

WHEN LIFE TURNS INTO MEMORIES. ANALYSIS OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S "LULLABY."

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Abstract

Historical events related to an onset of the Anglo-Western culture on the American continent led to the vast devastation of the Native American cultural communities. However, the indigenous population of the American continent found their own ways to survive such harsh times. By the means of their literary tradition based on the storytelling and oral traditions, many contemporary writers and activists have successfully re-established the previously blemished notion of the indigenous identity. This article deals with a short story "Lullaby" (1981), written by Leslie Marmon Silko, and presents the author's a sensitive, yet, an intensive depiction of consequences having resulted from the encounter between the Anglo-Western world and the world of Native Americans reflected into the life of one human being. Memories play inevitable role as they expose collective trauma of Native Americans hidden behind the traumatic experience of an old Native American woman. On the other hand, this article points on the other functions of the memories within this story, where they according to the traditional storytelling have obviously a positive impact on the life of the individual, the community as well, as they create the balance between the traumatic loss of the cultural identity and the survival through its restoring.

Key Words: Native Americans, Leslie Marmon Silko, memories, storytelling, loss, trauma, survival

Abstrakt

Historické udalosti spojené s počiatkom západnej kultúry na americkom kontinente viedli ku rozsiahlej devastácii kultúrnych komunit pôvodného obyvateľstva Severnej Ameriky. Pôvodné obyvateľstvo si aj napriek tomu našlo svoje vlastné spôsoby ako prežiť toto ťažké obdobie. Prostredníctvom literárnej tradície vychádzajúcej z rozprávačstva a ústnej tradície mnohí súčasní spisovatelia a aktivisti úspešne pomohli obnoviť dávno naštrbené vnímanie významu identity pre pôvodné obyvateľstvo. Tento článok sa zaoberá poviedku "Lullaby" (1981) od autorky Leslie Marmon Silko, a predkladá autorkin citlivý no intenzívny pohľad na zobrazené následky stretu medzi západným svetom a svetom prvodných obyvateľov Severnej Ameriky odrazené na živote jedného človeka. Spomienky hrajú dôležitú úlohu, vzhľadom na to, že odhaľujú kolektívnu traumu pôvodného obyvateľstva Severnej Ameriky, ukrytú v živote severo-americkéj staršej ženy. Avšak, tento článok poukazuje aj na ďalšiu funkciu spomienok, vychádzajúc z rozprávačskej tradícií, ktorá v tejto poviedke spočíva v ich pozitívnom pôsobení na život jednotlivca, a takto zároveň aj na komunitu, keďže sa podieľajú na vytvorení rovnováhy medzi traumatizujúcou stratou kultúrnej identity a prežitím prostredníctvom jej prinavrátenia.

Kľúčové slová: Americkí indiáni, Leslie Marmon Silko, spomienky, rozprávačstvo, strata, trauma, prežitie

Introduction

Silko's short stories and novels combine the visuality of the traditional storytelling and the readability of the Anglo-Western form of the written text. Influenced by her own experience with the Pueblo and Navajo cultures, Silko in her stories represents a deeper insight into the Native American communities and their traditional cultural world, as she interrelates their past

and the present. Her works deal with the traumas of the past, as well with those the indigenous communities have to face today, moreover, they seek the answer how to help through understanding the nature of trauma and its source. Silko's writing style is unique - she reveals a Native American perspective through re-telling the traditional stories interweaved with the elements of realism in her stories and novels, as she did to some extent even in "Lullaby" (2012).

In this article, the emphasis is put on the analysis of the confrontation of the indigenous world, the main character Ayah comes from, while experiencing an impact of the encounter with modernity and the domination of the Anglo-Western world. The analysed short story carries many features characteristic for a traumatic narrative according to Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), as it links deaths of the main character's beloved and her own struggle to survive in the ongoing life beside her husband. Therefore, the re-told memories as a powerful means of storytelling will be included within the analysis, in order to focus on their role in treating the personal and collective trauma the Native American communities and their people experienced.

In "Lullaby" (2012), first published as a part of the short stories collection, *Storyteller* (1981) Silko opens a space for a discussion reacting to many problems and negative consequences of the US Government policy on the life of Native Americans as she transformed such experiences into the memories of the characters in the story. Silko introduces a fictional story depicting a character of an old Native American woman, Ayah, who is almost at the end of her life, though she still has to face to the changing world under the domination of the white men. Despite its fictionality, Silko refers in her story to the common experience of many Native Americans and their view on that. That idea is supported also by Kolbeinsen (2010), who presents that "[I]n 'Lullaby' Silko writes from a Native American perspective, allowing Native Americans to tell their story, from their point of view, which provides a sense of realism to the short story" (p.11). Silko's short story "Lullaby" is, therefore, a highly critical piece of writing, even though it is presented through the gentle and very sensitively chosen words depicting particular moments and flashbacks during the story from the other, the Native American view, that is in contrast to the Anglo-Western literary tradition.

1 Traumas, Parts of One's Past

The arrival of the first European colonizers and settlers started a domino effect of many tragic events most of which affected the indigenous population of both Americas directly. Gradual deprivation of lands and reduction of civil rights, including their rights of the true residents of the American land, caused that instead of the traditional way of life, the indigenous population had to face to suppression and slow erasure of their own cultural identity at the expense of the Christianisation process and the political intervention of the colonial powers, and later the federal government. Consequences, which are still observable even in the contemporary Native American communities, have become just expectable results of the actions against the

Native American people.^{13,14}

Silko's portrayal of Ayah as the main character, turns a simple story into the story that is really deeply intimate as it shows moments from the old woman's personal life. Despite its fictionality, the story includes some of the real issues Native Americans have experienced during the 20th century. Furthermore, Silko's interpretation introduces the view from the perspective of a mother, a wife, and at the same time, still a Native American woman. In the papers "There Is No Word for Feminism in My Language" (2000), the author Laura Tohe deals with the distinguishing between the notions of what is feminist and feminine in relation to the Native American women, moreover, Tohe focuses more specifically on the position of Navajo women within the families and their own tribes including their treatment of being naturally respectable and honoured, which is in contrast with the position of women on the European continent during the same time period, and what is to some extent presented even in Silko's "Lullaby".

Patrice Hollrah (2003) specifies another view on the position and personal experience of a Navajo woman in the way that "Silko juxtaposes the past and the present to show both how Ayah maintains her sense of tribal identity in the face of change, disillusionment, and loss, and by extension how problems still exist today not just for the Navajo but for many American Indians "(p.1).

The story refers to many losses Ayah has suffered during her life, many of which are recalled in the form of her memories. Starting with Jimmy, her eldest son, and his death during the war conflict somewhere in Asia can be considered as one of the most eminent. It influences the whole story, for it uncovers the main character's perception of reality: "It wasn't like Jimmie died. died. He just never came back" (Silko, 2012, p.3084). Ayah's reaction to her son's death may seem strange, almost impersonal, yet, when focusing on the traditions of Navajo people, to whom the main character belongs, and their notion of the concept of death, where the death was something they were afraid of. In order to overcome the possibility, the spirits of the deceased would return and haunt the relatives. The pre-burial procedures were important for a spiritual journey to the underworld, so any disturbance during them, such as overdone mourning, might bring the soul of the dead back. Some of the Native American communities have understood the concept of death in the way the death should " be feared and handled with precautions 'in order to prevent unnatural illness and premature death'" (Hollrah, 2003, p.18). Silko's elaborated story presents the contrast between the strong bonds to the culture of Navajo, its traditions, and the bonds of the mother and children she lost during the helicopter crash or in some health care institutions. Caruth (1996) offers also another view, in which the memories related to Ayah's deceased son represent an obvious traumatic experience that repeats and affects Ayah's life directly and also the way she perceives the reality.

It was worse than as if they had died: to lose the children and now to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her.

¹³ See Axtell, James. *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*. 2001.

¹⁴ See Calloway, Colin G. *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. 1997.

There had been babies that died soon after they were born, and one that died before he could walk. (Silko, 2012, p.3086)

What Caruth emphasizes, is the fact that the individual story representing a trauma of one's own past may be tied up with the traumatic experience of someone else, and that is also Silko's objective in the case of those who experienced such things to find themselves in them, for "[...] the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound." (Caruth, 1996, p.8).

However, in case of the Navajo culture, death is a natural part of the cycle of life, and completing the burial ceremonies mends the bonds that have been broken, and helps to heal the wounds. In Ayah's case, that means to bring a peace to her mind and ease the farewell to her children who passed away because of or premature death caused by the accident or a disease.

She had carried them by herself, up to the boulders and great pieces of the cliff that long ago crashed down from Long Mesa; she laid them in the crevices of sand-stone and buried them in fine brown sand with round quartz pebbles that washed down the hills in the rain. She had endured it because they had been with her. (Silko, 2012, p. 3086)

Hollrah (2003) points on the way" Silko alludes to more than just removing American Indian children from their tribal homes because of illness. She exposes how well-meaning federal authorities can destroy culture and obliterate family structures, all in the name of acculturation and assimilation "(p.15). It is just one of the examples interpreting the consequences between the dominated and the dominating culture¹⁵. The consequences of such acting are long-lasting and seriously affect the individuals as well as whole communities. Ayah's lost of her own children as well as her dented relationship with her husband are simple examples which Silko used in her short story.

2. Two Cultures, Two Worlds

Even though Ayah's husband is not the main character in the story, he appears in many of her memories. Chato's case is a bit ambiguous. Even though it is him, who renounces his ties to his culture and identity in exchange to fit in the changing society, as he accepts the way of life of the dominant society, its habits, even its language. What he gets is only a fake feeling of appreciation while working on the white man's ranch. Still, Chato's character stands as a protective barrier between the traditional world of his people and the world of the whites, however, his own ways how to overcome all the traumas in his life, just trap him somewhere inbetween: "The illness came after the white rancher told Chato he was too old to work for him anymore, and Chato and his old woman should be out of the shack by the next afternoon because the rancher had hired new people to work there" (Silko 3087). Silko's interpretation just emphasizes the traumatic aspect of the attempt of Native Americans to integrate within the white society, where despite everything they were treated as Chato or even worse, as Ayah remembers

¹⁵ See Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin. *Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. 2004

on that moment:” To see how the white man repaid Chato’s years of loyalty and work. All of Chato’s fine-sounding English talk didn’t change things” (Silko 3087).

Silko’s critical interpretation of losing Jimmy, Danny, Ella, and even Chato, presents negative effects and consequences of the implementation of the Anglo-Western culture into the Native American communities or the attempt to integrate the indigenous people into the alien society through the military service, health care and education obviously from the viewpoint of the mother and the wife. In addition to that, it is important to take into account what is suggested either by Hardy. Silko’s intention resides also in the depiction of the old woman’s viewpoint and her attempt to keep deep connection to her traditional cultural Native American background despite her personal experience. As he notes, “At each point, the English language is significant in breaking the bond that ties Ayah and her family together through their Navajo cultural heritage.” (in Govedarica, p.8) On the other hand, the oral tradition and the spoken language were inevitable for the Native American culture according to belief of their power before the onset of the colonisation. According to Suzanne Austgen together with Susan de Brill-Ramirez, storytelling as such represented for the indigenous communities quite a complex system that could be considered not only as a source of entertainment, but also as a source of valuable information including their own history or religious issues all that enabling their coexistence between the real world and the spiritual world (in Ramirez, 2002).

Therefore, Ayah obviously believes in the power of her name as she was taught to write it down by her husband Chato, and feels strong enough to use such power against the white authorities. It may allude to Walter Ong’s idea (2002), that:” There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy.” (p.14) Instead of holding such a power, she suffers a great loss as she is deceived because of her signature, a written word that “[...] let the policeman and doctors put the screaming children in the government car [...]” (Silko, 2012, p.3086). Silko very sensitively, yet clearly, points at the fact how the tools of literacy can be misused (but not only) by the dominant culture against the individual according to the cultural misinterpretation.

Similarly, the military service of Native Americans while fighting in the name of their own country turned to be another tool how to deceive the indigenous community. Through promises and ideas given by the military propaganda, the young men were under the illusion that they were earning the respect of the society. As Hollrah (2003) critically points to that moment in Silko’s short story, noting that “many American Indians for the first time experienced respect from whites. Then, when they were discharged, they received the same kind of shabby treatment they had before entering the service” (p.11). The trust of institutions has become a fragile point for many Native American communities, as their words and promises caused so much harm to them and the young generations. Instead of promised health care and education respecting the cultural background of the children, as the story even it represents fictional characters and

environment, it still questions the strong cultural cut-off the generations of Native Americans have experienced, and try to seek their roots in order to realize who they really are.

3 Memories Are Like Stories ... Can Heal

Silko distills Ayah's memories as powerful and dominant elements into the "Lullaby" story, where they serve as a means of reconnection with the traditional Navajo culture where "people are sustained by remembering and passing on what is deep in the memory, there to draw strength from" (Palmer, 1997, p.102).

Silko gently plays with recalling the moments from Ayah's childhood, the times she used to process the wool when "her grandma sat beside and her, spinning a silvery strand of yarn around the smooth cedar spindle. Her mother worked at the loom with yarns dyed bright yellow and red and gold" (Silko, 2012, p.3084). There is no wonder that Silko reaches for these memories. Palmer (1997) characterises that idea through alluding the symbolism included in the creation of the blankets as "Ayah's memory turns naturally to birth, for as creation of the perfect blankets gives the birth to the world, so too had she given birth to children" (p.108-109), in the context of the tribal traditions in Ayah's family. As it has been mentioned above, the Navajo women have had a principal place in the traditional culture and social life, including the responsibility for sharing and passing knowledge from one generation to another¹⁶. Ayah's memories are therefore turning towards the women from her family at the times of her greatest losses in order to find the strength and directions to achieve not only her physical but also her spiritual survival.

The bonds between mother and her children are characteristic for the Native American culture, and in Silko's story such relationship is presented very specifically. Witherspoon (1975) characterises that in the way that "[...] the concepts of mother and child are inseparable in Navajo culture. [...] Mother and child are bound together by the most intense, the most diffuse, and the most endure solidarity to be found in Navajo culture" (p.15). The moment of childbirth represents one of the most intense and painful moments in the life of every mother, as it represents one of the strongest emotions imprinting on the mother's memory leading to creation of the strongest bond possible between the mother and her child. What makes "Lullaby" (2012) story so powerful, is how Silko firstly juxtaposes, and then substitutes the emotional pain caused by the loss of her eldest son for recalling the physical pain during his birth, for it is soon followed by joy.

Ayah's memories from her youth such as the process of weaving or the childbirth, are in strong contrast with the Anglo-Western stereotypical view on women and their traditional position in the society, for Silko gives them a tint of sacredness. The reason is simple, for within many Native American communities, women, and especially mothers have got a dominant and independent position of the keepers of the traditional knowledge and values. So, there is no wonder that Silko depicts such a strong bond reconnecting Ayah, her mother and grandmother. The knowledge of weaving handed down from one generation of women to another is changes its function as it becomes a

metonymy of life transforming into the form that “carries the tradition of weaving a tale in a style of the oral tradition” (Govedarica, p.6), as Ayah does when she “weaves” her own stories about her son and the things he would have done, if he had returned from the war. What may seem as a kind of a sentimental or naive fantasy of the old woman, is in fact a powerful act of personal healing through the stories, which is also present in other Silko’s works, for example *Ceremony* (1977).

Premature deaths of the infants and Jimmie may look like a violation of the principles on which the cycle of life characteristic for the Navajo tradition is based, and in some way they really do, as the natural concept is broken and the new life cannot substitute those who passed away. The collapse of the cycle becomes more obvious even with the decline of Chato’s behaviour due to senility and his old age, for the closer he is to his end, the more he is vulnerable like a small child.

Because of all she has gone through she becomes *Spider Woman* or *Thought Woman*¹⁷, the powerful figures from the Navajo mythology, as she feels the strength originating in those myths.

In the past years they would told her to get out. But her hair was white now and her face was wrinkled. They looked at her like she was a spider crawling slowly across the room. They were afraid; she could feel the fear. She looked at their faces steadily. [...] She felt satisfied that the men in the bar feared her. (Silko,2012, p.3087-3088)

Silko gives Ayah a chance to complete the cycle for all who passed away too early not only through her memories but also via her last moments with Chato. “He would not feel it. She tucked the blanket around him, remembering how it was when Ella had been with her [...]” (Silko,2012, p.3089) At the end of the story during the moment when Ayah starts singing the lullaby, it is obvious that the cycle is almost complete. The lullaby sung to let Chato fall asleep serves as a means to complete the cycle for everyone according to traditions and beliefs and join the Navajo spiritual world with all those who have already passed, in the correct manner. The cycle covers more than just the lives of individuals from the story or their return to the roots, cultural background and traditions - it covers all that is inevitable for a return back to the beginning and to start a new cycle. Loss and survival interconnected with the cycle of life in nature directly point to powers of spiritual healing. For its readers, Silko’s “Lullaby”, therefore, constitutes a story full of traumatic as well as healing memories through which she alludes to seeking the balance between the Native Americans and the contemporary world by elucidating their notion of traditions to those who are unfamiliar with the indigenous culture, the present-day

¹⁷ Spiderwoman and her role in Native American creation myths goes hand-in-hand with the idea of the Earth as a motherly womb that gave birth to all life-forms, and the principle of feminine creativity in all of life. Native Americans recognize and respect the idea that new life comes from the mother.

This idea of feminine creativity also contributes to the role of Spiderwoman as an authoritative teacher of critical survival skills, such as growing food and making pottery. In the Navajo tradition, she is credited with teaching their people how to weave. In fact, there is a ceremonial tradition of rubbing one’s hands in spider webs to prepare for weaving. (Kachina House website)

American society, and survive through that, still having in mind, who they are and where they come from.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of “Lullaby” (1981) resides in Silko’s mastery of interrelating the negative aspects caused by domination of the Anglo-Western world over the world of the Native American communities. She is not only pointing out to the causes of the sufferings, but she also presents some answers, as her character is able to return back to her past through recalling her childhood memories and get over the sufferings and “illnesses” introduced by the Anglo-Western world. While drawing from the traditional culture of her tribe and its healing power, and she uses them on herself. It is obvious how much attention Silko pays to the importance of the oral traditions and their effect on “Lullaby.” (1981) Her sensitive language and almost a lyrical atmosphere, while the author deals with the loss and the way her main character survived the hardest times of her life, just support the qualities of the story and put it on another level of understanding the past. Telling Ayah’s story presented the Native American perspective with such amount of realism on all the events presented within the story. Brewster E. Fitz (2004) has concluded Silko’s work in the way that “[T]hese images that paradoxically inote opposites, old age and youth, nature and culture, cold and warmth, life and death function like the metaphorical backbne of Silko’s written storytelling” (74). Through her writing, Silko restores what has lost in the traditional oral world, what she as well as her main character Ayah used to know and learn as children. She restores balance through the writing, the balance Ayah lost the moment she linked the letters of her name written on the piece of paper with loss and death. Almost at the story’s end, the balance turns into a remedy curing every pain her soul has suffered, for the recalled and rewritten stories from Ayah’s past have become in Silko’s rendition instead of old relics rather the elements of the continious cycle of life through which the old wounds of Native Americans are healed.

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