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Land, Memory, and ṚTA: Indigenous Ecology and Vedic Philosophy in Leslie Marmon Silko's Fiction

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to study the depiction of nature as a source of cultural memory with ecocritical perspective in the novels of Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko's fiction argues against the Western materialistic approach by depicting nature and all-natural elements not as passive resources but as an active dominating forces that preserve history, individuality, and collective wisdom. This philosophy echoes with the Vedic philosophical concept of *Ṛta*, the cosmic and ethical order. This paper is proposed to analyse the relationship between humans, nature, and moral responsibility. This paper primarily focuses on three novels: *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes* to explore how land, creatures, sacraments, and ecological cycles act as a source of ancestral memory and cultural permanence. With the Vedic understanding of *Prakṛti* as a living, the study analyses how thematic concern and portrayal of nature in Silko's fiction acts as a moral cosmic energy which act as a guiding force for human conduct through exchange and sense of balance. Silko repossesses oral, folk, and tribal narratives to accentuate that enlightening perseverance is an integral part that cannot be separated from natural harmony. An ecological exploitation in these select novels parallels cultural unconsciousness caused by human act of colonialism, industrialization, modernity, and capitalism during the course of time. This paper substantiates Silko's contributes to contemporary environmental discourse through textual interpretation through the perspectives of non-Western ethical frameworks, especially Indian Vedic philosophy.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, RTA, Ecocriticism, Cultural Memory, Indigenous Ecology, Identity

1.Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the most influential contemporary Native American writers. Her work of fiction shows how culture, land, and memory are in the form of triangle shape that creates own united space of coexistence by depending on each other. Born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Silko belongs to the Laguna Pueblo tribe. Her diverse legacy (Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and Anglo-American) provides deep philosophical background to shape her writing. She provides a revolutionary voice through Indigenous experiences and thoughtfully interrogates Western ways of insightfulness. She grows up with a folk tradition of verbalized storytelling through which she captivated *Pueblo myths*, rituals, and communal narratives. These psychological experiences later became central to her fictional world. Silko's literary career really took off with her novel *Ceremony* (1977), a landmark book in Native American literature. The novel portrays land and nature as active healers for the cultural and psychological wounds left by colonial violence and war. Her later works, including *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), continue to explore her ecological and political concerns. They lay bare the harm caused by capitalism, environmental exploitation, and the disappearance of cultures.

Silko often presents an Indigenous worldview: nature isn't merely a resource to control. Instead, she sees it as a living being with memory, spirit, and moral authority. In her novels, she depicts Landscapes, animals, weather, and sacred places as caretakers of cultural knowledge and ultimate wisdom. They grasp familial pasts and act as a guide for current and future generations. With this outlook, Silko questions human-centric ideas of progress that ignores nature as a passive force. She champions a give-and-take relationship between people and the natural world. When we read Silko's novels through an ecocritical lens, we see how environmental damage and cultural amnesia are deeply tied to colonial modernity. She presents nature as cultural memory, reviving Indigenous ecological wisdom. This offers a different way for people to live together: one built on harmony, responsibility, and sustainability. Her fiction substantiates a practical wisdom and initiates an ethical discourse related to current environmental discussions, prompting human community to realise that for ecological survival, cultures need to endure.

II.Ecocriticism and Indigenous Ecological Thought

Ecocriticism, within literature, examines how the relationship between humans and the environment is portrayed in narrative contexts. Though its roots

are deeply embedded in Western Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas represented by the human-centred insights of Emerson and Thoreau, this field has made a notable ontological transition toward Indigenous ways of constructing ethical knowledge. These viewpoints assess critically the binary division of "nature" and "culture," substituting Western conservationist models that frequently exploit the environment as a fixed "wilderness" with a principle of reciprocity.

In modern Indigenous perspective, the land is seen as an active force of communal memory instead of a static scenery. It exists as a living entity sustained by mythology, rituals, and actual community activities. Scholar Katelyn Borello contends that the works of authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko express a "perspective on global environmental justice," in which ecological well-being and cultural preservation are inseparably linked. As a result, environmental degradation is viewed not just as a biological issue, but as a deep "cultural amnesia" and a signal of colonial disruption highlighted through a thematic catalyst central to Silko's fiction.

III.Nature and Memory In *CEREMONY*

Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony is often seen as her ecocritical masterpiece. It highlights the close relationship between land, memory, and healing in the Laguna Pueblo worldview. The story takes place in the American Southwest after World War II. It follows Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna Pueblo veteran who experiences psychological trauma, alienation, and cultural dislocation. His struggles are not just personal; they reflect a larger community issue rooted in colonial disruption and ecological imbalance. Tayo's journey toward healing involves reconnecting with the land, engaging in rituals, and embracing ancestral storytelling. This suggests that true recovery only happens through restoring both the environment and culture. In Ceremony, nature is not a passive or decorative element. Instead, it acts as a living force that remembers and holds spiritual significance. The land carries the memories of history, suffering, and survival. Silko emphasizes this worldview early in the novel:

> *"The land was not empty. It was full of stories, full of spirits, full of voices" (Silko 69).*

This view sharply contrasts with the Western perspective that sees land as empty property or a resource to exploit. The drought affecting the reservation represents both ecological imbalance and cultural forgetting. Tayo gradually

realizes that the drought is not a natural disaster but stems from broken relationships between people and the natural world. The landscape in Ceremony reflects shared memory through repeated images of animals, plants, and weather patterns that connect to Pueblo cosmology. The cattle, mountain springs, and seasonal rains serve as symbols that remind people of traditional ecological knowledge.

Rachel Stein notes that the central conflict in Ceremony is not just psychological but ideological; it involves the struggle between Indigenous reciprocity and Western control of nature (Stein 128). Tayo's trauma deepens with his exposure to Western military violence, which parallels environmental destruction from uranium mining and nuclear testing in the Southwest. Tayo's memories of his uncle Josiah are crucial for reconnecting him to an Indigenous view of ecology. Josiah teaches Tayo that all beings are linked and that people must live in harmony with the land. Remembering Josiah's lessons, Tayo thinks, "He had believed in the stories for so long; they were like the stories about the stars and the mountains and the rivers" (Silko 191). These stories serve as a way to preserve cultural memory, passing down ecological ethics through generations. The sacredness of water, the spiritual significance of animals like the fly and the cattle, and the belief in balance strengthen the Pueblo idea that people exist within a continuum of life, not above it. This knowledge, often dismissed by Western science as superstition, becomes essential for Tayo's psychological healing.

i.Western Destruction and the Loss of Memory

Silko offers a strong critique of Western industrial modernity and its harmful effects on Indigenous land and memory. The scars left by uranium mines and the existence of nuclear testing sites in New Mexico represent what Silko terms "witchery," a force of greed, violence, and environmental destruction that aims to disconnect people from the land. The narrator warns:

"They destroy the feeling people have for each other… they destroy the feeling people have for the land" (Silko 132).

This destruction affects not just the environment but also culture. Losing land leads to the breakdown of stories, rituals, and collective memory. Colonial exploitation creates what can be called ecological amnesia, a forgetting of the mutual relationships with nature. Ecocritical scholars Farooq, Javed, and Murtaza argue that colonialism in Ceremony results in the displacement of Indigenous ecological knowledge systems. This creates a deep sense of paranoia and loss

among Native communities (148). The land, once a source of memory and identity, becomes polluted and unreachable, further separating characters like Tayo from their cultural roots.

ii.Storytelling as Ecological Memory

Storytelling is the key way to keep ecological memory alive in Ceremony. Silko mixes prose with poetry, myths, and oral narratives that reflect ancestral wisdom. The novel highlights that stories are not just old artifacts; they are living forces that can shape reality. As Silko writes:

"I will tell you something about stories… They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have" (Silko 2).

Stories hold knowledge about land, survival, and ethical responsibility. By retelling these stories, Tayo takes part in a ceremonial act that restores balance between people and nature. His healing ties directly to his ability to remember and re-enact these narratives. This reinforces the idea that cultural survival relies on ecological remembrance. Through storytelling, Silko brings the landscape to life and challenges Western thinking that breaks knowledge into separate fields. The oral tradition in Ceremony acts as an ecological archive, protecting Indigenous history and environmental ethics from colonial erasure. In this way, the novel argues that remembering the land is a form of resistance. Healing starts when people listen to the stories found in nature.

IV.Ecological Reconstruction in Almanac of The Dead

While Ceremony focuses on individual and local healing, Almanac of the Dead (1991) broadens Leslie Marmon Silko's ecological vision to a hemispheric and historical level. The novel spans centuries and various Indigenous communities across North and South America. It reveals the connected patterns of displacement, environmental harm, and resistance. Silko contrasts Indigenous care for the land with capitalist and colonial exploitation, showing how environmental destruction and cultural loss work together. In Almanac of the Dead, nature serves as a large archive of historical memory. Silko depicts land as a witness to colonial violence, marked by conquest, extraction, and dispossession. Early in the novel, the narrator states, *"The earth is the source and the giver of all good things; everything comes from the earth"* (Silko, Almanac 43). This statement supports an Indigenous ecological ethic based on reciprocity and responsibility, which directly opposes Western ideas of ownership and exploitation. Despite centuries of colonial

interference, Indigenous characters hold onto ecological memory through oral traditions, sacred texts, and communal rituals that maintain knowledge of land and resistance.

i.Mythic Structure and Indigenous Temporality

The non-linear, fragmented, and mythic structure of *Almanac of the Dead* reflects Indigenous views of time, where the past, present, and future exist together instead of in a straight line. This storytelling approach challenges Western historical order and emphasizes that land holds cultural memories across generations. Silko writes:

"The almanac was never destroyed… It carried the stories of the people, the ir migrations, their battles, and their prophecies" (Silko, Almanac 246).

The almanac symbolizes a living ecological text—a memory bank of Indigenous history, land ethics, and survival strategies. Through this symbolic structure, Silko shows that memories rooted in land and story can serve as a source of political and ecological resistance. Indigenous characters in the novel move through landscapes changed by mining, urban development, and militarization, but they remain linked to their ancestral knowledge systems. Their ongoing remembrance of land challenges colonial stories aimed at erasing Indigenous presence and legitimacy.

ii.Bio-colonization and Ecological Violence

Ecocritical readings of Almanac of the Dead highlight its focus on bio-colonization, which involves the material and ideological control of land, bodies, and ecosystems. Silko shows that capitalist expansion acts as a destructive force that turns nature into a commodity and dehumanizes Indigenous peoples. The novel warns: *"They see no life. They see only objects to use"* (Silko, Almanac 414). This view captures Western capitalist thinking, which treats land as a resource and overlooks Indigenous ecological knowledge as primitive or outdated. Mughal and Hussain argue that colonial powers in the novel not only take over land but also shape conversations, creating stories that justify environmental harm and ignore Indigenous knowledge systems (Mughal and Hussain). The ecological damage portrayed in Almanac, such as deforestation, mining, toxic waste dumping, and militarization, reveals ongoing environmental racism. Silko places Indigenous resistance in a larger historical context, implying that ecological justice must connect with the reclaiming of cultural memory and land ethics.

V. Garden as Symbol in *Gardens in The Dunes*

Gardens in the Dunes (1999) expands Leslie Marmon Silko's ecological imagination into the late nineteenth century. It highlights a Native girl's struggle to maintain her cultural identity amid colonial displacement and cultural disruption. Unlike the overt political urgency in Almanac of the Dead, this novel presents a quieter, restorative ecological vision focused on gardens. These are cultivated spaces where land, memory, spirituality, and community come together. Gardens serve as both actual sites of cultivation and symbolic spaces for cultural renewal based on Indigenous knowledge. Silko portrays gardening as a traditional practice that supports memory and identity. Indigo's connection to the gardens reflects an Indigenous perspective that views land as a living relative rather than as property. Silko writes: *"The gardens were alive with stories; every plant had its own history, its own purpose"* (Silko, Gardens 57). This statement emphasizes that plants serve as carriers of cultural memory, embodying Indigenous knowledge handed down through generations.

Gardening thus becomes a ceremonial act through which Indigenous identity is confirmed and preserved despite colonial intrusion. Sulagna Mohanty's eco-literal study suggests that Indigo's dedication to gardens brings back mythical memories by highlighting deep connections between Mother Earth and Indigenous identity (Mohanty 43). The gardens function as places for negotiation between the past and the present, tradition and survival. Even when Indigo is far from her homeland, her memories of the gardens help her maintain her connection to ancestral land ethics. Reflecting on this continuity, the narrator notes: *"Seeds carried far from home still remembered the soil they came from"* (Silko, Gardens 181). This metaphor reinforces Silko's belief that cultural memory, like seeds, can survive displacement and thrive when given the right conditions.

VI.Ecofeminism, Indigenous Knowledge, And Resistance

Elizabeth McNeil's ecofeminist analysis expands this ecological reading by highlighting Indigenous women as caretakers of environmental knowledge and cultural continuity. McNeil argues that Silko connects women's bodies, land, and spiritual practices, such as the Ghost Dance, to resist both patriarchal colonial structures and ecological exploitation (McNeil). In *Gardens in the Dunes*, women's close relationship with cultivation counters Western systems that devalue both female agency and the natural world. Silko strengthens this resistance by

emphasizing women's rituals and plant knowledge in her narrative. Indigo's grandmother teaches her that caring for the earth is a sacred duty:

"You care for the plants, and they care for you. That is how the world stays alive" (Silko, Gardens 94).

Such statements express an Indigenous ecological ethic based on reciprocity and care, opposing capitalist ideas that see land as disposable. Through the symbolism of gardens, Silko transforms everyday spaces into powerful sites of ecological and cultural resistance. The gardens act as living archives of Indigenous memory, maintaining resilience against colonial erasure and environmental harm. Ultimately, Gardens in the Dunes shows that ecological renewal and cultural survival are deeply connected, rooted in remembrance, care, and continuity with the land.

VII. Vedic Philosophy of Nature and Human Existence

Leslie Marmon Silko's fiction shows that land is not just a piece of territory but a cultural archive filled with memories, histories, and spiritual connections. In her novels, nature serves as a living storehouse of Indigenous knowledge systems. These systems have often been marginalized, fragmented, or erased by Western ways of knowing. Landscapes remember what colonial histories try to wipe out; rivers, mountains, plants, and animals hold onto ancestral memories and ethical teachings. Indigenous ecological views resist this erasure by asserting that caring for the land means caring for identity, history, and community survival.

This perspective aligns closely with non-Western ecological philosophies, especially Indian Vedic philosophy, which also rejects the separation of humans and nature. The Vedic idea of Ṛta, the cosmic order that maintains harmony among natural, moral, and spiritual realms, reflects Silko's call for balance between people and the earth. Just as breaking Ṛta causes cosmic disorder, ecological disruption in Silko's stories signals a cultural and spiritual imbalance. As the Rig Veda states, nature follows an ethical order that humans should respect rather than dominate (Rig Veda 10.190). Similarly, the *Sanatan* principle of Dharma, not just about duty but about correct ecological behaviour, matches Indigenous land ethics in Silko's books. Dharma stresses a responsibility toward all forms of life, promoting connections rather than a human-cantered hierarchy.

Silko's characters, particularly in Ceremony and Gardens in the Dunes, find healing only when they reconnect with this moral ecology. This idea is similar to the Bhagavad Gita's teaching that harmony comes from selfless actions rooted in cosmic responsibility (Gita 3.20). The Upanishadic idea of *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*, meaning "the world is one family," deepens this comparison. This philosophy blurs the strict lines between self and others, human and nonhuman. Silko's narratives also reject colonial divisions between humans and nature, emphasizing a kinship with the land. Ecocritical scholars argue that Indigenous land ethics challenge Western dualism by highlighting relationships, interdependence, and ethical coexistence (Glotfelty and Fromm 107). From a philosophical view, Silko's ecological imagination parallels the Saṃkhya idea of Prakṛti (nature) as dynamic, living, and generative rather than just passive matter. While Western capitalism often treats nature as a dormant resource, Silko, like *Vedic* philosophy, depicts nature as an active presence that reacts to human actions. This shared view reinforces Silko's critique of colonial exploitation and environmental harm as violations of both ecological and moral orders. Silko's narratives go beyond just literary storytelling. They present ethical models of ecological care based on reciprocity, memory, and historical awareness. These models connect with ancient Hindu ecological knowledge and Indigenous ways of knowing. Resistance in Silko's stories is not only political but also ontological and ethical: remembering the land is an act of defiance against colonial forgetfulness, and taking care of the earth is a sacred duty. In this light, Silko's work contributes to a global environmental humanism that brings together Indigenous knowledge and Eastern philosophy in the shared fight for ecological justice and cultural survival.

VIII.Conclusion

This ecocritical analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's novels demonstrates that her writing significantly alters our perception of the connection between humans and nature. She portrays nature as a form of cultural memory, moral consciousness, and a vibrant history. In Ceremony, Almanac of the Dead, and Gardens in the Dunes, Silko persistently dismantles Western concepts that divide land from life, culture from ecology, and memory from history. She offers an Indigenous viewpoint wherein land contains memory, narratives facilitate healing, and survival depends on a shared bond with the natural environment. Silko's environmental perspective is profoundly linked to resistance. In her novels, environmental degradation manifests as physical, mental, and ethical. This

devastation stems from colonialism, capitalism, and militarized modernity that detach individuals from land-based wisdom. Cultural amnesia and environmental destruction emerge as simultaneous outcomes of the same damaging perspective. Healing originates not from technological progress or institutional efforts but from remembrance, which entails recovering ancestral narratives, sacred sites, and ethical methods of communal living

In Silko's stories, memory and cultural retention performs as confrontation, and plot of the story serves as a compliance for ecological therapeutic. This spiritual perspective echoes with non-Western philosophical ideas that can be easily found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist theories that reject stringent separations between humans and nature. The Vedic idea of Ṛta reflects the cosmic moral order that maintains harmony among nature, society, and spirit, make parallel with Silko's vision that environmental unevenness indicates ethical disorder. The principle of Dharma, which involves proper ecological behaviour and 'responsibility toward all life forms, matches Indigenous land ethics that emphasize care over ownership'. The Upanishadic idea of *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam* ("the world is one family") reflects Silko's depiction of kinship among humans, animals, plants, and landscapes. Buddhist interconnectedness (Pratītyasamutpāda) and Daoist harmony support her stance against oppression and exploitation. By establishing these acquaintances, Silko's work engages in a global discussion that challenges Western extractive modernity. Her novels imply that today's ecological crises cannot be solved solely through scientific approaches or policies. They require a deeper philosophical and ethical shift. For Silko, environmental justice means restoring cultural memory and recovering non-Western ecological knowledge that modernity has pushed aside. In the end, Silko's fiction presents an ecological humanism based on reciprocity, remembrance, and responsibility. Nature is not just a silent victim of history; it actively witnesses and guides us morally. Listening to the land helps us uncover lost histories. Caring for the earth affirms cultural continuity.

In contemporary environmental predicament and cultural homogeneousness, Silko prompts us that sustainability is not only a scientific stipulation but also a divine and ethical one. This idea resonances eternally in the Upanishadic statement:

***"ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्। तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम्॥"* (Īśā Upaniṣad 1)**

Everything that occurs and exists on this cosmos is filled with the sacred power. Thus, we should live with balanced approach and surrender greediness for what belongs to other inhabitants. This ancient knowledge and wisdom capture the environmental ethics. In this context, Silko's stories mightily demonstrate preferring admiration over domination, synchronicity over exploitation, and retention over obliviousness by offering a transformative ancient Indian philosophical model for ecological justice based on humility, balance, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life.

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