

Dialectics of Time and Space in American Indian Women's Writings

Qasim Shafiq¹, Dr. Ghulam Murtaza², and Asma Haseeb Qazi²

¹National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

²Affiliation not available

July 31, 2020

Abstract

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Qasim Shafiq¹, Dr. Ghulam Murtaza², and Asma Haseeb Qazi³

¹PhD Candidate, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad

³Assistant Professor, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

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This study new-historically explores the dialectics of time and space in American Indian women's writings to explain American Indians' awareness of and attachment to their surrounding nature and its expression in the contemporary American Indian tribal life. With delimited focus on Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), this article analyzes American Indian approach to time and space reflecting Natives' awareness of their surrounding place. Mythical stories of oral tradition inscribed in *Tracks* and *Ceremony* recreate American Indian timeless and macrocosmic realities. American Indian women writers have been selected owing to the matriarchal nature of American Indian social order wherein women have been the conscious carriers of their timeless oral tradition. The two selected novels of different settings express the cultural range of American Indian tribal belt from Canadian border (*Tracks*' setting) to Mexican border (*Ceremony*'s setting). This range is evidence of the synchronic and diachronic integrations and distinctions of American Indian past, present and future.

Keywords : American Indians, macrocosmic space, microcosmic place, oral tradition, timelessness

Introduction

“[I]t makes no sense to separate literary texts from the social context around them because such texts are the product of complex social ‘exchanges’ or ‘negotiations’” (Booker, 1996, p. 138). As writers think and write in a given society, their creative imagination is social, not personal – negotiations of creative imagination are social because they build up their conceptions in the presence of already constructed sources, materials and aspirations. American Indian literary texts, likewise, tell the socio-cultural embedment of American Indian contemporary societies that sustain the distinctness American Indian oral tradition in modern cultures. These literary texts show contemporary American Indian tribes’ awareness of their surrounding place that is timeless and macrocosmic in nature. These literary texts express that the macrocosmic places “are an intimate part of [American Indian] ordinary daily activities because they tell of the drama that gives meaning to the ordinary” (Jahner, 1983, p. 214). They reflect that “[t]he achronological time sense of tribal people results from tribal beliefs about the nature of reality, beliefs based on ceremonial understandings rather than on industrial, theological, or agricultural orderings” (Allen, 1986, p. 150) of Eurocentric idea of time. Hence, American Indian social order is ceremonial in contrast to the organized linear system that isolated man from his surroundings and from God whereas the cyclic motion of time allows man to flow in harmony with the rest of the universe. The awareness of ceremonial time is, therefore, based on the knowledge of the natural surroundings which, for Deloria (1973), an American Indian historian, itself is cyclic. The study focuses on the American Indian ceremonial societies set in *Tracks* and *Ceremony* to figure out not only the American Indian attachment to their timeless and macrocosmic surrounds but also the concept of timelessness and macrocosm per se. Hence, to locate the oral tradition cultural concept of timelessness and macrocosmic places set in American Indian fiction, this article studies Native American textual retrieval of the oral traditional culture and its spiritual world surviving in the contemporary Euro-American material world.

Literature Review

American Indian literature and society, according to McMaster and Trafzer (2004), are based on the idea of cyclic/ceremonial time that makes them distinct from Eurocentric world that generally “emphasize[s] a sequential presentation of events or ideas” (p. 116). Joseph Epes Brown (as cited in Krech III, 2006) defines this ‘polarization’: the American Indian traditional world is “qualitative, sacred, and non-materialistic, and the modern scientific world of non-indigenous people, which, in contrast, is quantitative, secular, and materialistic” (p. 567). Brown’s description of the difference between Native American and non-native world is calculated. This calculated analysis not only makes the American Indian ceremonial world superior to the modern materialistic world but also explains that the nature of social or cultural issues of the two worlds is poles apart. However, Shepard Krech III (2006), an anthropologist, affirms the presence of both linear and cyclic time events in American Indian traditional world and perceives that the native tribes of America also fix their social and political affairs in a chronological sequence. This shows that there are some scholars who argue the dual dimensions of time – linear and cyclic/ceremonial – in American Indian culture. Deloria also, like Krech III, describes the dual nature of American Indian time sequence. According to him, a number of American Indian tribes, like the western approach, follow the linear trend of historiography. He exemplifies the Central American historiographical methods like ‘winter counts’, ‘calendar sticks’ and ‘Walum Olum’ practiced by North Dakota and Tohono O’odhams and Pimas of Arizona and Delaware that explained the chronological location of the numerous political proceedings. However, he does not believe in the duality: he accepts that there is a duality of time sequence, but, for him, this duality is singular in its nature. He argues that the linear mode of American Indian social order is interconnected with the ceremonial mode: the linear concept of time regarding American Indian storytelling cannot be understood without understanding the idea of ceremonial or cyclic time and without this concept of ceremonial/cyclic time sequence American Indian linear time presentation loses its worth (Deloria, 1973).

Paula Gunn Allen (1986), the American Indian theorist, argues that “[t]he basis of Indian time is ceremonial while the basis of time in the industrialized west is mechanical” (p. 150). Regarding the Eurocentric settings, for her, the idea of time is systematized through the beginning and ending of a particular thing, event and action. Defining the native viewpoint, she argues that man and nature actually communicate internally

but is affected by external time. She argues that the linearity of any organized system is propagated by the Eurocentric idea of chronology that isolated men from his surroundings that itself is cyclic. This cyclic motion of time for the native people of America is important since it makes the man flow with the flowing actions and universe. This American Indian viewpoint of time is perceived as timeless. This oral traditional perspective of ceremonial-linear mode of time is the nature of American Indian history and literature, which also describes the history of its time and place, that is disregarded by the modern critics and historians (Deloria, 1973).

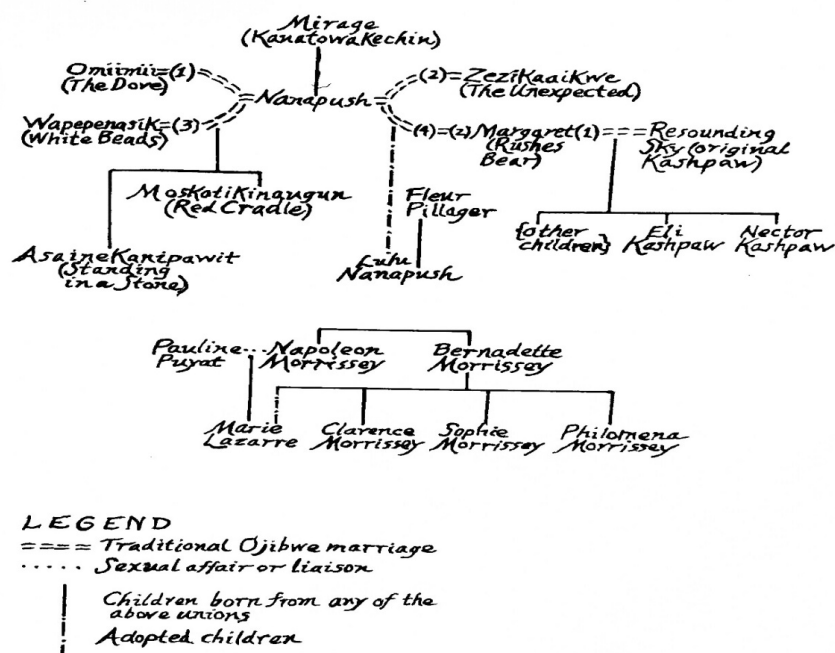
Robert H. Lowie does not give any worth to the oral traditional concept of time – whether linear or ceremonial – and considers it valueless. He argues the lesser capability of the primitive people of America to understand the concept of time, and criticizes the oral tradition's beliefs in timeless and macrocosmic realities and whips critics for assigning “extraordinary importance ... to trivial incidents” (Lowie, 1917, p. 164). However, Lowie ignores the ideology that John Leland, the English historian, calls “common voice” and “common fame” – the common belief of a particular community about a specific happening in the past, the standard of evaluating historic disposition of American Indian time and place. Leland (as cited in Woolf & Woolf, 2003) claims that one must not ignore “what people who had lived in an area all their lives agreed on, unless he had external evidence which contradicted or clarified” (p. 358). An individual is influenced by the tradition in which he is raised and that, ultimately, becomes his faith or religion. So, a responsive individual “may come eventually to see th[is civilized experience] as a kind of myth, essentially fictitious in that it does not portray the whole of life, but also undeniably impressive as a saga to live by” (West, 1960, p. 1).

Research Methodology

This qualitative analytical and descriptive research follows the theorization of new historicism that literature “cannot be considered apart from the society that produced it: a literary text is another form of social significance which is produced by the society and in return is active in reshaping the culture of that society” (Montrose, as cited in Doğan, 2005, p. 80). In his “Introduction” to *Representing the English Renaissance* Stephen Greenblatt (1988), the founder of new historicism, argues that a literary text is written in a cultural background; it is not an individual effort but a social practice with its ‘negotiations and contests’ (p. viii). He argues that a literary text not only defines the socially structured patterns but also reshapes those patterns in which it was produced. Thus, literature is a social production rather than the creation of an individual consciousness, and thus, can be understood within a ‘larger frame’ of historicity or social reality that is not “an indistinct background out of which [literature] emerges or into which it blends” (Forgacs, 1986, p. 167). A literary text is an explicit image of a society in which it was written, and one can know that society by the critical reading of that text. To follow the argument the study focuses on the *Tracks* and *Ceremony* which were produced in the societies of oral tradition and thus reproduce those societies.

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Literature, Stephen Greenblatt argues (1980), in all its forms, is the reflection of its contemporary social order and, therefore, becomes a significant knowledge of the past in which it was produced. Hence, the social and cultural truths of a society can be traced in its literature. The study, therefore, retrieves the oral tradition's concept of time and place in American Indian societies from 1912 to 1954 set in *Tracks* and *Ceremony*. The delimitation of these two novels serves to cover the cultural range of American territory as the settings of both the novels describe the nature of the American Indian tribal belt from the Canadian border to the Mexican border. This range shows the multi-ethnicity of American Indian tribal world (Coltelli, 1990). This cultural belt from *Ceremony* to *Tracks* is twofold – Native and Western – that shows on one hand the long trail of oral traditional beliefs and, on the other, the western influence on American Indian indigenous societies. The study, therefore, focuses on the dialectics of storytelling in *Tracks* and *Ceremony* to explore the concept of time and place in the oral tradition of American Indian ceremonial social order from Anishinaabe (Canadian border) to Pueblo (Mexican border).



Tracks is the third unit of the quartet: *Love Medicine* (1984, 1993), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), but regarding the sequence of the events in the four novels it comes first. Hence, the events and characters of the novel are interconnected with the plots of the other three novels. The story mainly describes the social and cultural embedment of Chippewa Anishinaabe from 1912 to 1924. However, the family-tree in the beginning of the novel tells about the culture and the time range of the twelve years.

Figure 4.1

(Erdrich, 1988, p. iv).

The shoots of the tree like the interconnected story of the quartet “[a]re all attached, and ... hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 46) that define how American Indian oral traditional concepts of timelessness and macrocosmic realities survive in modern times. The indigenous and mixed blood characters in the family-tree denote the distinctness as well as the hybridity of Anishinaabe culture. The tree expresses the long trail of families performing a critical role in the survival of oral tradition values in American Indian contemporary societies and also describes the time of European intrusion. Regarding oral tradition, concept of timelessness and the micro-cum- macrocosmic realities of the American Indian society, Erdrich distinguishes the oral societies from the European influence. She introduces the American Indian traditional belief system and rejects the western stance about the incredibility of American Indian macrocosmic stories.

Tracks follows a linear time direction as the events move from 1912 to 1924; the cultural variations of Chippewa are explained, however, with the duality of the time sequence: the chronological time defines western culture whereas ceremonial time proceedings signify native values. The nine chapters and their headings give chronological dates and ceremonial seasons simultaneously. This linear-ceremonial time approach of Erdrich documents both western and American Indian time periods and events, as well as languages, i.e. English and Chippewa:

“Chapter One: Winter 1912

Manitou-geezisohns

Little Spirit Sun

...

Chapter Two: Summer 1913

Miskomini-geezis

Raspberry Sun"

(Erdrich, 1988, pp. 1, 10).

Every chapter begins with "first a date, including the designation of season(s) and year(s), then a phrase in Anishinaabe followed by an English translation" (Peterson, 1994, p. 986). This information establishes two opposing frames of reference: one associated with orality with pre-contact culture's seasonal or cyclic approach to time; the other linked with textuality and post-contact culture's linear or progressive approach to time.

To follow the duality of time sequence – chronological or ceremonial – the events in *Tracks* are incorporated in the *microcosmic and macrocosmic space* that intensifies the description of Chippewa lands. The physical places in *Tracks* relate with the microcosmic concept of time however the beliefs in these microcosmic places as the habitat of metaphysical creatures make them macrocosmic. For instance, the multicolored map of divided Chippewa shows the physical space of cultural assimilation and contamination:

[T]he lines and circles of the homesteads paid up – Morrissey, Pukwan, Hat, Lazarres everywhere. They were colored green. The lands that were gone out of the tribe – to deaths with no heirs, to sales, to the lumber company – were painted a pale and rotten pink. Those in question, a sharper yellow. At the center of a bright square was Matchimanito, a small blue triangle. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 173)

By the same token, the western schools, churches or other urbanized places in Argus also explain the microcosmic nature of American Indian lands. However, this physical space limited in its area per se grows into a macrocosm with its connection to supernatural happenings. For instance, the places like Fleur's house at Matchimanito Lake and its surrounding woods gradually reveal their macrocosmic nature. Such mysterious locations, according to the Chippewa community, are the habitat of ghosts and other metaphysical species: "The Agent went out there, then got lost, spent the whole night following the moving lights and lamps of people who would not answer him, but talked and laughed among themselves" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 9). However, in *Tracks*, the macrocosmic space depends on the microcosmic as both microcosm and macrocosm focus on the power of a single place: for the American Indian land is "the only thing that lasts life to life" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 33) and that is in danger for it is dividing and selling (Wong, 1994, p. 45).

Erdrich also defines the concept of time and space through the *intrapersonal communication* – to communicate with the living and non-living things through the power of the mind – of different characters with each other and with other objects of nature. Through the episode of Nanapush's spiritual help to Eli Kashpaw, in hunting a moose, Erdrich merges the macrocosmic and microcosmic worlds. The event is placed in the tough winter of 1917. The shortage of food weakens Eli and Nanapush, and Eli takes his gun and travels North to hunt. Nanapush stays in his hut and helps Eli in hunting through his spiritual power. This ceremony connects both despite the physical distance between them. Nanapush appeals to the spiritual beings to help them: he blackens his face with the lump of charcoal and "began to sing slowly, calling on [the] helpers, until ... the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, [he] saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 101). The correspondence between Nanapush and Eli in hunting is different in nature but runs parallel: the former takes a spiritual position based on shamanic ceremony whereas the latter is physically there for hunting. Nanapush spiritually contacts Eli and follows his every step, since he can 'see' him and 'read' what he is thinking. Nanapush sends him instructions and directions for hunting as he knows his starving condition and fears that he would make a mistake: "Do not sour the meat, I reminded him now" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 102). The spiritual direction helps Eli hunt the animal which will provide them physical

strength. After cutting the meat Eli faces the problem of how to take it back home. The shooting and slaughtering of the animal make Eli dog-tired; so, he seeks the spiritual help of the old man in his journey back home in safety. Nanapush spiritually instructs him how he would bind the pieces of meat around his body and asks him to follow the sound of the drumbeats to come home safely. The hunting episode suggests that Erdrich assimilates the supernatural world, the world of animals and spiritual beings, with the natural world of beings and in so doing, explores the reality of the timeless American Indian ceremonial society.

The lovemaking between Eli Kaspaw and Sophie Morrissey is another episode of such intrapersonal communication. This time Pauline sets the events to get vicarious sexual pleasure. She requests Moses to give her the powder made up of “crushed fine of certain roots, crane’s bill, something else, and slivers of Sophie’s fingernails” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 80). She controls Sophie through this love medicine and hypnotizes her to attract Eli. The love medicine enables Pauline to control the love making episode between Eli and Sophie: “I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself ... I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits” (Erdrich, 1988, pp. 83, 84). Looking at them from the secrecy and distance of her hiding place, Pauline controls the mind of Sophie and enjoys sexual pleasure, without actually being a part of it. The whole event describes the power of the love medicine made by Moses Pillager. Pauline is a proven liar in the community but her narration of the episode of love making can be verified through other sources. For instance, it is not Pauline’s own magical power as she describes in other events but that of Moses who gave her the love medicine that she uses. Pauline is quite helpless in creating and erasing the influence of charm, for instance, when Bernadette, Sophie’s mother, beats her daughter with “a strap, and [Pauline] felt it, too, the way [she]’d absorbed the pleasure at the slough” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 86). Eli, on his visit to Nanapush, also tells him that he is not guilty because “[he] was bewitched” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 98). The transition of one world into another is related with the concept of time and space.

Like Erdrich, Silko also explains the idea of time and space and presents it with a dichotomy of the western and the Laguna worlds. Unlike Erdrich, however, she defines it diachronically: juxtaposing a contemporary hybrid society and the Laguna mythical past. The ceremonial sequence makes the simple things sacred. For instance, in the story of Hummingbird and Fly, the number four becomes sacred when it is placed in the circular mode: Hummingbird instructs the folk to “sing this softly / above the jar: / After four days / you will be alive / After four days / you will be alive / After four days / you will be alive” (Silko, 1977, p. 66), and on the fourth day the Fly comes out of the jar and goes with Hummingbird for finding Corn Woman in the fourth world. Silko (as cited in Coltelli, 1990), herself admits that the presentation of ceremonial time while writing *Ceremony* charmed her as she was brought up among those who have a ceremonial vision of motion:

I was trying to reconcile Western European ideas of linear time – you know, someone’s here right now, but when she’s gone, she’s gone forever, she’s vaporized – and the older belief which Aunt Susie talked about, and the old folks talked about, which is: there is a place, a space-time for the older folks. (p. 138)

Ceremony follows this ceremonial sequence. Even the chronology of Tayo’s story is based on it. His ceremony is not like a traditional ritual in a tent but a journey, although he experiences the same timelessness that is the soul of every ceremony. His shift from Japan to Laguna is a shift from linear time to ceremonial. When he returns from the Euro-American world to his native world, in his loneliness he decides that “[h]e wouldn’t waste firewood to heat up yesterday’s coffee or maybe it was day-before-yesterday’s coffee. He had lost track of the days there” (Silko, 1977, p. 10). Similarly, the calendars that embarrassed him in Betonie’s room are a ceremonial presentation of Eurocentric chronology:

[H]e saw layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost as if occasionally the oldest calendars had fallen or been taken out from under the others and then had been replaced on top of the most recent years. A few showed January, as if the months on the underlying pages had no longer been turned or torn away. (Silko, 1977, p. 120)

The unsymmetrical placement of calendars gives an achronological sense that defines the ceremonial or

circular pattern in American Indian traditional societies.

The concept of space constructs the reality that is beyond textual space and that raises the improbability of possibility (Wilson, 1985, p. 220). Silko textualizes this reality of the Pueblo mythical worlds with the microcosmic and macrocosmic concepts of space. The microcosmic concept relates with the physical places of Pueblo. The western contact of these natural places validates them for the modern readers. Tayo, on his way to Gallup, describes the urbanized impact on the native person and places:

I saw Navajos in torn old jackets, standing outside the bars. There were Zunis and Hopis there too, even a few Lagunas. All of them slouched down against the dirty walls of the bar along Highway 66, their eyes staring at the ground as if they had forgotten the sun in the sky. (Silko, 1977, p. 107)

The transitional change in the affected areas of Gallup intensifies the microcosmic concept of space as the physical place of Gallup affects the lifestyle of Pueblo youth as most youngsters, like Helen Jean and Rocky, are motivated to settle there and consider it a better place than the reservation. They too are eventually contaminated with the Eurocentric norms which turn them into prostitutes and drunkards. The unknown child, who narrates this description of Gallup, living with his prostitute mother at the bank of the river, can also be identified as Tayo.

The role of memory enhances the microcosmic concept of time and space. It is very spatial (like macrocosm) in its nature and functions as an archive of visual images of different places (Wilson, 1985, p. 216). In *Ceremony* most places and things come into description through Tayo's memory. For instance, the Veteran's Hospital, the school where Tayo studies with Rocky, the forest in Japan where Rocky is killed, the railway station where he meets Japanese children and women, the home on the bank of the river where he lives with his mother, the bars where he and other natives waste their time, are places the reader comes to know through Tayo's memory. These places prolong the idea of alienation that is ultimately harmful for the traditional harmony based on native cosmology: hospitals and schools are places that organize the native mind according to the western pattern by convincing them about the irrationality of their customs; similarly, bars affect native lives and drive them away from spirituality to nothingness. Silko could not present them physically and therefore uses the macrocosmic space of memory to explain them. After leaving the Veterans Hospital, Tayo goes to the train tracks where he confronts the Japanese children and woman. This confrontation pushes him back to his past time which he spends in Japan. At that moment he realizes the diminishing of time and space boundaries. The glimpse of the smiling face of the small Japanese boy makes him think not only about World War II but also about his childhood memories with his cousin Rocky:

[H]e cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time. (Silko, 1977, p.18)

During the war Tayo has a similar state of mind at different times. For instance, in Japan he rejected the order to kill his enemies as among them he sees his dear uncle Josiah in the face of one of Japanese. The same face, same slant-eyed look and the same color makes him realize the universality of brotherhood among beings that keeps the cosmos in balance and thus implies a universal time and space: "Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers" (Silko, 1977, p. 19). The timelessness of memories and visions is a true guidance of the supernatural spirits for the betterment of people and nature. These memories and visions have an important role in Tayo's ceremony.

Conclusion

The stories of *Tracks* and *Ceremony* reflect American Indians' awareness of and attachment to their culture. However, the non-natives conceive the reality of Native American world, for its timelessness and macrocosmic nature, as mythic and question the reality shaped by these stories as they do not tell the world in a positivistic way. Non-natives focus on the positivistic side of macrocosmic as well as chronological elements and ignore the microcosmic time and space and thus could not understand the American Indian concept of time and

space. The essentialization of American Indian societies makes the microcosmic world macrocosmic too for them. However, the natives, regardless of their tribal affiliation, perceive everything natural because of the strong belief system and their daily involvement in such mythical practices. The characters' presentation and the way they are textualized and the settings of the novels are normal things for the native community, for the native readers and even for Erdrich and Silko, as the writers like their protagonists have "believed in the stories" (Silko, 1977, p. 18).

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