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SINGING AGAINST SILENCE: CULTURAL EROSION AND RESILIENCE IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S "LULLABY"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby" examining how the author reclaims and preserves Navajo cultural identity amid colonial oppression. Through the protagonist Ayah's experiences, Silko highlights the erosion of indigenous traditions caused by linguistic and cultural imperialism. The narrative intertwines myths and folklore to revive Navajo heritage while critiquing the destructive impact of modernization and globalization. Silko exposes how the English language disrupts familial and spiritual bonds, reflecting the broader struggle of Native Americans to maintain cultural integrity. "Lullaby" ultimately celebrates resilience and underscores the importance of preserving indigenous identities against colonial dominance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The redemption, restoration and deconstruction of a past, which may have been consistently warped, degraded, deprecated or obliterated by the authoritarian colonial dynasty as a part of their Europeanizing and "polishing as well as acculturating" objective of the "natives" is the intrinsic concern of Postcolonial Studies. The course of colonization engages propogandism and regimentation of Euro-centric values which is unfailingly superseded by a suspension and diminution of endemic cultural identification. The postcolonial venture is usually an endeavour to repeal the process. The aim is to salvage the pulse and patois of an ethnology that stands entrenched in the collective memory of the coterie despite the subjugation and the expunging inflicted on them. Along these lines, alternative disquisitions are evolved to topple the dominating design of promulgating a grand motif, either of colonial ideals or that of the nation that, furthermore, leads to the denigration of obscure but exotic cultures.

This paper attempts to inspect the fashion in which "Lullaby", by the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko—a key figure in the Native American Renaissance, essays to recapitulate, repossess and decipher the relics of cultural ideology that created the unprecedented lifestyle of the Native Americans. The conglomeration of myths and folklore that feature in "Lullaby" is an engagement by Silko to reinvigorate the mores and distinctiveness of the underrated Navajo tribe. The Navajo culture is a culture in which the people bank on the gods and spirits. The protagonist in "Lullaby", Ayah and her

family being a part of this culture stand out different from everyone else because the rest of the people are white. The story scours the lores, fables, doctrines, heritage, customs and observances that go into the evolution of the Navajo culture and the unique character of the Native American tribe. Silko attempts to go back to her roots and reclaim the cultural and moral beliefs of a community which are slowly being annihilated in the incursion of modernization and globalization.

Colonialism orchestrates a methodical campaign to compel indigenous peoples to embrace Eurocentric ideals while simultaneously diminishing their cultural heritage and legacy. Faced with such a dire predicament, marginalized communities must summon their collective memory to reclaim and revive a past that has endured deliberate erasure. Mythology and folklore serve as repositories of a community's distinct language and ethos, safeguarding its cultural uniqueness and resisting the assimilation imposed by external powers. In this context, the Navajo lullaby emerges as a poignant expression of a bygone era, encapsulating a demeanor, a lifestyle, and a worldview that forms the bedrock of Native American identity. It stands as a testament to resilience in the face of encroaching modernization, which threatens to unravel the intricate tapestry of Navajo culture.

The impact of colonization on indigenous cultures has been eloquently analyzed by postcolonial theorists. Homi K. Bhabha, in his seminal work "The Location of Culture," posits that colonialism is not simply about dominance and submission but involves a complex negotiation of identity and power. "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other', as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite (Bhabha 86)." This notion resonates deeply with the Navajo experience, where the pressure to conform to Eurocentric norms while retaining a semblance of cultural authenticity creates a precarious balancing act. Frantz Fanon, also delves into the psychological impacts of colonialism, emphasizing how it instills a sense of inferiority in the colonized. "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon 210)" This distortion of history and cultural legacy is palpable in the context of Navajo culture, where the imposition of Eurocentric values threatens to efface indigenous knowledge systems and traditions. The Navajo lullaby, therefore, emerges as a potent symbol of resistance and resilience. Its melodic cadence carries echoes of a time when communal bonds and spiritual connections were paramount, offering a counter-narrative to the relentless march of modernity. Through its verses, passed down through generations, the lullaby becomes a mnemonic device, preserving not only linguistic nuances but also ethical imperatives that define Navajo identity.

Edward Said sheds light on how Western discourse constructs the 'other' as exotic and inferior, perpetuating stereotypes that undermine indigenous autonomy and self-determination. The plight of the Navajo people underscores the enduring struggle against cultural erasure in the face of colonial hegemony. The Navajo lullaby, with its evocative imagery and profound symbolism, challenges such narratives by asserting the enduring vitality of indigenous cultures amidst external pressures. The lullaby embodies a repository of cultural memory and resistance that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. As indigenous communities navigate the complexities of modernity, their mythologies and folklores stand as bulwarks against oblivion, asserting their rightful place in a world increasingly homogenized by dominant narratives.

Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Lullaby" first appeared in *Storyteller*, a book in which she interlaces autobiographical reminiscences, short stories, poetry, photographs of her family and traditional songs. The book as a whole focusses on the oral tradition of storytelling in Native American culture. Through a variety of patterns, Silko endeavours to emulate the significance of oral storytelling in a written English form. She also expounds the metamorphic influence of storytelling in the lives of her characters and the capacity of narratives in preserving ethnic mores and intergenerational bonds, particularly in a matrilineal line from grandmother to granddaughter. By synthesizing genres and portraying form in this way, Silko strives to secure something of the several indigenous traditions she depicts; their orality, their traditional or religious milieus, and their relations to specific locations and the like.

Silko is herself a defiant "half–breed." Of white, Mexican, and Native American (Laguna) lineage, she has always engaged two ethnic worlds and mediated between them. She was shaped by the stories and traditions passed down by her family and the Laguna community around her. "Lullaby" is an illustration of multi–generic amalgamation—it mixes poetry, fiction, and photographs and blends Anglo and Native forms and aesthetics. Silko has been predominantly fascinated by the role of the storyteller in the Native American culture, and the cathartic power of the act of storytelling itself. Her writing style has endeavored to embody the Native American literary tradition in a written English form by interweaving

memoirs, songs, poems, and photography into non–linear narrative. Silko's characters are often of mixed race, and wrestle to resolve their dual cultural heritage. Having learned much about her Laguna Pueblo cultural heritage from her grandmother and other female relatives, Silko often focuses on themes of the ways in which native culture is passed on through the matrilineal generations.

The lullaby that gives the story its title, and culminates it, is pivotal to the story itself. The lullaby symbolizes the transfer of the oral tradition from generation to generation of women in the Native American family: "She could not remember if she had ever sung it to her children, but she knew that her grandmother had sung it and her mother had sung it." When Chato is dying, this lullaby is the first thing that comes to Ayah's mind to sing to him as a means of assuagement. The lullaby itself assimilates images of nature and family to affirm both in eternal unity.

This ingenious story, is an intricate mosaic of the Native American myths and legends and Silko's own immersion within this cultural framework. The story leads the reader through an enchanting and intriguing jaunt over a long season of time and tribal mores, from the saga of the genesis of the tribe to contemporary times of progress that turn topsy-turvy, their lives, rituals and traditions . It masterfully spans multiple generations of a Native American family, portraying an array of compelling characters steeped in tribal customs and ideals. Their lives, perpetually vulnerable to danger, are consistently threatened by the colonizers' calculated efforts to impose Eurocentric values, thereby eroding their rich cultural heritage. Silko's narration, saturated with tribal narratives, is nothing short of brilliant. In a world where the cosmopolitan populace demands rationale for every occurrence, folklore and mythology invite readers to embrace faith. Silko endeavors to resurrect the myths, beliefs, practices, and supernatural elements intrinsic to the Native American tribe. This cultural tapestry lingers in their collective unconscious, binding them in a shared life experience. Myths and legends, as Joseph Campbell argues, "are the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation." (Campbell 3) Silko's story vividly captures this essence, ensuring that the spiritual and cultural essence of the tribe is not lost to the corrosive effects of colonization.

She contends with the complex interplay between the past and present, the indigenous and the imposed. She reveals how tribal rituals and narratives provide a sanctuary of identity and continuity amidst external attempts at cultural obliteration. By reviving these elements, Silko not only preserves but also celebrates the tribe's enduring spirit. "Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world, they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history." (Said 22) Silko's work is a testament to this powerful assertion, offering a profound meditation on the resilience of cultural memory and identity.

"Lullaby" details the Native American culture clashing with a white culture that has monopolized and subjugated it. Silko epitomizes the cataclysm encountered by a Native American woman at the hands of imperious white figures who wield authority over all aspects of her life. As the protagonist Ayah reminiscences on the most calamitous events of her life, she bemoans the misfortune of being stripped off tradition, language, and family encountered by many Native Americans in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Ayah, as many of Silko's characters, is able to integrate the traditional with modern cultural rudiments so as to create nuances in her life. Like many other important aspects of Ayah's story, Silko doesn't come right out and divulge Ayah's heritage. It is instead inferred to through specific details, such as the comparison between the sound of the wind and snow to a "high-pitched Yeibechei song." Yeibechei is a nine-day ceremony observed by the Navajo. Ayah grew up in a hogan, which is an eight-sided log house particular to Navajo culture. Recounting Ayah's story through flashbacks is also an acknowledgement of the oral traditions of Native American storytellers.

Since time immemorial, the indigenous peoples of North America have perpetuated their tribal dogmas, mores, and ceremonies through the rich tapestry of oral narratives. Each culture, a vibrant amalgamation of characters and plots, has intricately woven stories that impart essential knowledge about the cosmos and human existence. Silko reverently replicates this venerable tradition, employing a third-person limited narrator to great effect. This narrative choice is not merely a stylistic one but is deeply rooted in the conventions of Native American storytelling. "The oral tradition is the core of the Native American world view; it is the medium through which a tribe's collective identity is established, maintained, and transmitted" (Allen 33).

In general, Native American stories predominantly rely on third-person narration. Personal narratives are seldom part of the oral tradition, primarily because many native cultures deem it inappropriate to speak extensively about oneself. Silko's choice to utilize a third-person narrator underscores this cultural ethos, while also highlighting Ayah's profound sense of alienation from the encroaching white

society. Ayah's inability to speak or write English serves as a poignant barrier, ensuring that her story remains unheard by the white audience if told in her own voice. This narrative distance is a deliberate strategy that accentuates the chasm between Ayah's world and the colonizing forces.

Silko's narrative technique, through its adherence to traditional storytelling methods, subtly critiques the hegemonic discourse that seeks to silence indigenous voices. By engaging a third-person narrator, Silko ensures that Ayah's story, imbued with cultural and emotional resonance, reaches beyond the confines of her immediate reality. "Narrative authority in the postcolonial text involves the displacement of the linearity of history with the contingent, chaotic, and fragmented forces of memory and myth" (Ashcroft et al. 195). Silko's narrative, steeped in myth and memory, disrupts the linear historical narrative imposed by colonialism, offering instead a multifaceted view of indigenous experience.

Furthermore, this narrative approach emphasizes the collective over the individual, aligning with the communal values inherent in Native American culture. It reflects a world view where identity is not self-contained but is intrinsically linked to the community and the land. Ayah's experiences, while deeply personal, are representative of a broader collective suffering and resilience. "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined (Momaday 9)." Silko's storytelling imagines Ayah within the larger tapestry of her people's history and culture, thus preserving her identity against the erasure threatened by colonial forces.

Silko's use of a third-person limited narrator serves as a narrative bridge, connecting Ayah's inner world with the broader collective consciousness of her people. This choice not only maintains the cultural integrity of the story but also challenges the colonial narrative by foregrounding indigenous perspectives. Through this narrative strategy, Silko ensures that the "inexhaustible energies of the cosmos" (Campbell 216) continue to flow into the cultural manifestations of her people, preserving their stories for future generations.

Silko permits a rare glimpse into the psyche of a woman ensconced in traditional Native American moral frameworks, deeply wary of the dominant Anglo society. Ayah, the protagonist, navigates a world where the encroachment of Anglo-American culture continually severs her ties with her family, effectively eroding the rich Navajo cultural heritage that binds them. Silko deftly illustrates how the English language emerges as a corrosive force, undermining the familial bonds and cultural continuity that are central to Ayah's existence.

The essence of the story lies in the tragic estrangement of Ayah from her family, a severance wrought by the pervasive influence of a more dominant Anglo-American culture. The English language, in Ayah's perception, is not merely a means of communication but a vessel of cultural subjugation and betrayal. "It was like the old ones always told her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you" (Silko, 3087). This warning encapsulates the deep-seated mistrust and the existential threat posed by adopting the language and ways of the colonizers.

Ayah's husband, Chato, embodies the complex dynamics of assimilation and resistance. Confident in his mastery of English, Chato believes that this familiarity will grant him power and status in the white man's world. Yet, Ayah perceives the futility of this belief. Chato's command of English secures him a job, but it offers no protection against the exploitation and injustices meted out by his white employer. His linguistic proficiency fails to shield him from the socio-economic vulnerabilities that plague their lives, particularly when Chato becomes too old to work. The government welfare check, a supposed lifeline, instead fuels Chato's descent into alcoholism. "All of Chato's fine-sounding English talk didn't change things" (Silko, 3087), Ayah bitterly reflects, underscoring the hollow promises of assimilation.

The narrative also delves into the psychological and emotional ramifications of this cultural dislocation. Ayah's mistrust of English and her deep-seated connection to Navajo traditions underscore the existential struggle between preserving one's heritage and the pressures to conform to an alien culture. Silko's deft use of a third-person limited perspective also accentuates Ayah's profound sense of alienation and cultural dissonance. This narrative choice plunges readers into Ayah's tumultuous inner world, allowing them to taste her sorrow, simmering rage, and fierce resilience. It weaves a delicate bridge of empathy, drawing the audience into the visceral reality of her existence. Silko masterfully unveils the pernicious tentacles of cultural and linguistic imperialism that strangle indigenous identities. Through Ayah's poignant journey, Silko indicts the corrosive power of the English language as an instrument of colonization, while exalting the tenacious spirit of Native American cultural legacy. Freud insightfully noted, "The individual does actually carry on a double existence" (Freud 32), underscoring Ayah's dual struggle.

Language emerges as a powerful agent of cultural transmission and loss, profoundly shaping Ayah's experiences of bereavement and alienation. From the devastating news of her son Jimmie's death to the heart-wrenching separation from her remaining children, Danny and Ella, the English language symbolizes the invasive force of Anglo-American dominance, severing Ayah's ties to her Navajo heritage and exacerbating her sense of dislocation.

When Ayah first receives the news of Jimmie's death, it is delivered by "a man in a khaki uniform trimmed in gold" who hands her a "yellow piece of paper" and conveys the tragic information in English, a language foreign to her. Chato, her husband, translates, saying, "Jimmie isn't coming home anymore," using the specific Navajo words for speaking of the dead (Silko 3086). This interaction highlights the vast chasm between Native and Anglo modes of communication and perception, particularly concerning death. For Ayah, the manner of Jimmie's death and the bureaucratic, impersonal delivery of the news prevent her from integrating his loss into her cultural and spiritual framework. "It wasn't like Jimmie died. He just never came back" (Silko 3086). The death remains an abstract, unreal event, disconnected from the rhythms of life and death that she understands.

Language's role as a cultural agent is further underscored by the traumatic removal of Danny and Ella, Ayah's remaining children, by government agents. The white doctors, speaking only English, fail to communicate their intentions clearly to Ayah, who is left bewildered and frightened by their incomprehensible demands. Silko writes that this occurred "back in the days before they hired Navajo women to go with them as interpreters," emphasizing the doctors' disregard for Ayah's linguistic and cultural needs (Silko 3086). This neglect epitomizes the broader colonial attitude of erasure and domination, where the imposition of the colonizer's language serves to disenfranchise and disempower the native population.

Ayah's inability to understand the intricacies of the English language renders her powerless in the face of the white authorities. The officials, wearing khaki uniforms, thrust papers and a black ballpoint pen at her, demanding her signature on forms she cannot read. She perceives their gaze upon her children as predatory: "They were wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a black ball-point pen, trying to make her understand their English words. She was frightened by the way they looked at the children, like the lizard watches the fly" (Silko 3086). This vivid imagery captures the predatory nature of the state, ready to pounce on and consume her offspring under the guise of legality and health. Desperate to end the harassment, Ayah signs her name, a skill taught to her by Chato. This act of signing, which legally authorizes the removal of her children, becomes a source of profound regret and resentment. She chastises Chato for teaching her to write her name, an act that facilitated the government's appropriation of her children. Following this betrayal, she refuses to sleep next to Chato for many years, symbolizing the rupture in their relationship and her deep sense of betrayal.

The loss of Danny and Ella to the Anglo system represents a grievous cultural and emotional severance. Despite their survival of tuberculosis, they are never returned to Ayah's care, deemed by the state as unfit due to biases and misconceptions about her capabilities. The children's sporadic visits home only deepen Ayah's sense of loss and disconnection. Initially, Danny retains his grasp of the Navajo language, maintaining a tenuous bond with his mother. However, the white woman overseeing their visits views the Navajo home and language as detrimental influences. She is visibly unnerved by the sight of venison strips drying on a rope across the ceiling and the children speaking excitedly in a language she does not understand, highlighting her cultural ignorance and prejudice (Silko 3087).

As the visits continue, the children's assimilation into white culture becomes painfully apparent. During their final visit, Danny struggles to recall his native language, speaking in a disjointed mix of Navajo and English. Ella, the younger child, stares at Ayah with an alien gaze, unable to recognize her own mother. Ayah's cheerful attempts to engage Danny in Navajo are met with his faltering responses, marked by the intrusion of English words. This linguistic barrier epitomizes the profound estrangement between Ayah and her children, a rift so deep that she cannot even bring herself to say goodbye to them.

For Ayah, this cultural and emotional dislocation is more agonizing than death itself. Reflecting on the babies she lost in infancy and buried in the nearby hills, Ayah recalls the solace she found in their physical presence and the traditional burial rituals that connected her to her ancestors and the land. "She had carried them herself… [and] laid them in the crevices of sandstone and buried them in fine quartz pebbles that washed down the hills in the rain. She had endured it because they had been with her. But she could not bear this pain" (Silko 3086). The forced removal of Danny and Ella, facilitated by the alien language of the colonizers, represents an unendurable separation from her cultural roots and her identity as a mother.

Silko's narrative is an eloquent exploration of the destructive power of linguistic and cultural imperialism. Chato's adoption of English and his attempts to navigate the white world embody a mimicry, a coerced adaptation that ultimately offers no real empowerment or protection. Instead, it results in exploitation, alienation, and betrayal. Ayah's deep mistrust of English and her adherence to Navajo traditions represent a poignant resistance against the erasure of her cultural identity. Her memories, her connection to the land, and her enduring grief for her lost children are testament to the enduring strength of Native American culture amidst the onslaught of colonial forces.

Carl Jung offers a framework for understanding the deep cultural and spiritual heritage that Ayah embodies. Jung writes, "The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution born anew in the brain structure of every individual" (Jung 43). Ayah's experiences, her connection to the land, and her cultural practices are manifestations of this collective heritage, a living tapestry of memory and belonging that colonial forces seek to unravel.

Silko lays bare the devastating impact of linguistic and cultural imperialism on indigenous identities and familial bonds. The narrative underscores the superiority of traditional Native ways over the enforced assimilation into Eurocentric society, which has wreaked havoc on families and tribes. Ayah, the protagonist, epitomizes this clinging to Navajo heritage, steadfastly adhering to the old ways imparted by her mother and grandmother. Her family, conversely, embodies the tragic consequences of succumbing to the Anglo world: Jimmie, who goes to war, Danny and Ella, who are taken away, and Chato, who trusts the white man more than his own instincts, all face ruin.

The narrative's essence lies in the portrayal of these characters and their inevitable downfall as they drift from their Navajo roots. Jimmie's death in war, Danny and Ella's estrangement from their parents and heritage, and Chato's loss of job, home, and pride are stark illustrations of the detrimental effects of integrating into the alien society. Silko's critical perspective vividly exposes the negative repercussions of adopting Anglo-Western culture on Native American communities, as seen through the eyes of a mother and wife.

Silko's storytelling reveals the peril in learning the ways and language of the white man. Ayah, who remains faithful to her Navajo roots, emerges as the only character who attains a semblance of peace by the story's end. Silko's message is unequivocal: Native Americans who resist white cultural norms and influence will find greater contentment and security in the long run. She adeptly illustrates the adverse outcomes of Anglo-Western hegemony over Native American communities. She not only delineates the sources of their suffering but also proposes solutions. Ayah's return to her past, through the recollection of her childhood memories, serves as a balm for her tribulations inflicted by the Anglo world. This act of remembering allows her to draw strength from her traditional culture and its healing power, providing a form of catharsis.

Silko's work does not conclude with facile assurances of security or a pastoral idyll. Instead, it reflects a profound anxiety about obliterated histories and an uncertain future. Yet, inherent in the narrative is a refusal to separate dissent from passion. "Lullaby" is a work of quiet resistance rather than overt dominance. Silko bestows upon Ayah a voice that rarely rises in anger or despair but remains reconciled, contemplative, and introspective. Ayah's strength lies in her remarkable ability to accept her fate with serenity.

Silko's narrative poignantly depicts how the English language serves as a vehicle for cultural imperialism, severing Ayah's familial and spiritual bonds. The language of the colonizers becomes a tool of disenfranchisement and disempowerment, as Ayah is unable to comprehend or articulate the intricacies of English, rendering her powerless against the white authorities. The traumatic loss of her children, Danny and Ella, to the state is exacerbated by the language barrier. The white doctors, indifferent to Ayah's linguistic needs, fail to communicate their intentions, resulting in a devastating misunderstanding. Silko writes, "They were wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a black ball-point pen, trying to make her understand their English words. She was frightened by the way they looked at the children, like the lizard watches the fly" (Silko 3086). This vivid imagery captures the predatory nature of the state, poised to consume her offspring under the guise of legality and health.

Through Ayah's story, Silko critiques the insidious effects of cultural and linguistic domination. The English language, wielded as a tool of colonial power, disrupts the transmission of Navajo cultural heritage, severing familial and spiritual bonds. In conclusion, "Lullaby" is a profound exploration of the intersections of language, culture, and power. Silko's narrative lays bare the devastating impact of linguistic and cultural imperialism on indigenous identities and familial bonds. Through Ayah's poignant story, Silko celebrates the resilience of Native American heritage and critiques the colonial forces that

seek to suppress it. The narrative invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of cultural dominance and the vital importance of preserving and honoring indigenous identities. As Silko eloquently illustrates, the struggle to maintain cultural integrity and continuity is both a personal and collective journey, one that is fraught with pain but also imbued with profound strength and resilience.

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