

# From the Invisible to the Visible: An Analysis of Tayo's Return in *Ceremony*

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## ABSTRACT

Native Indians, as the minority in North America, have long been invisible to the American majority. Leslie Marmon Silko is an important writer rising in the early period of "The Native American Renaissance", and *Ceremony* is the most formally familiar of her texts. The novel actually records the Native Indians' journey toward home and identity. It narrates the story about a Native Indian veteran Tayo who suffers severely from what is called battle fatigue and later known as post-traumatic stress disorder. This paper is set to read Tayo's predicament as not a physical health emergency, but a crisis for his loss of a precise identity. After a close reading of the novel, we find the reason that Tayo keeps vomiting and urinating is that he wants to purge out the war's monstrous scene and the white people's lie to him and his people. The Native Americans lost themselves gradually by imitating and melting into the white world because of these lies. When their traditional culture and life destroyed by the dominate white culture, the Native Indian people live as an invisible man. Lost in the war and the white world, Tayo "shifts and grows up" through the journey of returning to his family and the Indian Reservation, and eventually regains his identity and the significance of traditional Native Indian life.

**Keywords:** Native Indians, Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, Tayo, Identity, from the invisible to the visible

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As what disclosed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, people of the minority group are habitually invisible to the majority. They appear only when permitted. Native Indians, as the minority in North America, have long been invisible to the American majority. They are firstly a legend for the white Americans in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. In Cooper's stories, the good Indians are those who stand on the side of the British against the French. However, Cooper himself admitted that he even had never seen a Native Indian himself but had only heard people talk about them or read about them on the book [1]. Also, the American Indians, in Frederick Turner's opinion, are a common danger, demanding united actions of the American immigrants [2]. These prejudices against and stereotypes of the Native Americans began to crash with the rise of "The Native American Renaissance". A host of Native American writers rise in the movement with their stories of characters' struggles in a white American dominate society.

Leslie Marmon Silko is an important writer rising in the early period of "The Native American Renaissance", and *Ceremony* is the most formally familiar of her texts [3]. It narrates the story about a Native Indian veteran Tayo who comes back from the war. Tayo suffers severely from what is called battle fatigue and later known as post-traumatic stress disorder [4]. What is more, Tayo constantly feels invisible in the white American dominate world. The war

and its violence have destroyed his hope and identification as an American. In this way, Tayo is sick both physically and psychologically not only because of his war experience but also because of his problematic ethnic identity. In the novel, Tayo is a mix-blood Native American. His white-skinned father abandoned his mother and him before he was born. Therefore, he is neither embraced by the white culture nor the Native American community. Tayo must straddle two different cultures, which renders his quest for identity particularly difficult.

*Ceremony* is actually a novel records the Native Indian's journey toward home and identity [5]. This paper is set to read Tayo's predicament as not a physical health emergency, but a crisis for his loss of a precise identity. Tayo does not suffer from repression or any other disorders that the psychiatric profession can diagnose and cure. After a close reading of the novel, we find the reason that Tayo keeps vomiting and urinating is that he wants to purge out the war's monstrous scene and the white people's lie to him and his people. The Native Americans lost themselves gradually by imitating and melting into the white world because of these lies. When their traditional culture and life destroyed by the dominate culture, the Native Indian people live as an invisible man. Then is there a way for the American Indians becoming visible again? How can the Indian Minority identify themselves under the suppression of the dominate white culture? As what pointed out by Louis Owens, the central lesson of *Ceremony* is that both individuals and the cultures will find that identity and the significance of tradition are able

to survive and grow. Thus, they will evade the deadly traps of stasis and sterility [6]. In the novel, Betonie has expounds this point well to Tayo: “things which don’t shift and grow are dead things” [7]. Lost in the war and the white world, Tayo “shifts and grows up” through the journey of returning to his family and the Indian Reservation, and eventually regains his identity and the significance of traditional Native Indian life.

## **2. LOST IN THE WAR AND THE WHITE WORLD**

Native Indians, as Turner mentioned in his paper, served as a military training school to the Americans during the Westward Movement [8]. They are strong because of their hunting traditions. While many of the Indians were enlisted during the World War II mainly because of American government’s appealing rather than their militant tradition: “anyone can fight for America!” “Now I know you boys love America as much as we do, but this is your big chance to show it!” [9] Tayo and his brother Rocky are among those Indian war heroes. They join the army with a romantic imagination of the war: “we can do real good, Tayo. Go all over the world. See different places and different people” [10]. Instead having good memories of travelling around the world, they lost in the inhumane war. Although Tayo claims that he had not killed anybody in the war, “but that he had done things far worse, and the effects were everywhere in the cloudless sky, on the dry brown hills, shrinking skin and hide taut over sharp bone” [11]. They return as the “second Lost Generation” of the World War. As what described by Malcolm Cowley in his *Exile’s Return*, the Lost Generation of the first World War lives a deteriorated life after the war: “we danced in the streets, embraced old women and pretty girls, swore blood brotherhood with soldiers in little bars, drank with our elbows locked in theirs, reeled through the streets with bottles of champagnes, fell asleep somewhere. On the next day, after we got over our hangovers, we didn’t know what to do, so we got drunk again” [12]. The Native Indian veterans such as Harley does the same as the Lost Generation: “Harley didn’t used to like beer at all, and maybe this was something that was different about him now, after the war. He drank a lot of beer now” [13]. People around Harley try to keep him away from beer and out of trouble, but all fail. Besides, more than the Lost Generation’s loss of the confidence of human nature, Tayo has lost his brother, his uncle, and his community. In the novel, his brother Rocky has been killed by the Japanese, thus Tayo loses his promise to Auntie that he will bring Rocky back safely to her; Josiah is dead because of overwrought, thus Tayo loses his promise to him that he would help him after he graduates from the school; Tayo also blames himself for the loss of the cattle because he fails to help his uncle when the cattle needs him. He lost everything because of the war. As a consequence, there is a coming together of the sicknesses of the land, nature, the social order, power

relations, the family, and the soul [14]. Tayo has lost his identity in the war.

In the novel, the Native Indian veterans cannot return to their normal lives as what before the war. They are not only addicted to alcoholism, but also lost in the old good days when taking as war heroes: “see these dumb Indians thought these good times would last. They didn’t ever want to give up the cold beer and the blond cunt. Hell no! They were American they beautiful too, this was the land of the free just like teachers said in school. They had the uniform and they didn’t look different no more. They got respect” [15]. They once believe that they are American because they attend the war. But the lies come into split just like the posters posted to attract them to join the army. “The war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she’s real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change” [16]. When the lies are disclosed, the Native Indians become resentful and lost on their way back to their homeland. “Every day they had to look at the land, from horizon to horizon, and every day the loss was with them; it was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going forever. So they tried to sink the loss in booze, and silence their grief with war stories about their courage, defending the land they had already lost” [17]. According to Bird, *Ceremony* seeks to take us through the issues including colonization and identity, which illustrates the instances of continued colonization of the mind and simultaneously secures liberation from the colonizers’ mental bondage [18]. In the novel, the American Indians not only suffer from the colonization of land and culture, but also of their mind. Drifting in time and space and experiencing everything at once without any frame of reference, Tayo realizes that it is hollow inside of all the outlines he sees in the white world. But when he leaves for the Reservation, “he felt the sunshine; he saw palm trees . . . . ., and at that moment his body had density again and the world was visible and he realized why he was there and he remembered Rocky and he started to cry. . . . .” [19].

In a world dominated by the white culture, although Tayo has been the war hero, he is ignored because of his ethnicity. In Silko’s description, Tayo has no appearance and no sound under the colonization of the white culture: “he can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound” [20]. But Tayo is different from the other veterans in the novel. He desperately wants to resume his identity as an American Indian. He realizes this when he yells at the Indian medicine man in the Reservation that “he would never get well as long as he used words like ‘we’ and ‘us’” [21]. Tayo decides to be one of the Native Indians. He begins his self-recovery by restoring what he has lost during the wartime, that is, returning to his family and the Reservation.

### 3. RETURN TO HIS FAMILY AND THE RESERVATION

Toni Flores holds that Tayo works out his cure, not solely within himself, but largely by going home, among people who know him deeply and who are known by him because he has been part of their story [14]. Tayo is raised by his uncle and aunt and grows up in the Reservation with his friends. They are the indispensable part of his life. Tayo's return signifies his resume of identity as a member of his family and the Indian community.

In *Ceremony*, Tayo suffers hugely from his uncle's death: "Josiah had been there, in the jungle; he had come. Tayo had watched him die, and he had done nothing to save him" [22]. In Tayo's mind, he is responsible for Josiah's death: "he loved me. He loved me, and I didn't do anything to save him" [23]. Tayo is guilty of his absence which leaves his uncle alone to take care of the cattle. He insists that his uncle died because there is no one to help him searching the stolen cattle. Also, the cattle are a part of Indian people's future. When they disappear after Josiah's death, Tayo feels that he has not only neglected his responsibility for his uncle, but also been severed from his relationship with his people and land. Therefore, Tayo returns to his family firstly by finding the lost cattle. It is a cure for his sickness of the war: "he had been so intent on finding the cattle that he had forgotten all the events of the past days and years. Hunting the cattle was good for that. Old Betonie was right. It was a cure for that, and maybe for other things too" [24]. The cattle are a symbol of the Indian people and the Reservation land. By bringing them back, Tayo gets a sense of belonging to his people and the lost land.

Besides, the fact that Tayo is half white produces the tension between Tayo and his Auntie. She reluctantly takes him into her household, and tries to keep him away from her son Rocky. In the nove, she "had always been careful that Rocky didn't call Tayo 'brother'". And when other people happen to call them brothers, she is quick to correct the mistake. In Auntie's mind, Tayo is not a member of the family: "'that's Laura's boy. You know the one.' She had a way of saying it, a tone of voice which bitterly told the story, and the disgrace she and the family had suffered" [25]. Auntie blames Tayo for allowing Rocky to die and thinks that it is Tayo that ought to die rather than Rocky: "it was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was still unburied" [26]. Though at the beginning Auntie believes that Tayo should die for Rocky in the war, and never admits him truly as a member of the family, she begins to accept him after he finds back the cattle: "Auntie looked at him, but when he looked up at her, she turned away to the stove to the simmering stew and boiling coffee. She had been watching him; she was waiting" [27]. After Tayo comes back from the ranch by getting rid of Emo's framing, Auntie talks to Tayo the way she has talked to Robert and old Grandma all those years..... [28]. Tayo eventually finds the way back to his family with Auntie's acceptance to him as a one of her families.

Tayo's mixed-race existence and lack of cultural understanding are, according to Bird, a result of internalized colonization, that is, the effects of colonization have caused an internalization of the idea that the Native American race is dying [18]. In *Ceremony* Silko creates the spotted cattle to represent the hybridization of the Native Indian culture. Indians in the southwest are not a dying race. They select certain desirable elements from the dominant white culture and incorporate these into their own culture to keep it alive and vigorous. Even though it often appears in crisis, it endures and survives [29]. As spirit guides, the spotted cattle lead Tayo on a journey of returning and healing. On his way to find the cattle and secure his healing process, Tayo realizes that love always endures, even if the object of that love (in his case Rocky, Josiah and his mother) dies. "This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was even lost as long as the love remained" [30]. Love is enduring as well as the Indian people and their land. Tayo keeps chasing the spotted cattle into the desert and mountains, and learns that his hybrid identity is also loved and cherished like these mix-blood cattle. In the course of the "ceremony", Tayo regains his confidence in humans which he has lost in the battlefield, and eventually releases himself from the guilt of the war and the resentment towards the white people's ignorance.

Silko also makes her point in the novel through Old Betonie: "and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs" [31]. It is the ceremony that Betonie conducts makes Tayo psychologically recovered. Betonie helps Tayo regain the confidence of his mixed-blood identity through the ceremony. When Tayo still feels sick after returns to his family, he doubts that maybe he cannot become visible again, and will stay in the white world forever: "everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible..... Maybe I belonged back in that place" [32]. But Betonie tells Tayo that if he goes back, he will lose himself forever: "sleeping in the mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women. Die that way and get it over with" [33]. Instead, Betonie sends Tayo into the journey of recovery. By finding the offerings for ceremony, the cattle, the stars, the mountain, and the woman, Tayo fulfils his responsibility to his family and the Indian community. In this way, Tayo finds back his identity as a true Native Indian.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The central conflict of *Ceremony* is Tayo's struggle to gain psychological wholeness in face of various traumatic experiences, ranging from a troubled childhood to cultural marginalization and combat experiences during World War II. Throughout the novel, the key to Tayo's recovery is his rediscovery of Native American cultural practices, that is, the ceremony [34]. Tayo leaves himself to the guidance of the Indian traditions and eschews violence in the name of love, the sacred, and the good spirits. In other

words, he must identify himself in terms of his real heritage and its living power [35]. What the Veterans' Administration doctors have labeled as battle fatigue is, in Tayo's case, actually a struggle to make a decision about the death or rebirth of his Native Indian identity. By desisting himself from indulging into the lie of the white people, Tayo finds the way back to his family and his community. "The cholla and juniper shivered in the wind, and the rumps of the two gray mules were twin moons in front of him. Josiah was driving the wagon, old grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered 'my brother'. They were taking him home" [36]. The white doctor's modern scientific treatment cannot cure Tayo's illness. Instead, he recovers by journeying back to the Indian Reservation and by performing its traditional ceremony. With Tayo's return to his family and his community, he becomes visible again: "in a world of crickets and wind and cottonwood trees he was almost alive again; he was visible" [37].

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