

Ecological Degradation, Disintegrating Psyches and Complicated Narratives: The Red and the White of Settler Colonies

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ABSTRACT--*In the recent times, many researches have pointed out that ecological degradation is playing havoc with the mental health of the human beings. Earlier this research was restricted to only scientific books, now the literary works around the world have started foregrounding the relationship between ecological degradation and the rising cases of insanity among the human beings. Native people around the world who were living their lives in the lap of nature were torn asunder from their homelands by the colonial forces. The mental problems are most prevalent among these communities. Now literature has started voicing concerns about ecological degradation and rising levels of pollution on the planet. Surprisingly the people who used to dismiss their way of life as barbaric are studying their techniques of preserving nature and maintaining balance between the human and the nonhuman elements of the ecosystem. Leslie Marmon Silko studies the relationship between ecological degradation and disintegration of human psyche in her famous novel Ceremony. The paper is a study of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Ceremony.*

Key words-- Ecology, native, psyche, psychology, Tayo, Ts'eh.

I INTRODUCTION

Eminent Indian environmentalist Sunder Lal Bahuguna suggested that the man under the influence of materialism has turned into “the butcher of Earth” (Guha, 2000, p. 179) and this plundering butcher is proving ruinous to the earth by accelerating the rates of “mass extinction” (Powell, 2005, p. 165) and rushing towards the “biophysical limits of the planet” (Plumwood, 2001, p. 5). This marauding butcher has created problems that look intractable. World is battling with pollutions of all kind; pesticides and insecticides have entered the food chains; large species of animal kingdom are being pushed towards extinction; global warming is posing new threat to the existence of human race. All these problems have emerged because of man’s “failure to live in peace with the earth” (Killingsworth, 1998, p. 203). Arnold Tonybee in his book *Mankind and Mother Earth* prophesied that man has the power to make earth “uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time” (1976, p.9). Theodore Roszak warns that this “ecological crisis of our time is either another detour along the open highway of economic progress, or it is warning of a dead end just around the corner, a disaster far worse than the Black Death” (2001, p.27).

That this ecological crisis is creating problems like pollution, global warming and pushing species to extinction is visible to all, but these crises are only tip of the iceberg. The ecological degradation is gnawing at the psyche of the human beings and a number of studies have suggested that there “are ecological factors in the

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incidence of mental illness” (Schwartz, 1963, p. 371). To cope with the new challenges that affect human psyche, researchers have come up with new areas like “Deep Ecology” (Deval & Sessions 1985), “ecopsychology” (Roszak, 1995) and “ecofeminism” (Merchant 1980). These researches have pointed out the connections between ecology and human consciousness. The fact that “city is typically a sink of psychological problems” (Shepard, 1982, p. 93) strengthens the point that man’s psychological problems are indeed an outcome of disconnect between man and nature. All these researches have pointed out that man’s unconscious has obvious link with “nonhuman environment” including “the trees, clouds, racoons” (Fisher, 2002, p. 3). Carl Gustav Jung pointed out:

Scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotion “unconscious identity” with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications.... No Voice now speaks to man from the stones, plants and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied (1964, p.85).

The connection between human psyche and ecology is further elaborated by Theodore Roszak who writes:

While sex and violence continues to smoulder in depths of minds that do reside in human heads, the anguish of what I will call the “ecological unconscious” has emerged in our time as a deeper imbalance. At this level, we discover a repression that weighs upon our inherited sense of loyalty to the planet that mothered the human mind into existence. If psychosis is the attempt to live a lie, the epidemic psychosis of our time is the lie of believing. We have no ethical obligation to our planetary home. (2001, p. 13-14)

Theodore Roszak’s work accentuates the relation between ecology and human mind. According to him man’s destiny is closely linked to the environment he lives in. If environment degrades, man’s psyche degrades; if the ecology is disturbed; man’s mental balance gets disturbed and man is pushed towards insanity.

What Roszak pointed out in 1992 is becoming more and more evident now. What was earlier limited to the theoretical and scientific books is now foregrounded in literature; with its wider reach literature is challenging “anthropocentric” (Purser, 1995, p. 1053) view of the people and trying to reinforce the forgotten relationship between the human beings and the “nonhuman world.” Literature contests the “moral hierarchy that assumes” that the human beings are “above” the “lowly creatures” (Purser, 1995, p. 1057).

One of the most important novels that assert that the relationship between human and “nonhuman world” is Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977). The novel asserts that natural or the “nonhuman world” offers the chance of restoring sanity in this chaotic world. *Ceremony* is most critically praised of all Native American novels and is a “staple in high school and college curricula” (Otfinoski, 2010, p. 63). *Ceremony* tells the story of a Second World War veteran Tayo who has become insane, the medicine system of the whites fails to restore his insanity. The elders of the community decide that he must be sent to the traditional medicine man for his well-being. The white doctors think in a linear way and try to treat Tayo for battle fatigue, but Tayo’s insanity is not one-dimensional; it is multidimensional and the devastation seen during the World War is only a small cause. On the other hand, traditional medicine system is holistic and the persons who treat Tayo realise that the insanity of Tayo is a result of rupture between the natural world and human beings. If sanity of Tayo has to be restored; then the relationships between the human beings and the animals and the other ingredients of the “nonhuman world” have to be restored.

The novel is conditioned by “a sense of irrevocable tragic loss” of the failure in restoration of natural landscape (Norden, 1994, p. 94). Silko makes clear that land for the Natives is not a commodity or the source of economic riches as perceived by the whites. Natives have deep spiritual ties with the land; the land is treated as mother:

Come on out, Come home again.

Your mother, The Earth is crying for you.

Come home, children, come home.(Ceremony, 1977, p. 163)

The relationship between the land and the natives is that of mother and children and if the children are removed from the mother; they get debilitated and their psyches get imbalanced. Silko tells about the devastating mining practices of the whites. The mining practices are so invasive that they completely disfigure the land and create abysmal pits where the mountains stand. The whites blinded by their greed do not care for the sacredness of the land in general or that particular site. The mining of Uranium took place on Laguna lands where “the shrine of the twin mountain lions had been” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 228). The mine devastated the land and heaped profanity upon the sacred. Mining has been compared to rape by Colin Johnson, the noted Australian Aboriginal writer:

They did approach mining operations as if it was a sexual act, hard thrusting without a care for the women beneath without care for the universe, the land beneath... We'll fix it up when we are done with her, much like battered wife syndrome. (Mudrooroo, 1993, p. 570)

On watching mining activities, the Natives have to undergo the same psychological duress as on seeing one's mother getting raped in front of him or watching one's mother's body being mutilated by the whites.

Thus the mining activity can be psychologically debilitating for the human beings and more so for the Natives who are spiritually attached to the land. Tayo's psyche is withered because of the destructive mining; but his problems compound when he realizes that “they had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only they could have dreamed” (Ceremony, 1997, p. 229). The whites not only disfigured earth with mining, but also used the product of benevolent mother's womb to destroy other living things causing distress to both mother and her children.

If Tayo's mental breakdown has to be associated with ecological destruction then his case cannot be an isolated one. Rather the psychological problems have to be universal; every Native who has seen ecological degradation must suffer from psychological problems. Though Silko concentrates only on Tayo's psychological problems; there are enough hints that psychosomatic problems are endemic among the Natives; especially the westernized Natives. This again reinforces the relationship between ecology and insanity. The Natives like Josiah and Robert who live near nature in their own cultural settings are sane and psychologically sound. That the roots of this insanity are deeper is indicated when the Army doctors tell Tayo's aunt that the “cause of battle fatigue was mystery, even to them” (Ceremony 28). George Steiner presented an interesting thesis that eruption of war may also be the result of breaking away from nature:

Thus there may be in the genocidal reflexes of the twentieth century, in the compulsive scare of massacre of lashing out of the choked psyche, an attempt to “get air” to break the live prison walls of an intolerably thronged condition. (Steiner, 1971, p. 53)

Silko seems to subscribe to this view that this choked psyche has the potential to end the world. In the novel, she seems to suggest again and again that if the ceremony is not completed then the world will end. The balance of the world; the balance between human and nonhuman world has to be restored only then the world can become a peaceful place to live in. For restoring this balance Tayo has to complete the ceremony. The ceremony here refers to restoring the balance between ecology and human unconscious. Tayo's unconscious is tormented because he holds himself responsible for the problem of land and thinks that "everything is dying" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 14) because he had "damned the rain until the words were a chant" (Ceremony 1977, p.11). The word 'chant' is important because his curse against rain became a sort of invocation when "he sang it" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 14). Tayo thinks that "he had prayed the rain away" (1977, p.12) and his unconscious is withering because he thinks that he was responsible for six year long drought:

So he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying; the gray mule grew gaunt, and the goat and kid had to wander farther and farther each day to find weeds or dry shrubs to eat. (Ceremony, 1977, p.13) Tayo knew that this is only the beginning if the drought persists for a longer time then the consequences will be worse. The consequences are summed up in the poem:

And there was no more rain then.
Everything dried up
All the plants
The corn
The beans
They all dried up
And started blowing away
In the wind (Ceremony, 1977, p. 12)

The grass has "turned yellow" and gray mule has grown "gaunt" due to this prayers. Though, Tayo himself is unaware that the problems that he is witnessing are due to the "ecocide" (Roszak, 2001, p. 37); the traditional medicine man understands his problem and takes his illness as an opportunity to create harmony between man and nature.

Sigmund Freud believed that some of the ideas and memories are inherited by human beings (Easthope, 199, p. 32). The idea was further developed by Carl Gustav Jung who gave the concept of collective unconscious. He described it through the term Archetypes:

These Archetypes he describes as "psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same type of experiences which have happened not to the individual but to his ancestors, and of which results are inherited in the structures of the brain, a priori determinants of individual experiences. (qtd. in Meisel, 2007, p. 104)

Tayo had also inherited some portion of his unconscious from his ancestors. He had inherited their world view in which every single plant and animal was important and earth was not "dead and mechanistic (Hartke, 1990, p.XV). On the other hand, the ancestors of Tayo believed that earth is living and benevolent mother. The White perspective is different. Their world view was shaped by the seven day creation story, which put man in the centre of scheme (Bleakley, 2000, p. 26).

The whites tried to thrust this world view on the Natives also. The conditioning process was started by the white schools. The Native world view was taught to be a bundle of arcane beliefs and “superstitions”: In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for class to see the true Source of explanations. He had studied those books, and he had no reasons to believe the stories anymore. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 37)

Conditioned by White teachers Tayo starts killing flies at home because they “are bad and carry sickness” (Ceremony, 1977, p.93). This action of Tayo is in conflict with what is embedded in his unconscious. The unconscious which was genetically inherited by him taught him that every living thing is scared. Till this point conditions does not exacerbate because Josiah is here to correct him, but when he goes to war his psyche gives away in the face of violence he observes during “white man’s war” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 33). In the war Josiah is not available to mend his spirit, so he keeps falling in abysmal depths and what white schools were not able to do to him is done by the war. He starts behaving like a white man and conflict starts with the traditional wisdom embedded in his unconscious. Hispsyche starts falling apart and insanity takesover.

While fighting in the ‘white man’s war’ distressed by the suffering of his brother Rocky, Tayo disintegrates and he forgets all the teachings of his uncle Josiah and starts behaving like a white man. His uncle Josiah has taught him:

This is where we came from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wild flowers this earth keeps us going. (Ceremony, 1977, p.42)

Josiah also taught him that long time back when the “mother of the people got angry” and “no rain came for a long time” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 93), it was the “greenbottle fly who asked the forgiveness of the mother and brought back rains (Ceremony, 1977, p. 93), but in the jungle under the duress of war he starts behaving differently:

But in the jungle he had not been able to endure the flies that had crawled over Rocky, they enraged him. He had cursed their sticky feet and wet mouths and when he could reach them he had smashed them between his hands. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 94)

While cursing the flies, he had forgotten the basic tenet of Native spirituality. His uncle Josiah had told him that “only human had to endure anything because only human resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 24). While trying to resist the natural behaviour of the flies, Tayo had misbehaved against the nature and natural objects and according to his Uncle Josiah “drought happen when people forget, when people misbehave” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 42).

Silko makes clear that this rupture between man and nature is not restricted to Tayo only. Most of the Natives have been unconditioned by the white schools. The white do not accept animals as living things:

Then they grow away from the earth
then they grow away from the sun
then they grow away from the plants and animals
they see no life
when they look
they
see only objects

the world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive
The deer and bear are objects
They see no life. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 125)

The view is quite different from the Native view that sees life in everything. Even permission was sought from the tree before taking its bark “old sister, we need your skin for our shelter” (Erdrich, 2005, p. 8) and the owl is considered as a “grandfather” (Erdrich, 2005, p. 13). The people in this world did not believe that they hunted the deer, rather “the deer gave itself to them because it loved them” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 48). Once the deer was hunted an elaborate ritual followed:

They went to the deer and lifted the jacket. They knelt down and took pinches of cornmeal from Josiah’s leather pouch. They sprinkled the cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer’s spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise the deer would be offended and they would not come to die for them the following year. (1977, p.47)

Natives hunted the animals, but they were hunted only for the food. The respect of Natives for the animals made sure that the animal populations thrived. On the other hand the whites killed frogs for experiments and shot the “bears and mountain lions for sport” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 172). This was tormenting for the Natives. Tayo at the later stage of ceremony realises that he has been distressed due to this irresponsible behaviour of the whites: The anger made him light headed, but he did not talk about this other dimension of their perversion which, like the hunting of the mountain lion was their idea of ‘sport’ and fun. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 198)

The use of word ‘perversion’ gives a fairly good idea about Tayo’s psychological state at observing this kind of reckless and irresponsible behaviour towards fellow living beings.

It may seem that the problem plagues only Tayo, but elders of the Native community know that the problem is not personal, rather it afflicts all and sundry. The elders of the community know that the world will be saved only and only if the balance is restored between human beings and the natural world. Here future of the humanity is at stake: “What will happen to us if you and other don’t get well”(Ceremony, 1977, p. 35) .

If Tayo completes the Ceremony then it will save the whole world. This is what medicine man tells Tayo: “It is important to all of us. Not only for you sake, but for this fragile world” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 33).The point is further stressed by medicine man old Betonie:

His sickness was only part of something larger and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 116)

The problem is clear. Earlier whites and Natives were doing balancing act. If the whites were destroying, the Natives were preserving; while the whites were pushing the species to extinction; the Natives were saving them, but now the situation has changed. Silko describes that the elders of the community followed the rituals of their ancestors even after converting to Christianity: “All the people, even the Catholics who went to mass every Sunday, followed the ritual of” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 47) sprinkling cornmeal on the deer’s nose. The incident shows that this generation may have converted to Christianity; but they were not de-cultured, but Tayo’s generation shows that they have been de-cultured by white colonial institutions. Harley, for instance thinks that animals “weren’t worth anything anyway” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 21). Emo has developed a sort of callousness for his own culture: “Look what is her for us. Look. Here’s the Indians’ mother earth! Old dried up

thing!” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 23). Emo tramples ants with his boots which shows that he had become a white man in his outlook (Ceremony, 1977, p. 57). Hewants to blow everybody from the “face of Earth” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 56).

Tayo’sbrother Rocky also develops a scorn for Native knowledge. He does not agree with his uncle Josiah that the “desert cattle” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 68) was good for their land. For him, only valid body of knowledge was created by the whites (Ceremony, 1977, p. 69-70). Rocky’s nonchalant attitude towards the Native knowledge that was accumulated over thousands of years show that his conditioning in the white schools is complete. With people like Harley, Emo and Rocky the next generation of the Natives seems to be emulating whites and whole of the world may face disaster. So restoring the balance in the world is important and for that purpose Tayo’s sanity must be restored and that job can be done only by re-establishing Tayo’s connection with the natural world. Old Betonie realises this and initiates Tayo into the ceremony.

Before starting the ceremony, Silko makes it clear that only nature has the power to restore sanity of Tayo and save the world. The ceremony is started by providing the verisimilitude of the natural world that surrounds him. This suggests that ceremony is meant for re-establishing Tayo’s ruptured association with the natural world:

He sat in the centre of the white corn sand painting. The rainbows crossed were in the painting behind him. The old man painted mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next, closer, he painted blue and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains and in front of him, Betonie painted the White Mountain range. The helper worked in the shadows beyond the dark mountain range; He worked with the black sand, making fear prints side by side.... They both reached for him then, lifting him up by his shoulders, they guided his feet into bear foot prints, and Betonie prayed him through each of the five hoops. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 131-32)

The ceremony was planned to resuscitate “Tayo’s reverence for the creatures of Nature” (Beidler, 2002, p. 19) that had dropped to “an unprecedented low” (Beidler, 2002, p. 19). The impact of ceremony on Tayo is almost instant. His spiritual self, the spiritual powers embedded in his unconscious become active. One of the most important spiritual aspects of the Native is power to dream about future.Tayo gets the power of dreaming and sees “the spotted cattle”, “Mountain” and “a woman” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 141). He immediately starts connecting with the nonhuman world. His journey to recognise “himself again” starts and to boy who killed the flies, cursed the rain, starts respecting the other forms life:

He looked down at the weeds and grass. He stepped carefully, pushing the toe of his boot into the weeds first to make sure the grasshopper were gone before the set his foot down in the crackling leathery stalks of dead sunflower. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 143)

The transformation of human being after walking into the drawing of a bear may seem like a superstition to the non-native readers, but bear occupies a special place in Native Indian life. The importance of bear is clear from Paul Shepard’s description:

The bear is also identified with spiritual well-being and with physical health and healing. Not only it is the animal of beginning, but also of re-beginnings of recovery from spiritual malaise and physical illness and metaphorical revival from death. Above all other animals the bear is considered to be the supreme physician of the woods. (1985, p.102)

Silko also enters the novel and tells a story in the poem which clearly describes that bear's powers to restore sanity in the human being:

At the summit of Dark Mountain
ask the four old Bear people.
They are only possible hope.
They have the power to restore the mind.
Time and again
it has been done. (Ceremony, 1977, p. 130)

The bear restores the sanity of Tayo. However, ceremony needs to be completed and for that he needs to reconnect with other "nonhuman" ingredients of the ecology. The novel advocates a "holistic system of ecological values" (Owen Louis, 92) for restoring sanity among the people.

Once Tayo meets his old friends after his meeting with Old Betonie, he once again realises the problems that plague the Indians. After coming across his friends he gets a feeling that old Betonie telling "to get his way" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 91) and to find "the cattle and the stars, the mountain and the woman" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 92). Tayo moves on to find the solution for his generation. He meets the woman T'seh who acts as a bridge between Tayo and the natural world. T'seh acts as the person who brings harmony between Tayo and his surroundings and helps him end the drought. She helps Tayo in completing the ceremony:

The efficacy of this ceremony depends on the precise relationship that Tayo establishes with the figure T'seh. The entity whom Tayo encounters is, clearly to be understood as a "spirit of place" a more-than-human being who represents that land's own life, who knows how things work and who is willing to share this knowledge with the people. (Nelson, 2002, p. 143)

It is clear that she represents nature and especially water, Even the love making between Tayo and her is full of images of water: "He eased himself deeper within her and felt the warmth close around him like river sand, softly giving way under flood, then closing firmly around the ankle in cloudy warm water" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 168). The writer further describes: "When it came it was the edge of steep river bank crumbling under the downpour until suddenly it all broke loose and collapsed into itself" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 168).

All the images used in the scene refer to water and water bodies, but T'seh's role is not restricted to water only; she reinforces the importance of rocks and plants also. She is seen matching the "plants with the stones" like an expert environmentalist (Ceremony, 1977, p. 170). Towards the end of the novel she tells about the properties of different plants that grow on Laguna land (Ceremony, 1977, p. 211). She sits down on the ground but makes sure that "no ants were disturbed" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 208). She also leads Tayo to the figure of "she-elk" (214), a larger than life figure whose belly is "swollen with new life" (p. 214). The elk is acknowledged as "A' moo'oo! A' moo'oo! You are so beautiful! You carry all that life" (Ceremony, 1977, p. 214). During their companionship T'seh teaches Tayo to respect all the natural objects as well animals and plants and rebuild the connection of Tayo with the natural world. Allen rightly argues:

The cure for that misunderstanding for Tayo, was a reorientation of perception so that he could know directly that the true nature of being is magical and that the proper duty of the creatures, the land and human beings is to live in harmony with what is. (2002, p.125)

The text generates “its own highly contextualized discourse in order to help non-Native implied readers see the relevancy of this discourse to Native World View” (Ruppert, 2002, p. 182). The readers throughout the novel observe the healing process of Tayo. The psychosomatic problems of all the Natives are also visible among the whites, but their problems remain hidden. They are less affected because they were already segregated from the natural world. Stein rightly points out that that novel shows “a struggle between different cultural orientation towards natural world” (Cited in Chakvin, 2002, p. 12193). Tayo realises that “lie was destroying the white people faster than it was destroying Indian people” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 190) and the lie was their reliance on the dead objects: “the plastic and neon, the concrete and steel” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 190).

Tayo completes the ceremony and the land is blessed with “the rain” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 202). One important question remains: How the completion of ceremony will help the whole community struggling with the problems that endanger their existence? The relevance of his completing the ceremony lies in the fact that by completing the ceremony he has created a new story. The elders realise that T’seh is “A’ moo’ ooh!” (Ceremony, 1977, p. 239) who has helped Tayo in regaining his sanity. The story in which Tayo played his part confirms that if the Natives will try to restore balance between man and nature then they will be helped by the spirits. This is what Silko says about the stories in the beginning of the novel:

I will tell you something about stories
[He said]
They aren’t just entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

The earlier stories of the Natives were inadequate to deal with the problems that were created by wars that engulfed the whole world and rapacious exploitation of mother earth. So Tayo’s new story will help the Natives in restoring balance and retaining their sanity. The people who fail to reconnect with nature and natural world die irrespective of their goodness or badness. Harley and Leroy are killed in an accident and pinkie is shot by Emo who is then exiled to California. The fate met by these people makes clear that the future generations have to emulate Tayo to save themselves from disintegration. If the future generations fail to restore balance in the environment, then their psyches will disintegrate with the environment and chaos will rule the world.

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