry takes into account the culture of origin of the poetry. The birthing of the category of "ethno-poetry" is a corollary of the politics of marginalization on account of races and associated ecological and epistemological knowledge. The classification of ethno-poetics is done basing on the assumption that the poetry of the 'ethno' is alike but not as great as 'poetry proper'. Ethnic minority verses are relegated to the zone of less intelligent poetry also on account of use of poetic devices they consider 'less intelligent' like 'repetition' and use of "nonsense syllables" and Onomatopoeia.

Ethnopoetry addresses, in Dell Hymes's terms borrowed by Webster and Kroskrity, the issues of "narrative inequality" and "inequalities of languages"(2) springing from cultural inequalities. "Narrative inequality" implies that "certain ways of telling a narrative are dismissed and marginalized"(Webster and Kroskrity, 4). To address these issues, Hymes formulates the concept of "voice" in ethnopoetry for the tone of production of meaning. Distinguishing marginalized "voices" from the mainstream narrative structures and

voices, Hymes's "voice" is understood to be both "a creative and a political accomplishment" in the opinion of Webster and Kroskrity(3). Marginalized voices are often relegated to the zone of the unimportant or meaningless writings. As a result, these voices seem "deviant" from mainstream modes of narrations (ibid., 3). However, "As creative non-fiction or historical fiction are to the novel, so ethnographic poetry is to poetry"(Maynard, 125). Also, it is very much 'poetry'.

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American writer. She belongs to the Laguna Pueblo ethnicity. Some striking features in Native American poetry based on "typical Western assumptions about what constitutes good poetry" as "repetitiveness, simplistic(perhaps even trite) images, lack of poetic device, and meaningless words"(Quick 95). It is the zone of these "typical Western assumptions", which needs to be transcended to arrive at a faithful interpretation of ethnic minority writings. The 'deviance' happens in terms of both content and form of the poetry concerned.

Ethno-poetic analysis accomodates different "poetic sensibilities"(Quick, 96) in critical interpretations. Quick identifies as essential, the following qualities in oral poetry: pauses, changes in volume and emphasis, gestures, facial expressions and audience responses(96). In terms of form, Native American poetry may adhere to different styles of versification, and use of metaphors thought to be obscure in mainstream tradition of critical interpretation.

Mythic origins, stylistic adornments in form, and use of Symbolisms that draw their conceptualizations from Laguna Pueblo customs are markers that help identify the poetry of Silko as distinct from poetry written in the Euro-American custom.

1.2 Mythic Origins

Most of the verse narrations by Silko in *Storyteller* are patterned after well-known structures of Native American storytelling which had oral origins. One central aspect common to most of these narrations as identified by Alan Dundes is the structure which contains two basic parts: disequilibrium, and restoration of equilibrium. In spite of this, Native American myths are known to follow three basic structures: first, containing two parts, 'loss' and 'loss liquidated'; second, containing four parts, 'warning', 'violation', 'consequences' and 'attempted escape'; in the third type, the six elements of the first and the second types are combined so that the six parts are 'loss', 'loss liquidated', 'interdiction', 'violation', 'consequences' and 'attempted escape'(Walker, 10). Silko follows these patterns of narration.

Silko's narrative, "One time", about the Twin Brothers who neglect the Mother Corn altar and later redeem it is one example of a story that fits in the category of the narrative type identified by Alan Dundes. The Twin Brothers, Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'wi, are Culture heroes of the Laguna Pueblo peoples. They are

entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the Mother Corn altar. The safety of the Mother Corn altar ensures sustained food safety for the people.

The Twin Brothers are aware of the risk associated with neglecting the Mother Corn altar. But, they violate the warnings. Pa'caya'nyi, son of Old Woman Ck'o'yo arrives to lure the Twin Brothers and others in the art of magic. The disobedience of the people has been described as such:

they were
 so busy
 Playing around with that
 Ck'o'yo magic
 they neglected the Mother Corn altar. (107).

Day in and day out, the people entertained themselves with magic, neglecting the Mother Corn altar. Therefore, Nau'ts'ity'i, 'Corn Mother', was angry. The result was that the rain clouds were lost, so were plant sand grass, and not even baby animals were born. The people starved. The result was thus:

So she took
 the plants and grass from them.
 No baby animals were born.
 She took the
 rainclouds with her. (108)

Eventually, the people realized their mistake. They decided to beg forgiveness from the Mother. They took help from non-human friends from all four directions, east, south, west and north: the Hummingbird, the Fly, Buzzard, and the Caterpillar in order to carry out the process of purification of their town. Eventually, the Mother redeems the town. The result of this redemption of the people was that:

The storm clouds returned
 the grass and plants started growing again.
 There was food
 and the people were happy again. (113)

Joseph Campbell, on the other hand, proposes a 'monomyth theory'. According to this theory, there is one universal myth which has certain characteristic features. The structure of all myths traces their characteristic to the characteristics of this myth (Walker, 11). As stated by Alma Jean Walker, most commonly, these myths are structured as the story of a wanderer who is separated from one's clan, is re-initiated, and then returns(12). The structure popularized by Campbell is found to persist in the culture hero tales of Native American populations.

“Cottonwood *Part Two: Buffalo Story*” is a narrative about Yellow Woman’s wanderings in search of water. It is the dry season. Meat and vegetation is scarce. Yellow Woman walks east looking for water. When she finally finds a pool in an arroyo, she encounters a beautiful man, Buffalo Man. Buffalo Man tells her that she has reached the land of the Buffalo People. He carries her away with him. Back home, Yellow Woman’s husband, Arrowboy, Estoy-eh-muut starts looking for the missing Yellow Woman. He takes the help of Spider Woman, who gives him some clay dust to throw into the eyes of Buffalo People and blind them. Arrowboy is on the verge of killing all the Buffalo People and carrying Yellow Woman back home, when Yellow Woman reveals that she wants to stay back with the Buffalo People instead. Therefore, she is killed by her husband. Nonetheless, the bodies of several Buffalo People who were killed by Arrowboy became food for the people of Yellow Woman. The circumstances of her death, or her being killed by her husband proves to be a kind of resurrection for the people of her community who were starving.

1.3 Stylistic Devices

Although ethnopoetry is ridiculed and termed less intelligent, it possesses complexities that mainstream poems reflect, and more. Dell Hymes’ extensive research on Chinookan and Clackamas texts is likely to benefit a reading of Leslie Marmon Silko’s texts as far as identifying some basic stylistic features in her poetry are concerned. “I do not expect that all Native American traditions will be found to parallel the Chinookan, but I do think that the starting point of the analysis of Chinookan texts, the identification of verses and lines in terms of initial elements and associated discourse features, will likely prove general”(Hymes, 341). A discussion on the organization of lines and verses, use of initial elements, repetitions, the patterns of endings to stories, lengthening of vowels and consonants and use of ‘nonsense’ syllables in Silko’s poetry in the lines of Hymes’ research that is characteristic of Native American verse narrations follows.

(a) Organization of Lines and Verses:

Several of Silko’s poems are patterned in the traditional Native American way as far as organization of verses and stanzas are concerned. Poetic pieces are organized on the basis of lines, verses, stanzas and scenes. And, “Lines begin flush left or with an indentation of three spaces. (An indentation of ten spaces or more shows continuation of a single line)”(Hymes, 310). The following example from Silko’s *Storyteller* shows the beginning and then continuation of a line:

And her mother says

“Oh my dear child, (9)

The markers of measure are important, and not the meter (Quick, 97). The “initial particle” or ‘initial element’ marks the turn of event, and therefore, determines the length of what in mainstream poetry is termed ‘lines’.

(b) Initial elements:

In Silko's narrations, one comes across "initial elements" or "semantic markers" such as "So", "And so" and "And finally". These typically occur in the beginnings of stanzas. "They are markers of measure"(Hymes, 318). Elements such as "And finally" or "Indeed" are used to indicate the climax of a narrative.

Silko's "*humma-hah*" or "long ago" stories have oral beginnings. They also follow certain structural patterns and devices recurrent in oral performance-stories. One such device used in Silko's narration about two little sisters who traveled to Mauhuatl, "the high place" because they were afraid their village would soon be flooded. After playing in a place called Shell Lake all by themselves until evening, the girls return home. They find nobody at home. An old man told them that everybody had gathered in the "high place" because flood was coming. Believing the old man, the girls go there too. At Mauhuatl, they look for their mother, but do not find her. In the end, the two girls and the village-people all turn to stone.

Silko begins every stanza with phrases such as "And so", "And finally" and "So she said" as "initial elements" to indicate a new turn of events. For instance, the first lines in each stanza in Silko's present work are as such: "This story took place/ somewhere around Acoma", "And so they went off to this lake/ and this lake had shells around it", "And finally/ toward evening/ they came home to their village home", "No one answered/ until an old man came out", "So she said they would./ She started off with her little sister on her back and/ pretty soon they began to cry" and "*That is how the song goes*"(36-39).

These "initial markers" can contribute to the narration by indicating change of action or scene, or passage of time. "And in a literature exclusively realized in oral performance, what better peg on which to hang signals of measure than initial elements?"(Hymes, 319). However, every instance of use of the words such as "Now" or "Then" may not be instances of "initial markers". These words can occur in the narration as mere lexical occurrences. Identification of "initial markers" depends on the organization of the whole of the narration. "Here, recognition of a verse is directly dependent upon the organization of the whole and the functional criteria of change of time, location or participation"(ibid., 320). Such patterning of language in narration is significant also from the point of view of their being designed for performance.

(c) Repetitions:

Repetition of phrases and certain important words is known to be a common feature of Native American Poetry. These repetitions are purposeful. "Among American Indian peoples the number of repetitions of an incident in a story or an act in a rite, the number of brothers and sisters in a story, etc. is commonly in accordance with such a number [pattern number having cultural significance], most often four"(ibid., 319). The number of verses contained in each stanza also depends on such a number.

The significance of the number four can be gauged from the narrative “One time” where the Twin Brothers neglect the Mother Corn altar in their town for their fascination with some Ck’o’yo magic and they invite the ire of the Mother. They have to cleanse their town of their misdeed. In the process, they seek assistance of their neighbours from all directions: east, south, west and north. Their first neighbour, Hummingbird, wanted to create the Fly so that the Fly would accompany it on its meeting with the Mother, who Hummingbird would try to plead for forgiveness on behalf of the town taken over by Ck’o’yo magic. The Fly came into being from mountain dirt mixed with a little corn flour and water kept covered in a jar painted with parrots and big flowers, blessed with the line: “After four days/ you will be alive” repeated four times (109). Also, the Fly comes into being after four days. The number ‘four’ is significant towards making the statement that for setting things right once again, the people who invited the ire of the Mother needed to seek the cooperation of beings in all four directions. All-round harmony is not only the ultimate purpose of activities in the community it is also the means to individual peace and fulfillment.

(d) The Endings to Stories:

The endings of Silko’s narratives are ritualistic. The pattern identified correlates to the pattern of closings noted by Dell Hymes in his research of Chinookan narratives. “First, there might be a summary conclusion of the action in progress. . . The second part of a full close would be an epilogue that states what becomes of the actors past the conclusion of the story. . . The third part of a full close can be verbally distinguished in English as the *finis*”(Hymes, 322-323). Common expressions for such a *finis* maybe, as in the case of Silko’s work, “The story ends there”(40). The line is used to indicate that the story ends right there.

In case of Silko, a “summary conclusion of the action in progress” is definitely narrated in the *humma-hah* story about two little girls visiting the “high place” for fear of flood and turning into stone. Four aspects of this detailed conclusion inform the reader. First, “They looked around/ but they didn’t see anything/ of their mother”(39). Secondly, “They sat down,/ the older girl did”(ibid, 39). Third, “She saw the rest of them sitting around/ holding their babies”(39). And lastly, “She sat there for a little while/ and then they all turned into stone”(39). These descriptions are key to realizing what happens to each character at the end of the story. There is also the ending which Hymes describes as the actual *finis*. In Silko’s case, the present verse narrative declares its end through the line: “The story ends there”(40). So, Dai’s way of ending this particular narrative fits in the category formulated by Hymes.

(e) Lengthening of Vowels or Consonants:

Lengthened vowels or consonants may be used for emphasis or may serve rhetorical purposes. A Laguna word for endearment “A’moo’ooh” occurs in Silko’s narration in connection to her story about her Grandma A’mooh, Marie Anaya Marmon. Marie Anaya Marmon used to use the word “A’mooh” for young children. The sound of the vowel “o” is lengthened, and it is used to express great feeling and love for young children. In

Silko's poetry, one notices such cases with respect to loan words from the Laguna language which are interspersed in Silko's poetry. Also, because Silko draws a lot of materials for her poetry from oral literature of her community, one comes across a reference to "*humma-hah*" or "long ago" stories. The lengthening of the consonant sound of "m" is an expression trying to convey the message that the incident referred to by the story happened a very long time ago.

(f) Use of "Nonsense syllables":

Native American poetry allegedly contains a lot of "nonsense" syllables. These "nonsense" syllables may feel so to readers on account of being uninitiated to the ways of Native American 'storytelling' or 'poetry'. For the Native Americans, 'storytelling' occurs synonymously to what is commonly understood as 'poetry-recitation', or 'song'. The word preferred by the Native Americans is "performance". In their 'storytelling', one includes all forms of participation usually considered separately in Euro-American literary culture: music, dance, recitation, ceremony and participation of the audience. When a "long ago" or *humma-hah* story is narrated, for instance, the audience responds with sounds of approval for the storyteller to proceed to the next sentence in the story by producing sounds like "*Aa-eh*". This kind of sound is considered to be a "nonsense syllable". But in the right context, it does possess meaning. The sound "*Aa-eh*" is a sound of approval for the story-teller to continue. In the absence of such participation of the audience, the story-teller may not proceed to tell the story at all.

1.4 Symbolisms

Besides the structure, the narrative tradition of the Laguna Pueblo people is characterized by use of certain images and symbols that could be perceived as obscure judged from a Euro-American critical point of view. Prominent among these symbols are the symbol of a circle or hoop, some specific numbers and some colours. "In the literature of the Christian-Judaic world, the number three has symbolic significance, but in the Native American world the significant numbers are four, six and seven. The number four represents the four directions or corners of the earth—North, South, East, and West—and the powers or spirits associated with them. The number six represents the six points of the Native American world, the four directions plus the Zenith and the Nadir, and the number seven encompasses the World, including the individual"(Walker, 24). So, the use of culturally significant numbers does take place in several of Silko's narratives as well. For instance, Silko illustrates the significance of the number 'four' when the Twin Brothers try to revive an almost dead earth. They have to take the help of all non-human creatures from the four directions. Thus, it signifies that co-operation in all directions is necessary for survival.

(a) Colour Symbolism:

For the Native American, directions are also associated with colours. The Pueblo people associate the colour red with the direction South as the direction South is related, for them, with the sun and warmth. It has come to be so as in Laguna, the Sun appears from the South-East. This Laguna fact is made use of by Silko in her poem “Cottonwood *Part One: Story of Sun House*”. Yellow Woman, Kochininako, sets out looking for the Sun one severe winter day. She decides to look for the Sun, for unless she did, the survival of her whole community was threatened by the intensity of the winter. When she finally meets Sun Man, the direction she is in is the southeast (64). The colour of the Sun, red, is associated with the direction southeast. This combination is used by Silko to express the significance of the colour red with regard to the importance of the Sun.

(b) Animal Symbolism:

Native American poetry may contain supposedly “obscure” animal symbolism. A reference to animals in Native American poetry or in poetry by Native American poets is common. Specific animals have specific importance and roles in the cultures of various Native American peoples. The possible speculations are that Native American poetry is constitutive of “obscure” animal symbols. Their behaviour in this regard throws light on the differences in their ‘environmental’ ethics.

Contrary to what the hierarchical Great Chain of Being suggests, amongst the Natives, “Animals represent the first beings, the ancient ones, the all-knowing deities responsible for creation and the source of strength and guidance in times of trouble, need, or spiritual healing and growth”(Hasan and Sadek, 61-62). Not just animals, this respect is extended to all non-human species. “Other living things are not regarded as insensitive species. Rather they are “people” in the same manner as the various tribes of human beings are people”(ibid., 62). Animals precede human beings in their existence on the surface of the earth, therefore, human beings respect them as their predecessors.

The bear is one animal that occurs very frequently in Native American poetry. The symbolism of the bear is derived from its mythological significance. “It is considered a medicine being with impressive magical powers, and is a symbol of strength and wisdom to many Native Americans. As bears continue fighting after being seriously injured, Native Americans often believed they were capable of healing their wounds”(ibid., 64). Bears and human beings have co-existed in North America for a long time as relatives.

Silko’s poem “Story from Bear Country” narrates the story of a boy who was allured by the Bear world and became part of it and was later, with the help of the medicine man, re-initiated into the human world. It is not a matter of a child adopting animal’s, and therefore, a lower life-form’s ways. It is about an individual joining another society. “Native Americans maintain a profound relationship with the natural world, believing animal spirits to be as unique and important as human spirits, each with their own powers and wisdom”(ibid., 66). In

Native American literature, as also in Silko's works, the bear figures as medicine beings capable of luring human beings to their world.

Native Americans have a close relationship with the horse as well. Horses have been their companions in times of hunting, raiding and transportation. It is also said that the Native American peoples and horses share the common "physical and mental characteristics to survive the ruthless attacks of the European colonizers"(ibid., 72). Horses represent bravery and grace. In keeping with this symbolism of the Horse, Silko draws a picture of the Horse as an extremely patient animal in "Horses at Valley Store". Every day, the horses turn up at Valley Store, even though the day gets very warm and dusty. People, cars and the horses line up waiting for their turn to get water. The horses seem more patient waiting for numerous human beings to fill up their wagons with water before their turn finally arrives (172). The horses in the poem are unlike the people in the poem, but they are more 'human' than them.

North America is also known by the name 'Turtle Island'. "In the creation myths of some tribes, the Great Spirit created their homeland by placing earth on the back of a giant turtle"(Hasan and Sadek, 72). The Native American peoples revere the turtle as the turtle figures in their origin stories as the creature that helped them stay above water when there was no land. According to Native American belief, the earth stands on the back of a turtle. "Turtles are a symbol of the earth in many different Native cultures. They are associated with long life, protection and fertility"(ibid., 72). They are also associated with healing, wisdom and spirituality.

"Prayer to the Pacific" is one poem where Silko makes references to the significance of the Turtle from the point of view of the origin of the universe (170). Turtles are believed to be symbols of life and protection as the myth suggests that it is the Turtle that carried the Native American people across the sea from China.

CONCLUSION

In studying the poetry of Leslie Marmon Silko, one has been helped by taking recourse to facts associated with 'Ethno-poetic' conventions with regard to Native American writings in terms of her poetry being reflective of the history, philosophy and culture of the Laguna Pueblo people, in presenting a story about a character significant to the community like Yellow Woman and the Twin Brothers, in its possessing oral roots, and in its being adorned with several elements of style characteristic to Laguna Pueblo art of storytelling. It is these poetic elements being used by Silko that stand as markers of the complexity that adorns poetry by Native American poets.

With respect to the poetry of Leslie Marmon Silko, it can be said that the natural impulse in poetry-writing is enmeshed in expressing issues that confront her people, and in the tradition of expression they are most comfortable in. So, 'form' and 'content' both determine the extent to which the poetry of these poets harmonize

with or contradict popular expectations from poetry as a literary genre. In the case of Silko, her resorting to Laguna traditional 'storytelling' as a poetic convention adds up with her concerns about infiltration of the values of the colonizers in Laguna hampering the harmony thitherto extant in her community. These two features make her works confront mainstream conventions of poetic expression and assert new standards in poetry-writing for the world outside her culture. "Ethnopoetics encourages recognition and appreciation of such differences"(Quick, 98). Ethno-poetics acknowledges the existence of different aesthetic standards across cultures.

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