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## MULTIVOCALITY, STORYTELLING AND THE DISRUPTIVE VOICE OF FEMININITY IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY*


LESLIE MARMON SILKO'NUN *AYIN* ADLI ROMANINDA ÇOKSESLİLİK, HİKAYE ANLATIMI VE  
DİŞİL SESİN OTORİTE YIKIMI

Fırat KARADAŞ\*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p> <b>Received:</b> 10.04.2021</p> <p> <b>Accepted:</b> 08.06.2021</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Ceremony,</i> <i>subversive discourse,</i> <i>Native American stories,</i> <i>female voice.</i></p> <p><b>Research Article</b></p>	<p>Leslie Marmon Silko's <i>Ceremony</i> is a Native American novel about the post-traumatic stress disorder of Tayo and his ceremony for recovery through living native stories and tribal ways. In the novel, Silko incorporates native stories and presents Native American culture and stories as subverting the ruling white culture. Though the main character of the novel is male, female figures, both human and mythical, play a crucial role in this subversion because they lie at the heart of the Native American culture and stories. In <i>Ceremony</i>, Silko identifies spinning and storytelling, as in Western culture, with femininity and highlights the role the voice of femininity plays in the stories of Tayo's healing ceremony. Relying on Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and the undermining role of another's word in authoritative discourses, this article aims to study how the Indian American Laguna culture subverts and decentralizes the white authoritative discourse with its stories and how the word of the other emerges as feminine voice in the novel.</p>

MAKALE BİLGİSİ	ÖZET
<p> <b>Geliş:</b> 10.04.2021</p> <p> <b>Kabul:</b> 08.06.2021</p> <p><b>Anahtar Kelimeler:</b> <i>Ayin,</i> <i>yıkıcı söylem,</i> <i>Yerli Amerikan hikâyeleri,</i> <i>dişil ses.</i></p> <p><b>Araştırma Makalesi</b></p>	<p>Leslie Marmon Silko'nun <i>Ayin</i> adlı romanı Tayo adındaki karakterin travma sonrası stres bozukluğunu ve iyileşmek için yerli hikâyeleri yaşayarak gerçekleştirdiği ayini anlatan bir yerli Amerikan romanıdır. Silko romanında yerli Amerikan kültürüne ait hikâyeleri bir araya getirir ve bu kültürü ve hikâyelerini beyazların egemen kültürünün yıkımına neden olan etkenler olarak yansıtır. Romanın ana karakteri erkek olmasına karşın, bazen insan, bazen hayvan, bazen de kutsal varlık biçiminde ortaya çıkan dişil ses, bu yıkımda önemli bir rol oynar. <i>Ayin</i>'de Silko, hikâye anlatımı ve örme eylemlerini Batı kültüründe olduğu gibi kadınlıkla özdeşleştirir ve dişil sesin Tayo'nun iyileşme ayinini oluşturan hikâyelerdeki önemini vurgular. Bu çalışma, Bakhtin'in diyalojizm ve ötekinin sözcüsü ile ilgili düşüncelerine dayanarak yerli Amerikan hikâyelerinin egemen beyaz Amerikalı söylemi yıkmasını ve dişil sesin ötekinin sözcüsü olarak bu yıkımda oynadığı rolü ele almaktadır.</p>

\* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Hatay Mustafa Kemal Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Hatay / Türkiye, E-mail: frt.karadas@gmail.com.

ORCID  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7546-717X>.

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## Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is about the post-traumatic stress disorder of Tayo, a veteran of World War II, and his search for native stories and tribal ways. According to the novel, the native stories play a decisive role in the survival of the Native American culture and in defying the multi-faceted effect of white culture on this culture. In the multivocal structure of the novel, texts, subtexts and voices belonging to the two cultures clash and inter-animate each other and native stories continually 'translate' and subvert the dominant white culture. However, though the main character of the novel is male and male characters, such as Betonie, play an important role in the plot, the crucial role for the subversion of authority is played by female characters, both human and mythical. Femininity functions as the real disruptive force within the authoritative white discourse.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, each utterance in human discourse involves an interaction and a struggle between two words: the speaker's word and another's word. The speaker of the utterance tries to dominate another's word by getting a reading on his own word. However, for Bakhtin, language is never unitary because every speaker's utterance involves another's discourse, which is present in the speaker's discourse (the story) in "*concealed form, that is, without any of the formal markers usually accompanying such speech, whether direct or indirect*" (1981: 303). In this sense, novelistic discourse, which can be considered an utterance, is a hybrid, double-voiced one, always including "*the embryonic beginnings of what is required for an artistic representation of another's discourse*" (1981: 347). As Dale Bauer puts it, "*the opposition between the surveillant gaze and the disruptive voice*" constitutes the structure of literary discourse (1996: 672). Relying on Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and the subverting role of another's word in authoritative discourses, the present article studies Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* in terms of how the Native American culture subverts and decentralizes the white authoritative discourse with its stories and how the word of the other emerges as the disruptive voice of femininity in the novel.

## Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Silko's *Ceremony* depicts the interaction and struggle between another's word and the white authoritarian discourse. Tayo's ceremony represents the major response to the authoritarian discourse and functions as the main factor of subversion in the novel. In *Ceremony*, Silko depicts the dire situation of the Laguna reservation after World War II, which Tayo calls "*the white people's war*" (Silko 1977: 37). The land has been destroyed by a uranium mine, many young people died in World War II, and those who did not, returned home as psychologically ill.

The young men registered in the army because they thought it would be an escape from their inferiority complex and a means of gaining respect in the white man's world. Tayo, Rocky, Emo and Harley, four young Laguna men believed they could finally escape their sense of inferiority when they were told by the army recruiter, "*Anyone can fight for America, even you boys*" (Silko 1977: 25). However, instead of bringing them respect in the white man's world, the war destroyed them both physically and mentally. Rocky died battling the Japanese, Emo and Harley have become alcoholics, and Tayo returned from the war with a serious case of

PTSD that white medication could not treat. The only way for recovery, Tayo realizes while searching for healing, is reunification with his roots, from which he separated because of what thinks the deceptions of the white man's world. Instead of following the traditional stories about their relationship with the Mother Earth, the Native American veterans "grow away from the earth then they grow away from the sun then they grow away from the plants and animals" (Silko 1977: 142). However, in the Native American culture, as Betonie, a new type of medicine man, puts it, all the things in nature "have stories alive in them" (1977: 127). As he passes Tse'pi'na, that is, Mount Taylor, which is believed to be lively with mythical figures, everywhere he looks, Tayo sees "a world made of stories [...] a world alive, always changing and moving" (1977: 100). They believe the earth is a living being and mythologize it as Spider Woman. However, Native American veterans like Emo have grown away from their origin, also growing away from their Mother (Corn Mother and Spider Woman). Looking at the dried up earth, Emo says: "Look what is here for us. Look. Here's the Indian's mother earth! Old dried-up thing!" (1977: 25).

Instead of losing belief in the native culture and becoming alcoholic like Emo and other veterans, Tayo tries to cure himself by getting reunited with the mother. Tayo attempts to heal himself first by enlisting the aid of Ku'oosh, an elderly medicine man who tries to heal him using an old ceremony, which does not work. Although the old ceremony aids Tayo, he needs much more to complete his healing ritual, which is where Betonie comes in. Betonie's personality is a mix of old and new: he dresses in traditional clothes, creates sand paintings, and uses devices belonging to the old ceremony. However, he has also modern healing devices as coke bottles, phone books, and calendars with pictures. When Tayo asks why he uses such non-traditional items, Betonie answers: "In the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things" (Silko 1977: 126-7). Betonie says that myth should be revised to meet the present circumstances. With the arrival of the white people, the world started to change, necessitating the conduction of new ceremonies. Silko suggests in *Ceremony* that the secret to survival is contained in the integration of old and new, so that the Pueblos can find the healing they need. As a result, Tayo's illness is "part of something bigger," as Betonie puts it, "and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (Silko 1977: 132). In other words, the work of witchery, which is represented in the novel as symbolizing the white man's discourse, can be spoiled only by responding to this discourse on its own ground.

### **Storytelling and the Disruptive Voice of Femininity in *Ceremony***

Although the main character of the novel is male, that is Tayo, and another male, Betonie, plays an important role in the ceremony, the major role is played by female figures in Tayo's ceremony and thus in the subversion of the white man's discourse among Native Americans. They are both the spinners and the subjects of the native stories that help Tayo in his ceremony for collecting the fragments of his native self and gluing his community. It is even safe to say that another's word, as said before, emerge as the voice of femininity in the novel, and thus, to delve further into the analysis of the novel, a feminist reading of Bakhtin could be employed. In her article "The Dilemmas of Feminine Dialogic" D. P. Hernall argues that Bakhtin excludes women and women writers from his discussion of novelistic discourse, though what he says

about this discourse best fits women’s writing. According to Hernall, “*multivoicedness is a feminine characteristic*” and “*dialogism is largely a gender, rather than genre, marked trait*” (Hernall 1991: 17). Bakhtin’s exclusion of women shows that he was not “merely culturally backwards, but was ignorant about the very nature of the genre” (1991: 17). Dale Bauer pinpoints this essentially ‘feminine’ aspect of Bakhtin’s dialogism, arguing that in many literary works ‘the feminine’ subverts the power of language. Employing Luce Irigaray’s term ‘disruptive excess’, she points out that this ‘excess’ is “*the voice of gender—which moves beyond the atomic self or body into the larger discursive corpus and which cannot entirely be accounted for in Bakhtin’s dialogic model*” (Bauer 1996: 675).

In Silko’s novel female figures play a major role in the multi-vocality of the novel and carnivalization of white male discourse because they are not only the tellers but also actors of the native stories. As the word of the other does in Bakhtin’s model, in Silko’s novel the feminine acts as a disruptive force that de-centralizes and dialogizes authority and guides Tayo in his ceremony. Tayo’s aunt, grandmother and most importantly such mythic or semi-mythic figures as Thought Woman, Corn Woman and Ts’eh represent the voice of gender in the dialogism of the novel and play a guiding role in Tayo’s search for a unified native self.

In her article “The Feminine Landscape of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*” in which she underlines the role of female figures in Native American culture and in the recovery of Tayo by helping him get re-united with this culture, Paula Gunn Allen argues that though the novel is about a man, Tayo, it focuses on the “*feminine life force of the universe*” (1983: 233). She contends that there is not a single symbol in the story that is not linked to womanhood in some way, that does not bind back to Ts’eh and, through her, to the universal feminine concept of creation: Tsits’tsi’nako and Thought Woman, Grandmother Spider, Old Spider Woman, all of whom are different forms of Tsits’tsi’nako ; “*all tales are born in the mind of the Spider Woman, and all creation exists as a result of her naming*” (1983: 233). Spider/Thought woman is regarded as the creator of the universe. In the story given as epigraph of the novel, it is said:

*Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman,  
Is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
Appears.*

*She thought of her sisters,  
[...]  
and together they created the universe  
This world  
and the four worlds below.*

*Thought-Woman, the spider,  
named things and  
as she named them  
they appeared. (Silko 1977: 1)*

As seen in the quotation above, Tsits'tsi'nako is represented as the feminine life force of the universe and is identified with The Spider-Woman that has woven all the fabrics of the universe. The Spider-Woman is known as the cause of physical manifestations such as mountains, lakes, animals, and human life. Her role as a life-creating power is also signified with the word 'Spider,' which means weaver, in front of her name. In the Native American cultures, Spider Woman is regarded as the "*creator of the universe and an important source of cultural wisdom and social values*" (Teorey 2010: 1). Like the Fates in Greek mythology who spin Destinies to mortals at birth, the Spider-Woman is believed "*to weave the web of life and spin the threads of the old ways, which, in turn, bear upon the new ways*" (Scarberry 1983: 102). She does not only weave the web of life but also stories to nurture this life. For Scarberry, weaving can be a metaphor for healing and this is indicated in the novel with the crucial role Spider Woman plays in Tayo's ceremony that helps him recover from illness. In a similar vein, Teorey argues that in her novel *Silko* represents the Spider Woman as a divine authority that heals "*a rift in the modern male psyche, a rift caused by the suppression of the feminine side of his humanity*" (2010: 2). With the help of the Spider Woman "*the conflicted male hero must remake himself, become mother to his own emotional, spiritual, and cultural rebirth*" (2010: 3). Initiation into motherhood by tracing the stories weaved by the Spider Woman is the only way for Tayo to fight against witchery and its destructive effects on Native culture. Putting it in Bakhtinian words, re-union with the feminine life source is the only way to subvert the authoritarian white discourse and ward off its damaging outcomes on the Native American life. As said in a Laguna story, the land is dry because the ck'o'yo Kaup'a'ta, the Gambler, tricked the natives by gambling with them for their property and get power over them by making them eat blue cornmeal and mixing human blood in it. Having authority on her children, the Gambler is able to have authority also on the nature isolated from her children. Thus, he imprisons the clouds and causes draught on the land. In the same Laguna story, it is told that the Spider-Woman, with the feelings of a mother who tries to protect her children from the Gambler, saves the Indian people and frees the clouds by asking help from her Grandson, the Sun.

The Gambler's deception of the people is represented in the novel with Tayo's and the other young veterans' situation. Tayo's illness symbolizes his and the other natives' falling into the trap of witchery and separation from Earth, their mother. His recovery is contingent on his reconciliation with his mother and the re-establishment of the ancient unity of human, ceremony, and land in his and his community's daily lives. Both the land and Tayo's mind are dry until the end of the book. Tayo recovers from his illness when he achieves re-unification with the Mother-Earth and comprehends that he is part of nature, Laguna culture, Native myths and stories, behind which the feminine life force lies as a constant presence. As Tayo's unification with motherhood is achieved, "*the witchery is dead for now, at least for one human being and his beloved Land. He had bridged the distance between his isolate consciousness and the universe, because he has loved the Woman who brings all things into being*" (Allan 1979: 12).

To save her children from witchery's trap, the Spider Woman appears in the second half of the novel as Ts'eh, who plays a crucial role in Tayo's ceremony and his consequent recovery. As Nelson puts it, "*the efficacy of the ceremony depends on the precise relationship that Tayo*

*establishes with the figure Ts'eh*" (Nelson 1988: 285). Although Tayo meets her in the latter half of the novel, in fact, she is a constant presence because she represents the feminine life force that is manifested in different forms in the novel. It is his affection for Ts'eh and his determination to take up her tasks of nurturing the plant, the animals, and the people she loves that heals Tayo. In the beginning of the novel, she is named Ts'its'tsi'nako, sitting in her room and thinking of a story. The relationship between Ts'its'tsi'nako and Ts'eh can be seen when, after Tayo asks her name, Ts'eh tells him "*You can call me Ts'eh. That's my nickname because my Indian name is too long*" (Silko 1977: 233). Tayo recognizes Ts'eh as the woman he saw on Tse-pi'na, Mount Taylor; he also recognizes that he saw her before the war, both as Grandmother Spider and as a woman known as Night Swan. Towards the end of the novel, she appears in the forms of woman, snake and she-elk, which suggests the natural link between nature and femininity in the Laguna conception of life.

Ts'eh teaches Tayo the lie behind witchery and helps him gather his uncle Josiah's spotted cattle dispersed over the ranches of white people, which belonged to the Native Americans in the past. It is because of Ts'eh that Tayo could gather the cattle. Tayo's quest for the scattered cattle as part of his ritual, and Ts'eh's assistance in gathering the cattle, give the impression that the speckled cattle represent the Indian community, and their gathering represents the recovery of communal feelings lost due to witchery. Ts'eh also teaches Tayo during the ceremony to love and respect nature and its beings. She teaches him that only by following the footprints of the beings of nature can he be cured from illness.

To test his approach to the beings of nature, Ts'eh and the hunter, who Tayo thinks at first to be her husband, appear to Tayo in the form of a deer and a mountain lion. Tayo, at first, fears from the lion and thinks of killing it, when all of a sudden he thinks that killing the lion would mean falling in the trap witchery devised for him. Step by step, he learns to respect and protect the beings of nature. When he hears some white people killing mountain lions, Tayo wishes to follow them as they pursue the mountain lion and to shoot them and their howling dogs with their own weapons. He thinks they had been sent by the destroyers to ruin the world and he wants to yell at Indians like Harley, Helen Jean, and Emo for despising themselves and admiring white culture.

Towards the end of the novel, Ts'eh takes the forms of a snake and a she-elk, with the snake serving as a sign of healing and regeneration, keeping in line with the snake's long history as a healing symbol in culture and religion. As Antoniou puts it, "*the healing symbol of the snake is as ancient as the medical art itself. Its use is indistinguishably connected with the ancient Greek god Asclepius and is symbolically associated with ancient deities of earth's blossom*" (Antoniou 2011: 221). Asclepius, the deity of medicine, is depicted with a serpent twisted on his rod in the anaglyphs. The snake-rod association is also observed in Biblical legend concerning Moses, where the snake-rod association is used as a symbol of rebirth, recovery, and renewal. In many folklores of the world, the serpent symbolizes the original feminine life source. Lilith, who is associated with evil in Biblical mythology, is the most well-known example of the feminine-serpent correlation in Western mythology. For critics such as Grenn-Scott, the association of Lilith with evil is a result of a misreading of the myth and confusion of her name with such demons as Lilu in Sumerian mythology. Lilith is in fact the

first woman and represents the feminine life force of humanity. The symbolization of the serpent as the original life force can also be seen in the Shahmaran figure of the Anatolian, Mesopotamian, and Iranian cultures and the *Yılan Ana* (Mother Serpent) myth in Turkish culture. In line with these healing and rejuvenation symbols of the snake, in Silko's *Ceremony* the snake represents the feminine life source and heals Tayo by helping him re-unite with the Mother Earth. As Tayo sees Ts'eh in the form of snake, he sees that with the snake the world becomes alive in all directions and can sense "*the motion pushing out of the damp earth into the sunshine*" (Silko 1977: 231). He dreams he makes love with her, feels her body on the sand, and he could not tell where her body ends and where the sand begins. In the context where this scene takes place, Tayo's desire to make love with the snake seems to symbolize his desire to be united with his origin. Tayo learns from the snake to love the roots and plants in nature. She shows him the roots and plants she has gathered from nature and gives him information about them. With this physical unification with the feminine life force embodied with the snake, Tayo recovers from his illness. The cattle, whose scattering seems to symbolize the Native Americans' separation from each other and from the feminine life force, are also gathered: "*They stopped moving south. They had worked the direction out of their systems and had settled into the place*" (1977: 235).

Lastly, Ts'eh becomes a she-elk crying for the loss of the old unity between man and nature. She tells Tayo that the cliff on which she resides was painted by priests each year in the past to show their respect to her. Warning him about Emo's and a few other veterans' searching for him to kill him, she tells Tayo that the whites want to end their story, the way they want to end all of their stories: by slowly encircling the life out of it. She adds that Emo and those following him are being used as tools by witchery, after which Tayo is trapped by them but is able to save himself through the ceremony. Then, he sees them at night torturing Harley for letting him run away and he is about to kill Emo with a screwdriver. However, keeping in mind the elk's warning, Tayo rejects killing Emo because that would be falling into the trap of witchery. He thinks that he has almost killed Emo the way the witchery intended. Army doctors would conclude that the signs of his demise had been present since his release from the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles' psychiatric ward. "*The white people would shake their heads, more proud than sad that it took a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it*" (Silko 1977: 265-6). He does not kill Emo because it would be falling into the trap of the authoritarian discourse which expects them to be scattered like the cattle, to be psychologically ill, and destroy each other. In the words of the novel, the witchery will be at work all night while they kill each other, so that the people will only notice the losses and continue its work for draught to sear the land and ruin the animals, making the people increasingly exposed to the lies. Having taught him to love other human beings and helping him arrive at a point of unification with his origin, Ts'eh saves Tayo also from the individualism imposed on Native American by the white man's discourse.

## Conclusion

As seen in the overall argumentation of this article, in the novel, stories play a critical role in subverting white authoritarian rhetoric and avoiding its harmful consequences. As said many times in the novel, stories are all Native Americans have to fight off illness and sterility of the

land. Silko incorporates stories with different addressers, addressees, and subject matter, all of which represent in some way or the other the importance of the stories in the subversion of authority. By means of the stories, the novel acquires a multivocal dimension in which another's discourse translates, weakens, and subverts the white culture. Stories are also all Tayo has to conduct his ceremony for healing his post-traumatic stress disorder. The point that requires underlining is the role of the female figures in the novel. Though the main character of the novel is male and Betonie, another male, plays an important role, the decisive role is played by the female figures. Such mythical beings as Spider-Woman, Thought Woman and Ts'eh represent the feminine life force of the novel. As Bakhtin thinks, the authoritarian discourse always contains within it "the embryonic beginnings of what is required for an artistic representation of another's discourse" (1981: 347). Another's word emerges in the novel as the female voice, sometimes human, sometimes mythological, and sometimes metamorphosing into an animal to show Tayo the importance of nature and reunion with it for his recovery. The omnipresence of the Spider-Woman in the Native American Laguna culture and the appearance of Ts'eh in different forms, as woman, goddess, snake, she-elk, and so on, demonstrates the importance of the feminine in Tayo's ceremony and in the subversion of authority. The emphasis that Tayo can heal only by initiation into motherhood and uniting with the original feminine life force signifies the critical disruptive role of femininity in the novel.

### Ethical Statement

According to the author's statement, scientific, ethical and quotation rules were followed in the writing process of the study named "Multivocality, Storytelling and The Disruptive Voice Of Femininity In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*"; according to ULAKBİM TR DİZİN criteria, there was no need for data collection in the study requiring ethics committee approval.

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