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Witchery and Weather: Decoding the Metaphor of Drought in Silko's Stories

Bijaya Raj Panta 

Dhawalagiri Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Baglung, Nepal

Email: bijayarajpanta26@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper analyzes the effects of colonization on Indian life as presented in Leslie Marmon Silko's two stories, "Tony's Story" and "Lullaby," from *Storyteller*. Through close textual analysis of metaphors as informed by Gerald Vizenor's interpretation of "witchery," the study posits that Silko uses metaphors from nature and body, such as drought, cold, illness, and alcoholism, to show the effects of colonization. In these stories, colonial agents, including state police, government doctors, and state institutions, function as agents of witchery that disrupt Indian's relationships to land, to their past, and to their communal life. The use of metaphors is to frame a colonial power not merely as political domination but as a destructive force producing spiritual and cultural disintegration within Native communities. At the same time, Silko's narratives exhibit ritual, storytelling, and cultural memory as counterforces capable of restoring balance and healing the effects of witchery. By interpreting witchery as a metaphor for colonial violence, the paper adds knowledge on Silko studies in relation to postcolonial epistemology.

Keywords: colonialism, metaphor, ritual healing, witchery

Introduction

The research paper analyzes Leslie Marmon Silko's use of different metaphors such as weather, drinking, and the colonial police to depict the effects of colonization in the Native American landscape... These effects are referred to as witchery, and in Silko's stories— "Lullaby" and "Tony's Story"—they are represented by drought, alcoholism, and sickness. Through close textual analysis of these three key metaphors, the study argues that the presence of the Whites among the Indians equates to diseases and causes pathological effects. With the publication of *Ceremony* (1976), Silko emerged as a genuine voice condemning the widespread Westernization of Indian practices. In her works, Silko particularly condemns the colonization of Native Americans. The metaphor of witchery to symbolize this sinister practice is central to her narratives. Moreover, in her use of the concept, witchery is not only a supernatural belief but also a metaphor for the destructive forces of colonialism that cause Indian youth to lose their ancestral connections. In "Tony's Story," the drought symbolizes social pathology. As seen in many of her works, Silko's portrayal of Pueblo culture presents the environment and social order as intertwined. Therefore, the connection between the actual drought in the story and the presence of the state trooper creates a cohesive narrative. Additionally, the research examines how Silko employs the theme of "witchery" to argue that colonialism is a form of environmental sickness. Similarly, in "Lullaby," the damaging effects of colonialism are conveyed through metaphors of coldness and slow death. Government doctors and alcoholism serve as the pathogens of destruction. This study demonstrates how ritual power can counteract witchery, as Silko articulates through her use of metaphors.

Literature Review

Leslie Merman Silko's representation of the Indian life received scholarly praise and critical appreciation. Her subject matter and characters are claimed to be the realistic and authentic voice of Indian life. It is found that she looks to the past to find solutions for current issues, argues Ruoff in "Ritual and Renewal." The need to return to past rituals and oral traditions to rediscover one's cultural identity becomes the main theme in her stories (Ruoff, 1978, p. 2; Carsten, 2006, p. 105). When this is achieved is one prepared to address present problems. However, Silko supports returning to the core rather than the exact forms of these rituals and traditions, which must be continually adapted to meet new challenges. Through her own stories, Silko "demonstrates that the Keres rituals and traditions have survived all attempts to eradicate them and that the seeds for the resurgence of their power lie in the memories and creativeness of her people" (p.105). Moreover, in her narratives, Silko "experiments with multiple genres—fiction, poetry, historical narrative, and memoir—within a single work" (Carsten 2006, p. 107) and her stories evolve out a richly textured oral tradition, and thus, the written words become merely an extension of tradition, not a reflection of higher form of culture and sophistication. This is a common practice in the Indian literature where the concept of the teller/listener dynamic is so essential to vital oral tradition. Thus, Silko unites writing with elements of oral tradition both in her choice of material and in her presentations (Brown 1995, p. 173-74, Thompson, 1989). This unique ability to blend genres and

bring the speaker and audience in the same time frame allows Silko to portray Indian life vividly, earning her the title of “tribal storyteller” (Lorenz 1991, p. 61). In other words, the unique narrative strands also represent the polyphonic Indian life as well.

Similarly, Arnold Krupat (1990) argues that Silko’s *Storyteller*—in which both stories are anthologized—is a dialogic engagement with biography. However, unlike mainstream Western biographies, it does not tell the story of an individual but the story of an entire tribe. By calling herself a storyteller, she places herself within a tradition of tellings, suggesting that her stories cannot strictly be her own nor will we find in them what one typically looks for in Western autobiography (p. 60). Finally, Krupat concludes that Silko’s book does not make a claim; it does not offer “a theory of communication nor of politics” (p.12). Instead, it provides a window for readers “to see its art as a matter of values that are most certainly not only aesthetics” (p. 65). If it is a dialogic approach to Krupat, *Storyteller* is a “polyvocality” to Langen (199), because Silko “has employed a silent, tangible object used by one person at a time—a book—to effect that person’s participation in an audible, intangible, communal art—storytelling, which is more than “just the presence of multiple voices, but the sounding of voices through each other” (p.7). Similarly, the subject-matter of *Storyteller* are the traditional tales retold, poems, bits of family history, and written short fiction crafted from tribal and oral tradition, making it a unique Native American text heralding narrative autonomy of Indian tale that documents “Silko’s appropriation of the storytelling role and validating in particular her claim to the role of Laguna, American Indian storyteller” (Jaskoski 1992 p. 80). Silko reinserts a belief of ritual healing and its transformative potential in medication and well-being of an individual as well as an Indian community.

In discussion on Silko, quite much attention is given to *Ceremony* (1977) and *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). However, the cultural implication of *Storyteller* (1981)—a collection of family stories, stories of creation, interviews, and a photograph—is wide and meaningful. *Storyteller*, in this sense, counters the schematics designed by European cultures, erasing the traditional schematics practiced by Native Americans (Domina 2007; Hernandez 1997, p. 54; Velikova 2002). In the same vein, Arsten (2006) explains that Silko crafts a narrative patterned after Native American myth at the center of the *Storyteller* theme through her transformation of the literary into a written form of the oral. This transformation becomes the linearity of the narrative structure, and by constituting the thematic clusters as reading strands, like in the spider web—the primordial image in the Native American myth system. While radial strands provide the organizational pattern of the book [*Storyteller*], the web’s lateral threads connect one thematic strand to another, suggesting a whole and woven fabric (de Ramairez 1997, p. 340; Danielson 1989, p.21). Structurally, the narrative provides a focal point for the dialogue among the various texts in the book, and the mythical story gives the reader some important interpretive insights into the other texts. It is a story attributing the destructive aspects of European civilization to the misuse of language in storytelling (p. 121).

Bernard Hirsh reviews “Lullaby” as a practice of storytelling itself in a form of retelling as an original telling (p.8). It is not merely a story of survival, . . . but a survival story itself. Scholarship on *Storyteller* has focused on Silko’s literary art and voicing the life on the reservation after the Colonial encounter. Her artistic ability to

create a new form of biography that breaks away from the Western tradition. Conversely, some critics have emphasized her skill in blurring genres and developing a unique mode of writing that differs from the 'dialogic mode of storytelling.' Finally, in *Storyteller*, Silko spins such a lateral thread of attention to storytellers and the art of storytelling (Danielson 1989, p. 21) and takes the readers to experience the Native American life on the reservations.

After a careful reading and scholarly engagement with Silko's narrative style, her theme of Native American life, and her technique of storytelling, the research proposes to examine Silko's use of metaphor to explain the downside effects on Indian life in the reservation stemming from the colonial encounters. Therefore, a research gap exists: the impacts of colonization on Indian life have been thoroughly examined yet Silko's use of metaphor to represent the effects and her reliance on the potential power of ritual healing to counter the effects is a new research avenue. Additionally, the effect of colonization—referred to as witchery in Silko's narrative—emerges through key metaphors. Thus, it examines the narrative situations of colonial encounter and explains the effects on Native life. Similarly, it analyzes how Silko uses the metaphor of witchery, and for what purpose? Furthermore, it explains how her narrative offsets the effects of such witchery.

Methods

This paper employs a critical textual reading to explain the effects of colonial encounters in the Native Indian life and the redemptive power of rituals in countering the oppressive effects of such evil forces in the Indian reservation. The reading uses Gerald Vizenor's definition of witchery and a critical reading of metaphors. Check it. The data for the analysis comes from two stories—"Tony's Story" and "Lullaby." The characters, situations, and conflicts in these two stories are treated as data. All the data is explained through the key literary device, metaphor. Thus, the research design for the analysis become critical analysis of the use of metaphor to represent the witchery, and the use of ritual to counter it. In these stories, Silko's use of metaphor illustrates the impact of witchery and the application of ritual as countering the witchery, thus healing. Ultimately, the metaphor is analyzed to show how rituals can offset the harmful effects of witchery.

Analysis and Discussion

Disease, blight, and death are the outcome of witchery in "Tony's Story," and alcoholism and white medicine equals to witchery that causes death and desolation in "Lullaby." Silko presents these effects through the application of metaphors. The sickness, as outlined by Silko in *Storyteller* and in her other narratives, is a cultural condition resulting from complicity in the White man's cause. Similarly, the condition can affect the Indians due to their participation with the colonizing agents. For instance, in "Tony's Story" and "Lullaby"—two stories collected in Silko's *Storyteller*—we learn about the good and evil from an Indian perspective (Brown 1995, p. 176). In the first story, the witchery becomes a metaphor of death and desolation, and in the second story uses the government soldiers and alcoholism as metaphors for disease and death. In both of the stories, Silko's use of metaphor is a

key narrative technique employed to explain both the witchery's effect and counterweigh to it.

"Tony's Story" begins with an image of death and desolation. The key metaphor depicting this is weather. Through "the sky was wide and hot . . . and the tumbleweeds turned brown and died" (p. 116) the narrator sets the tone of the story by foregrounding death upfront. The opening image serves as the larger context of the story, where Tony has returned home after serving in the army. And "It's good to be home again," but fears that he might have forgotten how to corn dance. The image recurs again later in the story, "the sky was hot and empty. The half-grown tumbleweeds were dried up flat and brown beside the highway" (p. 118), where "the cop's following" them as if they were some sort of burglars. This violates what Vizoner calls "native sovereignty" (1998 p. 181): "natives are neither exiles nor separatists from nations of territories" (p. 181) The narrator reports that Leon does not understand the situation and talks about right, but through the reference to Old Teofilo's story, the narrator implies that the Grants (reservations) have been nationalized, and a few patches of land are what the Natives have now. For Leon, "Native sovereignty is the right of motion, and transmotion" which is "personal, reciprocal, [and] the source of survivance, but not territorial" (p. 182). Transmotion is a term coined by Vizoner to explain the natural motion of the natives, cultural survivance across time and space. However, Leon won't understand it since he has been out of the reservations for quite a long time, working for the white man.

Leon met the Governor and had him promise to "send letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and to the State Police Chief" (Silko p. 119) regarding the police officers' behavior. Leon's uncle requested the narrator "to stay at the sheep camp for a while" (p.120). They headed for the farm, but the cop appeared. Though the background image changed from bleak to "suddenly all the trees are pinions," which means a happy mood, the disease remained there. In other words, this cope becomes a synecdoche of witchery, blight, and the primary cause of Tony's problem. In the climactic scene in the story, Tony proposes to exorcise the witchery: We've got to kill it, Leon. We must burn the body to be sure" (p. 120). The use of the pronoun "it" is an indicative to a thing, not a person. Thus, the white police following them becomes an agent, like a pathogen of plague, which needs burning to get rid:

The big cop was standing in front of the pickup, facing Leon. "You made your mistake, Indian. I'm going to beat the shit out of you." He raised the billy club slowly. "I like to beat Indian with this. He moved toward Leon with the stick raised high, and it was like the long bone in my dream when he pointed it at me—a human bone painted brown to look like wood, to hide what it really was. (p. 120)

The pronoun reference to the thing is an indication that the white police represents larger, more sinister force than it actually appears to be: it is an agent of destruction and disease. Thus, it needs a cure. Tony killed the cop: "The shot sounded far away and . . . he [the cop] was motionless on the ground." The ritual is performed by spreading the blood in the tumbleweed, and they "set the care on fire," finally completing the cycle of witchery (p. 120-21). This act is an assertion of "the sovereignty in motion which is mythic, material, not mere territorial" (Vizoner p.

182). Thus, the killing of the cop cannot be an act of murder, but rather the opposite, asserting the ritual independence.

Rampant Witchery and Ritual Healing

In “Lullaby,” the white doctor is so powerful and overpowering that they can take away children from their mothers in the name of medicine, snubbing the principle of native sovereignty. Thus, if white cop is a pathogen of witchery in “Tony’s Story,” the doctors and alcoholism work as metaphors and effects of witchery in “Lullaby.”

Chato worked for the white all his life as he spoke both tongues. Ayah, his wife, had consented, without being aware of what she had done, to let the white doctors take her children for treatment. As the Indian reservation was affected by disease, and the white “doctors [were] running, but they had been taken by surprise” (Silko p. 43). When Chato was not home, they took their children, Ella and Danny, away:

She hated Chato not because he let the policeman and the doctors put the screaming child in the government van, but because he had taught her to sign her name. Because it was like the old ones always told her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you. (p. 44)

The effects of the complicity in the white man’s language are evident here. Chato became vulnerable against the witchery because she became complicit by learning their language, by learning to sign. Just learning their language cost her children.

The idea of witchery does not refer to a supernatural fantasy, as popularly understood in the West; it becomes a visceral force acted out through a body. Among the Navajo people, witchery primarily refers to an external force, such as a white man, that causes imbalance. In other words, it is an imbalance stemming from colonial complicity. Thus, it becomes a pathological manipulation of the natural order that causes diseases in the body and desolation in the landscape. The consequence of this cultural imbalance includes the state machinery’s control of Indian life and culture. The strongest performance of witchery occurs when the white doctors take away Ayah’s children, Jimmy and Danny, on the pretext of better treatment. The white doctor controls them without resorting to brutal force for he has the law, which Ayah does not understand because she does not speak their tongue. For Ayah, the doctors are the agents of dark ritual. Therefore, the white man’s legal documents that she signed equal to the dark spell which effectively force her to accept their terms. But Ayah signed the paper without knowing the content. Thus, in an ironic reversal to the Navajo ritual, tropes such as using body parts—hairs, clothes, or even their name—to harm become a tool to subjugate themselves.

Similarly, Ayah’s husband, Chato, embodies the bodily realization of the witchery’s effect. He learnt English so that he could communicate between his people and the colonizers. Ironically, again, this very complicity destroys him. His alcoholism and dementia are the direct repercussion of the witchery. Colonial force is so deep that Chato forgot his own past. As a result, he wandered cold and without any memory. No ritual could bring him back: his labour, his mind, and his children. Chato’s dementia is an all-erasing effect of witchery that destroys the human spirit.

Jimmy was killed by the hand of the military, but the government never gave the body to the family. This is an indication that the complicity destroys the body and sets the consequences down the line in the future.

However, the Indian ritual has the power to counterweigh the cold, senseless effects of witchery. The titular ‘lullaby’ functions as an antidote to Chato’s sickness. As witchery has separated Chato from his culture, Ayah’s singing becomes an act of ritual healing, reintegrating Chato from the breakages and disintegrations. By the end of the story, Ayah is sitting beside a cold, lifeless, and dying Chato and singing. The song is a ritual; Ayah is a medicine man. Her song appeals to the earth, the sky, and the ancestors that are more permanent than the effects of witchery or some laws drafted to control the Indian life or to rob off the children from mothers. Thus, in her final song, Ayah reclaims identity by asserting that despite the divisions forced by the state, the spirit remains intact, unabated, and integrated. In the larger context, Silko uses Ayah as a metaphor of medicine man healing the divisions caused by the witchery. She exhibits the ritual power to repel witchery.

Conclusion

The paper positions that Leslie Mermon Silko’s use of metaphor is a depiction of witchery. It has a sinister effect on the Indian life, communities, and the reservation as a whole. In “Tony’s Story,” natural calamities such as drought foreground the wicked imbalance in nature, thus a ritual resistance is needed to purify it. Similarly, in “Lullaby,” the alcoholism and disease expose the slow but relentless damage caused by the white doctor. Both the stories, white colonization takes a shape of a diases desolation and dryness that drains life out of the native community. Thus, Tony’s final act of killing a white policeman becomes meaningful, as well as a necessary act, in the cultural context of the native life—the witchery should be eliminated for survival. In other words, it is a meaningful response to witchery than a criminal act. Finally, these stories stress the importance of ritual healing for survival and cultural continuity.

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About the Author

Bijaya Raj Panta (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3415-327X>) is a Lecturer of English at Dhawalagiri Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. His research interests span ecological issues, gender studies, power, and agency within literary and cultural studies. He has published several research articles addressing contemporary themes in literature and culture.