

# Identity at the Crossroads: Exploring Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate exploration of identity in two seminal works of American literature: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. Focused on navigating identity crossroads, the analysis encompasses the nuanced perspectives of hybridity and nativity within the characters' journeys. Silko's *Ceremony* immerses readers in the spiritual and cultural struggles of Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo World War II veteran. At the same time, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* delves into the African American experience during the early 20th century, emphasizing the pursuit of freedom and perseverance. Through a comparative lens, this paper seeks to illuminate the parallel thematic threads in these works, exploring how both authors skillfully unravel the complexities of identity, providing a profound understanding of the human condition. Nativism and Identity Crisis are the main issues in the artistic works of Leslie Marmon Silko. As an American, she has depicted all that relates her to Native Americans. This paper tries to represent her as an author of internal conflict, nativeness, depression and then the potential to establish herself. In her works, characters often suffer from hybridity which later helps them to find themselves. This paper is the study of the protagonist through the lens of hybridity with which he suffers and then works for reconstruction in which he succeeds through a lot of effort. The paper also aims to showcase the lives of African Americans during the early 20th century through the renowned play, *Gem of the Ocean* written by African American writer August Wilson. Wilson touches on African spirituality and tries to compare it to the Western religion. He discusses what it means to be a free man in a land of whites.

**Keywords:** African American; Cross-cultural exploration; Hybridity; Intersectionality; Native American.

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## Introduction

Native means an inhabitant of the land. Nativeness stands for local and locale wherein members, location, gardens and local nature with its scenery are described with all love by a writer. At present the burning aim of literature is existence where people feel uprooted from their locale. They consider what can establish them to have their own identity. The loss of self is one such area that most writers are dealing with which is a search for nativeness. As per the opinion of Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity or mixture of cultures in one society, community or individual has complicated modern man's life. Bhabha focuses on the 'hybridity' of cultures and identities resulting from colonial encounters. He also says that Mimicry is a complex process through which colonized subjects imitate and adapt aspects of the colonizer's culture. The characters in *Ceremony* and *Gem of the Ocean* have mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion that characterize the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Their acts focus on the 'fragmentation, plurality, and instability' of meaning. The power structures and identities are unsettled throughout the plot and the different agencies discussed by Bhabha restrict them to act independently and make their own choices. This involves questioning who has the power to speak and represent themselves. This leads us to the theory of Intersectionality where cultural hybridity interplays in the the mixing of identities and cultural forms. Appiah is another writer who discusses the complexity of identity in a globalized world. The postcolonial and postmodern literature shares a concern with the effects of globalization by blurring boundaries between cultures, nations, and identities.

Many world writers are dealing with anger, frustration, loss of identity, love for homeland and search for identity. Leslie Marmon Silko also tried to write about Native American land, with people who love their locale, culture and surroundings. Her characters also have an urge for their own culture to break free from the chains of isolation, and crisis of identity and want to work for their establishment:

All these indigenous and aboriginal worlds including Native Americans are known for their holistic tradition as they love and revere a variety of ecological elements such as the Mother Earth, foliage, waterway, deep marine, and downpour. In the Native American fiction *Gardens in the Dunes* by Leslie Marmon Silko, the author weaves a spectacular narrative to convey the story of nature, home, mother, memory, exile, and return. (Ruppert 179)

These lines make it easy to understand what nativity means and how hybridity can occur. Nativity is depicted as one's land and all like people, scenery, rivers, mother, sister, and relations whom we love and hybridity is the mixing of different cultures which can happen when we associate with different people. Hybrid is complex and its example can be a person living different lives at the same time. It can also mean a mixture of different cultures, races, stories in an artistic work, languages of different groups or even various concepts blended with one idea. This paper seeks to explore how hybridity contributes to the complexity of human nature, creating pauses or disruptions in life.

Leslie Marmon Silko has tried to comprehend and identify hybridity and nativity in her artistic works and her characters suffer from complexity which complicates and confuses an individual. Zhou says that:

*Ceremony*, written by a Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko, tells a story of an old veteran Tayo's journey to recover from after-war trauma and to reconstruct his identity. Owing to the inherent hybridity existing in many aspects, including mix-blood identity, occupied land and assimilated culture, hybridity leads to Tayo's identity loss. However, because of its uniqueness and strength in combining heterogeneous cultures, hybridity has also contributed greatly to Tayo's identity reconstruction. (Zhou Qi 21)

Leslie Marmon Silko is herself a victim of an identity crisis. She is a mixture of two different races which leads to the crisis. Her characters do feel the problem of identity crisis because of a mixture of races and blood which both alienate them from self and society and compel them to search for their identity. Tayo, the protagonist of *Ceremony* has the problem of identity crisis. Tayo's loss of his land, his mixed heritage from both paternal and maternal sides, and, most importantly, his hybrid identity shaped by his diverse associations, led to his sense of lost identity and the emergence of hybridization. Silko writes: "...he had not been crazy at all; he had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time." (Silko, 1977, p. 219). This quote reflects the blurred boundaries in Tayo's identity, suggesting that the mix of his heritage and experiences led to his struggle with identity but also to a broader understanding of the world, where transitions and hybridity are integral. His sense of loss is tied to navigating these transitions and the hybrid nature of his being. Identity loss is inevitable in the modern world. The cities that have become hubs of hybrid culture are easily vulnerable to identity crises.

Tayo represents the crisis of cultural identity and therefore loses himself. There is a conflict within, which never allows for any reconciliation but still, the hybridity within has helped him a lot to recover from existential dilemma. Metaphorically, he has a landscape problem as land (mind) is occupied by superiors (who always tease him), two groups or communities are working within him and thus the identity is lost. How can it be gained? There is only one way and that is to reconcile with the self or in other words to balance the counteracting selves within one individual.

In the modern-day world, people suffer from anger, anxiety, dilemma and frustration which lead to the crisis of identity and hybridity and Tayo epitomizes these conflicting human tendencies in *Ceremony*. He is an embodiment of the mixed heritage of Native American culture and Whites. He doesn't know his father and was abandoned by his shield (mother) at four. Now and then he is in difficulty when it comes to negotiating with society anywhere. He got his education in White schools but was never satisfied with the White ways of life. Enlisting in the U.S. Army and then experiencing a traumatic life also troubles him, as he cannot take pride in his time there. These are the things that make his life a search, especially a search for himself. He is at war with himself and it is his journey towards awareness of how he will become a man and a human being. He accepts his cultural tradition thus the search for belonging or home ends. His identity crisis is answered when he hears the call from himself. He withdraws from the hybrid culture to live a common life.

Tayo, a mixed and a complex character is "part White" and "half breed" and is lost between his ancestry's two cultures. Accordingly, Gretchen Ronnow mentions that Tayo "is Fragmented confused and disowned, alienated from self, family, land and tribal traditions" (Vizenor ed. 57). The character experiences a conflict of identity and may be described as torn, having struggled or continuing to struggle with his sense of self. Tayo is acceptable neither to American culture nor to Laguna. Father is not known and mother has not accepted him. How can a nation and society accept a man who is not accepted by his parents? Modern-day life creates tough times as we see in the case of Tayo. Trying to patch up with American people is not allowed and tying with Laguna is not welcoming. A conflict within Tayo has made his life a search for or to belong. Both the internal conflict which allows for hybridity and external conflict which gives way to search for self are present in Tayo. Here, the historical approach along with the analytical method can apply to the life of the main character and the writer. The application of Reader response theory may reveal that both the writer and the character share similar problems. They

are existential and their problems and issues are the same. Until he patches himself, it is impossible to end the identity search: "his identity is bound with Laguna's identity, with something larger than his psyche". (Chavkin ed. 179)

He "...had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at school taught him not to believe in that kind of nonsense" (*Ceremony* 19). His hybrid nature made him a target of ridicule, not only in his aunt's house, where she treated him inhumanely, but also at school, where natives and hybrids were seen as different from one another, a distinction further emphasized by his teachers: "the holy missionary white people ... wanted only good for the Indians, white people ... dedicated their lives to helping the Indians" (*Ceremony* 213). It is just ironic as it is the real cause of hybridity and colonization:

Harley and Leroy were his buddies. His friends. But he was feeling something terrible inside, and his heart was beating now, from what Leroy had said 'driving around all night; they come from the direction he had come, behind him, following him.' He gripped the can tight, trying to squeeze away the shaking in his hands. (*Ceremony* 240)

He tries to patch up with the American tradition, drinks alcohol and tries to befool the natives (his friends) but how can that happen? There was something inside his belly that always remained there to never allow him to free himself from the problem of hybridity, "Scream loud as he can hear you" (*Ceremony* 251). This arouses bad memories in Tayo's mind and reminds him of the spiritual and physical torture by living amid the Whites. Emo tries to prove that Tayo is unable to dismiss the White culture that oppresses the Native one, saying "Look at this, you half-breed! ... You can't hide from this! Your buddy, Harley". (*Ceremony* 252)

Auntie also expresses feelings of shame or embarrassment for Tayo's hybrid origin. She breeds him among her family, but he is unwelcomed and he has known Auntie's shame for what his mother had done, and Auntie's shame for him. (*Ceremony* 67)

Not only outside and in society but also with relatives Tayo suffers because he is ill-treated even by his Auntie. It seems just like the problem of caste or untouchability. In school, teachers who have to enlighten the world and enrich the lives of students treat Tayo as other. The subject of hybridity is mixed with sub-alterity, "Cultures come to be represented by

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the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to - through - an Other" (Bhabha 58).

Bhabha looks at hybridity as a site of resistance. He argues that 'cultural hybridity' provides a space for resistance against colonial domination, disrupting clear binaries like colonizer/colonized. 'Hybridity' creates a 'Third Space' where new identities and forms of agency emerge. The arguments given in the paper attempt to articulate how postcolonial subjects can represent themselves beyond the confinements imposed by the dominant form of colonial discourse. The 'postmodern scepticism' towards fixed identities and narratives is paralleled by the postcolonial struggle to reclaim self-representation. Both postcolonialism and postmodernism challenge the idea of fixed, essential identities. Bhabha critiques both for their tendency to overlook the 'material realities' of the colonial and the post colonial conditions while also advocating for a nuanced understanding of cultural identity. Thus, the characters in *Ceremony* and *Gem of the Ocean* push readers to think beyond binary oppositions and to embrace the fluidity and 'contingency of cultural identities'. Bhabha calls for a rethinking of agency in light of the postcolonial and postmodern conditions. This involves recognizing the potential for resistance within 'hybrid identities' and understanding the transformative potential of 'the 'in-between' spaces'. Both Silko and Wilson critique the idea of Eurocentrism and the idea of progress. Both emphasize hybridity and challenge fixed identities. Both support Appiah's view that Postcolonialism often employs postmodern tools but serves different goals, particularly the project of cultural reclamation.

Though we don't have the concept of superior and inferior we can comprehend Gayatri Spivak's otherness here from which Tayo has suffered in his relations with companions, society and himself. Homi K. Bhabha was right when he defined the mixture of different cultures or personalities as hybridity and this is how conflict within occurs. A crisis of identity is one process that dislocates a person from his/her real self and places the same in the land where war will go on with fantasy and reality. We see such a kind of battle in the life of Tayo but in the end, he wins by accepting the reality. This challenges the binaries of colonizer/colonized and suggests a third space where new identities and cultures emerge. Traditionally seen as a Western construct; in colonial narratives, colonized subjects were often denied agency. Bhabha proposes a more nuanced understanding of agency that considers cultural hybridity and the ambivalence of colonial encounters.

The mixture of languages can be hybridity, yet the art of storytelling as a scheme employed by Silko can be one form of this example. Her tradition of storytelling is different. She has blended oral and written forms to make it a mixture. With this tradition, she has dislocated the Eurocentric hold on cultures and many other things that have been lost due to colonization. She has talked about myths, legends, and traditions through her art form. She never allows for the discourse domination of whites but goes her way to prevent the complexity. She has emphasized that myth, legend and tradition are important because they help preserve the culture and this way complications are saved. Silko's stories help the readers understand their nation, its rise and fall and thus hybridity is opposed.

*Gem of the Ocean* (2004) is another work that focuses on 'otherness' created in the mind of the protagonist due to external agencies. This is the ninth play of the well-known African American writer August Wilson. Wilson throughout his play talks about the black experience in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like any other play by August Wilson *Gem of the Ocean* is also set in Pittsburgh. It is a play full of history, rich with humanity and all in all a great story told through the characters Aunt Ester, Solly, Two Kings and many more. *Gem of the Ocean* also talks about the oppression these characters witnessed at the hands of the White men. Even though the play takes place decades after the abolition of slavery. Wilson wants to convey to his fellow audience how these coloured men still feel bondage in the present time and how these people feel captive in the modern days because of their legacy and the need for spiritual healing to become a freeman.

*Gem of the Ocean* talks about the story of runaway slaves and their journey towards free land, a gruesome journey taken by blacks from the South up to the North. And we can see stories within stories through characters sharing their stories of struggle and freedom. In this play, the protagonist is Aunt Ester. The play is set in her house. It was in the year 1904 when slavery was already abolished and the black people were free. They migrated towards the North where lives for these people were comfortable compared to the South where they are still treated as a slave. They still have to deal with the remembrance of slavery and move on in life. In the play, Aunt Ester is a 285-year-old woman who tends to offer spiritual help to those who have lost their way or to those who want peace from their past. Another major character in the play is Citizen Barlow who comes to Aunt Ester to seek redemption for the sin he has committed. He has heard from people about an old woman who performs rituals to set a man free from what seems to be restricting him from being himself. Even at this

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age, Aunt Ester has the spiritual gift to heal people or help them come out of 'otherness'.

August Wilson has given names to his characters very thoughtfully and every name in the play has its significance linked to the bible and other great figures from the past. Aunt Ester is the representative of the past and also a connector of the future. Her life exemplifies the endurance of the past, as she is the sole witness to the legacy of a survivor of slavery. She has suffered a lot because of slavery and has named the stars after her children whom she lost. She has felt so much pain and has seen the struggles caused by colonization and the effects of slavery. Her house is a sanctuary for others. The citizen comes to her house because he feels guilty about the death of Garret Brown who was accused by a black constable named Caesar of stealing a can of nails from the mill. In reality, it was Citizen who stole the nails from the mill.

To wash away his sin Aunt Ester tells him to travel through the city of bones and it is where he meets Garret Brown who confesses to him that he was the one who stole the nails and only the gate opens for him. In this play, Wilson has used references from the Bible as Aunt Ester knows that the Citizen is quiet when an innocent man dies because of his sin and at that very moment he does nothing but watch the innocent men die because of his action. She compares it to Peter denouncing Jesus towards the end three times. He does not dare to speak the truth. So, towards the end Citizen is free from his guilt and his soul is now clean but another trouble arises in the play. Caesar sets the mill on fire which ends up in the death of Solly. The play ends with Caesar being disowned by Black Mary and Citizen dressing up like Solly and leaving.

One of the major themes in *Gem of the Ocean* is freedom. And so, freedom means having the right to speak, act and think in the way we want and in other sense it also means not being caged or enslaved by anyone be it physically or mentally. This play by August Wilson extensively talks of being mentally free as the chaos of the Civil War ended. It was the time in history when slavery was abolished and these blacks were no longer slaves. Just like the characters in the play some wanted to cleanse their soul, and some even after being a free man were like a puppet for the white authorities.

We see that freedom is not just about being a free man just like Aunt Ester who is still stuck with memories of the past which are nearly three hundred years old. She is seen as the lineage of a wise person who holds the



memory of her ancestors. She connects the past and present through a spiritual journey. She knows it's a very huge burden to carry all the memories of the past for everyone but she feels she must keep those memories alive so that the present can have the idea of things that happened in the past.

Citizen Barlow once comes to Aunt Ester to cleanse his soul. He wants to be free spiritually because he is a free man but bound by the guilt of killing an innocent man. It is like the cost of his freedom that results in the death of Garret Brown. Garret drowned himself because he was innocent and he knew what would happen if Caesar caught him. So, his innocence is paid through his death. A bucket of nails is more important than a man's life. Citizen watched Garret drown himself for his action so he has committed a huge sin. For this reason, before he leaves, he wants to cleanse his soul and go to a new place as a new man. So, Aunt Ester tells Citizen to take up responsibility and own his mistake otherwise he won't have redemption. Coincidentally Garret is at the gate in the city of Bones so Citizen tells him the truth that he is the one who stole the nails and then the gates open and he returns to Aunt Ester's place.

Another important thing Wilson tells us throughout his play is 'what freedom meant to the black Americans at that time.' The name of the character Citizen has an interesting story behind it. Citizen tells in Act I, that his mother named him Citizen after they got freedom after so many years of being slaves and being oppressed by the whites. It was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that they got freedom and became the citizen of the United States. Solly tells him "to truly be a Citizen, you will have to fight to defend freedom when it becomes a heavy load" (Wilson 2). Solly knows what it takes to be a freeman in a place where for centuries their ancestors were held as slaves. All these years their ancestors had to suffer in the name of freedom. Wilson through this play wants to show his readers how their ancestors earned their freedom.

August Wilson, through this play, talks about the black experience, their struggles to survive in a new land, and their perseverance to earn their rights and eventually freedom. Perseverance means having the determination to do something despite the difficulties of reaching one's goal. Wilson set the play in the 1904s almost three decades after the abolition of slavery in the year 1865.

Through characters like Solly, we come to know that once he was a slave his name was Alfred. It was the name given by his white owners which

he later changed to Solly Two Kings. The two kings were David and King Solomon. These two kings according to the scriptures were the most beloved and the wisest kings. As David went through tribulations, he became victorious towards the end. Just like King David and Solomon, Solly had his share of misfortunes of being a slave. We also come to know that once he got lucky and moved towards Canada, he felt strange. He felt strange being free and that too in a new place so he decided to go back and help others for freedom. Solly says "Ain't nothing worse than slavery!" (Wilson 27). He says that it was dark as the night and the ground was cold. He even carries a piece of chain as a symbol of good luck, which was something he was tied to when he was a slave. People tend to keep the remembrance of something from the past and preserve their memories just like Aunt Ester and Solly. And the younger generations are fighting their own battles to survive in the new normal like Caesar who became a constable by showing his worth to the white man. To survive one has to decide whether one will be the same or change one's whole perception. Caesar is considered a slave of the whites because he has worked under them. He has been living a comfortable life compared to his other black friends.

Wilson is showing the realities of society through these characters and telling us that our society is not perfect. Sometimes their acts show Ambivalence i.e. A state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone. In colonial contexts, ambivalence can lead to both resistance and complicity. Sometimes their acts show Mimicry i.e. When the colonized subject imitates the colonizer but in a way that subtly undermines authority. Mimicry reflects both the desire to assimilate and the resistance to domination. These characters are creating a conceptual space where hybrid identities form, allowing for new forms of agency. It's a site of negotiation, resistance, and the creation of new meanings beyond colonial binaries. The select writings of both Silko and Wilson explore characters who navigate multiple identities, demonstrating the fluidity of agency in the third space. The readers are expected to understand the importance of localized narratives to see texts through broader socio-political contexts.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* reveal a rich tapestry of themes surrounding identity, cultural hybridity, nativity, and the relentless pursuit of freedom and perseverance. Both works intricately weave together the complexities of personal

and communal identities, shedding light on the struggles faced by individuals caught in the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Silko's *Ceremony* delves into the profound impact of historical trauma on the identity of Tayo, illustrating how one's cultural roots can be both a source of strength and a battleground for inner conflicts. Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, on the other hand, presents a powerful narrative of the African American experience, exploring the significance of ancestry, spiritual resilience, and the quest for freedom within the context of the early 20th century. This research witnesses how these works engage with the complexities of identity crisis and hybridity. Both Silko and Wilson invite readers and audiences to reflect on the intricate interplay between personal history, cultural heritage, and the relentless pursuit of freedom. The characters in both narratives serve as poignant symbols of resilience, illustrating the transformative potential inherent in embracing one's roots while navigating the challenges of a rapidly changing world. While applying Intersectionality, Postcolonial theory uses some aspects of postmodernism but rejects its radical indeterminacy. Postcolonial thinkers still believe in grounding identities in history and culture; despite recognizing their fluidity but Appiah urges careful consideration of how postcolonial theory uses the tools of postmodernism without losing sight of political and cultural reconstruction.

Both *Ceremony* and *Gem of the Ocean* stand as powerful testaments to the enduring human spirit and its ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The works compel us to reconsider the significance of our individual and collective journeys, urging us to recognize the strength that emerges from embracing our cultural identities while navigating the complexities of the modern world. In doing so, Silko and Wilson contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on identity, cultural heritage, and the timeless pursuit of freedom. Leslie Marmon Silko is a writer who believes in the preservation of culture. Her characters suffer from different weaknesses and are subjected to oppression with the help of new forms of violence like Tayo. But her main concern is hybridity, isolation, suffering, identity pull, search for establishment and much of the reconstruction. She deals with the issues of the post-colonial era and provides solutions to the problems. August Wilson's success comes directly from how he can create a connection between himself and his readers and with the sad realities of American society throughout different generations. He talked about his people the African Americans, their black experience in a white society, their struggles, their experiences and how they strived for freedom. *Gem of the Ocean* was able to showcase what it meant to have freedom. Were they, actually, free? Wilson through his play highlights the importance of car-

rying the legacy of not forgetting the past but keeping it as a part of one's memory. He also justifies that people cannot survive without knowing their legacy - the legacy of being an African American.

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