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**RESISTANCE OF A CULTURAL HERITAGE: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE  
LAND AND HISTORY IN NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN LESLIE  
MARMON SILKO'S *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD***

**Bir Kültür Mirasının Direnişi: Leslie Marmon Silko'nun *Almanac Of The  
Dead* Romanında Toprak/Yurt ve Tarih/Geçmişin Amerikan Kızılderili  
Kimliğindeki Önemi**

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**Abstract**

*Almanac of the Dead* shows how a disrupted relationship to the land and history would lead to cultural disorientation, societal degeneration and fragmentation of identity for the Native Americans. From a Postcolonial perspective, *Almanac of the Dead* is a novel which emphasizes the importance of the land and history in the Native American identity. To criticize the imperialist practices forced onto the Native American cultures and societies, the author Leslie Marmon Silko, creating degenerate and alienated characters who are gripped by the realities of capitalistic neo-colonial structures, intends to draw attention to the corruption and disintegration taking place in individual and societal levels. Through dramatic episodes offered in the novel, Silko suggests that the main culprits in the Native Americans' cultural degeneration and isolation are first and foremost the oblivion of ancestral history/past and a loss of traditional connection to the land and nature. Therefore, the novel becomes a manifesto of resistance against the imposed Euro-American cultures and its narratives. As Postcolonial critic Frantz Fanon would advise, Silko maintains that the cure lies in understanding one's history and regenerating their ties to the land and nature.

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### Öz

*Almanac of the Dead* romanı Amerika'nın yerlileri olan Kızılderililer için toprak/yurt ve tarih/geçmiş ile olan ilişkilerdeki kopukluğun kimlik parçalanmasına, kültürel yozlaşmaya ve toplumsal dejenerasyona yol açtığına işaret eder. Sömürge Sonrası Araştırmaları perspektifinden incelenecek olursa, roman Amerikan Yerlilerinin kimliğinde toprak ve tarihin önemini vurgulayan bir metindir. Kızılderili toplumları ve kültürleri üzerine empoze edilen sömürgeci-kapitalist uygulamaları eleştirmek için yazar Leslie Marmon Silko, kapitalist neo-sömürge yapıların gerçekleri tarafından esir alınarak yozlaşan ve yabancılaşmış karakterler yaratır ve böylece bireysel ve toplumsal düzeylerde çöküş ve parçalanma süreçlerine dikkat çeker. Romanda sunulan dramatik hikayelendirmeler sayesinde Silko, Kızılderililerin kültürel dejenerasyonundaki ve soyutlanmasındaki temel etkenlerin her şeyden önce ataların tarihine / geçmişine kayıtsızlık ve toprak ve doğa ile olan geleneksel bağlantının kaybı olduğunu ileri sürer. Bu nedenle roman, empoze edilen Avrupa-Amerikan kültürüne ve anlatılarına karşı bir direniş manifestosu haline gelmektedir. Sömürge Sonrası Araştırmalar eleştirmeni Frantz Fanon'un önereceği gibi, Silko, kültürel iyileşmenin kişinin tarihini anlamada, doğa ve toprakla olan ilişkileri yeniden oluşturmada yattığını savunur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kızılderililer/Amerikan Yerlileri, Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, Toprak/Yurt, Kültürel Miras, Sömürgecilik Sonrası Araştırmaları ve Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat.

### Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko's 1992 postmodern novel *Almanac of the Dead*, though pessimistically apocalyptic and suspicious of redemption, can still be read as a narrative of cultural resistance which displays the persistent and destructive legacy of the European colonialism on the Native Americans<sup>1</sup> identities, cultures and traditions. Through portrayal of a plethora of unredeemable and unlovable characters, corrupted by the socio-economic and cultural vestiges of colonialism and postmodern capitalism, the book laments the Native Americans' loss of the land and history, and conversely traditional cultural identities. Silko's protest, a Native American who was born in 1948 and raised on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation Laguna, against racist Eurocentrism which can also be observed in her essays

<sup>1</sup> The term Native Americans will be used instead of "Native Indians or American Indians"

collected in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, succinctly underpins the anti-colonialist message of *Almanac* when she says “*There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans’ own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land*” (133).

One of the most salient themes that is observed in Silko’s novel is the Native Americans’ unique ties to the land and nature as well as history and the past. Therefore, as Silko dramatically points out the disruption of this unique bond by the colonial expansions and capitalist practices has resulted in the moral disintegration and disorientation of the Native Americans; that is to say, in the novel from a Postcolonial perspective, Silko traces the degenerative forces of colonization on the Native American identity and culture. In order to better grasp her poignant criticism of the European settlers’ seizure of the Native American territories, it would be a good idea to look at the history of the original inhabitants of the Americas.

According to the proved theories of the origins of the Native Americans, their pre-historic ancestors<sup>2</sup> have been thought to have set off from Central Asia and arrived at the North American continent through The Bering Strait, which used to be a land bridge connecting the two continents—over Siberia and Alaska—in about 15-000-20-000 BC during the Ice Age (Dulik, 2012 p. 229). These migrating proto-Turkic populations<sup>3</sup> slowly dispersed southward from Alaska throughout the Americas, subsequently diversifying into different tribes over the centuries and growing in numbers until the arrival of the colonial settlers starting with the Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World in 1492. It is interesting to

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<sup>2</sup> There has been controversy surrounding the origin of the Native Americans. However, recent DNA tests seem to prove what even the American President Thomas Jefferson had long suspected: The Native Americans are related to the Turkic Peoples in Central Asia through a common paternal ancestor and they had arrived in the Americas through the Bering Strait. This is the recent scientific finding of Matthew C. Dulik et al.: “Based on these data, we noted differences in the origin and population history of Altaian ethnic groups, with northern Altaians appearing more like Yeniseian, Ugric, and Samoyedic speakers to the north, and southern Altaians having greater affinities to other Turkic speaking populations of southern Siberia and Central Asia. Moreover, high-resolution analysis of Y chromosome haplogroup Q has allowed us to reshape the phylogeny of this branch, making connections between populations of the New World and Old World more apparent and demonstrating that southern Altaians and Native Americans share a recent common ancestor. These results greatly enhance our understanding of the peopling of Siberia and the Americas.”

<sup>3</sup> In recent years In *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other sources giving information about Native American origins, it is interesting to note a deliberate attempt to hide any reference to possible Turkish and Turonian origins for Native Americans; as a result recent DNA researchers and archeologists have come up with the term “Beringians.” According to these theories, these nomadic peoples are believed to have inhabited the Bering passage for thousands of years before they dispersed into the Americas. Invention of this new terminology and their ages-long stay in this region are presented as if it had erased the Turkic origins of the Native American peoples. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-American/Prehistory>

note that this hypothesis has long been suggested by eminent European scholars; for instance, nineteenth century Scottish architecture historian James Fergusson, who is particularly interested in the Turonian burrow/mound burial sites, called *höyük* in Turkish, in *Rude Stone Monuments in All Countries: Their Age and Uses* (1872) maintains the existence of Turonian origins of the Native American populations. First, he puts forward the claim that the Vikings and Scandinavians had arrived in and discovered the Americas centuries before Columbus in 900s: “*If it is wished to establish anything like a direct connexion [sic] between the two continents, we must go back to the far distant prehistoric times when the conformations of land and water were different from what they now are. No one, I presume, will be found to contend that, since the continents took their present shape, any migration across the Atlantic took place in such numbers as to populate the land, or to influence the manners or customs of the people previously existing there. It may be that the Scandinavians did penetrate in the tenth or eleventh centuries to Winland, by the way of Greenland, and so anticipated the discovery of Columbus by some centuries*” (516). Then Fergusson goes onto his argument which determinedly marks the Bering Strait as the only possible passageway that led to the pre-historic Turonian people to the American continent: “*If any connexion really existed between the Old and the New World, in anything like historic times, everything would lead us to believe that it took place via Behring Strait or the Aleutian Islands. It seems reasonable to suppose that the people who covered the Siberian Steppes with tumuli may have migrated across the calm waters of the Upper Pacific, and gradually extended themselves down to Wisconsin and Ohio, and there left these memorials we now find. It may also be admitted that the same Asiatic people may have spread westward from the original hive, and been the progenitors of those who covered our plains with barrows, but beyond this no connexion seems to be traceable which would account for anything we find.*” (516).

Thousands of years after the migration of these proto-Turkic settlers in the North and South Americas, the fateful arrival of the European explorers, in fact in search of a direct route to India in an attempt to evade the taxes collected by the Ottoman Turks who controlled the Mediterranean maritime and land trade routes at the time, was a turning point for the history of the indigenous populations of the Americas, including the Native Americans. From the fifteenth century onward, Spanish conquistadors, followed by the British and French in the seventeenth centuries, began a process of colonization of the Americas, establishing plantations to grow profitable commodities such as sugar, tobacco and cotton and enslaving native populations (later resorting to the Atlantic slave trade where captured Africans were put to work) and invading and capturing the lands which belonged to the indigenous populations for natural resources such as silver and gold.

In addition to years of warfare and clashes between the colonial settlers the Native American tribes as well as their forced displacements, epidemics caused by

small-pox and measles— diseases that the indigenous peoples had no immunity to— caused a sharp decline in their population and a shrinkage in the land they owned. During the American Revolution, the Native Americans lost further land, as their allies the British signed the Treaty of Paris, 1783 with the revolting American colonies and ceded vast amounts of Native American territories to the emerging U.S without their consent or approval. In the late eighteenth century, the newly established federal government of America decided to deal with the Native American problem through land purchases and acculturation. George Washington, who deemed the culture and civilization of the “Native Indians” inferior, for instance, initiated The Civilization Fund Act of 1819, aimed at civilizing the “barbaric” Native American tribes and assimilating them into society. Obviously for the Native Americans this meant the replacement of their native languages and dialects with English and ancestral cultural practices with that of the Anglo-American norms and standards.

The American westward expansion continued in the nineteenth century despite the resistance of the indigenous tribes of the Great Plains east of the Mississippi River. The finding of gold in modern day state of Georgia, used to be known as Cherokee land, caused another series of tragic events and forced relocations for the Native American tribes. Based on the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, thousands of Native Americans were forced to migrate areas to the west of the Mississippi River designated as Indian Territory in 1838. This long and arduous forced journey, known as the Trail of Tears, caused the death of thousands of people from hunger, cold and disease. In the following years after this tragic displacement of the Native Americans, the ideology of the Manifest Destiny, popularized by the American media and supported by the politicians, helped provide a justification for further invasion and occupation of the Native American territories. In modern day America, according to 2010 Census<sup>4</sup> there is approximately 5.2 million people identified as Native American, thus making up 1.7 percent of the overall population. They are mainly concentrated in the north-western parts of the continent and currently out of federally recognized 570 tribes half live in Indian Reservations: “*The ten states with the largest American Indian and Alaska Native alone-or-in-combination populations in 2010 were California, Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas, New York, New Mexico, Washington, North Carolina, Florida, and Michigan.*” Though most Native Americans seem to have integrated into society, as Silko shows in the novel, majority of the Native American populations live in

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/c2010br-10.pdf>

poverty suffering from societal problems such as unemployment, gambling, gang activity, alcoholism<sup>5</sup> and drug addiction.

### Methodology

Postcolonial theory examines the effects of colonization on the conquered and displaced peoples as well as their responses to colonialist power structures. First and foremost, Silko's novel can be read as a postcolonial protest against the traumatic erosion of the Native American identities and their cultural heritage by the European narratives and norms. Therefore, in reading this novel to investigate the legacy of colonialism in areas such as identity, language, culture and history it will be useful to adopt a Postcolonial perspective which provides the necessary theoretical framework in study and the analysis of literary/cultural texts. Obviously Edward Said's influential 1978 book *Orientalism* helped to bring to attention some of the key ideas and notions that underpin Postcolonialism, such as conducive relationship between knowledge and power, Eurocentric cultural hegemony, and representations of the other. Even though, in *Orientalism*, Said's focus is on the binary construction of the West vs. East (mainly Europe and the Middle East) and builds his arguments on the existence of West's Orientalist, Eurocentric conception its other the East, theoretically a similar binary construction can be detected in initially the Europeans and later Anglo-Saxon Americans' relations with the Native populations of the Americas. Spivak's further elaboration on the concept of the other is also important in identifying the persistent legacy of colonialism on cultural identities and traditions. As she maintains, the West's hegemony over the conquered or colonized people as a form of epistemic violence was further strengthened by the West's representation and definition of the East as the other: "*The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and*

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed historical observations on this issue, see Andrew J. Blackbird's, a Native American author, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan* (1887). He describes how alcohol, an unknown substance before the arrival of the European settlers, was introduced to Native Americans and precipitated alcoholism among them.

"I never heard any boy or any grown person utter any bad language, even if they were out of patience with anything. Swearing or profanity was never heard among the Ottawa and Chippewa tribes of Indians, and not even found in their language. Scarcely any drunkenness, only once in a great while the old folks used to have a kind of short spree, particularly when there was any special occasion of a great feast going on. But all the young folks did not drink intoxicating liquors as a beverage in those days. And we always rested in perfect safety at night in our dwellings, and the doorways of our lodges had no fastenings to them, but simply a frail mat or a blanket was hung over our doorways which might be easily pushed or thrown one side without any noise if theft or any other mischief was intended. But we were not afraid for any such thing to happen us, because we knew that every child of the forest was observing and living under the precepts which their forefathers taught them, and the children were taught almost daily by their parents from infancy unto manhood and womanhood, or until they were separated from their families. These precepts or moral commandments by which the Ottawa and Chippewa nations of Indians were governed in their primitive state, were almost the same as the Ten Commandments which the God Almighty himself delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai on tables of stone." (p.12-13)

*heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity*” (Spivak, 1988: p 24-25). So in my reading of *Almanac*, this concept of othering the East or non-Western cultures and peoples, and the establishment of Eurocentric cultural hegemony on the Native Americans will be an important point of analysis.

Another important concept in Postcolonial criticism is “cultural resistance,” a notion developed and exemplified by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). A psychiatrist by training, Fanon in his critique of the brutal colonization of Algiers, and the African continent at large, by the French in the first half of the nineteenth century, is particularly interested in the psychological impacts of colonization on native populations and lays out the steps for postcolonial healing: reclaim your past and identity and then obliterate the colonialist ideology which suppressed your identity and history. Fanon’s prescription to colonial suppression as he describes a “*passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era*” closely resonates with Silko’s lamentation for a colonial eradication of Native American cultural heritage, followed by a call to reclaim history and the land (1963: p 209).

In addition to Postcolonialism, in my reading I will make use of the postmodernist notions of fragmented identity and disorientation largely brought about by the capitalist, neo-colonialist modes of productions and life styles. Postmodern criticism and Postcolonialism merge in their attempts to critique and deconstruct of the idea of the empire, the Enlightenment, modernity and the Eurocentric grand narratives. Therefore, it can be said that Postcolonial criticism draws attention to the suppression of indigenous cultures and identities in the postmodern period. As Silko in *Almanac* locates capitalist and mass media culture as factors contributing to the moral disintegration of the Native American societies—though she equally dismisses Marxism as unfit for the specificities of the indigenous cultures—Fredric Jameson’s critique of Modernism and Postmodernism from a Marxist viewpoint, in other words because of his detailed investigation of cultural implications of economic modes of production, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) will offer an important philosophical and theoretical framework to analyze *Almanac*. In this work, Jameson particularly draws attention to the hegemonic powers of the mass media in enforcing ideologies onto individuals to maintain the triumph of the interests of capitalism. Therefore, media and capitalism join forces to colonize people’s minds. As a result, for Jameson postmodernist world turns into an arena filled with disoriented subjects with fragmented identities. Likewise, Silko provides us with disoriented characters of the Native American origin, in oblivion of the past, are easily hypnotized and degenerated by the mass media culture. Jameson tries to create a link between this cultural degeneration and capitalism. Commenting on Jameson’s work, Chela Sandoval, in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), draws attention to Jameson’s

public warning which states that “*transmutation of economic, political, cultural and psychic forms, under the influence of unprecedented global exchange, are coalescing into dangerous neocolonial conditions*” (p.15). To him those conditions are responsible for the predicament facing humanity.

Jameson while discussing Postmodernism sees it as a cultural phenomenon created and precipitated by the expansion of capitalism around the globe. To him, the consciousness of people in the postmodern are is at stake as a result of “*a breakage in our diachronic sensibilities, the sense of history that links a civilization’s comprehension of itself to its past and future*” (1991: p.17). As a result, because of Jameson’s establishment of a direct correlation between loss of sense of history and capitalism, Jameson’s critique of postmodernism becomes useful in reading *Almanac* which points to a vicious circle created by colonialist cultural hegemony and capitalism. Jameson maintains that because in the postmodern era, mass media and capitalist structures (hegemonic powers) discourage collective memory and cultural heritage, though the modernist period ended with “*its conquests, slavery, colonizations and resistances,*” it does not mean that “*a higher, morally evolved*” postcolonial order will flourish. (p.19). Inevitably, the neocolonial globalization renders people disoriented, placeless subjects who cannot turn to their past to actualize themselves and to construct their identity. That results in what Jameson calls loss of “*positions as individual and collective subjects.*” Jameson’s solution to the problem is formation of cognitive mapping which “*enable[s] a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.*” Through cognitive mapping, according to Sandoval, Jameson aims at strengthening subject people’s abilities of “*making their way through society, at crossing its scattered distances, at central spaces...* (2000: p.28). Jameson’s idea of cognitive mapping is crystalized by Silko’s insistence on keeping the story telling tradition alive in the Native American culture (1991: p. 92). Actually, the title of the novel *Almanac of the Dead*— almanac as a word of Arabic origin meaning a yearly book which registers history and the dead referring to Native American ancestors— can be interpreted as a desire to create a cognitive map which provides an aesthetic connection to past and ancestors.

Lastly, this paper will contribute to the Native American literary studies field by bringing a different perspective with its emphasis on the importance of the intrinsic relation between the self, the land and history in construction and survival of the Native American identity. An overview of the scholarly works on *Almanac of the Dead* will vouch for this. For instance Virginia Bell in her comparative analysis titled “Counter-Chronicling and Alternative Mapping in Memoria del fuego and Almanac of the Dead” is mainly concerned about indigenous people’s conception of nation saying “*Thus, they [these two novels] may be said to reinvent what “nation” means, dislodging it from Eurocentric narratives*” (6); however, Bell concludes by



pointing out the failure of this project because “*the novel continues to emphasize the regional and global economic networks in which all the characters are caught*” (2000: p.27). Ann Brigham in “Productions of Geographic Scale and Capitalist-Colonialist Enterprise in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*” is mainly concerned about the concept of space and map-making in the novel by offering how this geographic construction of the space “*contribute [s] to both the survival and overthrow of colonialist-capitalism.*” She argues how the stories in the novel can be read as unique portrayals of “*a Native American conceptualization of space and narrative modeled on expansiveness rather than expansion*” (Brigham, 2004: p. 303). Tim Libretti in his article titled “The Other Proletarians: Native American Literature and Class Struggle” adopts a Marxist perspective—“*therefore studying Native American literature as proletarian*”—to read how the Native American labor is problematically excluded from the capitalist constructions of economy or tied solely to claims on the land: “*This isolation and invisibility of Native American labor has also been furthered by a narrow, even obsessive, focus on the land question as the overriding if not sole economic concern of Native Americans.*” (Libretti, 2001: p. 164-165). Channette Romero in “Envisioning a “Network of Tribal Coalitions”: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*” focuses on construction of tribal coalitions among the dispersed Native Americans based on traditional and spiritual connections “*to reclaim their Indigenous land*” when she concludes that “*Silko believes that these cross-national spiritual connections have the power to resist injustice in the Americas more effectively than secular political and nationalist movement*” (Romero, 2002: p. 623).

### **Analysis**

*Almanac* showcases the macabre disorientation and degeneration brought about in the Native American culture caused by a breakage in traditional ties to the land and history which had existed for centuries before the European colonial expansion in the Americas. The novel thematically centers on the idea that how a disrupted relationship to the land and ancestral history results in the fragmentation of identity for the Native Americans. It attempts to show the ways in which the loss of native land has caused irreparable damages in indigenous identities; while the notions of space and the land, economics, time and history have been replaced by European constructs. Therefore, the novel becomes a manifesto of resistance against the imposed Euro-American culture and its narratives. To show the effects of colonialist and imperialist expansion on Native American life, *Almanac*, mostly works on the ideas of the land and history. It points to the troubling changes in their conceptualizations. At this point, it would be informative to briefly introduce different conceptualization of the land/nature/earth and history/oral traditions/culture held by the indigenous people.

Before the Columbian Exchange that started after the Columbus's 1492 voyage— Native Americans had lived in small tribal societies which valued family and kinship relations. The Native American societies were composed of closely knit sharing clans in which private property was shunned. Some tribes depending on the climactic conditions of the land, maintained their livelihood as hunters-gatherers or farmers. They used what was available to build houses and some led nomadic lifestyles by carrying along tepees made of buffalo hides –cognitively similar to the Turkish word 'tepe' meaning hill or top— for makeshift lodgings. One of the salient features of the Native American belief system was their reverence for nature and animals. As they believed inanimate objects and animals possessed souls, they saw everything as part of human beings and avoided usurping of the land and sources for unnecessary accumulation of material wealth. This thinking, consequently helped them to preserve the nature and its inhabitants from human harm. Obviously this lack of capitalistic greediness at the expense of the destruction of the natural habitat and avoiding exploitation of the natural sources and human labor in the form of slavery would become one of the cultural contentions between Europeans and the Native Americans- a point dramatically exemplified in the *Almanac* in its critique of capitalist mode of production and avaricious colonialist relationship to the land. In addition, Native Americans placed utmost importance on ancestors, and maintained their reverence for their forbearers by building elaborate burial burrows and conducting burial and remembrance ceremonies. This reverence for the ancestors helped them with an awareness of history and cultural past, which was mostly kept alive over the generations through story telling. Thus oral history tradition helped the Native Americans construct and maintain their identities as such.

Throughout the novel working on those two notions, namely the land and history, Silko tries to stress the importance of perseveration of national conception of the land and history in identity construction of individuals. To her, Native Americans' disorientation and cultural disintegration has occurred as a result of lack of knowledge in ancestral history and changing attitudes toward the land. As we can infer from the text, Silko partly holds European colonizers, who having confiscated the Native American territories, disrupted the indigenous people's relation to the land by forcing new methods of production such as capitalism, responsible for this transformation. As it is clear, the concept of the land and history is closely linked to each other as disruption of traditional ties to nature is linked to an oblivion of history and past in a vicious circle. So, through the depiction of degenerate characters in the novel, it is revealed that following the forceful displacement of the Native Americans from their land, they lost contact with the past and corrupted their traditional ties to the land. This inevitably resulted in disoriented and fragmented identities in a postmodern capitalist society, to use Jameson's phrasing.

### The Land and Nature

The forced breakage from the land culminated in socio-economic changes in the lives of the Native American tribes as capitalist mode of productions replaced the old agricultural, nomadic and communal life styles. Failing to compete with the technology capitalist corporations use, a conversion in the economic structure became inevitable for the indigenous people. People were forced to work for capitalist corporations as factory workers. This capitalist-colonialist capture of the Native American territories which disrupted the indigenous people's traditional roles and ties to the land and economic structures, is aptly exemplified through multiple characters in the novel. One such character is Sterling who had to abandon his traditional occupation of cattle grazing and crop growing to become a railroad worker. Silko harshly criticizes this change in economic structures through the example of mining business: "*the Indians had seen generations of themselves ground into bloody pulp under the steel wheels of ore cars in crumbling tunnels of gold mines*" (1991: p. 312). These structural changes in economic production eventually brought about social adaptations in family structures. Surviving tribes who used to live in big communities have shrunk in size to become loosely connected groups of individual workers or small families. As the ties between individuals have become loose, individuals have been attracted to seek more and more individualistic and selfish ambitions. The novel tries to trace back this degeneration of individuals to the time after they were forced to abandon their sharing communities. Sterling and Lecha are examples to those isolated and lost individuals in different perspectives.

Imperialist practices also brought about the exploitation of human labor, isolating people further away from the skills possess. That also meant the alienation from the land and the meaning it inheres for the indigenous peoples. In the novel, it is revealed that land used to be the most important factor forming indigenous people's identity. For that reason, the exploitation of human labor is harshly criticized in *Almanac of the Dead*. For example, when La Escapia reflects on her readings of Marx, she is appalled by the "*gruesome stories about giant spinning machines that consumed the limbs and the lives of the small children in factories*" (Silko, 1991: p. 312). In the readings she has done, Marx describes the "*corpses of children who had been work to death*" in detail; and therefore, she is extremely overwhelmed by the imagination of "*tiny children wedged inside the machinery just to make a rich man richer*" (p. 312).

As indicated before, *Almanac* showcases the contrasting relations that the Native Americans and Europeans have developed toward the land. Therefore, the novel firstly differentiates between the European and Native American conceptions of the land and ultimately criticizes the interpellated Native Americans, to use Althusser's terminology, who cherish capitalistic attitudes toward the land. The novel is filled with instances which poignantly illustrate how the land and human

labor are exploited by the capitalist entrepreneurs. For instance, the constructed notions of what land is and its importance to human beings become obvious when the Anglo-American insurance adjuster refers to Alaskan tundra as “*frozen wastes*,” failing to appreciate the nature for its beauty. Obviously, no living being matters for this estranged interest-driven relationship to the land except a capitalistic profit. Silko comments on his attitude writing “*the insurance man really believed there was no life on the tundra, nothing of value except what [oil, gas, uranium, and gold] might be under the crust of snow and earth*” (1991: p.159).

Bridget O’Meara in her analysis also points out to the exploitation waged by the capitalists saying that “*global capitalists of the present day compulsively and ritualistically sacrifice land and labor in exchange for the "surplus" wealth it produces, believing it will secure their own lives and happiness.*” (2000: p.65). This ironic identification of the false assumption cherished by the greedy capitalists can be picked up in *Almanac* as a criticism because Silko showcases how the novel characters’ relentless pursue of economic interest renders them degenerate, selfish individuals who are unable to love. Moreover, the novel implies that estrangement from the land will result in the loss of identity because the exploited earth will take its revenge by rendering the destroyers hollow beings. For instance, Yoeme’s father, a white mining engineer, was “*dried up inside, and although he still walked and talked and reasoned like a man, inside he was crackled...So their silent father had been ruined...*” (Silko, 1991: p. 121). The violation of the earth consequently leads to the destruction of the self: “*the white man had violated the Mother Earth, and he had been stricken with the sensation of a gaping emptiness between his throat and his heart*” (p. 121). Also the description of his strange death, drying up inside, figuratively draws attention to this same idea of loss of humanity and identity.

In addition to showing the destructive effects of capitalist disruption of traditional ties to the land on the Native American identity, *Almanac* draws attention to how the capitalist mode of production has also brought about the exploitation of the land at the expense of causing environmental damage. As the novel suggests the destruction of the natural habitats, poisoned waters, polluted air, estrangement from the nature (city lives), are all the ills of the modernity brought on by capitalism. Wandering in the streets of Mexico City, La Escapia, is disgusted by the pollution and deterioration of the environment: “*In the filthy, smog-choked streets with deafening reverberations of traffic jammed solid around her, La Escapia had laughed out. [In an ironic sense] This was the end of what the white man had to offer the Americas; poison smog in the winter and the choking clouds swirled off sewage treatment leaching fields and filled the sky with fecal dust in early spring*” (Silko, 1991: p. 312-313).

Silko, in line with Native Americans’ spiritual reverence for the nature, admonishes that the response of the nature will be harsh against those abusers who insist on the destruction of the environment: “*the mother earth would punish those*

*who defiled and despoiled her. Fierce, hot winds would drive away the rain clouds; irrigation wells go dry; all the plants and animals would disappear*" (1991: p. 632).

For some characters in the novel who are conscious of the damage brought along by imperialist domination, the retaking of the tribal land becomes the only solution for healing. For instance, for El Feo, the leader of guerilla army of resistance, taking the land back matters above all other things. He is nostalgic for the old days when they were one with the nature. He daydreams about the past days, and those dreams become "*sensuous daydreams of Mother Earth who loved all children, all living beings*" (Silko, 1991: p. 313). However, he is hopeful that after some time, the previous relationship to the land will be restored. And revitalized relation to the land is the only precondition for a true happiness for indigenous people, he thinks.

Tacho is another character who embodies the resistance spirit. Also his idealistic choice to be a member of people's army by sacrificing the riches of a safe life becomes a great contrast to the interest-driven ambitions of capitalists. His choice between a wealthy and safe life serving rich Menardo and arduous struggle for emancipation of his people marks the distinction between capitalism and idealism [or materialist struggle]. We are given an account of his confrontation with his conscience: "*A life might be short or a life might be long; duration mattered little. What did matter was how one lived until one died. Tacho examined his conscience carefully; he must not go to the bundle if his motives were selfish; he must not pick up the bundle if he wanted riches or a long life or an easy life. For riches and a long life Tacho knew all he had to do was continue to serve Menardo*" (Silko, 1991: p. 477).

### **History and Identity (Cultural Heritage)**

In the Native American cultural traditions, history is constructed through stories told by every generation to the next, entailing the formation of collective memory. Given the importance of oral story telling tradition, the novel suggests that collective memory has a pivotal role in forming personal identity. Thus, many stories told in the novel would become a form of cultural glue which holds up the past, current and future generations of the same group together. Since the indigenous culture is based on oral tradition, the stories told generations after generations constitute the backbone of their history. Silko stresses the importance of stories in Native American societies saying, "*the stories of the people or their 'history' had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence. If the people had not told stories, or if the stories somehow been lost, then the people were lost..., within history reside relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice*" (Silko, 1991: p. 316).

Also contrasting notions of history held by European men and indigenous people are maintained throughout the novel like the different conceptions of the land and space. For example, El Feo, the guerilla leader, reflects on those different conceptualizations of history held by two opposing parties. The following thought process of the character is a good example to highlight the difference: "*In the Americas the white man never referred to the past but only to the future. The white men didn't seem to understand he had no future here because he had no past. . .*" (p. 313). El Feo, implicitly refers to the fact that oblivion of history results in an indefinite future.

Given the direct correlation between storytelling and history, in *Almanac* it is emphasized that the loss of identity is largely caused by a lost sense of history and the past. As exemplified through some characters in the novel, Silko maintains that there are two types of ignorance regarding the past: one is dictated and forced by the powerful (cultural hegemony) and the other stems from people's indifference to their own culture (to use Althusser's terminology, cultural interpellation). For those who indulge in the deliberate act of making people forget their history, Silko's criticism becomes more severe when she writes, "*the powers who controlled the United States didn't want the people to know their history. If the people knew their history, they would realize they must rise up*" (Silko, 1991: p. 431). Although Silko's statement may seem astoundingly sharp, her main point is to draw attention to the drawbacks of an insufficient knowledge of history on the part of an exploited people. Thus *Almanac* becomes a criticism of degeneration of individuals as a result of disorientation brought about by a lost sense of history. Because lack of historical consciousness leads to cultural disorientation and fragmentation of identities, throughout the novel Silko's salient contention is that colonizing ideology's main aim has been to make people forget their past. She points to this corruptive agenda of the Anglo-American white men along with its cure in the following statement: "*For hundreds of years, white men had been telling the people of the Americas to forget the past; but now the white men Marx came along and he was telling people to remember. The old-time people had believed the same thing; they must reckon with the past because it lay the seeds of the present and future. They must reckon with the past because within it lay this present moment and also the future moment*" (1991: p.311).

In *Almanac* both types in oblivion of history are revealed through some characters. As an example to those who are indifferent to history, Sterling is introduced. And the change which has taken place in his conscience is exemplary to all indigenous peoples. To show this transformation, the novel starts and ends with Sterling. At the beginning, he is portrayed as somebody who hides from the past. He is not interested in the stories that are told by the old people. He continues to work as a railroad worker for fear that he will be exposed to old men's tales if he quits, "*Sterling had avoided being caught up in the raging arguments made by the old-time*

*people who had warned all the people would pay, and pay terribly for this desecration, this crime against all living things*” (Silko, 1991: p. 34-35). All in all, at the beginning of the novel, Sterling is presented to be an individual who chooses to isolate himself from the old generation saying, *“the old ones stuck to their predictions stubbornly”* (p.35). Eventually, we encounter a transformation in his attitude toward the importance of collective history transferred through stories. At the end of the novel with a meaningful change of occupations—he quits his job at the railroad company and becomes a gardener— Sterling strengthens his ties to the land, which can also be read as a symbolic act in his awakening to a historic consciousness. His deliberate choice to forget the past in order to get rid of the troubling memories at the beginning of the novel is eventually replaced by an idealistic consciousness at the end.

Given the importance Silko attaches to gaining a knowledge of history to establish cultural identity, Sterling’s transformation is detailed in the novel. His confrontation with Seese, who is in a hopeless search for her lost child, alters his thoughts regarding the past. In a way, the lost baby becomes a symbol for a lost history of the Native Americans. As a result, in his search for the “lost baby” Sterling joins those who try to recover historical consciousness from the hands of the colonizers. Before his transformation, readers are introduced with a Sterling who had been deeply buried in his readings of popular magazines, as products of postmodern capitalist culture to use Jameson’s ideas. Sterling used to confine his understanding of societal issues to the representations he encountered in magazine articles. That is the reason why he used to follow their suggested cure for depression, for instance, an ironic treatment for the Native Americans as it advised an indifference to the past: *“to cure depression one must let bygones be bygones”* (Silko, 1991: p. 36). In a way, Sterling had chosen to avoid remembering the past which witnessed the forcible removal of his ancestors from their territories; however, after a moment of awareness, Sterling’s decision to step outside the capitalist media culture became catalyst in his regaining of identity: *“the magazines referred to a world Sterling had left forever, a world that was gone, that safe old world, Sterling had left forever, ..., that safe old world that had never really existed except on the pages of Reader’s Digest in articles on reducing blood cholesterol, corn jokes, and patriotic anecdotes”* (Silko, 1991: p. 757).

Like Sterling who is transformed to embrace the Native American history, we witness other characters in the novel who purposefully work toward making people gain awareness of the past. Clinton, who is a conscious activist, prepares informative programs to remind people of their historical background to help them take action against the injustices and exploitations. However, aware of people’s frustrating oblivion to realities of their situation, he despairs that he wasn’t going to find poor blacks in L.A. or Miami who would waste time listening to him: *“The poor were tired and sick. They would rather watch TV. A few were making big money form*

*the others who bought a few minutes of forgetfulness from a pipe or a needle. Illness, dope, and hunger were the white men's allies; only dope stopped young black men from burning white America to the ground"* (Silko, 1991: p. 426).

This passage directs criticism to all those who have a part in the exploitation of Native American people. First, it levels a criticism onto those who render people oblivious of their history. Second criticism is targeted to people from the same group whose greediness and love for money cause them to add to the misery of the fellow people. They sell drugs to those desperate people in need of a moment of forgetfulness without considering how much harm they are inflicting on them. And the last criticism goes to those people who are utterly indifferent to the problems they are facing; they choose to live in complete forgetfulness.

*Almanac* offers an elucidatory link between the oblivion of history and disruption of traditional economic structures brought about by estrangement to nature and the land. In other words the novel illustrates degenerative forces of capitalism on indigenous identities. One such character that Silko introduces in the novel is Lecha. As an individual caught in the machinations of capitalist avarice, Lecha who performs psychic readings to locate missing or murdered persons, becomes a relentless degenerate. She indulges in strict bargains with the producers of the TV shows about the payment for each program she joins. She says she won't speak a word without taking enough money. Concerned only with economic interest, she becomes oblivious to the miseries of other people; during the programs, most of the time, she is either concerned with her appearance or her possibility of having sex with the man she falls in love "in an instant." As a result, Lecha's psychic shows become an object of exploitation and commodification which is exchanged for money while those programs become an arena where program makers abuse people's miseries and sufferings to gain economic profit.

Another exemplary character who has become a palm in the capitalist system is Trigg. Trigg founds organ and blood plasma donor centers, where he exploits the weak for economic surplus. His donors are homeless poor men and war veterans. Because those people have no relatives who will realize their absence, Trigg cruelly rejoices for the lucrativeness of his business saying that "*nobody ever notices they are gone. The ones I get*" (Silko, 1991: p. 444). He grotesquely murders his victims while slowly collecting their bloods. His insatiable thirst for money turns him into a cruel sadist pleased with the possibility of a war—very much like weapons dealers yearning for more violence and fighting to sell products. As a result, for Trigg wars and killings are capitalistic opportunities which will supply an abundance of bodies to be commodified. Although there will be a shortage of wealthy patients in the course of a war, he thinks that "*if Mexico blew up, the beds of Trigg's hospitals would be filled with wounded U.S. soldiers paid for by Uncle Sam. And of course, if civil war broke out in Mexico, there would be no shortages of donor organs in Tucson*" (Silko, 1991: p. 663). Ann Brigham in her essay comments on Trigg's



practices by tying them up to the consumption and commodification mentality on global scale which is projected throughout the novel: *"The novel shows how the practices of production, consumption, and reproduction develop according to Euro-American plots of individualism and productivity. These, in turn, represent a larger ideology of expansion. As the exploits of Trigg and others show, globalization is not about connectivity and the flattening out of inequalities. Rather, it represents the expansion of the ideology of the individual, the pitting of the self against all else as other in order to privatize and commodify the other as resource and profit"* (2004: p. 305).

Like Trigg, another character Beufrey, a cruel sadist, has a company selling video clips full of violence and blood. Cashing in on others' suffering and death, he embodies the capitalist notion which dictates that every means regardless of ethical values should be utilized as long as it leads to the desired end. The novel criticizes those who pursue economic profit by releasing graphic videos through which *"death-as-spectacle is widely disseminated, packaged for mass consumption in the form of entertainment, including mainstream national news, network news magazines, blockbuster movies, music videos, talk shows, dramatic series, and taken-from-the-headlines television movies."* (O'Meara, 2000: p. 67) As Beufrey and those who like him earn money while displaying suffering and death relentlessly, Trigg does not hesitate to provide the conditions for self-destruction for the people whom he wants to get rid of. Silko at this point suggests that drugs, alcohol and guns become perfect tools for self-destruction. The powerful, when they want to silence others, simply make them addictive to drugs and alcohol. Seese despairs that those who are exploited *"in this world would obligingly kill themselves for you. [The powerful] No need for hired assassins. You might have to supply a woman, drugs, or a fast car and a gun"* (Silko, 1991: p. 50).

Janet St. Clair, in "Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*" shows how the characters in the novel fall into the abyss of degeneration as a result of individualism and capitalism. She starts by commenting on the atmosphere of the novel: it is *"a nightmarish wasteland of violence, bestiality, cruelty, and crime"* (St. Clair, 1996: p.141). In the article, she points to the deformed and grotesque family relationships, sexual perversion and the inability to love. She says that *"Almanac reveals an utterly amoral and atomized society in which each isolated member is indifferent to everything but the gratifications of his own enervated passions. He is connected to nothing: all existence outside himself is reduced to a stock of commodities for which he must compete."* (1996:p.142) Moreover, in an attempt to show the novel characters' inability of love, she offers thorough character analysis which underscores loveless, degenerate individualism in a corrupt society where *"status is determined by how much one is capable of taking and keeping, everything--land, money, materials, human bodies and lives--are commodified, priced, and labeled for consumption"* (1996:p.142).

Silko positions awareness of history as a crucial precondition which delineates a people's path to take in the future. History is also important as it throws light onto the facts about lives and characteristics of a people, those facts in the end promote a true understanding of who they are. Failing to learn it results in adaptation of some imposed ideologies and wrong practices. As we have seen so far, Silko offers a Marxist criticism of the capitalist postmodern society imposed on the Native Americans. However, Silko, who wants to think outside the frameworks delineated by the white European men, equally dismisses a Marxist economic system as a cure to the suffering of the Native Americans. That is the reason why Silko wants to emphasize the unsuitability of Marxist practice in indigenous people's lives. Pointing to the importance of traditional culture and ancestral history, in *Almanac* she stresses some major incompatibilities between Marxist ideology and Native American experiences. Silko even considers Bartolomeo's betrayal of history as an adequate reason for his death, writing "*Bartolomeo had somehow managed to exceed all the others in his disdain for history before the Cuban revolution. Before Fidel, history did not exist for Bartolomeo. That was his crime; that is why he died*" (Silko, 1991: p.315). Although Marx is referred as being different from other white man, she still says that "*Marx had been inspired by reading about certain Native American communal societies, though naturally as a European he had misunderstood a great deal*" (1991: p. 519). This is an indicator of how cultural specific experiences play an important role in the full understanding of current situations.

Another character in the novel, Angelita even curses Marxism saying "*Marxists don't want to give Indian tribal land back. We say hell with all Marxists who oppose the return to tribal land!*" (Silko, 1991: p. 519). When, however, Angelita makes a distinction between Marxism and Marx himself, it becomes a criticism of wrong practices of Marxists, such as Cuban Marxists, and others like Lenin and Mao. She goes on saying, "*so called disciples of Marx disgraced his name. . .*" (p. 519). As indigenous people's only aim is to retake the land, she claims that the earth and history will help them to realize their one and only ambition: "*We simply wait for the earth's natural forces already set loose, the exploring, fierce energy of all the dead slaves and dead ancestors haunting the Americas.... we wait for the tidal wave of history sweep us along*" (Silko, 1991: p. 519). To her no ideology except taking the land back describes their path: "*People have been asking questions about ideology. Are we this or are we that? Do we follow Marx? The answer is no! No white man's politics. No white man Marx!*" (p. 518).

The same point has been taken up by some scholars as well. For instance, in "The Silko Road from Chiapas or Why Native Americans Cannot Be Marxists" Tamara Teale talks about the impossibility of the Native Americans' embracing Marxist ideology. She points to the exploitative nature of both capitalist and Marxist mode of productions as they both, to varying degrees, require the industrialization of production. She says "*both capitalism and Marxism require exploitation of natural*

*resources and industrial development of the earth, and thus, both conflict with the Native American life way which holds the earth sacred*"(Teale, 1998: p. 158). According to her, Silko's inclusion of Marx only puzzles the readers as the only thing that matters for the Native Americans is taking the land back. In a way, Teale suggests that the Native Americans do not need to make use of Marx to reclaim their land; restoring their traditional relationship to the land would suffice. For this reason Teale identifies the earth as a main character in the novel. The difference in the relation of people to the earth becomes more obvious in this statement she makes: "In relations of humans to earth, Silko has two camps: those who industrially develop the earth, i.e., the capitalists and the Marxists, and, those who take nothing from the earth, the indigenous peoples of the Americas" (1998: p. 160). Working on Silko's argument, she believes that neither capitalists nor Marxists would hand over the land to their genuine owners as they cannot dare to risk their economic interests. Interestingly this can be seen as the book's final position on this issue.

### Conclusion

Consequently, *Almanac of the Dead* becomes a novel which emphasizes the importance of the land and history in the Native American identity. As a cultural manifesto, though pessimistic and maccabre, this postmodern novel can be read as a critique of the imperialist practices forced onto the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the novel, by creating mostly unlovable as well as degenerate and alienated characters, who are gripped by the realities of capitalistic neo-colonial structures, Silko intends to draw attention to the destructive repercussions of such cultural and economic changes for the Native American individuals and societies. Through dramatic episodes offered in the novel which illustrate this idea of aliniation and disintegration on the part of the Native American identity, Silko designates the main culprits as such: a lost sense of the past and oblivion of the ancestral history as well as the disruption of a traditional connection to the land and nature. As Fanon would advise, Silko maintains that the cure—or the postcolonial healing—is incumbent on sustaining a responsible understanding of a people's history and regenerating their ties to the land and nature. All in all, the novel can be read as a resistance of the cultural heritage of the Native Americans.

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