

## Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby": The Power of Resistance and Healing Force to Cultural and Spiritual Genocide

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The Native American writer and critic Paula Gunn Allen asserts in *The Sacred Hoop* that Native American fiction, particularly that of women, is "a major part of Indian resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide" (42). Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby" is one of the clearest examples of such assertion. Silko's story displays various levels of resistance in defense of Native American history, oral tradition and gender. As asserted by various critics, "Lullaby" is a metaphor for the Native American experience and, by presenting the conflict between Euro-Americans and Native Americans, the author establishes the basis of how the latter came to be one of the so-called ethnic groups in the United States. The circular structure and non-linear narration of the story is also used by Silko to state and recapture the oral tradition of Native American Lagunas. Finally, by choosing the character of Ayah as the protagonist of her narration, an enduring mother and wife, Silko reclaims the Native American gynocratic tradition against patriarchal Christian colonization.

It is through Ayah's memory, the main character in "Lullaby", that the reader learns how Euro-Americans have intruded and tried to erase Native American culture and family unity. Jimmie, Ayah's son, died while in the United States Army, and Ayah did not cry when they told her Jimmie had died "but hurt inside with anger. And she mourned [Jimmie] as the years passed ... [and] after the white doctors came to take Danny and Ella [her two other children] away" (Silko 1990:2170). Ayah remembers her son's passing away while she suffers from the absence of her children after having signed a document she could not read and that authorized the "white doctors" to take her two other children away from her: "[Ayah] could not bear this pain. She did not sleep for a long time after they took her children. ... She carried the pain in her belly ... . The pain filled her stomach and there was no room for food or for her lungs to fill with air" (2171). It is not only the loss of her children that breaks the harmony of Ayah's family, but also the accident suffered by her husband Chato when he fell from the horse and he was told by the rancher that he would not be paid "until he could work again" (2170).

At a certain point, Ayah's strength seems to be stumbling from so much suffering, until she becomes ill: "The illness came after the white rancher told Chato he was too old to work with him any more. ... All Chato's fine-sounding English talk didn't change things" (2172). As a consequence of Chato's being fired from his job, he begins to use the little money they receive from the government to go to the bar and drink: "[Ayah] would find him passed out at the bottom of the wooden steps to Azzie's Bar. All the wine would be gone and most of the money too, from the pale blue check that came to them once a month in a government envelope" (2172). When after some years Ayah's children are taken back to her for a short visit, she discovers that her children were "jabbering excitedly a language she did not know. So they stayed for only a few hours" (2173). Ayah's family has been completely dismembered.

In "Lullaby", the reader becomes aware of the evils brought to Native Americans by western colonization: imposition of a new language, new customs, new rules, poverty and final destruction of the family unit and their members. Silko underlines the dangers of assimilation. The literary critic Werner Sollors considers assimilation "the foe of ethnicity" because "the focus is on the group's preservation and survival, which appear threatened" (xiii-xiv). Silko thus establishes the basis of how Native Americans became one of the so-called ethnic groups in the United States. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, an ethnic group is "a social group or category of the population that, in a larger society, is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality, or culture" (582). Ayah is the only character that throughout the story maintains the language, memory/oral tradition and culture of Native Americans, and constantly tries to keep the family together. In spite of her husband's working for and having learnt the language of the whites, in spite of the suffering caused by her older son's death while he is in the United States Army, in spite of the deep pain inflicted upon her by the forced separation from her children, and in spite of being witness to her husband's addiction to alcohol, Ayah never forgets nor leaves her Native American roots and traditions. It is actually the memories of her traditions and past that help her to go on fighting against adversity.

Ayah is the representative of that oral tradition that remains firm against assimilation. It is the memories of her roots and her culture that many times save Ayah from dying of pain, from coldness: "[Ayah] felt peaceful remembering. She didn't feel cold any more ... . Ayah remembered sleeping warm on cold windy nights, wrapped in her mother's blankets on the hogan's sandy floor" (Silko 1990:2169). It is also by remembering that Ayah is capable of recovering the family unity that does not exist in her life. Silko states that "through the narrative [of stories] you can begin to see a family identity and an individual identity" (1981:64). When Ayah feels sad or lonely, she goes back to her past and it is her clan memories of togetherness and harmony with nature that heal her, as she does while remembering Jimmie's birth: "The morning was already warm, even before

dawn and Ayah smelled the bee flowers blooming and the young willow growing at the spring. She could remember that so clearly, but *his birth merged into the births of the other children and to her it became all the same birth*" (Silko 1990:2169, emphasis mine). Individual and community become one in harmony with nature.

Silko points out that "when some violent emotional experience takes place, people get the urge to run off and hide or separate themselves from others", but, at the same time, "one does not recover or get well by one's self, but it is *together* that they look after each other and take care of each other" (1981:59, emphasis mine). Since Ayah has almost been left alone, the only way for her to restore the lacking togetherness is to return to the past when she was happy among her people. She also remembers the times when her mother and grandmother used to weave, thus establishing an important part of Native American women's tradition, that of weaving: "She had been only a little girl when her grandma gave her the wooden combs to pull the twigs and burrs from the raw, freshly washed wool. ... She watched [her mother and grandmother] dye the yarn in boiling black pots full of beeweed petals, juniper berries, and sage" (Silko 1990:2169). It seems inevitable and necessary for Ayah to recapture moments shared with a family and with tasks that were done together. She resists to accept the imposition of a totally different way of life and culture that has actually violated her space and dismembered her family, and her sense of wholeness.

Paula Gunn Allen underlines that the Native American "sees all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), as offspring of the great Mystery, as cocreators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered balanced, and living whole" (59). Ayah's illness, which appears after a few serious emotional experiences related to her and her family, is cured only by her memories, which include her contact with nature and which actually exert a powerful effect of healing upon her: "She was an old woman now, and her life had become memories. She sat down with her back against the wide cottonwood tree, feeling the rough bark on her back bones; she faced east and listened to the wind and snow sing a high-pitched Yeibechei [Navajo Night chant—a song of healing]" (2169). Wholeness and/or harmony with all creatures that live on earth are symbolized in Native American culture by the wheel or sacred hoop: "The concept is one of singular unity that is contained in its most essential aspect, that of life" (Allen 56). This circular dynamic movement that exists among Native Americans is also reflected in the circular structure of "Lullaby".

Among the different layers presented in "Lullaby" that represent resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide are not only Ayah's recuperation of history and tradition through memory, but also that of the author's when she writes her own story. Against the idea of a western universe that is fixed and static, and a linear model that "assumes that some 'points' are more significant than others" (Allen

59), Silko uses a circular structure within which her story develops. Consequently, Silko presents a "universe that moves and breathes continuously" (Allen 59).

The story begins with Ayah's watching the snow "thick tufts" falling, which reminds her of "new wool washed before the weaver spins it" (Silko 1990:2168). And the story ends with Ayah being aware of the freezing of the night, and while sitting next to Chato to keep themselves warm, she remembers the only song she could sing for babies: "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" (2174). The harmony and unity between human beings and nature is present at the beginning and at the end of the story, as the lullaby she sings for Chato and herself to go to sleep states: "Sleep, / sleep. / Rainbow is your sister, / she loves you. / The winds are your brothers. / They sing to you. / Sleep, / sleep. / We are together always ... / There never was a time / when this / was not so" (2174). Silko closes a circle that, however, remains open and changes in the cycle of life which shows the dynamics of living and dying, and being one and whole with the cosmos. The words sung by Ayah at the end of the story while she is waiting to die, and in Simone Pellérin's words, can then "be more powerful than death" (123).

The Navajo song —the Yeibechei, which Ayah hears and which is mentioned at the beginning of the story— and the lullaby sung at the end, are both healing songs to smooth and cure Ayah's pain. The whole story is a kind of ritual of healing and transformation, a ritual that according to Allen "changes a person from an isolated (diseased) state to one of incorporation (health)" (80). Allen also claims that traditional tribal narratives "possess a circular structure, incorporating event within event, piling meaning upon meaning" (79) until everything together results in a story.

Apart from using oral tradition and memory as the means to combat cultural and spiritual genocide, Silko takes a woman as the main character of her story, reclaiming the Native American gynocratic tradition against patriarchal western imperialism. Literary critic Mary V. Dearborn underlies the importance of understanding ethnicity as connected to gender: "Ethnicity and gender have long been overlooked as crucial features of American identity. In recent years this has become to change" (6). Silko's story shows the author's awareness of the dynamics of both ethnicity and gender.

Ayah, a woman, mother and wife, is the main and only character that keeps resisting assimilation and looking back to her roots and customs so that her Native American traditions may survive and she can continue whole against adversity and the suffering inflicted by whites. In this respect, Allen claims that a Native American woman "is primarily defined by her tribal identity. In her eyes, her destiny is necessarily that of her people, and her sense of herself as a woman is first

and foremost prescribed by her tribe" (43). Ayah symbolizes the Native American woman, as well as the Native American community and concept of earth.

Ayah remembers how she gave birth to Jimmie, her power of creating a new life, as she lies next to her husband while waiting to die. Ayah completes the cycle of life, and becomes a metaphor that stands for the earth: "Woman's agency is conditioned by abundance, fecundity renewal and growth that permeates her world. She can act according to these properties inherent in her sexuality to affect both game abundance and success in growing crops" (Carocci 169). Ayah has the power of transformation and that transformation process "engenders the ritual cycle of birth, growth, ripening, dying and rebirth" (Allen 80). Ayah accomplishes that cycle including rebirth: she leaves her lullaby, which is recaptured by the author after her death and which will be read by other generations.

Against Christian patriarchal societies, Silko restores the important role of Native American women, where woman is the spirit "that informs right balance, right harmony and these in turn order all relationship in conformity with her law" (Allen 14). Ayah, a woman, appears not as a passive character but as a dynamic force that is capable of transforming her reality and of capturing her lost harmony with the cosmos and her traditions. As a result, Silko's story symbolizes the restoration of a gynocratic tradition existing among Native Americans as a way to resist western cultural and spiritual genocide.

In summary, "Lullaby" is a powerful statement that rejects assimilation of Native Americans by Euro-American culture and establishes the existence of an ethnic separate group, that of the Lagunas, within the mainstream culture. She uses a woman character to recuperate a gynocratic tradition in which women pass down their oral traditions from generation to generation and have the power of transforming, healing and creating harmony with the cosmos. Through Ayah's character, "Lullaby" becomes a healing chant that restores the harmony and wholeness of Native Americans with the cosmos and with themselves.

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