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Subaltern Voices and Strategic Essentialism in Silko's The Man to Send Rain Clouds

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Abstract

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Key Words: Leon, Silko, Subaltern Voices, Strategic Essentialism, Pueblo

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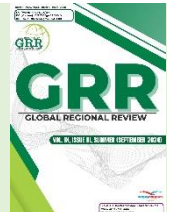
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Title

Subaltern Voices and Strategic Essentialism in Silko's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*

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Abstract

*This article studies the Subaltern voices and Strategic Essentialism in Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*. These concepts unveil individual voices raised against the power structures and the Pueblo characters strategically respond towards the Western's hegemony and syncretism. There is depiction of rebellion and adaptation through Subalternity and Strategic Essentialism respectively, by the Native Americans in the short story. Leon's effort towards securing his traditional values and cultural practices, highlights struggle towards autonomy and preservation in the text. The story depicts the uncertainty of preservation and adaptation, as characters suggest to quench the thirst of the old man through Catholic's Holy water. This paper discloses the harms committed by the Euro-Americans to the Native American culture and the Natives' efforts to preserve their culture and to survive under the oppressive regime.*

Keywords: [Leon](#), [Silko](#), [Subaltern Voices](#), [Strategic Essentialism](#), [Pueblo](#)

Introduction

“When asked by an anthropologist what the Indians called America before the white men came, an Indian said simply “Ours” (Deloria Jr., 1969). America belonged to Native Americans and they were the true owners of the land. The Euro-Americans reached America in 1492. They looted gold from America and killed millions of Native Americans, destroying their culture and

environment. Native Americans believed in shared life. They had no concept of private property and individuality before the arrival of the Euro-Americans who valued individuality. The basic difference between these two cultures is that of selfishness and individuality contrasted with collaboration and harmony. Silko's narration depicts the domination and emergence of colonialism over the traditional values and local



practices of American Indians. The characters' continuous struggle to preserve their Pueblo customs and religious beliefs can be observed in the text. The story revolves around Leon, a young grandson of Teofilo who passes away and Leon wants to bury his body according to their tribal rituals and religious beliefs. He struggles a lot against catholic beliefs and tries his best to credit the Native American culture. After his grandfather's death, Leon performs his tribal rituals by sprinkling corn meal, folding the body in a red blanket, and placing feathers in his hand. After that, he wishes his grandfather to bring rain which will fertile the land of the Pueblo tribe. Leon asserts his Subalternity against political, social, and cultural marginalization exercised by the White settlers. We can also examine the Catholic fusion in the Native American culture. Leon moves towards the priest for Christians' Holy water hoping that this effort will bring fertility in the form of rain. In this way, he engages with Strategic Essentialism, he doesn't abandon foreign interventions for his spiritual purposes. Natives do not resist European doctrines openly but strategically embrace a few colonial aspects into their traditions for the sake of survival.

Native Americans were kind and hospitable but Europeans treated them worse than the animals and used their lands for evil gains. They did not only use them but also exploited them by hook or by crook. When Columbus arrived on Hispaniola in 1508, Las Casas says, "There were 60000 people living on this island, including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508 over three million people had perished from war, slavery, and mines" (Zinn, 1995).

Leslie Marmon Silko (also known as Leslie Chapman, 1968) is a Native American writer, born in Albuquerque (New Mexico USA), belongs to the Pueblo tribe, and was brought up in Laguna. Most of her writings are related to the clashes between Native Americans and the White settlers. Her writings greatly emerged from the oral traditional stories and she adopts the historical way of storytelling to convey her point of view to the reader. As she belongs to the Native American culture and background, her writings mostly revolve around her experiences of tensions between the Native Americans and the Euro-Americans. She illustrates the richness of Native culture, identity, land, and rituals in her works. Silko sketches the struggles of the Native Americans to preserve their identity. The major themes of her works are cultural

identity, spirituality, connectedness with nature, oral tradition, resistance towards oppressive forces, war and conflict, and colonialism.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduced her post-colonial term 'Subaltern' which refers to the oppressed people of the society, whose voices are not heard. The voices of such people were termed Subaltern voices by Spivak. These voices are ignored and are not heard by dominant groups. She says; "Can the subaltern speak? The simple answer is no. The Subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988). Spivak relates this term with women and asserts that in a colonial world, women are doubly colonized. They are doubly colonized because of colonialism and then by patriarchal society. But in this research, I will identify the oppressed subaltern voices of the Native Americans in America who are being exploited by the Euro-Americans. Native Americans were exploited and marginalized by the Euro-Americans. The Euro-Americans adversely affected their history, culture, identity, language, literature, and whole lifestyle. Europeans eliminated their identity and cultural practices. The Native Americans were treated as subalterns who had no say at all in history. The Euro-Americans painted them as evil in the world through their own constructed discourse.

Strategic Essentialism is a postcolonial term coined by Gayatri Spivak. Strategic Essentialism is the kind of political tactic in which shared identity traits are mobilized for representation by an ethnic group. It is also the acceptance of essential rituals or identities for a specific purpose (it may be political, social, or religious). Leon asserts this ideology by embracing some aspects of colonialism in his grandfather's burial. He asks for Holy Water from a catholic priest (Paul), which can be interpreted as a step toward Strategic Essentialism. This blending can be derived as strategic essentialism, accepting the Holy water for the betterment of the tribe (preservation of tradition) and also to avoid conflict in the society.

Subalternity is highlighted in the form of the repressive voices of the people of Pueblo, who are being exploited and marginalized by the Euro-Americans. The Euro-Americans wanted to erase the Native culture and religious practices. Silko has skillfully portrayed marginalized voices in the story. Strategic Essentialism could be seen in the story when tribal people advance strategically towards

catholic practices and amalgamate their native traditional values.

Literature Review

This story has attracted wonderful scholarly interest for its analysis as it has been explored to study cultural erosion, identity crisis, religious clash (between Natives and Catholics), ambivalence among two cultures, and reservations of hope. This paper studies *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* against the gap of Strategic Essentialism and Subaltern Voices which has not been explored in the already existing scholarship.

The Native Americans were exploited and marginalized in every possible way by the white settlers. They killed millions of Native Americans and destroyed the ecology in America. But it wasn't enough for them, they wanted to eliminate even the signs of Native American Culture. The Europeans aimed to destroy the cultural roots of the Native Americans and wanted their "transition from an established, inherited culture to an attractive but formidably foreign new culture" (Peterson, [1975](#)). One gets his identity from the culture in which he is born and then raised. The Native Americans were deeply rooted in their culture which made it difficult for the settlers to rule them. The white settlers devised plans to destroy the Native American culture. The identity that was given to Native Americans by their culture was snatched by the white settlers because of this they became weak. The White Settlers imposed their culture on them, asked them to wear Western dresses, made them believe in Christ, and allowed them to enter the schools after cutting their hair which was symbolic of the native American culture. Native Americans were forced to learn the settlers' ways of living because of this they lost their own culture. This short story depicts the natives who try to mix their identities with the oppressors. It shows that some of the Native Americans preserve their culture but they are also influenced by the culture of the settlers and thus ambivalent. In this story, a constant struggle could be seen between the Native Americans and the White Settlers as the natives are trying to preserve their own culture while the other hand, the white settlers are trying their best to impose Catholic traditions on the Natives as, the story has a media res plot and it starts with a conflict between two different cultures (Prohasazka-Rad, [2012](#)).

Both cultures are very different from each other in their histories, religion, and values. The Native Americans believed in the horizontal chain of being which states that each and everything in this universe is worthy and can't be sacrificed just for the sake of others' enjoyment while the Europeans' philosophy is based on the vertical chain of being which categories and ranks of superiority and inferiority. Natives tried their best to preserve their culture but there was a great influence of Catholicism on native culture because of which they were assimilated. Temple ([2023](#)) comments on the death of Teofilo and very truly asserts that the old man's death was actually the end of hopes of a better life filled with immense prosperity on the part of the people of the tribe. Rain is not only the symbol of hope but also of fertility. Most of the Natives try their best to preserve their culture, but there are characters like Leon, who are ambivalent and sail on two ships because of their lost identity. It was a deliberate and conscious effort of white settlers to leave the Native Americans without any identity. It could be seen in this story through the actions of the white settlers that, "Syncretism, while offering a sense of accomplishment, ultimately only diminishes both the salience and identity of the indigenous community" (White & Goodwin, [2012](#)). The forced amalgamation of the European culture into the Native American culture resulted in the identity crisis of the Native Americans.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks for the women of the third world and the adverse effects of colonialism on the people of the third world. V Parveen, [2016](#) rightly states that Spivak counters the first world's self-oriented conduct. According to her knowledge carries in itself an ideology to manipulate. It favors and promotes the Western financial interest and dominion (2016) which could be seen in the context of the subjugation and marginalization of the Native Americans by the white settlers. They landed in America, started controlling people with the use of force which did not do the work and then they experimented with their ideology and their language. They enslaved the Native Americans by installing the knowledge of the White Man's culture's superiority in their minds. There arises a question when the Settlers were doing all this, were the natives resilient or they were so naïve that they accepted their cultural erosion and assimilation without any question? In this regard Eide justly remarks, "Strategic essentialism

entails that members of groups, may engage in an essentializing and to some extent standardizing of their public image, advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives" (2010). This strategy was adopted by the Native Americans to save their rights but they were not successful because of the lack of resources. They could not fight against the settlers barehanded even then they kept trying and were killed resultantly. Piu (2023) recasts Spivak's theoretical Framework because of its relevance to sociology to explore the injustices to the socially unprivileged people of the society exploited by the ruling class. He broadens the scope of Spivak's theory of Subalterity and says, "Spivak's sub alterity is a philosophical, literary but also empirical and sociological category with potential for increasing our understanding the society and bringing about social change". It shows that a revolutionary response brings a huge change in the whole system and society. Griffiths' (2017) insight into Spivak's theory further delimits it by asserting that Spivak's work invigorates readers to connect with marginalized voices in a caring and moralistic way. It enables the individual to come across the importance of subjective voices that are exploited by oppressors and the Native Americans are also the suppressed, exploited, and marginalized subalterns.

Temple (2023) depicts the clash in religious values and customs between natives and the colonizers. It also differentiates the thoughts and doings about religion at the same time. Each and everything depicts their culture and is associated with the religion that is very important in their lives. Devi and Singh (2021) unearth the importance of the central deceased character who is the one around whom all the action takes place and his death becomes the reason for, the "reassertion of Indian culture and tradition" in colonized America. The feathers, sprinkling of the holy water, and the other funeral traditions symbolize Native American culture. Ivypananda (2018) highlights the symbolic significance of the Holy Water and shows the evil intentions of the Catholics in converging the traditional beliefs of indigenous people with Christian practices. So, the old man's death could be seen as the dying culture of the Native Americans who gave hope to all other characters and worked as a medium to unveil the Red Indian culture and their customs.

The research presented earlier is thematically categorized and it identifies a gap that *The Man To Send Rain Clouds* could be studied through the lens of Strategic Essentialism and Subaltern Voices by Spivak. These theories serve as essential tools to investigate the ways in which the Native Americans are trying in the story to save their culture, identity, and traditions from extinction.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial studies critique the European interventions and destructions that they caused in the name of civilizing missions in third-world countries. Their evil practices adversely affected the culture, politics, and religion of colonized nations. In this research, Silko's short story has been analyzed in the context of colonialism and the marginalization of the colonized by the looters. The resistance against colonial agendas has been explored by native's autonomous attitude toward the practices of the Euro-Americans. Leon stood for his traditional values against the Euro-American tactics for syncretism. The research employs two postcolonial concepts, Subaltern Voices and Strategic Essentialism by Spivak in which we have mentioned indigenous autonomous attitude and assimilation (political or social purposes), respectively. Silko's story shows silent resistance. Leon buried his grandfather according to his native traditions by maintaining his cultural identity. Their families are socially and politically marginalized, despite the subaltern voices speaking in alternative ways.

Strategic essentialism is the adaptation of colonial (catholic) interventions by colonized communities for the sake of temporary social and political purposes. Silko mentioned that marginalized set agency in this way by avoiding any conflict and complexities. When Leon asked for Holy water it indicated strategic engagement with colonial interventions. Silko highlights the resistance and assimilation of the Pueblo community at the same time in the form of Leon's actions. As the concerned story has elements which could be studied through the concept of Subaltern voices and Strategic Essentialism. Thus, this research employs these two concepts of Spivak as a theoretical framework to indicate rebellion and adaptation of foreign interventions, respectively.

Analysis & Discussion

Silko highlights themes like cultural clashes, identity crises, and the amalgamation of Western culture in the Native American culture. The Pueblo tribe's traditions and religious beliefs have been described in this story. It also provides a lens to see the spiritual connection of the Native Americans with nature. Subaltern voices and Strategic essentialism are majorly depicted by the characters to preserve their identity and culture under the rule of the colonial looters. First of all, Silko highlights the importance of her tribe's traditions by the characters' actions. "Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man's long white hair" (p.133). These beliefs and ideologies were transmitted from ancestors and preserved by youth. He felt compulsory to do this and it highlights the subaltern voices raised against the dominant narratives of Europeans. The funeral ceremony of Leon's grandfather was carried out according to the religious practices of Native Americans, as the narrator says, "He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of corn meal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather" (p.133). Again author raised a subaltern voice and mentioned the religious belief that was going to be suppressed by the Westerners in the future. She belongs to the Native American community so she insists on the Native autonomy. Subalterns have to raise their voices against oppressors as Guha defines the subaltern in his work, *Subaltern Studies*, "The subaltern is not just a victim; they have agency and a voice" (Guha, 1982. n.d).

Throughout the narration, characters try their best to preserve their aboriginal practices. It has been mentioned that "Leon painted with yellow under the old man's broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across chin, he smiled" (p.133). His smile symbolizes the completion of his first nation's culture towards his grandfather's last rituals. Throughout the narration, Leon conveyed his ancestor's legacies to his upcoming generations through his actions. All the characters are struggling for it. , one of his actions is sketched in the work when he spreads the red shawl over the bed accompanied by a new brown shirt and a pair of stiff new Levi, arranged alongside the pillow.

There is a custom of the Pueblo tribe that all members of the tribe are involved in the funeral ceremony of the dead. After burying the dead, the

grave diggers eat food provided by the owner of the dead. This was performed by Leon but he is drinking coffee with a meal, here coffee is symbolic of the embracing of the culture of the oppressors (western) by Natives. So, the Natives are strategically essentialized and adopt a few colonial religious and social practices for social stability and mobility. The characters in this story could be seen struggling and raising their marginalized voices through their actions. There are also some actions manifested by characters towards Strategic Essentialism. When Louise insists Leon use Holy water on Teofilo's body, in the hope of rain clouds and thirst quenching of the dead. This is the indirect representation of strategic essentialism by emphasizing and adopting some cultural and religious beliefs. As Louise says, about the priest sprinkling holy water for Grandpa, "So, he won't be thirsty" (p.135): influenced by white cultural practices, she tries to quench the thirst of Grandpa through this Holy Christian act. Indirectly, the Holy water became the cause of rain for which the Pueblo tribe is waiting. On this suggestion of Louise, Leon wonders and thinks about the moccasins. These are the footwares that belong to Teofilo. It highlights the importance of their original symbols which come to Leon's mind immediately after the suggestion to bring holy water from the priest. Silko demonstrates that on this point moccasins were covered by a blanket and this is metaphorically covering native tradition and moving towards strategic essentialism.

Leon moved to the priest's place and asked for Holy water to quench the old man's thirst. He blended native and Western cultural traditions strategically. A conscious effort of syncretism could be seen on the part of Leon. Leon is an ambivalent character who tries to save the customs and rituals of the tribe as well despite adopting the Catholic traditions of the White settlers. The clergyperson was in the Pueblo tribe to preach Catholicism. When he came to know about the funeral ceremony that was carried out according to the Native traditions, he was upset with Leon. He says: "Why didn't you tell me he was dead? I could bring the last Rites anyway" (p.135). The priest wants to complete the funeral rites according to his own culture and expects support from Leon. But Leon raised his voice, "It wasn't necessary" (p.135). Pastor pressurizes Leon by saying these are necessary things to do at any funeral. But in response, Leon

defends his point of view that he only wants his grandpa to have plenty of water so he comes here and requests for Holy water. The author writes, "He sprinkled more water, he shook the container until it was empty and the water fell through the light from sundown like August rain" (p.136). Sprinkling the whole bottle of water indicates Leon's hope that quenching his grandpa's thirst will bring rain (fertility) to the tribe. This act metaphorically relates to the assimilation and blending for an essentialist purpose.

In the conclusive paragraph Silko points out the destruction of her cultural practices by the White settlers, she says, "The priest's brown Franciscan robe and swirled away the corn meal and pollen that had been sprinkled on the blanket" (p.136). Symbolically Native American traditions not only melded in the western catholic beliefs, but also swirled and destroyed like the meal on the blanket of the old man by priest. When all the rituals were performed Leon was hoping for rain and clouds from nature because he thought that he had fulfilled all the funeral rites and also quenched the thirst of his grandpa's body. So both elements of 'Subalternity' and 'Strategic Essentialism' are depicted in the sample text.

Conclusion

Highlighting the Subaltern voices and Strategic Essentialism by Gayatri Spivak on Marmon Silko's under-study narrative, this study enhances the

understanding of the complex relationship of Native American traditions with Western culture. It has been mentioned in the story that the funeral ceremony was performed as per the traditions of aboriginal culture. The dispersion of corn meal on the dead Teofilo and the covering of the body with the red blanket depicts the Native culture. Characters were trying their best to preserve their cultural norms through their actions as Leon has done. Leon, being the subaltern, raised his voice against the marginalizing power eradicating his culture. This resistance indicates the persistence of the Native Americans to save their culture. Throughout the story, Leon is the character, who seems to resist these colonizers' attempts at cultural fusion by ignoring the priest's offer for the funeral ceremony of his grandfather. But at the same time, we encounter ambivalence in Leon towards Western culture. Leon tries to quench his grandfather's thirst by demanding Holy water from the priest. This depicts his strategy towards adopting the hierarchy of Catholics. When he requested the priest for holy water, he (the priest) was a little upset at Leon's not performing Catholic rituals at the old man's funeral. This depicts the efforts of colonial power to control the native's rituals and traditions. This reaction from the priest highlights the effort of Leon for retaining his cultural identity. So, Subalternity and Strategic Essentialism enhance our comprehension of syncretism and survival as discussed in the analyzed literature.

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