



## From Dissonance to Harmony with Nature: A Material Ecocritical Reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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### Abstract

Although much has been written about Silko's *Ceremony*, little attention has been paid to reading the novel from a material ecocritical perspective. This study employs material ecocritical theory to expound the representations of humans, flora and fauna in Silko's *Ceremony*, and how these entities are agentic and capable of producing meanings, communicating with each other, and altering the course of events in the novel. Influenced by new materialisms and the work of two leading theorists, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, who co-edited a book entitled, *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), this new wave of ecocriticism highlights the importance of reading matter in texts or/and reading a matter as a text. The study argues that, in *Ceremony*, all Tayo's relationships with nature, including springs, landscapes, animals, and humans, in which he remembers his relationship with his belated uncle Josiah and his cousin Rocky, narrate an experience of a story that can be viewed as storied matter. The study concludes that everything in the world that is presented in the novel is interconnected, entangled, and enmeshed in a complex network of relations and one should respect and regard the environment because human destiny is intrinsically interrelated with the destiny of the world.

**Keywords:** Ceremony, Silko, Nature, Agency, Harmony.

## I. Introduction

This study uses material ecocritical theory to expound relationships between human and non-human entities in Silko's *Ceremony*. There is little attention, on the part of scholars, to read the novel from a material ecocritical perspective. This may be due to the fact that material ecocriticism is a new field of study and Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) is relatively decades away from the incipience of this new field of criticism. The main character of the novel, Tayo, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder due to his participation in WWII and ignoring his native culture. Silko uses Tayo to show how abandoning one's native heritage results in catastrophe not only for human beings but also for the entire ecosystem. Tayo's entanglement with the non-human entities and his communication with them leads to the recovery of both himself and the world. In other words, Tayo in the novel is engaged in a communicative practice of *becoming with* other non-human entities and consequently, he and the world are healed.

Influenced by quantum physics, Materialist feminism, New Materialisms, and Critical Theory, Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, who co-edited *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), published several articles describing and elaborating on material ecocriticism, and by this, they have become leading theorists of this new branch of ecocriticism. They defined material ecocriticism as

the study of the way material forms—bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories (Iovino and Oppermann 7).

This definition implies that one can read the world as “storied matter.” It explores a mode that can be dubbed as material expressions which constitute a sign and meaning agency. Matters *per se* hold experiences, creativity, and life; everything in the world has its own story and can be narrated. It is a kind of attunement to the natural world, with objects outside human beings. That is to say, everything in this world including living and non-living things, all forms of matter, and all human and non-human entities, are entangled in, borrowing Jane Bennett's words<sup>i</sup>, the “dense network of relations” producing stories that, in Iovino and Oppermann's words, can be seen as “storied matter” (Iovino and Oppermann 2). It is argued that, in *Ceremony*, Tayo is enmeshed and entangled within a material world, and through his senses, narrates stories of himself, his people, and his land, which are subjected to conditions of modern destructive civilization.

## II. Material Ecocriticism

Material ecocriticism, as theorized by Iovino and Oppermann, takes insights from new materialisms and does not restrict narrative agency to human beings, but assigns it to all forms of matter. It affirms that “non-human matter has an incalculable agency of its own” (Clark 112). It holds that all forms of matter are interconnected and entangled in a dense and complex network of relations and they influence each other. Hence, any change in these relations will make changes in all too. The idea that matter is agentive, vital, vibrant, dynamic, alive, and active emanates from the material turn in humanities in the wake of the twentieth century and it is introduced and elaborated by many theorists in the field. Material ecocriticism calls for more than that and they attach stories to all material forms. In her article, “Storied Matter,” Oppermann writes that storied matter “is one of the conceptual tools of material ecocriticism, which basically underlines the idea that matter is not only lively, agentive and generative, as it is theorized in the new materialist paradigm [ . . . ], but also densely storied” (411). Another concept which is also presented by this wave of ecocriticism is that “the world’s material phenomenon are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be read and interpreted as forming narratives, stories,” (Iovino and Oppermann 1, emphasis added). In other words, material ecocriticism is no longer concerned with or studying the relationship between man and the world but between objects and relations. This understanding puts aside human interactions with the world and instead brings to the fore material intra-actions with each other and with human dimensions, and this by itself produces new meanings, as Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino mentioned above in their definition of material ecocriticism. This indicates that matter is agentive in relation to other forms of matter and they are interconnected in a network producing meanings by their “intra-actions.” To elucidate this, both Oppermann and Iovino resort to new materialist philosophers and materialist feminists. Iovino in the article “The Living Diffractions of Matter and Text” (2015) refers to the two terms used by French philosopher Bruno Latour, namely “actant” and “collectives” to expound the idea of a network of agencies or diffraction, or in her words “intermingling of agencies” (75). An actant, Iovino writes by quoting Latour in two different sources, is “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others,” or “an entity that modifies another entity in a trial” (ibid.). Hence, “The main feature of actants is their cooperative efficacy” (ibid.). A “collective,” on the other hand, “is a coalition of actants into an expanded web of ‘bodies and forces’” (ibid.). According to this understanding, everything in this world affects and is affected by others in a complex network of relations. Thus, material ecocriticism

maintains that human beings are also part of this network and they cannot view themselves as masters of the world.

In another article entitled “How the Material World Communicates,” Oppermann criticizes the traditional understanding of environmental communication because as Opperman says they confine communications “within the parameters of human signifying systems, [and] disregard [. . .] the ‘communicative capacities of nonhuman others’” (109). Oppermann offers new understandings of non-human entities including both living and nonliving ones by resourcing to biosemiotics, new materialisms, and developments in biological and physical sciences. She even takes a step further and writes “Material ecocriticism takes a step further and declares that all agentic entities are *expressive* and have the ability to communicate intelligibly with other entities around them and with their immediate environments” (110, emphasis is original). In this sense, Oppermann takes Donna Haraway’s concept of *becoming with* to illustrate the idea of communication. *Becoming with*, Oppermann writes, “is a relational medium for all agencies to express their sense of being in the world” (111). Hence, all forms of beings and all material forms are intertwined and entangled in a complex web of relations and affect each other. In other words, communication is not restricted to human beings and his/her expressive ability, which is embodied in his/her language usage. All material forms, including humans and animals, are interconnected and bear stories in relation to one another. Material ecocriticism, thus, “aims to explore not only the agentic properties of material forms [. . .] but also how these properties act in combination with other material forms and their properties and with discourses, evolutionary paths, political decisions, pollution, and other stories” (Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Introduction” 7-8).

In *Ceremony*, Tayo becomes entangled in this network of relations and anything he did and does will influence the course of events in the life of himself, his people, and humanity as a whole. Tayo is a WWII veteran and has recently come back to his reservation in New Mexico. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and seeks a cure from the local health institutions in his country but finds no recovery until a traditional healer in his community combines both elements of modern and traditional medicine of the Navajo people to heal him. Throughout the novel, Tayo struggles to find peace with himself, his surroundings, his people, animals, and all forms of matter, including landscapes, springs, trees, and even cosmic planets such as the sun, the moon, and the stars. Tayo thinks that his sickness, the drought in his country, and the deaths of his beloved relatives, such as Uncle Josiah and his cousin, Rocky, are all due to loss of connection with nature and disrespect for it, and this leads to his suffering. For Tayo to be healed, he must go on an odyssey and undergo a ceremony to reconcile himself with all elements of nature including

human and non-human entities because all have impacts on his life and the life of his people.

At one point at the beginning of the novel, for example, Tayo tries to calm himself by thinking about a deer, but seeing Uncle Josiah's face among dead Japanese soldiers diverts his attention and he feels uncertain (Ceremony 6-7)<sup>ii</sup>. This indicates how Tayo is interconnected with the things around him and how this connection affects his mind. Another example of this interconnectedness and the concept of a network of relations is when Tayo feels guilty cursing the rain of a jungle while he with his wounded cousin march in the Philippine jungles during the war. Tayo thinks his curse of nature precipitates drought in his home country (Ceremony 181).

### III. Literature Review

In an essay, "The Smell of Cottonwood Leaves: Plants and Tayo's Healing in Silko's *Ceremony*," Ubaraj Katawal argues that although nature plays an important role in Tayo's recovery, "plants help him in reconnecting with the land and the people" (148). Katawal in his essay focuses on the way Native American Culture shows respect for nature and deems the natural world as a friend. What is ignored by Katawal is the very idea of materiality and the narrative agency that these natural elements have to exert influence on other beings including Tayo. Furthering this contention presented by Katawal, it is argued that plants, using Karen Barad's terminology, intra-act with Tayo and he is entangled in a network of relations with all plants around so that his becoming is always, in Donna Haraway's words, *becoming with*. In other words, Tayo's communication with the plants in the novel is the very act of *becoming with*, telling stories that can be read as storied matters.

James Tarter's essay, "Locating the Uranium Mine: Place, Multiethnicity, and Environmental Justice in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," however, focuses on "places as sites of culture" (98), and argues that Tayo through Laguna stories and culture manages to connect to the whole humanity. That is, Tarter shows in the novel "how stories function to interrelate people and place, how places function as forms for multiethnic relationships, and how commitment to place becomes an exigency that demands environmental justice" (99). Tarter's analysis is intriguing as it depicts the role of non-human entities in shaping Tayo's identity and in curing Tayo and his integration with his community. While Tarter focuses on the idea of *belonging*, it is argued that the very relationship Tayo has with places puts both Tayo and the places into the realm of *becoming with*. Places are sites of narrativity and Tayo functions as an interlocutor communicating with them, and through them narrates the stories of both himself, his people, and the land itself. Entangled in this network of

relations, Tayo is no longer a supreme being in relation to other non-human beings, but rather, he is part of this unifying whole system that governs the whole world.

In another article, "Police Zones: Territory and Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," Karen Piper highlights the importance of stories in shaping the identity of Laguna people. Referring to Silko's essay, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," in which "Silko discusses the impact of the decision in the early 1950s to begin open-pit mining of the huge uranium deposits north of Laguna," (Piper 483) Piper uses this discussion as a basis for reading *Ceremony*. She argues, based on this discussion, that *Ceremony* "represents a site of warfare between the destruction of the world by the colonizers and appropriation of these very weapons through the stories of the colonized" (484). Since according to the Laguna tradition, the landscape is a character, Piper maintains, "to eliminate the land is to eliminate the story itself" (486). Associating stories to the Laguna land and territory from this perspective is to challenge the supremacy of the colonizer and to give voice again to the colonized. Hence, the land tells a story of its people. Different from this view, it is argued, based on a material ecocritical perspective, that the land not only tells a story of its people, but rather cooperates with them to tell a story of itself, its people, and the "destroyers." In other words, the encounter between human and non-human entities in the novel results in a co-emergence of material-semiotic narrative that serves to blur or fade the boundaries between culture and nature, body and mind, and discursive and material entities.

Many critics hail Silko's *Ceremony* for mixing American Indian oral tradition and literature with American and European literary traditions to convey human conditions in the twentieth century (Cummings 66). The novel has also attracted the attention of scholars and university professors for its difficulty and complexity and they pick it for university courses because they see the novel as one of the literary canons of American literature (Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin 23; Roemer 223; Ruppert 129). Ruppert further notes that the novel cannot be separated from contemporary literature, and he claims that critics should "merge culturally and historically grounded approaches to such texts with contemporary theoretical approaches" to understand it (ibid.). The difficulty of the novel lies in its dealing with the traditional beliefs of the Amerindian tribes that Silko uses to communicate its message. Hence, Edith Swan, who is one of the early critics of the novel, in two successive articles, tries to show and explain the symbolic meaning of the story based on Laguna's beliefs. Feminist critics highlight the importance of a return to femininity because they believe that the novel depicts that modern, patriarchal technological culture tends to produce death (Orr 145). This ecofeminist approach is compelling because the focus is on the way the land is used like how women are oppressed

in society. Revealing this aspect of dealing with nature will later serve the purpose of this chapter because of the association of ecofeminism with material ecocriticism. Other critics highlight the symbolic role of plants and animals in the novel. In this respect, Peter G. Beidler argues that when Tayo lives within white culture, he moves away from animals; as a result, he loses his self-respect. Yet, when he returns to his native culture and brings back his uncle's cattle home, he recovers from his sickness (17-22). This understanding of the novel is quite helpful when dealing with environmental aspects regarding Tayo's harmony and dissonance with nature because both plants and animals are basic elements of the natural world.

However, material ecocritics have partly drawn their ideas from the animism that Indian Americans believe in (Rigby 289). The belief that considers the earth as mother, trees as selves, and other entities in nature as having spirits should not be taken simply as myth or superstition, but rather it should be taken seriously as a foundation of new ontology to deal with nature (Clark 114). Since Native American belief systems pay heed to nature and what it contains, they should be respected and understood because it is a new ethical belief for the sake of the earth. Hence, materials should no longer be inert and passive but rather, as Jane Bennett notes, "as something that *acts* on other things, as a kind of relational *force*" (ibid.; emphasis is original). Jane Bennett draws her ideas not only from Native ideas, but she also uses Spinoza's ideas to discern the thing's tendency both to exist and consolidate (in) itself, which Spinoza terms *conatus* (Bennett x). This new view, in other words, challenges the stereotypical image that sees the non-human-world as inert and passive, the old view that humans should conquer, destroy, and use the planet for their own good. However, contrary to this old view, if we give vitality and life to non-human things, this enables us to feel the non-human force in our bodies.

#### **IV. Material Ecocriticism and Native Studies**

In his PhD dissertation, "Organizing Fictions: Material Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, and American Indian Literature," (2015) Kyle Bladow argues that there is a connection between material ecocriticism and American Indian beliefs (1). Bladow gives an example of rocks to illustrate this connection. Based on Iovino and Oppermann's interpretation, Bladow points out that Stone Mother, a stone near the pyramidal tufa rock on the shores of Pyramid Lake, is a storied matter. He writes, "The shape of Stone Mother, the direction she faces, and the water before she reinforce the story" (4). Bladow further shows this connection, or in his own words, convergence between American Indian philosophies and ecocriticism by quoting from two scholars writing about this convergence namely Donell Dreese and Mita Banerjee, he concludes that "Both scholars stress the influence of Native worldviews on ecocriticism and call for continued dialogue," (11) and

he adds that Material Ecocriticism “best represent[s] this dialogue” because it reorganizes philosophical underpinnings of involvement with critical study and “offers potential alliances with Native studies” (ibid.). Bladow uses two Native scholars’ works, Daniel Wildcat’s *Red Alert!: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Realism* and Sean Kicummah Teuton’s *Red Land, Red Power*, to direct his involvement and to compare their ecocritical projects with Native studies. He points out that both of their works “adopt versions of philosophical realism” to demonstrate the American Indian vantage point about environmental crises and cultural marginalization (33). For this, Bladow maintains, Native Americans refer to the land as a concept to challenge white supremacy and colonization. Land for American Indians is not only a place but rather is something related to their being and their identity (34). To further his discussion, Bladow refers to two Native Literary studies collections, and finally, he concludes that “A strong resonance builds between the interrelatedness of ecology, the relationality of Native perspectives, and the relational ontologies of the new materialisms” (40).

Based on Bladow’s discussion, American Indian worldviews are akin to the view Silko presented and portrayed in *Ceremony* because as Silko herself writes, according to the ancient Pueblo, things are “intricately connected with a complex system of relationships which the ancient Pueblo people maintained with each other, and with the populous natural world they lived within” (Silko 266). Reading Silko’s article, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” one can trace out the move toward understanding the relationship between American Indian beliefs and material ecocriticism. Silko demonstrates the belief systems of American Indians, especially the ancient Pueblo and depicts how they respect all things and their remains including humans, animals, plants, and rocks “Because for the ancient people, all these things had spirit and being” (265). Iovino and Opperman write that “all material entities, even atoms and subatomic particles have some degree of sentient experience and that all living things have their agency of their own, [which is] essential in the making of the new materialist approaches” (“Material Ecocriticism” 78). The earth, Silko notes, is the mother of the Pueblo because it is the source of all living and non-living things. When something dies it turns to dust and joins the mother earth again. “Connection with the spirit dimensions requires a figure or form which is all-inclusive” (Silko 266). A thing *per se* is something but may mean more than that. It may be an ominous or good omen. It all depends on harmony with nature. Silko writes, “Survival depended upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings but among all things” (267). Everything becomes a story as they have an inclusive worldview toward their surroundings. Since all things belong to the one source which is mother earth, they do not believe in dualities and this contradicts with “Cartesian duality” which the traditional Western philosophy believes in (273). Thus, human beings are part of the natural world and cannot



be separated from it. “Human beings depended upon the aid and charity of the animals. Only through interdependence could human beings survive” (ibid.). Hence, maintaining balance with other things is the condition for survival and a good life. Opperman writes “All matter [. . .] is like a library of Earth’s evolution, which is deeply interlaced with human mindscapes and imagination,” (2019, 112) which means “every living creature, from humans to fungi, tells evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization, extinctions and survivals” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Introduction” 7). Thus, material ecocriticism rejects anthropocentrism and calls for a posthuman epoch in which man is no longer the centre. Agency, creativity, and consciousness are not only restricted to humans, but rather these roles are distributive and interrelated to more-than-human entities.

## V. Distributive Agency

In her book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett challenges the notion of seeing matter as passive, inert, and lifeless dominant in Western traditional thought, and instead proposes, employing Bruno Latour’s term an “actant”, that all matter, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, human or non-human, is alive, has the capacity to produce effects, and to alter the course of events. Bennett uses the theory of “distributive agency” to denote this notion and states that everything is alive and interconnected in a complex web of interrelationships, trajectories, and propensities. In Bennett’s words “vital things [. . .] are characters in a speculative onto-story” (4). To Bennett, things have vitality, a power which can be termed as “*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6; emphasis is original). A thing-power does not act alone, “Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces,” (Bennett 21) and this is what she calls a theory of distributive agency. In other words, for Bennett, the agency is both intrinsic and emanates from the interaction between all things whether organic or inorganic, physical beings or abstract things such as culture, economy, politics, industrialization, technology, etc. Hence, Bennett’s theory of distributive agency is compatible with material ecocriticism and can be used here to analyze Tayo’s relationships with others. *Others* here include all forms of matter whether organic or inorganic.

Many instances in *Ceremony* suggest and reaffirm the idea of relational ontology, relationality, and interdependence that manifests through Tayo’s relationships with others—both human and non-human—and in the narrative thread of the novel. A case in point is when Betonie blends indigenous and modern elements to cure Tayo. Looking around the old Betonie’s room, Tayo sees many things including boxes filled with things,

bundles of newspapers, telephone books, coke bottles, a medicine man's paraphernalia, and layers of old calendars gathered in the room for hundreds of years. Betonie explains to Tayo that "In the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays..." (Ceremony 111). At first sight, Betonie's views appeared instrumental by Tayo, but later when two of the pictures remind him of Josiah, he understands the relationship. Betonie sees relations between all these things and he needs them for his dealing with the patients. The things are from both Navajos and modern American culture, and to Betonie "All these things have stories alive in them (Ceremony 112). This idea is compatible with both storied matter and the idea of "distributive agency." Betonie knows that the world is changing and it is not like the old days, and hence he needs to adapt to the situation. The ideas of evolution and change, expressed by Betonie, are not only restricted to human beings because each of these things has a story to tell. Betonie attaches the story to everything he points to. He tells Tayo his story of going to school by train to learn English at his mother's request. When he is trying to tell another story, "a single hair came loose from his thick grey moustache," (Ceremony 112) and he keeps it in a footlocker. Keeping even a single hair by Betonie suggests that he believes everything is connected to each other and should be kept for treatment as they hold stories and need to be known.

Before meeting with the two traditional medicine men, Betonie and Ku'oosh, to help Tayo regain his balance and harmony with nature, Tayo expresses the relationship between human beings and nature through a narrative poem which describes two mythical figures, Reed Woman and Corn Woman who are sisters. The former is careless and takes bath all day, while the latter is attentive and works all day. Being scolded by Corn Woman, Reed Woman gets angry, goes back to her home, and takes all the rain with her causing drought to the land (Ceremony 12-13). This narrative poem reveals much about Pueblo philosophy as they make connections between natural phenomena and give sentience to natural elements whether alive or not. It also accounts for the real drought in Tayo's country as he carelessly prays for the rain to stop while in the Philippine jungles oblivious of the consequences his action would make afterwards. Hence Tayo, the narrative suggests, must reconnect with nature, and reconcile with it to regain balance and harmony, and end both the drought and his mental disorder. As Louis Owens notes that at this point in the novel *Silko* through this story implicitly refers to the fact that Tayo did the same mistake as Corn Woman because "through a partial vision he has failed to see the necessity for every thread in the web of the universe, even the maddening jungle rains" (99). Similarly, Katawal points out "Tayo must learn an interconnection that marks not only human relations but also the relation between humans and the rest of nature" (151). *Silko* writes that according to the Pueblos the earth and the sky are sisters, and "As long as good family relations are

maintained, then the Sky will continue to bless her sister, the Earth, with rain, and the Earth's children will continue to survive” (Silko 267). But who is responsible for maintaining this balance? The idea is that everything in this world relates to one another and creating a small slit in this connection because of the greed of malicious beings will affect the world. Silko, as an example, recounts an ancient Pueblo story in which “a malicious *ka'tsina*, called the Gambler, seizes the *Shiwana*, or Rainclouds, the Sun's beloved children” because the Gambler was greedy and “such greed, even on the part of only one being, ha[s] the effect of threatening the survival of all life on earth” (ibid.). Old Grandmother Spider helps Sun Youth and they outwit the Gambler. Then “the Rainclouds are set free. The drought ends, and once more life thrives on earth” (ibid.).

Akin to this story presented by Silko herself, *Ceremony* recounts a realistic story in which the natural balance of the world is disturbed by the greed of the White man and the carelessness of Tayo. The White man brings war to humanity and Tayo participates in this war instead of staying at home and helping his uncle Josiah. As a result, Tayo himself becomes sick and out of his curse of the rain, severe drought comes. To break the drought and for Tayo to be healed, Tayo must go on in a journey and with the aid of medicine men in his community must perform a ceremony to regain harmony with nature. The drought of the land, Tayo's illness, the war, and the White man's greed are, in this web of relations, all connected and interrelated with each other. They are agents and have a distributive quality. Their efficacies exert influence on others and vice versa. In other words, they are, in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, “assemblages” which produce effects and have the ability to make something happen.

Tayo's memory only works when he is in nature and in contact with it. At the outset of the novel, when he stands outside the train depot in Los Angeles he remembers Rocky but only after he sees palm trees, “at that moment his body ha[s] density again and the world [i]s visible and he realize[s] why he [i]s there and he remembers [s] Rocky” (*Ceremony* 14). The image of palm trees reminds him of Rocky and he cries a lot. At that moment, Tayo is sick and cannot comprehend this relational force. Although Tayo is suffering from war trauma, plants help him to reconnect with the world and find meaning in it. Coming back to his room, sitting, and watching the sun rays on the wall of his room, Tayo feels uneasy as the sunlight entangles his body. The narrator notes

He knew at some point the sunlight on the wall would collapse into his thoughts like pale gray cobwebs, clinging to all things within him, and then his stomach would begin to convulse, and he would have to hold himself with both hands to try to hold back the tremor that grew inside. He went outside before it happened. (*Ceremony* 17)

The sunlight here is agentive, representing an agentic process that affects Tayo in such a way that he is obliged to leave the room and go outside. The very presence of the walls has also influenced Tayo's physical and psychological beings as he "begins to convulse". In the yard and in the open sky, Tayo feels different and remembers the time when with Rocky Mount Bone Mesa. At that time, he believes that touching a sky and reaching the moon is easy if one knows a story and a new direction, the narrator writes

Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there was a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions—exactly which way to go and what to do to get there; it depended on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone. (Ceremony 17-18)

Tayo's past and present are intertwined. His body is in the present but his thoughts are in the past. What always makes Tayo remember the past, especially his relations with Rocky and Josiah is the force he finds in the non-human elements in nature. These natural agentive forces have a transformative power exerting influence on both Tayo and the environment as a whole. Tayo needs this transformation on both individual and collective levels. Without this change, both humans and non-human entities face death and destruction. When Tayo becomes part of the human narrative, he feels good and capable of doing impossible things like touching the sky and reaching the moon. Now, Tayo, the narrator suggests, needs his own story to challenge all the evils in the world.

Another case in point that underscores the agentive force of non-human entities can be seen in Harley's trying to control his burro (Ceremony 18). Harley is Tayo's friend and he is a veteran like Tayo, but Harley is an alcoholic and does not suffer from mental disorder as Tayo. Harley is always restless and cannot sit silently alone. This is an indication that Harley is not at peace with himself and his surroundings. The recalcitrance of the burro reminds Tayo about Old Grandma's stubbornness. Everything for Tayo is a reminder because to Tayo everything has a story to tell. Although Harley ostensibly laughs all the time, he is always suffering and he is a victim, and this is because Harley cannot preserve a balance or harmony with nature. In other words, he suffers a lot but he tries to use alcohol to control his emotions, unlike Tayo who challenges the status quo and tries to comprehend his situation. The agentive force of alcohol on Harley cannot be denied. It is this alcohol, as a non-human agency, that makes Harley betray his childhood friend Tayo and consequently, he becomes a victim of the witchery highlighted in the novel. In other words, and contrary to Tayo who tries to establish a reciprocal relation to nature, Harley shows detachment from it because the former wants to reconcile with his native heritage and culture while the latter admires the white culture. As Rachel Stein points out that the

novel is a site of a “struggle between different cultural orientations toward the natural world” (193).

*Ceremony* narrates a process of entanglement and correlations between different agentic forces in nature to exert influence on human beings and with these agencies, human beings can challenge the brutalities of white dominant culture. Tayo represents not only himself but also the entire nation and his sufferings are the result of his dissonance with the natural world. Rachel Stein’s analysis is compatible with this ecocritical reading of the novel. Stein notes, using Donna Haraway and Evelyn Fox Keller’s feminist methodologies, that the division made between subject and object in the western traditional model of thought is responsible for the subjugation of women and nature alike. The dominant paradigm of white culture separates nature and women from the mind and this leads to the objectification of nature and considering it as inert. In other words, nature is not looked at as an agent but objectified as a thing. *Ceremony* challenges this notion by highlighting Indian American beliefs that consider nature as animate and agentic, having the capability to interconnect with the human mind in an intricate web of relations and consequently alter the course of events (Stein 202). The relations Tayo establishes between the natural world and himself and his tribe are not exploitative and destructive like that of white culture. Nature is no longer an object and is treated as a knower exerting influence on Tayo. To illustrate this, Stein takes Tayo’s relationship with Ts’eh as a case in point. Ts’eh is a mysterious woman who helps Tayo to reconnect with his tribe and nature, and she is at once a “human being, natural entity, and supernatural being” (205). Stein notes, “For [sic] Tayo, Ts'eh is living proof of the spiritual animation of nature, of the living presence of the sacred beings of the tribal stories. Through the love of Ts'eh, Tayo is able to renew the bond that tribal stories had articulated between humans and nature” (ibid.).

Despite the drought, Tayo on his way with Harley and Emo to the bar, finds a spring which reminds him of his maternal uncle Josiah (*Ceremony* 42), who tells him how their people are connected to the land, this spring, the sky, and all the natural world then:

Tayo knelt on the edge of the pool and let the dampness soak into the knees of his jeans. He closed his eyes and swallowed the water slowly. He tasted the deep heart rock of the earth, where the water came from, and he thought maybe this wasn’t the end after all. (*Ceremony* 42)

At this point, Tayo realizes his connection to the earth and perceives the agentic power of the earth which makes him see the world differently. This becomes a starting point for Tayo to reconnect to the natural world and be healed by the power of this connection. In Tayo and Josiah’s perspective, the earth is not an object outside human perception, but rather a

mother whom all things including humans and non-humans come from. By returning to mother earth and recognizing her needs, Tayo revives again and hopes that there might be a solution for his anguish and the drought of the land. There is a relationship between Tayo's sickness and the sickness of the land. Both are interconnected and influence one another. "The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget when people misbehave" (ibid.) Tayo's behavior, and by extension his people's, leads to the drought and their sickness as well. This idea is also supported in the novel by introducing a story poem by the narrator: A gambler, *Ck'o'yo*, visits a town and fascinates the people of the town with his magic. The gambler makes water come out from a stone and animals appear in the air. So, the town's people are so amazed by these magic acts that they forget all about Corn Mother alter, *Nau'ts'ity'i*. Hence, Corn Mother becomes so furious that takes all rain clouds, the young of animals, and plants with her (Ceremony 42-45). This story-poem suggests how people are moved away from the earth and engaged in a material world and in return, the earth is becoming angry with them. To end this, Tayo must reconcile with nature and respect it.

All of Tayo's memories in the past are a reference to the fact that Tayo respected nature and lived in harmony with it, but after he neglected this connection and became part of white culture's greed toward the natural world, he and the world were disturbed. To regain balance and harmony with nature, Tayo must renew this connection and the narration suggests that this is not easy. Whatever reminds Tayo about the past tells a story through Tayo's feelings. The agentive power of these natural elements is expressed through Tayo's relationships to them. In the bar, Tayo again thinks of Rocky and remembers a time when he and Rocky hunt a deer. The respect Tayo and Rocky show to the deer when they hunt and then cut it is intriguing. Tayo covers the deer's head, and then they scatter "cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit" (Ceremony 47). This ritual of feeding the spirit of the deer is "to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise, the deer would be offended, and they would not come to die for them the following year" (Ceremony 47). Only through love, respect, and appreciation of nature, human beings can survive because all elements of nature, including human beings, are interconnected in a web of relations and affect each other.

## VI. Conclusion

Through Tayo's character, Silko in *Ceremony* demonstrates that the world is not as simple as it is seen. Everything in this world is interconnected and human beings are not the master of the universe but rather they are part of it. If humans want to live and survive, they should respect the environment because mankind's destiny is intrinsically interrelated with the destiny of the world. Tayo's story is the story of the entire world. Tayo is not the master of

the world and other actants shape his being and identity. The world is interconnected, interrelated, and entangled together. Any action, story, thinking, and word affects others because the world is not created by our mind, but our mind is shaped by what we encounter in the world. Man is an entity intermingled with other entities whether organic or inorganic.

*Ceremony* challenges us on all levels of our understanding of the world. On the ontological level, it tells us that our being is not based on the duality of mind and body and culture and nature, and the world we live in is not socially and linguistically constructed, but rather differences exist because we encounter each other and no one is passive. All substances have an active force that affects and is affected by others. On an epistemological level, it challenges our knowledge about the world and proposes a different understanding of reality. What is real is the correlation between consciousness and the physical world. The world and its configurations are the result of intra-actions between the dynamism of forces which exist at the same time. On an ethical level, it challenges us to think about the consequences of our actions and hence proposes different behavior to save the earth. Silko, like White, posits that if we want to survive, we have to change or revive our “axioms”. Otherwise, we will die because if we live, we live together, and if we die, we die together as well.

## له ناته بايبه وه بو هاونا ههنگي له گهه سروشتدا: خویندنه وه یه کی ره خنه یی ژینگه یی ماددی بو رۆمانی مه راسیمه یی لیسه یی مارمۆن سیلکۆ

به ههمن جه بار محهمه د<sup>1</sup> - محمد دلیر امین<sup>2</sup> - کاوه عثمان عارف<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1+3</sup> به شی ئینگلیزی، کۆلیژی زمان، زانکۆی سلیمانی، سلیمانی، هه ریمی کوردستان، عیراق.

<sup>2</sup> به شی زمانی کوردی، کۆلیژی زمان، زانکۆی سلیمانی، سلیمانی، هه ریمی کوردستان، عیراق.

### پوخته:

هه رچه نده زۆر له سه ره رۆمانی رپوره سمی سیلکۆ نوسراوه، به لام گرنگیه کی که م به خویندنه وه ی رۆمانه که له روانگه ی ئیکۆکریتیکی ماددیه وه دراوه. ئەم توێژینه وه یه تیوری ئیکۆکریتیکی ماددی به کارده هینیت بو باسکردنی ویناکردنی مرۆف و روهک و گیانه به ران له رۆمانی رپوره سمی سیلکۆدا، هه روه ها چون ئەم بونانه توانای کرداریان هه یه و توانای به ره مه هینانی مانا و په یوه ندیکردن له گهه یه کتر و گۆرینی ره وتی روداوه کانی ناو رۆمانه که یان هه یه. له ژیر کاریگه ری ماتریالیزمه نوێیه کان و کاره کانی دو تیوریستی پیشه نگ، سیرینتلا ئیۆفینتو و سیرپیل ئوپه رمان، که به هاوبه شی کتیبیکیان به ناو نیشانی، ره خنه ی ئیکۆی ماددی (2014) نوسیوه، ئەم شه پۆله نوێیه ی ئیکۆکریتیسیسم تیشک ده خاته سه ر گرنگی خویندنه وه ی مادده له دهقه کاندایان و خویندنه وه ی مادده وهک ده قیک. ئیمه ده لێین که، له رۆمانی مه راسیمدا، هه مو په یوه ندییه کانی تایۆ له گهه سروشت، له وان هه ش کانی، دیمه ن، ئاژهه ل و مرۆف، که تیندا په یوه ندییه که ی له گهه ل مامی کۆچکردوی جۆسیا و رۆکی ئامۆزاکه ی بیره ده هینیته وه، ئەزمونی چیرۆکیک ده گێر نه وه که ده توانریت وهک مادده ی چیرۆکار ببینرین. توێژینه وه که به و ئەجامه ده گا که هه مو شتیک له جیهاندا که له رۆمانه که دا ده خریته رو، به یه که وه گریدراون و تیکه لاون و له تۆریکی ئالۆزی په یوه ندییدان و پێویسته مرۆف ریز له ژینگه بگریت و ره چاوی بکات چونکه چاره نوسی مرۆف له بنه رته دا په یوه ندی به چاره نوسی جیهانه وه هه یه.

وشه سه ره کیه کان: مه راسیم؛ سیلکۆ؛ سروشت؛ هیژ؛ هارمۆنی



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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> For more understanding of this concept, see Bennett 13, and Iovino, "Steps to a Material Ecocriticism. The Recent Literature About the "New Materialisms" and its Implications for Ecocritical Theory." 87.

<sup>ii</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, deluxe edition, (New York: Penguin, 2006). Subsequent citations are from this edition and will be cited as (Ceremony Page number).