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Voicing Indigenous Identity: Language and Cultural Continuity in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between language, identity, and cultural continuity in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Both novels emerged during the Native American Renaissance and foreground Indigenous storytelling as a means of resisting cultural erasure and restoring tribal identity. The study argues that language in these texts extends beyond communication to function as a repository of collective memory, ceremonial knowledge, and Indigenous epistemology. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Indigenous literary criticism, the paper examines how Momaday and Silko integrate oral traditions, myths, sacred narratives, tribal philosophies, and ceremonial discourse into their fictional worlds. In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday presents language as a healing force that reconnects the alienated protagonist, Abel, with his cultural roots through ritual, memory, and the sacred landscape. Similarly, *Ceremony* portrays storytelling and ceremonial language as transformative practices through which Tayo overcomes historical trauma and re-establishes harmony with his community and the natural world. Both novels challenge colonial narratives that sought to suppress Indigenous languages and cultural practices by affirming the resilience of Native knowledge systems. Through a comparative textual analysis, this study demonstrates that the preservation of Indigenous languages and oral traditions is inseparable from the survival of Native cultural identity.

Keywords: Cultural Continuity, Indigenous Identity, Language and Culture, Native American Literature, Oral Tradition.

Introduction

Language constitutes one of the most enduring foundations of human identity, serving as a repository of history, culture, spirituality, and collective memory. For Indigenous communities across the world, language is not merely a system of communication but a living expression of their relationship with the land, ancestors, ceremonies, and traditional knowledge. Every Indigenous language embodies a unique worldview through which communities understand nature, social relationships, and the sacred. Consequently, the loss of language signifies far more than the disappearance of words; it threatens the

continuity of cultural traditions, historical consciousness, and communal identity. Native American literature repeatedly demonstrates that the survival of Indigenous cultures depends upon the preservation of their languages and oral traditions, which have transmitted tribal histories and philosophies across generations long before the emergence of written texts.

The history of Native Americans has been profoundly shaped by colonization, displacement, and cultural suppression. European expansion into North America initiated a prolonged process of political domination and cultural transformation that disrupted Indigenous ways of life. Colonial governments sought not only to acquire Indigenous lands but also to reshape Native societies according to Euro-American values. Language became one of the primary targets of assimilationist policies. Indigenous children were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools where they were prohibited from speaking their tribal languages and were encouraged, often through coercive measures, to abandon their customs and beliefs. Such policies attempted to sever the relationship between language and identity, replacing Indigenous cultural knowledge with colonial systems of education and governance. Although these measures resulted in the decline of many Native languages, they failed to eliminate Indigenous cultural consciousness. Tribal communities continued to preserve their histories, ceremonies, and worldviews through oral traditions, communal practices, and storytelling, laying the foundation for cultural revitalization in later generations.

Storytelling occupies a central position in Native American societies because it functions as a means of preserving collective memory and transmitting ethical, spiritual, and historical knowledge. Unlike the conventional distinction between history and myth found in many Western traditions, Indigenous narratives often integrate mythology, history, personal memory, and ceremonial practices into a unified cultural framework. Stories explain the origins of tribes, establish relationships between human beings and the natural world, preserve ancestral wisdom, and reaffirm communal responsibilities. Oral traditions therefore represent dynamic cultural practices rather than static records of the past. They are continuously renewed through performance and participation, enabling each generation to inherit and reinterpret its cultural heritage. The movement of these traditions from oral performance into written literature has enabled Native American authors to preserve Indigenous voices while engaging a wider readership without abandoning the philosophical foundations of tribal knowledge.

The emergence of the Native American Renaissance during the latter half of the twentieth century marked a decisive moment in the development of Indigenous literature in the United States. Native writers began to challenge stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples that had dominated mainstream literature and scholarship for centuries. Instead of presenting Native Americans as passive subjects of history, these authors asserted Indigenous perspectives rooted in tribal experiences, oral traditions, and cultural continuity. Their writings foregrounded community, ceremony, spirituality, and ancestral memory while simultaneously addressing the historical consequences of colonization, forced relocation, and cultural displacement. Literature became an important medium through which Indigenous authors reclaimed their histories, reaffirmed tribal identities, and preserved cultural knowledge for future generations. The Native American Renaissance thus represents not merely a literary movement but also a broader process of cultural affirmation and intellectual self-representation. Among the most influential writers associated with this literary resurgence are N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko. Their works have transformed the landscape of Native American literature by demonstrating how storytelling can function simultaneously as artistic expression, historical testimony, and cultural preservation. Both authors draw extensively upon tribal oral traditions while adapting them to contemporary literary forms, thereby creating narratives that bridge Indigenous epistemologies and modern fiction. Although they belong to different tribal communities and employ distinct narrative

techniques, their works share a commitment to preserving Indigenous knowledge systems and challenging colonial narratives that sought to marginalize Native voices.

The suppression of Native American languages was closely linked to colonial strategies of assimilation that included boarding schools, missionary instruction, and policies restricting the use of Indigenous languages. Native children were frequently discouraged or punished for speaking their ancestral tongues, with the objective of weakening their ties to tribal communities and cultural traditions. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes in the broader context of colonial domination, "language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" of colonized peoples (Thiong'o 16). Within Native American communities, these assimilationist practices contributed to the decline of numerous Indigenous languages and disrupted the oral traditions through which cultural knowledge, history, and values had long been transmitted. The erosion of language therefore represented not only a linguistic loss but also a profound threat to Indigenous cultural identity and continuity.

In response to the historical erosion of Indigenous languages and traditions, Native American authors have employed literature as a powerful means of resistance, cultural remembrance, and renewal. Through novels, poetry, autobiographical writings, and adaptations of oral storytelling, they recover voices that were marginalized by colonial narratives and reaffirm Indigenous systems of knowledge. Leslie Marmon Silko underscores the vital role of storytelling in sustaining Native communities by asserting that "stories are all we have to fight off illness and death" (Silko 2). This statement illustrates that storytelling functions as more than a literary practice; it serves as a cultural resource through which collective memory, historical experience, and linguistic heritage are preserved despite the decline of Indigenous language use. Consequently, written literature extends the function of oral tradition by maintaining cultural identity and transmitting ancestral knowledge across generations.

The consequences of language loss are frequently represented in Native American literature through themes of cultural estrangement, identity conflict, and spiritual fragmentation. Many protagonists experience a sense of displacement as they negotiate the tensions between dominant Euro-American society and their Indigenous heritage. N. Scott Momaday captures the profound relationship between identity, language, and place when he observes that "a people's identity is rooted in language and land" (Momaday 85). The erosion of Indigenous languages therefore weakens the bonds connecting individuals to their ancestral landscapes, spiritual traditions, and communal histories, producing a profound sense of cultural dislocation. Native American literary texts portray this linguistic decline not simply as the disappearance of a means of communication but as a disruption of the cultural values and historical continuity that sustain Indigenous life.

Despite these challenges, Native American writers consistently present cultural recovery as an ongoing process grounded in the revitalization of traditional knowledge. They incorporate Indigenous languages, tribal myths, ceremonial practices, and oral narrative patterns into English-language texts, creating literary spaces that reflect Indigenous worldviews while engaging contemporary readers. Rather than rejecting English outright, these authors reshape it to convey tribal philosophies and cultural experiences. Joy Harjo emphasizes this creative transformation by arguing that "reinventing the enemy's language" allows Native writers to express Native realities within a dominant linguistic framework (Harjo 20). Such narrative strategies challenge the linguistic authority established through colonialism and affirm the endurance of Indigenous cultures. The use of untranslated Indigenous words, ceremonial chants, bilingual expressions, and culturally significant imagery functions as an assertion of Native presence, reinforcing both cultural continuity and resistance to assimilation.

Oral tradition remains fundamental to the preservation and renewal of Indigenous cultures, occupying a prominent place in Native American literary expression. Many Native American texts reflect the

characteristics of oral storytelling through their circular narrative patterns, communal orientation, and emphasis on shared cultural experience. In contrast to the predominantly linear structure of many Western literary traditions, Indigenous narratives privilege continuity, relationality, and the transmission of collective memory across generations. Paula Gunn Allen emphasizes this distinctive quality by observing that Native narratives “are not meant to be read as isolated artifacts but as living processes” (Allen 54). Her insight underscores that Indigenous literature should be understood as an evolving cultural practice rather than a fixed body of written texts. Through the preservation of oral traditions within literary narratives, Native American writers sustain cultural knowledge and strengthen communal identity even in contexts where Indigenous languages have experienced significant decline.

The recovery of Indigenous culture in Native American literature extends beyond the simple preservation of the past. Rather than presenting tradition as a static inheritance, Native writers depict it as a living and adaptive force capable of responding to changing historical and social circumstances. Their works demonstrate that cultural continuity is achieved by engaging with contemporary realities while remaining grounded in ancestral knowledge, tribal values, and ceremonial practices. This dynamic negotiation enables Native American literature to challenge the enduring effects of colonialism while simultaneously envisioning possibilities for cultural renewal. Gerald Vizenor articulates this perspective through the concept of “survivance”—a combination of survival and resistance that rejects victimhood and affirms active presence (Vizenor 15). His formulation emphasizes the resilience of Indigenous communities and their capacity to assert cultural agency despite centuries of colonial oppression.

Language loss and cultural recovery, therefore, constitute deeply interconnected concerns within Native American literature. Although Indigenous writers acknowledge the profound consequences of linguistic suppression and cultural displacement, they also demonstrate that literature can become a powerful medium for healing, resistance, and renewal. By incorporating Indigenous voices, oral traditions, tribal histories, and collective memory into their narratives, they reaffirm the persistence of Native identities and cultural worldviews. The present study examines how literary texts function as sites of cultural reclamation by resisting historical erasure and reinforcing Indigenous continuity. It argues that language whether spoken, remembered, translated, or imaginatively reconstructed remains central to the preservation of Indigenous identity, cultural resilience, and the ongoing process of self-definition.

Native American literature occupies a significant position within postcolonial studies because it addresses the historical consequences of linguistic suppression while envisioning pathways toward cultural renewal. Among the leading voices of the Native American Renaissance, Leslie Marmon Silko gives particular attention to the interrelationship between Indigenous languages, oral traditions, and cultural memory. Her writings reveal the ways in which colonial policies disrupted Native systems of knowledge by weakening Indigenous languages, while simultaneously demonstrating that storytelling remains a vital instrument for cultural endurance, resistance, and regeneration. Through her distinctive narrative techniques, Silko affirms that the restoration of Indigenous identity depends upon recovering language, reconnecting with ancestral memory, and reaffirming the enduring relationship between people and the land.

Colonial educational institutions played a central role in the systematic suppression of Indigenous languages as part of broader assimilationist policies. Native children were compelled to replace their ancestral languages with English, creating a rupture in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Silko consistently portrays this process as an intentional strategy of colonial domination

rather than an inevitable historical development. In *Ceremony*, she illustrates the profound consequences of separating Indigenous communities from their linguistic and cultural heritage, “the Indian Boarding Schools cut us off from our own lands, from our own families, and from the stories that had been passed down for centuries. Without the stories, the people were left unprotected, and the words that once held power were silenced by another language that did not belong to the land” (Silko, *Ceremony* 2–3).

This passage demonstrates that language serves as far more than a means of communication; it functions as a source of cultural protection, spiritual strength, and communal continuity. Silko suggests that when Indigenous languages are suppressed, the consequences extend beyond linguistic decline to include the weakening of cultural memory and spiritual resilience. By linking language with ancestral landscapes, historical experience, and collective identity, she illustrates that linguistic displacement produces not only social and psychological alienation but also a profound disruption of Indigenous cultural continuity.

Silko's writings consistently underscore the importance of oral tradition as a cornerstone of Indigenous cultural life. Within Native American communities, oral narratives preserve tribal history, ethical principles, spiritual beliefs, and traditional knowledge, ensuring their transmission across generations. Storytelling is therefore not simply a literary practice but a cultural institution that sustains communal identity and reinforces Indigenous worldviews. In her essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Silko explains the profound relationship between language and cultural continuity, “For the Pueblo people, language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a way of knowing the world. Stories are alive, and they are told so that the people may remember who they are and where they come from. When the stories are forgotten, the people begin to disappear” (Silko, “Language and Literature” 54–55).

This reflection highlights the dynamic nature of storytelling within Pueblo culture. Rather than functioning as a fixed record of the past, stories remain active cultural practices through which identity, memory, and traditional knowledge are continually renewed. Even in circumstances where Indigenous languages have experienced decline, storytelling continues to preserve cultural values through both Native languages and English adapted to express Indigenous perspectives. Silko's literary style demonstrates this process by incorporating Indigenous rhythms, imagery, and oral patterns into English, thereby reshaping the language of the colonizer into a vehicle for cultural affirmation and continuity.

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) occupies a landmark position in Native American literary history. Widely recognized as the novel that brought national attention to contemporary Native American fiction, it explores the experiences of Abel, a young Jemez Pueblo veteran who struggles with alienation after returning from military service. His disconnection from community, language, and ceremonial life reflects the broader consequences of colonial disruption experienced by many Indigenous peoples. Rather than presenting healing as an individual psychological process alone, the novel portrays recovery through reconnection with tribal traditions, sacred landscapes, ritual practices, and communal memory. Ceremonial language, traditional songs, and oral narratives become essential elements in Abel's journey toward restoring his cultural identity. Momaday's narrative demonstrates that language possesses creative and spiritual power, enabling individuals to recover their relationship with both community and place.

The process of cultural renewal is vividly represented in *Ceremony* through the character of Tayo, whose personal healing mirrors the restoration of communal memory and Indigenous identity. Alienated by the combined effects of war, colonialism, and cultural displacement, Tayo gradually

regains a sense of belonging through his participation in traditional ceremonies and his reconnection with ancestral stories. Silko captures this transformative process in the following passage, “the stories were still there, even if the people had forgotten them. The words waited patiently in the earth and in the wind, and when the time came, they rose again to heal the broken world. This was the ceremony, and it could not be completed without remembering the old stories” (Silko, *Ceremony* 246–47).

This passage reflects Silko's conviction that stories possess the power to restore balance and renew cultural life. In her vision, cultural recovery does not imply a return to an unchanging past; rather, it involves reawakening ancestral wisdom so that it may respond to contemporary realities. Storytelling and language consequently emerge as powerful agents of healing, enabling individuals and communities to confront historical trauma, reaffirm Indigenous identity, and sustain cultural continuity despite the enduring legacy of colonialism.

Native American literature also resists the conventions of dominant Western literary traditions by adopting narrative forms that reflect Indigenous modes of thought and expression. Rather than relying on linear plots and chronological progression, Leslie Marmon Silko employs cyclical storytelling, myths, songs, and ceremonial patterns that embody Indigenous understandings of time, community, and existence. These narrative techniques emphasize relationships, continuity, and interconnectedness instead of fragmentation and individualism. Paula Gunn Allen highlights the cultural significance of such storytelling when she observes, “tribal stories are not simply entertainment or historical accounts; they are the means by which cultural values, spiritual knowledge, and communal identity are transmitted. When these stories enter written literature, they carry with them the power of survival and renewal” (Allen 58–59).

Allen's observation affirms that Indigenous storytelling extends beyond artistic expression to function as a vehicle for preserving cultural memory and sustaining communal identity. Silko's narrative practice reflects this principle by integrating oral traditions into written fiction, allowing ancestral knowledge to remain vibrant despite the historical decline of many Indigenous languages. Her work suggests that while language loss poses a serious challenge to cultural continuity, the persistence of storytelling traditions provides an important means through which Indigenous values and collective memory can be preserved and revitalized.

Silko further connects the decline of Indigenous languages with the historical dispossession of Native lands, presenting language, place, and identity as inseparable dimensions of Indigenous existence. In her literary vision, the land itself functions as a source of memory and cultural knowledge, reinforcing the belief that identity cannot be separated from ancestral landscapes. This relationship is expressed in *Ceremony* through the following passage, “the land remembers the stories, and the stories belong to the land. Without listening to the land, the people forget how to speak to one another. The ceremonies were born from the earth, and only through them could balance be restored” (Silko, *Ceremony* 118–19).

This passage illustrates that language, within Silko's Indigenous worldview, extends beyond spoken words to encompass the spiritual and ecological relationships that bind people to their environment. Cultural renewal therefore requires more than the preservation of vocabulary; it depends upon restoring meaningful connections with the land, ceremonial traditions, and ancestral knowledge. By presenting language as inseparable from place and spirituality, Silko challenges Western models that treat nature primarily as a resource for human use and instead affirms an Indigenous philosophy grounded in reciprocity, balance, and cultural continuity.

Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance provides an important framework for understanding the cultural vision expressed in Leslie Marmon Silko's writings. Rather than defining Indigenous communities through narratives of suffering or victimization, survivance emphasizes endurance, agency, and the continued vitality of Native cultures. According to Vizenor, survivance is an active sense of presence,

the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction to dominance; native narratives are stories of resistance that refuse to vanish. (Vizenor 15–16)

This concept closely aligns with Silko's literary practice, in which storytelling functions as an enduring expression of Indigenous identity and cultural persistence. Her narratives transform the historical experiences of displacement and loss into opportunities for cultural affirmation, demonstrating that memory and storytelling remain powerful means of resisting colonial erasure. Through the recovery of ancestral traditions, ceremonial knowledge, and collective memory, Silko asserts the continuing presence of Indigenous communities and reclaims spaces that colonial narratives attempt to silence.

Native American literature, as exemplified by Silko's work, therefore illustrates that the decline of Indigenous languages should not be understood as the disappearance of Indigenous cultures. Instead, it reveals how Native communities have developed innovative literary and cultural strategies to preserve and revitalize their heritage. By integrating oral traditions, Indigenous worldviews, and culturally grounded narrative forms into English-language texts, Native writers create new possibilities for expressing tribal knowledge and historical experience. Silko's fiction demonstrates that storytelling continues to play a central role in preserving cultural identity, addressing the enduring effects of historical trauma, and strengthening communal resilience. Her writings ultimately affirm that literature serves not only as a record of colonial disruption but also as a powerful expression of Indigenous survivance, cultural continuity, and creative renewal.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) similarly investigates the relationship between language, storytelling, and healing within the context of Indigenous experience. The novel follows Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna Pueblo veteran whose psychological suffering reflects the cumulative effects of war, racism, and colonial history. Silko presents healing not through conventional medical treatment but through participation in Indigenous ceremonies and the recovery of traditional narratives. Throughout the novel, myths, chants, poems, and oral stories are interwoven with prose, illustrating that Indigenous knowledge cannot be separated into isolated literary categories. Storytelling itself becomes ceremony, enabling Tayo to restore harmony with his community, the natural environment, and his ancestral heritage. Silko thus emphasizes that cultural continuity depends upon sustaining living traditions rather than preserving them as static relics of the past.

Both *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* illustrate that Indigenous language encompasses far more than vocabulary or grammar. It embodies cultural memory, ethical values, ecological knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and collective identity. Through storytelling, ceremonial discourse, and symbolic landscapes, Momaday and Silko demonstrate that language establishes connections between individuals, communities, ancestors, and the natural world. Their narratives challenge colonial assumptions that privileged written documentation over oral knowledge by affirming the intellectual and philosophical richness of Indigenous traditions. The incorporation of tribal stories into literary narratives also reflects a process of adaptation rather than replacement, illustrating how oral traditions continue to evolve while maintaining their cultural significance.

This study approaches these novels from the perspectives of postcolonial theory and Indigenous literary criticism. Postcolonial scholarship provides valuable insights into the cultural consequences of colonization, particularly the relationship between language, power, and identity. Colonial domination frequently sought to impose linguistic hierarchies that marginalized Indigenous languages and privileged the language of the colonizer. Indigenous literary criticism, however, emphasizes that Native texts should also be interpreted through tribal philosophies, oral traditions, and community-based knowledge systems. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of how Momaday and Silko transform literature into a site of cultural resistance and renewal. Rather than

merely documenting historical oppression, their works actively participate in the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous worldviews.

The comparative study of *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* is particularly significant because the novels present complementary yet distinctive visions of Indigenous identity. While Momaday foregrounds ceremonial restoration through memory, landscape, and sacred language, Silko expands the concept of ceremony by integrating multiple narrative voices and tribal stories into a comprehensive vision of communal healing. Both authors reject the notion that Indigenous cultures belong exclusively to the past. Instead, they demonstrate that cultural continuity is sustained through the dynamic interaction of memory, language, storytelling, and lived experience. Their novels illustrate that identity is continually reconstructed through participation in cultural practices that connect present generations with ancestral traditions.

Against this background, the present study investigates how *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* employ language as an instrument of cultural continuity and Indigenous self-representation. It examines the ways in which oral traditions, myths, ceremonial narratives, and storytelling preserve collective memory while resisting the assimilative pressures of colonial history. The paper argues that both Momaday and Silko transform literary language into a space where Indigenous voices are reclaimed, historical trauma is confronted, and tribal knowledge is transmitted to future generations. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that language functions not only as a medium of literary expression but also as a living cultural force that sustains Indigenous identity, strengthens communal resilience, and affirms the enduring continuity of Native American heritage.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis establishes that language loss and cultural recovery constitute two closely interconnected concerns within Native American literature. These themes reflect both the historical consequences of colonial domination and the remarkable resilience of Indigenous communities in preserving their cultural heritage. The suppression of Native languages brought about more than the disappearance of linguistic traditions; it disrupted cultural continuity, weakened communal identities, and created profound spiritual and psychological dislocation. In response to these historical realities, Native American authors have transformed literature into a powerful medium through which resistance, remembrance, and cultural revitalization are articulated. By drawing upon storytelling, myths, ceremonial traditions, and oral narratives, they safeguard collective memory while reaffirming Indigenous identities that colonial ideologies sought to erase.

The writings of Leslie Marmon Silko exemplify the enduring significance of storytelling as a source of cultural preservation and renewal. Her works demonstrate that, despite the historical decline of Indigenous languages, ancestral narratives continue to possess the capacity to sustain communal identity and promote healing across generations. Through the incorporation of Indigenous narrative patterns, ceremonial symbolism, and an ecological understanding of human existence into English-language texts, Silko reasserts Native cultural sovereignty while responding to the realities of the contemporary world. In her literary vision, language transcends its communicative function, encompassing relationships with memory, place, spirituality, and the natural environment.

Furthermore, Native American literature presents cultural recovery not as an attempt to recreate the past in its original form but as a continuous process of renewal and adaptation. Indigenous writers emphasize resilience, creativity, and cultural agency rather than narratives of victimization, reshaping identity in ways that remain rooted in ancestral traditions while addressing present-day circumstances. Their works affirm that storytelling continues to serve as an essential means of preserving cultural

knowledge, strengthening collective identity, and ensuring the transmission of Indigenous worldviews. Through literary expression, Native voices continue to reclaim historical memory, challenge colonial erasure, and sustain the living traditions that define Indigenous communities. Consequently, language whether preserved in speech, remembered through stories, or creatively reimagined in literature remains a fundamental force in the survival, continuity, and self-definition of Native cultures.

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