

**THE FOLKLORE MATERIAL
IN HA THI CAM ANH'S *THE SON* AND LESLIE M. SILKO'S *CEREMONY*
FROM THE ECOCRITICAL ETHNIC MINORITY PERSPECTIVES**

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Abstract. From the perspective of ecocriticism, this article shows that Ha Thi Cam Anh's *The Son* (2006) and Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) use folklore materials to express the eco-friendly philosophy towards the nature of their ethnic minority people. That feminine eco-philosophy contrasts with the masculinist culture which is showing many flaws and failures. Both writers implicitly call for a return to harmonious coexistence with nature.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ethnic minority, Muong ethnic group, Indian, eco-philosophy, nature, cultural studies.

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism is the literary study associated with environmental themes. Taking ecology as the center, ecocriticism considers man as a factor in the ecosystem and considers nature an entity with its own voice and rights, not just an object for human exploitation. From the perspective of ecocriticism, this article shows that Ha Thi Cam Anh's *The Son* (2006) and Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) have met in the art of using folklore materials to express their ethnic people's eco-friendly attitudes towards nature.

The Son (Đứa con trai) is a medium-length fiction by Ha Thi Cam Anh, a female writer of the Muong ethnic group, a typical prose writer of the current Vietnamese ethnic minority literature. Getting rich quickly through fish farming turned In's father into a traitor to the family. He married another woman, took all his possessions with him, and pushed In and his mother into a miserable life. In dropping out of school, looking for ways to earn a living to feed his mother who lost her mind because of suffering. Although being exploited and threatened by Mr. Black Bear, a greedy and cruel man, who profits from the exploitation of natural resources and poor local people, In did not tell him about the gold treasure of Pu Co forest because he loved nature. Overcoming hatred, In and his mother decided to leave the house for In's father and his despairing family. Thanks to Ms. Chem Cao's help, In and his mother had a better life in Pu Co Forest.

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Leslie M. Silko (1948-) is considered one of the pioneer writers who opened a new turning point for Native American literature. *Ceremony* (1977) is her most famous novel and also one of the typical works of American Indian literature. The work is the story of an Indian veteran who was exiled after World War II, and seeks to recover and find his true self. Tayo is a character full of sadness and sadness. Hated by her aunt and friends in the Indian community for being a mixed-race child without a father, Tayo has always lacked self-confidence because of guilt about her bastard origin and half-skinned color. He found himself again when he returned to the cultural traditions of the Indians.

Recently, Vietnamese researchers have carried out many systematic studies on ecological literature, typically the Ph.D. dissertation “Men and Nature in Vietnamese Prose after 1975 from the Perspective of Eco-criticism” (Tran Thi Anh Nguyet, 2006). Tran notices the emergence of women, loners as the ones who have the attitude towards nature which are different from the masculine culture of dealing with the environment [1; 38, 139]. Pham Duy Nghia (2010) considers Ha as a writer who consciously declares the harmonious relationship between man and nature and raises the issue of protecting nature clearly and resolutely [2; 94]. However, both Pham and Tran have not paid adequate attention to this issue in Vietnamese ethnic minority literature in general and in Ha’s works in particular. Only a few short stories by Ha (*Chasing Away Evil spirit, Dialogue with Immortals*) are mentioned in their dissertation. Tran Thi Viet Trung (2016) and Nguyen Thi Bich Dau (2014) consider the cultural identity of Muong people is the most important feature in Ha’s works. However, they have not put Ha’s works in the tradition of world ethnic minority literature and uncoded the issue of “ethnic identity” from the perspective of cultural studies. This leaves a space for us to conduct a comparison between Ha’s works with a typical American Indian female writer to see whether there is any difference or similarities in the way these writers look at the relationship between men and nature, as female ethnic minority writers. By combining ecological and natural perspectives, this article applies eco-feminist criticism to examine the way these female ethnic minority writers present the relationship between children, women, men and nature.

In these fictions, Ha and Silko revise the monomyth plot and apply fantasy elements from their ethnic minority folklore into the works to present their people’s philosophy towards nature.

2. Content

2.1. Monomyth plot

The term “monomyth” was used to name the timeless story plot of mankind by the American critic Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. He points out that there is only one story that is told by mankind over and over, and that is the story of the hero's adventures. Looking at people's lives, Campbell found that the process of initiation that everyone has to go through in life is unconsciously reflected in the stories themselves. The hero's adventure reflects the rite of passage which includes departure, initiation and return. The monomyth shows mankind’s hope and belief in one's own ability to overcome hardships and his own limitations in the real life.

We find that not only *Ceremony*, but also *The Son* inherit and rewrite this monomyth plot. Tayo and In's journeys in the two works can be summarized as below. Several key events are compatible with the monomyth plot that Campbell points out. Here is a comparison of the monomyth plot in *Ceremony* and *The Son*:

	<i>Ceremony</i>	<i>The Son</i>
1. Departure	In their people's drained land, Tayo is suffering post-war psychological illness,	In is struggling to survive and in danger of being corrupted by Mr. Black Bear
Adventure Call	Grandma intends to invite old Ku'oosh to heal Tayo	Old Man Bear wants In to become his henchman to find Pu Co Forest's hidden treasures.
Refusal of the call	Tayo wants to reject	In wants to reject
Supernatural aid	Meet Priest Betonie	
The crossing of the first threshold	Accept Betonie	Try to escape from Mr. Black Bear
Belly of the whale	Go to the mountain to do the Scalp Ceremony	Go to Pu Co Forest to earn food to feed his mother by his own
2. Initiation		
The road of trials	Look for Uncle Josiah's cows	The struggle between falling or not falling for Mr. Black Bear's evil plan
Meeting with the goddess	Recall the meeting with the Night Swan; meeting Ts'eh	Meet and get help from Ms. Chem Cao; Meet wild animal friends, get help from the forest
Women as the temptress	Helen Jean	Discover gold treasure, an opportunity to get out of poverty
Apotheosis	Philosophy of life from the mountain lion as well as from dealing with the gun and the fence of the white people	Save and forgive the treacherous father; run away with his mother from the hand of Mr. Black Bear
The Ultimate Boon	Get help from Ts'eh to find the cows	
3. Return		
Refusal of the return		
The magic flight	The days of meeting Ts'eh in the mountains	
Rescue from	Escape from the capture of	

without	corrupt veterans	
Crossing the return threshold	Don't kill the enemy	Mother gets recovered mentally when she returns to live in the forest
Mastering of the two worlds	Re-engage with the community and Nature	Mom regains consciousness and recognizes In
Freedom to live	Peace in the old house	Live happily with the forest and the village community

If Tayo had to overcome the challenge of his mental illness which is the result of his obsession with the death of his beloved ones, the horrible war, his mysterious sins and his estrangement, In's adventure is his journey to save his mother from mental illness and save himself from the fall into the evil plot of Mr. Black Bear,

Unlike the heroes in epical literature who manage to perform great deeds, in *Ceremony*, the hero lives a humble life without violent fluctuations or flashy miracles. Tayo's journey is a journey towards the soul. Returning home after the war, Tayo was still just like a child who had not yet come of age. Joining the army for Rocky, Tayo has never been able to kill a person. He still has the pure soul of a child, but of a child traumatized by the brutal war and the materialized America. Tayo's whole journey to find the lost family's cows is more symbolic than a physical act: it is a time when he confronts himself and nature to overcomes his mental illness. He realized the true nature of the conflict between the two cultures: the dominant white culture which focuses on profit and exploitation of nature, and his ethnic minority culture that respects and blends in with nature course. However, the important thing is not the destination, but the journey itself. More than the fact that the cows were found, it was the healing and resurrection of Tayo's soul. Therefore, the subtle transformation of the hero is another thing that makes *Ceremony* special. At the end of the work, Tayo did not kill Emo, who hunted him and killed his friend Harley. Tayo left, because he understood that if he did, he would be caught in the net of Evil as the Indians believe so. Choosing not to act, Tayo has enlightened to the tolerant philosophy of agrarian cultures which praise the harmony and attachment between men and nature.

Likewise, In's journey, despite the presence of the evil man, Mr. Black Bear, is still more of a journey of fighting with his own self. In struggled with himself to decide whether to sell the secret of the gold-filled forest to Mr. Black Bear. If doing that, In and his mom will be free of debt and suffering, however, this act will destroy the forest. Subtle little events such as the meeting with Ms. Chem Cao, the tragic witness to the despairing life of his unfaithful father, and the meeting with the beautiful and kind Pu Co Forest completed In's initiation process. In won over himself and managed to preserve his kindness and his forest friend. That journey takes place in the character's inner psyche rather than the actual conflict with the outside world. This is a new feature in the application of the monomyth plot of the two works. Besides, the heroes here are also different from ones in epics, legends and fairy tales. The characters are not simply dichotomized along the lines of Good and Evil, but are more multifaceted: in the evil and depraved ones, humanity still glimmers. It was the desire for freedom and natural

beauty that liberated the Night Swan from the life of a call-girl. It was because of worrying for her own miserable daughter that made In's stepmother rob away In's father. In's stepmother was also touched and recognized In's kindness.

The common point in the monomyth plot of the two works is the happy ending of the heroes. They both find enlightenment and spiritual freedom in the sun. In *Ceremony*, the symbol of the sun appears densely more than 50 times. It seems that the writer wants to identify Tayo's journey with that of the sun to convey a profound philosophy and optimistic message about man and nature: man is as great as nature, man and nature have an inseparable connection. Humans and nature are both full of potential power and energy to free themselves and lead a happy, loving life. Tayo's journey parallels the sun's, he reaches his destination when he becomes one with nature: "I've been walking with them for a long time but it was my legs that brought me here. When he felt the damp smell of the river, he started running. The sun sent golden rays through the clouds, the golden sand on the riverbank was filled with willow and tamarind trees along the shore. To the west and south, heavy clouds had gathered to greet the dawn. It didn't have to be, but it did, and even in a cloudless sky, the outcome is the same. The ears that heard the story and the eyes that saw the pictures were theirs and felt like they were theirs: we came from this land and were all her children" [6; 299]. In *The Son*, the end of the journey is also the birth of the baby langur and the mental rebirth of In's mother in Pu Co Forest, where the boundary between people and nature seems to have been blurred. The image of the sun also repeats again and again at the end of the work: "After feeding her cubs with her first drops of milk, the mother langur looked up at the rising sun, and raised her baby's hand up high a few times, making the newborn baby too scared to scream. All the female langurs in that circle turned their heads and followed their eyes. After doing these strange movements, the mother langur again hugged the baby in her arms and kissed her face and head on the baby's head so tenderly... They held the newborn langur, bringing it to face level, and then swinging back and forth a few times like that, the whole group of langurs cried out with joy..." [5; 196-197]. The expression of love in the langurs has touched those people. Ms. Chem Cao, mother and In cried out of happiness because they have found love and the meaning of their life again: "Mother smiled, In buried his face in her chest. His small hands caressed her nipples. And when his warm hand touched the pink nipple on her mother's shriveled breast, her whole body jerked, she hurriedly hugged her little boy. It took forever for her to utter a single word: Son! Son! She cried. In cried. Ms. Chem Cao also cried. The sun was slowly descending the mountain. On the cliffs, the strange and mysterious ritual of the langurs has ended" [5; 198]. The space where the hero's journey ends is the space associated with the revival of the land and human enlightenment.

2.2. The integration of ethnic folk legends and myths

In *Ceremony* and *The Son*, both Ha and Silko integrate into the plot a lot of their ethnic folk materials. At the beginning of *Ceremony*, Silko opens the story with a song about Thought-Woman creating the world and thinking about this very story:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears.

She thought of her sisters, Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i, and together they created the Universe this world and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider, named things and as she named them they appeared [6; 1].

By nesting story in the story, Silko has brought the story of Tayo's life and modern people into the timeless category. It goes back and parallels the time of original world creation. In addition, in the novel, Silko repeatedly includes the legendary stories of the witch Ckoyo and the gambler Kaupata in order to show the Indian community's attitude of Evil from the folklore perspective. Evil is always present in human lives: "The witchery would be at work all night so that the people would see only the losses - the land and the lives lost - since the whites came; the witchery would work so that the people would be fooled into blaming only the whites and not the witchery. It would work to make the people forget the stories of the creation and continuation of the five worlds" [6; 293]. The world is only one and evil does not originate from any further than the "evil force" within each human being, which is the cause of suffering and injustice that the modern human world is experiencing. It is the consequence of a civilization based on exploiting nature.

The poetry in *Ceremony* is mostly from the Indian legends and myths, which helps to combine Tayo's current moments into the timelessness of the universe. Kathryn Vanspanckeren notices that Leslie Marmon Silko "uses colloquial language and traditional stories to fashion haunting, lyrical poems" [7; 93]. In *Ceremony*, we come across Indian folk poems about Mother Earth, about Green Fly, Silver Trickster. They add magical dimensions to Tayo's life. Each story contains profound philosophies about nature, the universe, and men. This is a view of language from an Indian point of view, a non-historical perspective, which sees time as cyclical and repetitive. When leaving the mental hospital and going into the desert in search of the cows, Tayo when experiencing the real space is always with the mysterious traces of folk legends because, in Tayo's eyes, all living beings in nature Each of them has a vivid story, a soul and a sacred mission to life: it is a golden snake - carrying the first message on its back to mankind, the worm bird, the greenfly that used to bring rain back, the spider - the creator mother of all things, the mountain lion - the guardian of the world, the friend of the hunter. The Indians do not divide the world into two separate spaces of the mundane and the sacred like many other peoples, to them all beings in the world are sacred, have a soul and contribute to the wonder of the world. Silko desires to regain the Indian confidence in themselves as they are a necessary and inseparable part of the world. That space of *Ceremony* thus embodies the original and pure nature, which is in contrast to the wasteland of human society that has been deserted by war, hostility, and prejudice. The culture of the Silko community believes in the existence of five worlds. If the "fifth world", the land of human life "has become entangled with European names...everything has two names: a White name and an Indian name", then the four worlds underneath the earth in the myth about Green Flies and Worm Birds are a beautiful, simple, and pure nature:

Down below

Three worlds below

this one everything is green

all the plants are growing
the flowers are blooming. [6; 113]

In *Ceremony*, there are also pictures, going along with some impromptu captions. Every picture contains a story behind it and is intended to convey the author's message about the potential richness and vitality of the world. For example, while narrating Tayo's meeting with Old Betonie and his assistant Shush (Bear Man), Silko suddenly attaches this note:

“NOTE ON BEAR PEOPLE AND WITCHES

Don't confuse those who go to the bears with the witch people. Human beings who live with the bears do not wear bearskins. They are naked and not conscious of being different from their bear relatives. Witches crawl into skins of dead animals, but they can do nothing but play around with objects and bodies. Living animals are terrified of witches. They smell the death. That's why witches can't get close to them. That's why people keep dogs around their hogans. Dogs howl with fear when witch animals come around [6; 170].

The old man Ku'oosh taught Tayo his first lesson about attitudes to Indian language: “No story exists by itself, and the reason for choosing that word must be explained in words, a whole story about why it has to be told in a certain way. The story behind each word must be told so as not to be confused about what was said; and that requires a lot of patience and love” [6; 61]. That conception of the power of language and storytelling helps to bring Tayo back to life and his true self.

Meanwhile, *The Son* integrates folk stories about mythical Mother Da Dan. In often talk about her: “I bow to Da Dan so that you can forgive me this time. (...) Mother Da Dan in Muong Troi will help me. I have found her” [5; 128]. “In told his mother: There is a small forest trail running along the river, lush green all year round, and noisy with children's voices and birdsong. Perhaps Mother Da Dan in Heaven had sent the strongest and most sacred of the Muong people from Pu Hu Forest deep in the mountains to prevent the craziness of Horse River in the flood season! The forest is gone! The forest is the mother of rivers” [5;169]. The love story of In's parents is also attached to the image of a beautiful magical fish, her mother's friend. When she was still a girl, In's mother was especially fond of “a big fish with two long beards., and sunflower-shaped silver scales. Her tail, fins, lips and eyelids are red.” Dad thinks it might be the magic fish: “It's a magic fish. It was originally a fairy in Da Dan's palace in Muong Troi. It is not clear how she met and fell in love with a Muong mandarin at the palace of King Lang Cun Can... [5; 136]. The love story of In's father and mother seems to be integrated into the lovestory of the god fish. Even the reason that Pu Co Forest has not been violated is also explained by folk legends about the leper village, the shaman, and the white-crested snake: “The old people said the snake is the horse of the forest deity who is protecting the forest.” [5; 180].

The integration of fantasy elements from ethnic folklore is both a celebration and respect for the ethnic minority identity of the Muong and Indians. They are in danger of being lost and estranged from material civilization. Ha and Silko share a similar ecological philosophy: let's return to the smart way of dealing with nature hidden in ethnic minority cultures. Men instead of exploiting should respect and live in harmony with nature.

3. Conclusion

According to the social evolution theory, all human societies have to go through a single development path from low to high, from ignorance to civilization. In this evolutionary ladder, Western societies used to be considered to be the most advanced level of development. However, the application of Western urban technocratic civilization to the rural life of ethnic minority communities has shown many downsides and put the theory of social evolution into question. Cultural diversity is reconsidered as necessary for humanity and the starting point for innovations and creativity. For developing countries, cultural diversity plays an even more important role, because it not only represents the richness of cultural practices, but also ensures their survival. Preserving local knowledge is preserving the conditions and foundations for the sustainable existence of ethnic groups.

Through *The Son* and *Ceremony*, two ethnic minority female writers both want to convey a feminine philosophy of their people towards ecological issues. In the masculine culture, women, children and ethnic minority groups sometimes are considered vulnerable and ignorant. However, in these two works, they are presented as the ones who give birth, protect and revive life. The eco-friendly attitude of many ethnic minorities in the world, whose lives are closely linked with nature, are often similar to the views of women and children towards nature. That feminine eco-philosophy contrasts with the masculinist technocratic culture which is showing many flaws and failures. From the perspective of ecological criticism, both writers implicitly call for a return to the ethnic minority philosophy of harmonious coexistence with nature. Only in this way can man save himself from the danger of destruction and decay in both mind and body.

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