

Features of Spiritual Awakening in Gardens in the Dunes

Anissa Sboui¹

PhD Scholar, English Department, Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, Tunisia.

Corresponding Author: Anissa Sboui

ABSTRACT: *Gardens in the Dunes* is a work of spirituality. Leslie Marmon Silko does celebrate the transformative power of Mother-Earth, for it is an emblem of rejuvenation and rebirth. The present paper purports that the land-based spirituality, color symbolism, dance rituals and storytelling are features of the quest for a spiritual revival for which most characters long throughout the novel.

KEYWORDS: Dance rituals, Religion, Spirituality

Date of Submission: 15-12-2018

Date of acceptance: 31-12-2018

I. INTRODUCTION:

Leslie Marmon Silko's third novel *Gardens in the Dunes* has received much acclaim. As a Native American writer, she is preoccupied with replicating the cultural, social and especially spiritual aspects of the Native American's life. In her novel, spirituality constitutes a central part, in contrast with the advent of modernity, with all its iniquities. Despite her immersion in a Western mainstream culture, she celebrates the healing power of 'gardens' and nature. Having been marginalized, humiliated and banished, Native Americans – as depicted in *Gardens in the Dunes* – still glorify the spiritual beliefs as well as practices of elevating and transcendental motives. Important to keep in mind that Silko privileges the spiritual depth in her work, and in this respect, Denis K. Cummings articulates that, "rather, quite significantly, I think Silko reflects in *Gardens* on the possibility of a different historical trajectory, one that moves towards spiritual and mystical recuperation" (84).

II. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY:

To begin with, religion and spirituality are different within the Native American cultural framework. Religion implies the theological dogmas, the rules, the religious buildings or even the statutes of eminent religious figures; while spirituality is a simplistic belief in the healing power of 'Mother Earth,' spirits and the practices of tribal traditions such as dancing, wearing white dresses and having the sky path open for ancestors' spirits to come and inhabit the world in a mutual embrace. In the Anglo-American sense, Christianity has a distinct body of rules and religious practices, whereas many regard the Native American spirituality as the belief in the coming back of ancestors' spirits to coexist in total harmony with these indigenous people, in special ceremonies held for the purpose of gathering together.

Gardens in the Dunes is rooted in spirituality. The spiritual identity of the indigenous people lies in the belief in everything living on earth: flowers, roses, gardens, animals, water, river and birds. Spirituality is manifested by the communion with the land. There is a call for a spiritual enlightenment through a mutual symbiosis with nature. The rituals of animating these elements of nature are proof enough that the very typical notion of "religion" has no clear traces within this culture. To illustrate further, "For many Native American tribes, both in the past and today, a vision quest is a crucial part of one's spiritual journey. It is a rite of passage that marks a significant change in one's life, and often involves communing alone with nature, connecting with the inner self, and typically includes a vision that is both personal and to be shared with the community at large" (Wigington N.pag.).

The American government assists with the Indian police to bar the natives from practicing their rituals in peace. Back to history, the indigenous peoples have long been denied the right to preserve their traditional heritage that they regard sacred. Westerners have rejected such ceremonies; they regard them as 'pagan', profane and 'unnatural', for they do not coincide with the official teachings, structures and basic tenets of Christianity. Ongoing assaults, imprisonment and entrapment of Grandma Fleet, Mama and Sand Lizard people

¹ A PhD Scholar at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, Tunisia. She is also a poet and has produced two volumes: *Rebirth* and *Transcend*.

are manifested in Gardens in the Dunes: “[T]he U.S. government feared the old Marmons ... the old Marmons who answered the call of Wovoka [a Paiute prophet] were hated most of all” (47). Being deprived of the right to perform the rituals, the indigenous people disclose fervent and ardent attachment to their land. Hence, they are left bereft of a sense of belonging.

III. ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY IN GARDENS IN THE DUNES:

1.1. Land-Based Spirituality:

The land-based spirituality entails the presence of spirits all around the natural landscape. The image of ‘Mother Earth’ is so telling, for Native Americans have celebrated the sacredness of the land which is akin to the mother who never neglects her child. The earth is like the mother who provides affection and containment. Part of their identity is the land which is at the heart of their ritualistic propensity to organize ceremonies in many places, especially on reservations and amidst the landscape: “The people were fleeing the government; the new orders stated all Indians must leave their home places to live on the reservation at Parker” (Gardens in the Dunes 20). Not only do these Indians honor the earth, brooks and trees but they also valorize the intimacy with birds and animals. These people are cast away from the modern world and their eyes switch to the upper skies where truth exists and harmony seems undeniable.

The mutual symbiosis with nature foregrounds Grandma Fleet, Sister Salt and Indigo’s quest for a spiritual enlightenment under which they undergo a perfect union with gardens. Nature is given human characteristics. It is at the core of each character’s search for real affinity within the beauty of the landscape. Sinda Larson, in an article entitled “Native American Aesthetics: An Attitude of Relationship,” argues that, “land is so intrinsic to Native American as to be considered their Mother” (qtd. in Zamora 108). The image of female characters, being enraptured with the land, that Silko creates in her novel further mirrors this idea. The land stands for the protective mother that soothes the pain of the Sand Lizard people. A good example occurs when Sister Salt gets stung by the bees. She has “... rubbed her swollen arms and legs vigorously and laughed, saying it was good medicine- a good cure for anything that might ail you” (Gardens in the Dunes 16).

The analogy of ‘Mother — Earth’ mirrors the feminization of the earth which has a healing power, for most of the characters display a big attachment to it. The tie to nature parallels the tie to life and growth. The spiritual enlightenment is at the heart of the Native Americans’ basic beliefs. The analogy between the land and the mother is articulated in Luther Standing Bear’s own words: “We [Lakota people] are of the soil and the soil is of us” (qtd. in Allen 127). The fact that these Native Americans are the land reinforces the tight link between the people and the redeeming soil to which they are attached. Silko affirms that the spiritual dimension of the land serves as a source of safety. For her, “there is a sense of familiarity” between the first inhabitants and their land. “[B]eing related to [it] in a familiar way [projects] a kind of security” (qtd. in Arnold 2).

The characters in Gardens in the Dunes plant seeds despite being struck to poverty. Destitute, they never disregard their Mother-Earth. Silko herself admits, in an interview with Ellen L. Arnold that “[her] character[s] ... planted flowers instead of food” (163). The land is so divine in the sense that it becomes their primary concern. Grandma Fleet’s need for money does, under no circumstances, hinder her from planting the seeds to regenerate fertility. They respond to the suffering of the land, for whenever they witness people throw garbage, they feel part of their body being hurt. Grandma Fleet has taught them that the commotion does harm roses and flowers. According to her, “plants listen” and no one can “argue or fight around the plants-hard feelings [because] the plants [do] wither” (16).

In Ceremony, the fusion with the land is illustrated in the character of Tayo whose illness is the direct cause of his separation from the land. Being closer to the ‘Mother- Earth’ ensures his relief and serenity. In this respect, Paula Gunn Allen postulates: “The healing of Tayo and the land results from the reunification of land and person. Tayo is healed when he understands ... that his being is within and outside him” (128). Gardens in the Dunes also provides grassroots for a highly spiritual embrace between Man and Nature. In this novel, little Indigo faces the same fate: Her separation from her Sister Salt and the forced school enrolment aggravate her agony. Woebegone by dejection and loneliness, Indigo does not hesitate to throw herself in the welcoming arms of ‘Mother Earth.’ There, she achieves a spiritual fulfillment and reaches rejuvenation. She remembers the near past when the family was united: “[Indigo] glanced over her shoulder and saw no one; then with both arms in front of her face she dove under the thick green bushes the way Grandma Fleet taught her and Sister” (72).

1.2. Color Symbolism:

Color symbolism is an essential ritual in the Native American culture. As everything in their lives has meaning, Silko’s deliberate choice of colors converges with this statement. At first step, one is entitled to compare the significance of the color theory in the Western culture. These colors: white, red and blue are the colors that do constitute the American flag. They denote the notion of ‘patriotism’ that all Americans glorify. The white color, for Indians, is associated with the notion of ‘sharing,’ which highlights the very act of collectiveness for the Sand Lizard tribe – as expressed in the novel. In other tribes, the white designates death or

snow for the 'White Mountain Apaches.' For the Navajo tribe, the "four colors [are] important: Turquoise, white, yellow, and black, [for] these colors represent four sacred mountains ("Color" N. pag.). White is linked to the sacred mountain 'Mount Blanca,' designating high spirituality. For the Cherokee tribe, this color represents warmth, peace and happiness especially in the south ("Color" N. pag.).

Silko, in her novel, frequently refers to this color when she describes the dancers whose "painting[s] and wrapping[s] in white robes took a long time" (28). Their faces and hands are protected by "white clay" which "made the wind feel like a warm breeze" (30). This is a perfect reflection that the dancers' immersion in dancing is imbued with a whitish aura. Dancing rhymes with the notion of warmth, a spiritual awakening and a peaceful atmosphere. The red color is linked to the notion of success, sacred fire and blood: "Now the dancers were resting on the sand around the fire" (28). The Cherokee dancers consider red a "cardinal color" to refer to the east, and white to refer to the south. The mingling of colors stands as a tool for Silko to embellish her novel with the touch of the rainbow. The use of the green color is significant and Silko wraps her novel in a greenish tableau of gardens. The 'Mother Earth' is impregnated with different colors of which 'green' is the predominant one: "[T]he shoulders of the dunes were crisscrossed with bands of bright colors: bird green, moss green, grass green; blossom orange, blossom yellow, and blossom white" (17).

The colorful rainbow reflects Sand Lizard's high sense of relief and rejuvenation. Grandma Fleet and the tribe have been yearning for a spiritual awakening as soon as they reach the 'old gardens.' In other words, being persecuted by the heinous deeds of the U.S. government and the Indian police, these poor people have no way out to their woeful and despondent lives but through the planting of different flowers. In deep scrutiny of the novel, the character of Indigo foreshadows an unrivalled attachment to the cleansing power of the flowers. She has the tendency to plant germinating flowers: "Remember all those gladiolus spuds Indigo planted in their garden ... and in no time white, lavender, red, and yellow flowers opened. People passing by on the road stopped to stare —the flowers were quite a sight" (477). This mosaic appeases every by-passer's eyes and provides time for meditation.

www.ijhssi.org 3 | page

Features of Spiritual Awakening in Gardens in the Dunes

The profound and solemn fusion with different colors mirrors the indescribable effect it leaves on the soul of every human being. Silko seems intent on bringing Edward -the prototype of a generation bogged down in arrogance- to identify with this 'sublime' nature, for the sublime "came to be associated with the powerful emotions, with spiritual and religious awe, vastness, immensity, with the natural order in its grandeur" in Edmond Burke's own words (qtd. in Cuddon 691). The blue color has given Edward a new way to decode the infinite and the 'sublime' aspect of nature. Instead of regarding it as a mere object for scientific research, he is given the chance to experience harmony with this tableau: "the sky and sea were bright blue. A refreshing breeze blew in his face ... What a mighty sound it was! Edward felt the coolness of the salt mist on his cheeks" (Gardens in the Dunes 166).

1.3. Dance Rituals:

The indigenous people find an overwhelming solace when conversing with nature. Dancing is fundamental to reshape the Indians' identity. For them, it is a way of reaching a spiritual awakening due to the celebration of the visits of the ancestors' spirits to the earth along with the 'Messiah.' It has become a form of a prayer which is done through the movement of the body, creating relief in return. The dance ritual is thus transformative, for it helps these dancers release enough energy that seems evident in their ongoing quest for purification. It is a way by which these peoples exteriorize their tempestuous inside, a path by which they follow the infinite truth, and find a solution to their crippling predicament within a heartless Western society. This society is pragmatic, materialistic and malevolent in motives, for it encapsulates a phony life that is divested of any deep meaning. Dancing is a ritual for these people to exteriorize their inner torment. Silko herself claims that the dance parallels a sense of belonging: "Gardens in the Dunes really is about now. It all connects together and it gives ... a psychic and spiritual way to try to live with this" (qtd. in Arnold 183). Through dancing, the Sand Lizard people retrieve their sense of order, unity and serenity. It is an opportunity for them to flee persecution and abide by a reciprocal conversation with their ancestors, and particularly Jesus who comes to liberate them from the fetters of abduction and humiliation. In this respect, Silko empowers her "Paiute visitors" to be able to initiate their usual ceremony. These people come to fast, dance "a peaceful dance" and Jesus coming to bless them (Gardens in the Dunes 25). Spirituality is enhanced by the moment of affinity whose aim-from this sacred gathering – is to give their thanks to Jesus, and to attain spiritual healing and purification. Songs translate their highly spiritual lives. They are "articulated through memory" evoking nostalgia (Grice et al 18). The Aboriginal people:

[D]anced until late at night, when Jesus told them to stop. The next morning Jesus talked to them, and talked all day. He told them all Indians must dance, everywhere, and keep on dancing. If they danced the dance, then they would be able to visit their dear ones and beloved ancestors ... Great storms would purify the Earth from her destroyers (Gardens in the Dunes 25).

Ghost dance unites all Native Americans, including Indigo and Sister Salt, in one sole place and for one sole target which resides in elevating the spirit to the high skies, to get a glimpse of the saint (the Messiah). They feel cleansed and undergo an essential metamorphosis on the body and the mind. It leads them to wisdom and full understanding of the world around them. Sister Salt and Indigo have gone through the path to reach self-assertion: four nights of dancing “let [them] know how beautiful [they] will become” (Gardens in the Dunes 30).

Dance rituals are inclusive. As an American citizen, Hattie wishes to see the ‘Messiah’ of the Native Americans and expresses herself within their realms. She recognizes that these Indians are awaiting the Messiah to come and bless their souls. She also shows compassion and sympathy when the police orders to disperse the solemn gathering of people who have been yearning for a spiritual revival. In this regard, Silko admits that “our human, our [Native] human spirit wants no boundaries” (qtd. in Arnold xi). Dancing enables these people to adjust with their lives in reservations. They learn to indulge in the process of quenching their thirst in a therapeutic fusion with supernatural forces. In this context, James Riding articulates that “despite the reservation grim origins, Indian people have been able to adapt to reservation environments while preserving many of their traditional values, beliefs and customs” (qtd. in Grice et al 50).

www.ijhssi.org

4 | page

Features of Spiritual Awakening in Gardens in the Dunes

1.4. Storytelling:

Storytelling custom is another aspect of spiritual awakening. Gardens in the Dunes hinges on Grandma Fleet’s instructive teaching to Sister Salt and Indigo. These instructions have helped them formulate a considerable understanding of the world in relation to nature. Silko expresses the importance of storytelling when she avows that “our greatest natural source is stories and storytelling ... it is part of the way of life, storytelling is” (qtd. Arnold 5). The language Grandma Fleet uses and the songs she chooses to teach both girls have a ‘creative function’ and effect on their future life. Maria Lauret assesses the role of the ‘Oral Tradition’ when she argues that: “Much oral storytelling conveys a religious sensibility that stresses ideals of reciprocity, wholeness and beauty and so expresses a deep sense of attachment between a people and the land they inhabit” (Grice et al 18).

In many concrete instances, Indigo recalls back what Grandma Fleet has taught her to do. In the novel, the abundant use of “she told me” (16), “Grandma Fleet and Mama told the girls old stories about the land” (22) and “the Paiute visitors told a strange story” (24) underline the importance of storytelling. Another example lays bare when Indigo feels thirsty and remembers the advice of her grandma. She “taught them to smell water, to catch the scent of dampness early in the morning before the heat of the day scattered it” (73). It mirrors Indigo’s capability to cope with the environment around her in her journey. What her Grandma has instilled in her has been of great validity as it helps her overcome certain obstacles and come to terms with her void life amidst the purifying power of nature. In this respect, Lauret argues that “the oral tradition is more fully inclusive and consists of the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people” (Grice et al 18).

IV. CONCLUSION:

Gardens in the Dunes is a novel where the spiritual aspect of life supersedes the phony pragmatic and individualistic society. Immersed in community, the Sand Lizard people have retrieved a profound spiritual revival and have reached an emotional growth. Mutual symbiosis with nature and infinite conversation with the spirits of the ‘Messiah’ along with the ancestors have provided the earthly persecuted and humiliated nation with grace and redemption. The gardens, for Silko, are the secret of life, for this work “offer[s] people another way to things and possible ways to connect up, in a spiritual way, to withstand. In the end [Silko] think[s] there is a kind of spiritual and interpersonal accommodation. By trying to go, into this personal, spiritual solution” (qtd. in Arnold 183).

REFERENCES:

Books

- [1]. Silko, Leslie Marmon. Gardens in the Dunes. New York: Simon and Schuster Rockefeller Center, 1999. Print.
- [2]. Allen, Paula Gunn. Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983. Print.
- [3]. Arnold, Ellen L., ed. Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. Print.

- [4]. Cuddon, J.A. Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. London: Penguin Books, 1998. Print.
- [5]. Grice et al. Beginning Ethnic American Literatures. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. Print.
- [6]. Zamora, Lois Parkinson, ed. Contemporary American Women Writing: Gender, Class, Ethnicity. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd, 1998. Print.

Journal Papers:

- [7]. Cummings, Denise K. "'Settling' History: Understanding Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony, Storyteller, Almanac of the Dead, and Gardens in the Dunes." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*. Sail. 12. 4 (2000): 65-91. PDF File.
- [8]. Wigington, Patti. "Native American Spirituality." ThoughtCo. 01 Feb. 2018. Web. 20 Feb. 2018.
- [9]. "Color Symbolism and Culture." www.incredibleart.org/lessons/middle/color2. Accessed 10 July 2018.

Anissa Sboui" Features of Spiritual Awakening in Gardens in the Dunes"International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI), vol. 07, no. 12, 2018, pp.53-57