War Trauma and Traditional Rituals in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

Submitted by

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Abstract

A mixed narrative of hallucinated ponderings, disruptive and fragmented flashbacks as well as retellings of indigenous stories, Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977) is a blend of Native American belief system with the life altering aftermath of the Second World War. As per the American Psychiatric Association people tend to suffer from a condition called Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after experiencing any distressing or disturbing event that leaves behind a severe impression and implication. Thereby the objective of this paper is to examine the sickness that plagues the protagonist of the novel as a three-layered understanding of PTSD, cultural anxiety and the mythical undertone of the events. The hybrid cultural background of the protagonist is taken as one of the most important factors for his alienation and aloofness from the society which culminates to a compromise in the acceptance of balance and adaptation. The entire Traditional Ceremony that is conducted, is analysed as a Quest formula to determine the healing framework and its operation on Tayo’s diseased health.

**Keywords:** PTSD, Cultural Anxiety, Hybridity, Quest Formula, Traditional Healing
Apart from massive destruction and loss of life as well as property; there was also an adverse effect in the mental stability of the people; specifically, those who had represented the countries in the regiments in World War II. The victims would go through intense repetitions of flashbacks or relive the entire scenario through nightmares that creates a sense of overwhelming depression and imposes a certain kind of isolation that keeps the victim detached from the surroundings. Most obvious symptoms of the condition include intrusive thoughts where the distressing memories would keep on urging repeated flashbacks, negative thoughts and self-blame, highly volatile emotions like anger along with displaying reckless behaviour and insomnia; estrangement from the society at large and complete avoidance of certain issues that trigger emotional breakdown. This condition was very prevalent in the World Wars and Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Centre for PTSD estimated that 1 in 20 of the 2.5 million surviving World War II veterans suffer from the disorder. As such it was known as shell shock in World War I. In World War II it was known as battle fatigue and Combat Stress Reaction (CSR).

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The protagonist of the novel, Tayo, is a war veteran of the World War II who was a member of the Laguna Pueblo Native American Community owing to the blood of his mother’s side for his father was an unnamed white man whose identity is neither disclosed in the novel nor is enough importance given to it. As such Tayo is a person who is the union of two different races and two different belief systems. This aspect results in a hybridized situation where Tayo gets trapped in this very bicultural identity that manages to ensnare his beliefs, twist them and suffocate his identity. In the war he gets an official American Identity but after it is over, he is shuttled back to being an Indian. Later after war, he falls deeper and deeper into the quicksand of deteriorating belief systems and in a manner starts to self-destruct when traditional ceremonies come to his assistance and change
his entire perception. This change in perception makes Tayo better connected to the natural habitat of the reservation and specifically the land which begins to feel like a part of himself again. He moves around in search of any kind of validation to feel that he belongs to it and end the suffocating havoc of alienation that seeps into the mind of a retired soldier. He constantly fights against the overbearing blindness that white men are treated with which try to make him internalize a variety of norms and values that are considered the white man’s definable set of characters; of course, by putting them in a superior pedestal in comparison to their own native values and norms. Tayo, however unlike many of his comrades, is able to understand that vague internalization thus realizing that the overly emotional actions corresponding to that internalization are in no way beneficial to any society. These issues along with his overwhelming guilt result in his isolation and alienation due to which he hits rock-bottom. It is only after this that he steps into a ceremony, and walks the path of his own self-identification that he seemingly reaches a stable state of mind. The ancient practices of the community immediately fall into pace and leads both Tayo as well as the reader to a world of intertwined myths and reality where the nature has a massive role to play.

As such, Tayo’s condition can be seen as an affliction of the mind in three layers. First is the human plane of understanding that consists of Tayo’s pain and despair as he struggles to face the looming depression; the mental state of an individual who suffers from PTSD. The second layer can be seen as the cultural anxiety where Tayo deals with his bicultural background as well his experiences in the war where he realizes that after death all skin looks the same irrespective of colour or background. Thirdly surfaces the mythical or the ritualistic plane which reconcile the traditional beliefs of the Laguna with the supernatural elements that crop up in the narrative. In this plane, Ts’eh can be seen as not just a woman who comes to Tayo’s life to act as his guide but an embodiment of Spider Woman herself who is the Creator of the world as per their beliefs. Thereby “the novel can and should be viewed as a part of the changing rituals in which the novelist has become the healer or shaman and the readers are the
participants in the new ceremony” (Mitchell; 27). There is now a duality in the idea of the ceremony.

The novel opens with Tayo tossing in the old iron bed in his home, where sleep without nightmares of his cousin Rocky’s death, was a novelty for him. He constantly remembered the moments spent with his brother in their years of growing up and those memories made him even more aware of the fact that one of them was dead. He lay on bed but could not get any rest, continuously haunted by the spectre of guilt and desolation that ate at him. His present reality kept on blurring with his past continuously suffocating his spirit. As Silko writes,

He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present... had to sweat to think of something that wasn’t unravelled or tied in knots to the past. (Silko; 6)

The mere image of a deer pulls him back to the past when the cousins had hunted together and had managed to snag a deer for themselves. He would try his best to imagine a stand-a-alone deer but it would mutate to the one they had hunted and this kept on reminding him of his dead cousin. In this manner, the associations never stopped. From focus on the “skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands” (Silko; 7) to the weather conditions, everything would draw him into the cavern of the past; specifically, to the conversation with his comrades in the jungle of one Pacific Island and then to Rocky’s death scenario.

Even in his memories of the battle, he faced dire mental stress when he was made to pull the trigger on the Japanese soldiers and could not make himself do it. Instead, he hallucinated that he saw his uncle Josiah’s face on the soldiers he was made to kill which destroyed his fragile hold on reality. After the war was over, he was admitted to the Veterans’ Hospital for some time where he had tried his best to fade to the background. He continuously envisioned himself as only “white smoke” that had an outline but was completely hollow. He had suppressed a part of himself to be invisible buried deep under the fog. He had so thoroughly suppressed himself that he begun to denote himself in third person in a conversation between the
doctor and himself. Also, this resulted in a severe disconnect from the world which was highlighted when he pondered that it “had been a long time since he thought about having a name” (Silko; 15). His detachment was such that he had wondered about the Japanese women moving about in the LA depot where he had collapsed. His wonder was evident in the way he questioned the depot man about these people being locked up. He had not even begun to realize that the Pearl Harbour attack was in the past; the war was over and things were beginning to settle.

Beyond the stress of the war, another aspect that haunted Tayo was his guilt at the terse relation that met his homecoming after the war, when he returned alone without his cousin by his side. For long, he had been the cause of shame for his Aunt who had looked after him since his childhood after his mother had abandoned him. Born of mixed race, he had been a reminder to the community of the indiscretion that his mother had committed and was the blight against his family name. He had always been made to feel the difference between his place and his cousin Rocky’s place in their home where his Aunt had never allowed Rocky to call him as brother and made sure that Rocky would not share his playthings with Tayo. In fact, she had willingly wanted “him close enough to feel excluded” (Silko; 62). While no one had explicitly told him anything, not even his aunt; he was well aware about how Rocky had been the pride of the family, often dreaming that Rocky was alive and instead he was dead but there was wrong information owing to some mismanagement with corpses.

While he had left for the war front, there was another tragedy that stuck the family in their absence. Tayo had been the closest with only one member of the family, his uncle Josiah who was the only adult that tried his best to guide Tayo in his life. Josiah had such impact in Tayo’s life that western ideals could make him completely forget Josiah’s traditional explanations and practices which were in a manner ingrained into Tayo. In a way Josiah was the core link that tied him to the traditional thinking. It was also Josiah who used to consider violence completely ridiculous, and perhaps it was due to this that when Tayo was face to face with the mindless killing and unnecessary violence of the war; he saw Josiah on a
dying Japanese soldier’s face. In fact, that day it was not just a soldier dying but the death of the traditional belief of co-existence that was hampered by the imposition of fences and violence. However, his return did not grant him a re-union with Josiah for he was long dead while he was away.

This guilt festered along with his situation that plagued his heart and mind making him feel guilty that he was responsible for the drought that was encompassing the land. Like it was after the First World War when drought had made an appearance, as a recurring consequence; the drought had also returned after the Second World War to their lands. The water had to be hauled in wagons for the cattle and since the hills were barren; scorched cacti had to be given to the cows as food. When Tayo was in the war, Rocky had been brutally injured and the unending rain in the jungle had resulted in his wounds getting aggravated. The rain which had always been considered a blessing for his people ended up becoming the factor that acted against any possibility of a hope to save his cousin’s life. At that time Tayo prayed for the rain to end as the “wounds turned green” (Silko; 10). As the author writes,

When Tayo prayed on the long muddy road to the prison camp, it was for dry air, dry as a hundred years squeezed out of yellow sand, air to dry out the oozing wounds of Rocky’s leg, to let the torn flesh and broken bones breathe … it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him. (Silko; 10)

For Tayo the rain had become a hated aspect and he had “prayed the rain away” (Silko; 13). However, after he returned home, he saw the strangling drought that was choking the land and he began to nurture a severe guilt, believing himself to be the reason for the suffering of so many people and animals. Silko aligns this situation with a folk narrative in poetry where she writes that the Iktoa’ak’o’ya left and that resulted in everything drying up. Due to that, all “were thirsty…They were starving” (Silko; 12). Beyond this, Tayo had also gone against Josiah’s teachings on showing respect and empathy to every organism.
As such with his circumstances ending up in the extreme end, all Tayo felt was guilt for his actions that was slowly killing everything; his inability to reconcile with the killings in the war and finally his self-hatred at being alive when Rocky was dead. In fact, all he feels is hopelessness, confusion and a feeling of indebtedness where he wrestles with the fact that after all that happened, he “owed it to them” (Silko; 121). All these together plagued at his mind and resulted in a sense of permanent depression where all he did was think negative thoughts, cry and vomit. His life became stagnant when nothing could give him a cure, nor the Veteran Hospital from where he had been discharged neither the company of his own people, which did nothing more than serve as a reminder of his shortcomings. It was as if he was stuck in that life of horror and despair from where he could not breach the present. Tayo’s state of mind is very similar to one of the characters in Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs Dalloway where Septimus after going through the war had become numb to everything around him. He simply could not feel anything and that was the core of his guilt that led him to depression. He was taken to two different doctors but all that resulted rather negatively to his mental health. The Western medicine system failed him and the end was that, plagued by the false pretences and the increasing threat of being locked in some shelter, Septimus killed himself. Similar to this, is the case of Tayo and yet this is where the paths diverge. Instead of sending him to have further treatment in hospitals, his grandmother suggested taking a traditional route.

It was her insistence that brought the first medicine man to their home to look at Tayo. Old Ku’oosh spoke in the old dialect and Tayo felt hints of shame fluttering in him as in comparison his language was childish and mixed with English words. In fact, it is important to note that this was the first time since he returned, that Tayo felt something for a situation that was not the war. This medicine man describes a cave that Tayo immediately connects to when he realizes that it was the place the cousins had often visited together. Amidst this however, the old man carefully portrays the world as fragile. This in a manner greatly affects Tayo as a series of associations connects in his mind. However, as all these interactions go on,
the important fact is that Tayo begins opening up to the old man. He slowly reveals about his feelings and begins to actually talk, which is always the first step in counselling sessions administered to PTSD patients. A Silko writes,

“I’m sick,” he said turning away from the old man to vomit. “I’m sick, but I never killed any enemy. I never touched them…you could help me anyway…Do something for me, the way you did for the others who came back. Because what if I didn’t know I killed one?” (Silko; 33)

This is the juncture in the novel that highlights the two sides of traditional practices. On one hand it is somewhat successful as Tayo genuinely begins to talk of his mental state and even acknowledges that he needs help. Yet what he did say was completely alien to the old man. The war had mass killings without even knowing how many had actually died, killings occurring in great distances with the push of a button, atomic heat-flashes and dismembered bodies lying all around; these kinds of warfare was not something that the native belief system could comprehend. However, the approach of the old man despite not understanding these aspects was not of total denial. Instead, he divulged that they are unable to cure people like before. This shocked Tayo, as somewhere he had that little blaze of hope for a cure and broke down in the aftermath. Yet days later, while he did not get well completely; he did stop vomiting and often got a few hours of sleep without nightmares that did much for his health. Thereby this can be clearly ascertained that the Scalp Ceremony as termed by Ku’oosh may have not produced complete and a hundred percent result but it did make him share his experience and at least gave him a sort of momentary peace. The road to healing is further taken up when the old man of the community through Ku’oosh approach Grandma to express their views that Tayo needs further help and as a result Robert and Tayo journey to the Gallup Ceremonial where Tayo is taken to meet a Navajo medicine man called Betonie.
Betonie is the catalyst and the starting point of the actual ceremony. Right from the beginning Tayo realizes that Betonie was different. Betonie was unlike any medicine man Tayo had ever seen before. In fact Betonie keeps on saying that the elements of the worlds have undergone a great shift and proclaimed that he “made changes in the rituals” (Silko; 105) for it was the only way to keep the ceremonies strong and effective. He stayed in a town that was filled with the white clamouring around in large groups and yet refused to move citing the reason that his ancestors were there before the town was set up. In a way, “the Navajo identifies himself even with evil in order to overcome it” (Reichard; 215). Though he was eccentric and stubborn in nature there was also a self-assurance in him when he declared that their people were comfortable in the lands in a manner that comfort was not simply about luxury but rather a sense of belonging to the land as a part of their very identity. As such there is a certain duality about his character and this familiar connection stops Tayo from fleeing.

The common link between Tayo and Betonie was that both of them belong to a mixed heritage. They both from two different belief systems, and while Tayo at that time was a confused soul alienated from both; Betonie was self-assured and comfortable in his own identity. Thus, the medium of the ceremony inspired a kinship in Tayo which made him more susceptible to the suggestions and visions. As such the ceremony started stealthily sliding towards Tayo the moment he saw the clutter in Betonie’s room with cardboard boxes holding old clothes, other things along with bundles of newspapers, calendars, telephone books etc. This, all of a sudden made him forcefully aware of the world outside breaking the bubble he had made around himself. The sense of detachment due to self-isolation and adopted indifference is shaken. Betonie then casually reveals that he was educated in the Sherman Institute where he was made to learn English. Yet his anglicised education had not fully encompassed him, but he had managed to find the balance in all situations. Tayo begins to talk about his own experiences about him being invisible inside the white walls. However, his half-heartedness and his longing to go back to the white space where
there were no issues, results in the old man reasoning with Tayo that if he wants to do so, he might as well adopt the entire set of characters like “sleeping in the mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women” (Silko; 113). In further interactions, Tayo ends up speaking clearly about a couple of sensitive matters that plagued his psyche. He mentions the case of Emo and the human teeth and with utter disgust expresses Emo’s viewpoints filled with violence and aggression. It is then that Betonie offers an alternative narrative showcasing that white men were actually shaped and created by Indian witchery. As per that narrative, in a gathering of witches, the Indian witch tells the story of a kind of a creature that has white skin and sees “only objects...they see no life” (Silko; 125). It is also clearly stated that they will destroy whatever they fear. The witch paints such a gruesome state that the rest in the gathering declared the winner to be the narrator witch who was asked to stop narrating to which the witch refuses as, “It’s already turned loose...can’t be called back (Silko; 128). This narrative empowered Tayo’s mind set when confronted with the binary equation of the white versus the natives. There had always been a long festering hatred for the ones who not only stole their land but also knowingly flaunted of the same. Yet with this version in place, the whites end up becoming a powerful rival but one that was created by an Indian mind. This makes Tayo feel confident and self-assured as slowly his doubts and negative perspective regarding himself begins to thaw and for the first time since he had returned, he not only smiled but essentially felt himself getting stronger.

After this experience, the ceremony starts formally as Betonie makes a small ritual cut on the top of Tayo’s head all the while murmuring prayers as Tayo was moved through five loops. Simultaneously there was the chant that spoke of following footsteps to return home, something that holds significant importance in the entire scenario. He was then walked outside and made to sit down on the very edge if a rim rock where he was served Indian tea. In his slumber he kept on dreaming of Josiah’s cattle that his uncle had bought to rear and had died in the search for them after they got lost. This is an important motif of the text – the symbol of the cattle.
Right after these rituals, however, Betonie narrated his past and as his tale grew to a close, he managed to wring out a small prophecy. As Betonie said,

“I’ve seen them, and I’ve seen the spotted cattle, I’ve seen a mountain and I’ve seen a woman.” (Silko; 141)

This was at first incomprehensible for Tayo to connect to or understand these predictions and he begins to lose track of his path. Yet he returns to the path due to a pull of the possibilities and he finds that he is able to reach each one of the requirements of the predictions, which he clearly mentions by saying that, “Old Betonie’s stars were there” (Silko; 167). Throughout the process, he is guided by a woman who appears at times to fulfil roles like being his lover and at other instances like a moral guide. Yet as they engage in physical relations all that flit across Tayo’s mind was the cattle. His sexual fulfilment also resulted in him feeling alive and could breathe in a way that he had not engaged in, for a long time. As a result of this for the first time he gets up to greet the sunrise which in itself is a sign of his optimism and slowly increasing positive attitude towards life. He rides on his mare to the North Top where as he surveys the land pondering on the way the land was snatched from the natives not because they gave it or made boundaries but because, “they could not stop these white people from coming to destroy the animals and the land” (Silko; 172). Thereby as seemingly simple incidents connect to make him realize that Betonie’s vision was actually coming true, he decides to take a leap of faith for, “Betonie’s vision was a story he could feel happening” (Silko; 173) and moved towards the north as the vision indicated instead of going to the south, which was the direction the lost cattle had always preferred to drift in.

His journey surfaces in him various kinds of understandings about life and the people. As he moves forth, he realizes the actual use of fences after he ponders on the supposed wolf-proof fence of a white man called Floyd Lee. Since that man had already hunted and slaughtered all the wolves around, all the fences did was “keep Indians and Mexicans out…to
make the land his” (Silko; 174). This understanding also came with a
discovery and a realization as he found the cattle which connected him to
Josiah. Thus, apart from keeping them out, Floyd Lee’s fence also kept the
cattle captive within the land which he had claimed as his. This is where his
biggest realization sets in, that is also the solution to a greater part of his
trauma as he learns to reconcile the simple reality from the fabricated lies
that had been imposed on his mind by the white society. He understands his
own part in the scheme of being a puppet when he could not make himself
accuse the white man of stealing because all he had internalized till date
was that, “only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t
steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted”
(Silko; 177). With this realization setting in, Tayo’s mixed birth as well his
experiences also enable him to look at the entire picture and understand that
it was not just the natives who were fed this lie. As Silko writes,

> The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other. (Silko; 177)

He is able to figure out that white people were also the victims in this
scenario for they could not reconcile that the land was not actually theirs.
This entire equation had festered like a rotting wound pitting the coloured
people against the white people in a continual battle of injustice and anger.
As the coloured people boiled in the injustice meted out to them; the white
people were plagued by hollowness, an emptiness that literally haunted
them as they tried to cover it up by investing in technologies, churning out
the wealth and engaging in meaningless wars in the name of patriotism. In a
way, it was not the natives who had nothing; rather it was the white people
who in reality had nothing of their own. They probably suffered worse than
them because there was always this thought in the back of their minds that
what they were so proud of was “something stolen, something that had
never been, and could never be, theirs” (Silko; 189). Instead, their fate was
visible in their art which was sterile for long; lack of vitality in their
cultures that they had to feed on other cultures and also dissolution of their consciousness that promoted only a stagnant and materialistic society.

Thus, the search for the cattle had resulted in three different layers of effect. Firstly, it assuaged his guilt regarding Josiah’s death. Secondly, he was purified from the lie that changed his entire value system destroying many of the bindings that were imposed on his thoughts and thirdly, he realized by himself that the search for cattle had him so busy that he had not even thought of his entire traumatic experience and nor had he faced any sort of emotional breakdown. Thereby the entire ceremony also bases itself on a re-enactment of the hero and his quest formula where the pattern of the mythical past is imprinted on Tayo’s present. The search for the cattle symbolizes Tayo’s “quest for wholeness…events following the hoop transformation only complete the ceremony began in the opening pages of the book” (Chavkin; 26). All this while, however, Tayo is prone to having fits of anger that would urge him to commit violence as he struggled to reconcile his traditional mind set and the western beliefs. This often caused him a great deal of fatigue all throughout his journey of getting back the lost cattle. However, he did succeed in the end with the help of the Montanto woman Ts’eh, who trapped his cattle as they fled from Lee’s place and later returned them to Tayo. With the cattle back to his home, a certain peace enveloped his mind as now; he had a purpose to live for.

The entire ceremony had not done any magic on Tayo to cure him of his state. It had not hypnotized him and nor had it changed everything in the blink of an eye. What the ceremony did was getting him to speak about his problems, talk about them to Betonie who realized the multiple issues he faced; from his home life to the war and the bicultural mind-set that became a battleground of ideologies. The next phase of his ceremony was to search for the lost cattle which had been bought by Josiah. The unique capabilities of these cattle were that they could survive in drought ridden areas by feasting on dried grass and less water which would not have been possible for others. These cattle in a way symbolize the fact that for Tayo to live a stable existence, he too will have to adapt to the bicultural framework he belongs to and choose to gain a balance in his own hybrid existence instead
of focusing on grand visions of either side. This is also similar to Betonie’s way of changing the ceremonies to make them adapt to the present scenarios instead of continuing the age-old practices like the Laguna medicine man, which often ended up failing in their inability to conform to the time and context.

Once Tayo gets back the cattle, it connects him back to his traditional roots and invigorates him by giving him a motive. This immediately starts to dissolve his alienation and sense of detachment which had taken root in him. It brings him back to the fold of the community and with the realization of the narrative that the white people were the creation of the Indian witch along with the fact that all were burdened by a lie; Tayo begins to heal. Thereby the last phase of the ceremony involves actually giving Tayo the proof of this lie where Ts’eh herself tells him that all the people have been fooled by Emo and his cronies to hunt for Tayo by telling them lies that Tayo had lost his mind and is living in the caves. She clearly says that “the Army people don’t know” (Silko; 216) which can be seen as an indication to the victim status of the white too.

Thus, the last phase of the ceremony to completely heal Tayo begins nearly a year after his arrival to the reservation and Ts’eh who becomes his companion and guide proclaims that the ceremony was almost completed and they were, “coming to the end soon” (Silko; 217). She leaves him with warnings and advices as he goes into hiding but gets diverted when he sees his friends Harley and Leroy. While they spend some good time together, Tayo’s instinct makes him aware that he was being betrayed and he realizes that it was the punishment for having doubted and diverted from his ceremony. Urged forth by this feeling, his resolution to complete the ceremony gets stronger, which is tested when he hides in the uranium mine. This signifies multiple aspects with the mine being the symbol of white hegemony but the hole on the earth symbolising the lack of connection of the white to the land that was instead present in the culture of the Native American Population.
In the uranium mine, as he hides, he is witness to the destructive violence that Emo commits on torturing Harley and the sadistic pleasure he gains from it. There are two such instances in the novel where Emo becomes the embodiment of the inhumane violence. Once when all of them were sitting around drinking and trading stories, Tayo had to “fight off the nausea that surged in him” (Silko; 55) as he heard Emo feeding on his own stories of brutal killings in the war when he finally loses patience and in his own blind fury stabs Emo with a piece of broken glass. Yet towards the end of the novel and also the end of the ceremony, Tayo feels the same fury when he sees Emo dismembering Harley as a part of the torture, he inflicts on him. He later disfigures Leroy in the same bloodlust. Emo’s accomplice Pinkie had begun to pound the hood of the car and the metallic sound is describes as “the sound of witchery” (Silko; 232) which disturbed Tayo again and again. As Emo forcefully shoved the broken glass bottle into Harley’s mouth, Tayo’s sanity teetered and he nearly visualized, “the contours of Emo’s skull…the bone that would flex slightly before it gave away under the thrust of the steel edge” (Silko; 234). Yet while he nearly made his decision to kill Emo, something in him made him stay.

Thus, Tayo completes the cycle and learns the equation of balance in his life. He re-connects to his traditional roots and gains a clearer understanding of the dual cultures he belongs to; thereby searching for reconciliation between them. He finally accepts that nothing is completely evil, be it the jungle rain or the whites and it all depends on the context and situation. With the ceremony at its end, it manages to show Tayo a place where he belongs to, thereby enfolding him back to the community.
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