

2012

A World Apart: Silko's Support of a Gynocentric Existence in Gardens in theDunes

Sarah Graham
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Graham, Sarah (2012) "A World Apart: Silko's Support of a Gynocentric Existence in Gardens in theDunes," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2011, Article 13.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2011/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day Collections at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

A World Apart: Silko's Support of a Gynocentric Existence in *Gardens in the Dunes*

Sarah Graham

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American feminist and author of the 1998 novel *Gardens in the Dunes*, which focuses on the contradictions between repressed females in the patriarchal Western culture and self-determined Native American women. Her skillful storytelling expresses the power that can be drawn from being part of "collective sisterhood" that resists existing within the confines defined by patriarchy. Silko's representation of repressive upbringings under patriarchy, positive portrayal of self-determined sexuality, and assertion of the existence of a "collective sisterhood" outside the influence of Western culture lays the foundation for Silko's stance of challenging accepted gender roles in a mainly patriarchal world.

In *Gardens*, Silko introduces us to Hattie Palmer, an intelligent upper class white woman stuck in a patriarchal world in the early twentieth century. Hattie is the protagonist whom Silko deliberately traps in a patriarchy-defined world, so that we may watch her collapse under its influence and then rise above its restrictions. Silko first focuses on the approach of the education of women during this time period, an ironic commentary when considering the accepted notion that learning is a liberating experience. Hattie's father initially supports her avid learning and she completes her early education "under the direction of her father" (Silko 95). Hattie then enrolls in university schooling, at a university run by men. Upon presenting her thesis, "The Female Principle in the Early Church," she is immediately turned down by the male thesis review committee because this female perspective is deemed "a peripheral detail" (101). A male friend at college, Mr. Hyslop, compares her thesis "to the 'lofty and spiritual ambitions' of Margaret Fuller," passing off her hard work as a joke and refusing to take her seriously (101). He then insults her person by sexually assaulting her. Hattie's sexual encounter with Mr. Hyslop leads her to have a mental breakdown, though the male doctor who treats her nonsensically blames the "overstimulation caused by the reading and writing for her thesis" to be the reason why she has fallen ill (93). Silko uses these examples to confine Hattie's education within the world of men's rules, as she is constantly under the

influence of the male perspective. Though she becomes "educated," in terms of patriarchal methods, her self-knowledge is completely hampered. Her attempts to express herself and her budding feminism are condemned and rebuked by the men in her life.

Silko presents Hattie's suppressed sexual desires and discontentedness with life as another aspect of her patriarchal cage. Hattie's sexuality is confined within the realm of high society women. Ironically, even in this all-female setting, women are still influenced by male institutions because of their own upbringing in patriarchal society and the moral standards passed down to them from their own mothers. In her youth, Hattie's mother is adamant about Hattie attending catechism classes, where the nuns outline clearly the "sins of the flesh" (94). These classes are also the only times Hattie is able to interact with other women her age, and she finds they "talked about nothing but young men and marriage," forcing her to follow their examples into a "traditional" woman's life, or else be shunned (95). Hattie's mother also instills in her daughter a fear of childbirth, which Hattie carries throughout her life. She unwillingly falls into another trap that confines her feminine spirit through her marriage to the strictly traditional Edward Palmer. He is skeptical about accepting feminist ideas (including Hattie's) that contradict his own conservative views, and refuses to tend to his wife's sexual needs because he himself is satisfied with a sexless marriage. Silko portrays Hattie as being powerless in defining her sexuality; her mother, her peers, and her husband all direct Hattie's opinion on sex, which is fearful and accepting of the limited affection her husband offers her. In her essay "Landscapes of Miracles and Matriarchy in Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*," Mary Magoulick explains that, "matriarchy cannot fully exist within a patriarchy" (22). Thus, Hattie's struggling independence and feminism cannot be fully expressed within her patriarchal existence.

Silko contradicts Hattie's unnatural repression under patriarchy with the Native American characters Sister Salt, who comes from a fictitious tribe called the Sand Lizard people, and the twins Maytha and Vedna, who work with Sister Salt washing clothes and beer mugs. The twins, in

contrast to Hattie, refuse to be trapped by anyone's guidelines for living, as can be seen by their ambitious plan to save up enough money to buy their own land. Silko informs us at the end of the novel that they "managed to save up enough money so they didn't have to live in a wallow of green beer" (Silko 475). They have livestock, a variety of plants, and are living a good life. When asked if they are "at least pregnant or engaged...they all laughed and shook their heads," a rejection of any male help that may have otherwise been seen as "necessary" to survive as a woman (475). Hattie's patriarchal education has taught her that women cannot survive on their own, and need men to give meaning to their lives. The twins clearly prove this idea wrong.

Silko also uses the Native American women show the power that results from self-determined sexuality, a power that is unavailable to Hattie. Sister Salt and the twins approach the views of sexuality much differently to Hattie. They accept sex as pleasurable experience, and relish in performing the act selfishly. Realizing they can use sex for more than just pleasure, they happily take their "free choice of the men willing to pay a dime for fun in the tall grass," and make money off of their gratification (218). This is partially where the money for the twins' land comes from. The Native American women have complete control over their sexuality, instead of others being in command of it like in Hattie's case. Though Sister Salt has a deeper connection to the man Candy than to any other man in the story, she does not feel ashamed about sleeping with Charlie, her side lover, and others. "Her body belonged to her-it was none of [Candy's] business," Silko explains within the tale (218). This free sexuality goes against all that Hattie was taught in her catechism classes, but Sister Salt uses sex as a tool, not as a shameful moral burden: "Old-time Sand Lizard people believed sex with strangers was advantageous because it created a happy atmosphere to benefit commerce and exchange with strangers," and it "was valued for alliances and friendships that might be made" (218, 202). Half-breed babies resulting from free sex were welcomed into the family. Sister Salt also uses her sexuality as a weapon against men, such as when the twins fear the wrath of a policeman. Sister Salt comforts them by saying, "Don't even worry about him [...] I know where to touch him so he won't tell anyone" (206).

Silko deliberately constructs a distance between Hattie and the Native American women, created by Hattie's difference in opinion regarding

self-sufficiency and free sexuality. Silko desires the reader to realize the existence of a "collective sisterhood" that all independent women are innately part of, if they disengage themselves from patriarchy. While the rest of the women in the novel support each other and welcome each other's company, Hattie feels completely alone because she is still under the influence of patriarchy. The deep connection of unity between Sister Salt and the twins is Silko's representation of a "collective sisterhood." With their free sexuality and control over when and which men come into their womanly sphere, these three females live alone together and take care of each other like a mother would a daughter, or like sisters. When Sister Salt is grieving for the loss of her little sister, it is the twins who hand feed her to keep her alive. Though Sister Salt is from the Sand Lizard people, a tribe normally left out of Indian pacts because of their strange practices, the twins do not ostracize her, but "[tease] her to cheer her because they [love] her" (201). When the twins plan on buying their own land, they offer to let Sister Salt live with them, even though she has almost no money to chip in for support. Nevertheless, they all do what they can to insure the collective survival of them all.

At the end of her storytelling, Silko finally provides Hattie the setting to be welcomed into this "collective sisterhood." After divorcing her husband and freeing herself from his constrictive hold, Hattie adds to the feelings of sisterhood by reuniting Sister Salt with her little sister. Initially, when Hattie first meets Sister Salt and the twins, she feels very distant from them. Hattie watches as "the girls [chatter] happily inside, laughing altogether" (409). At this time, Hattie begins feeling a "dreadful sense of how alone she [is]" (410). She decides not to return to the controlling life of her upbringing (as many people expected her to do as a divorcee), and instead stays to help Sister Salt and the twins build a home out west, beginning her journey into the atmosphere of a collective sisterhood. However, while trying to get supplies to Sister Salt, Hattie is raped, beaten, and mugged by white men who live in the area. This is because "the White people [of out west] disapprove of her as an independent woman who helps Indians" (Magoulick 26). Since Hattie has rejected returning to her former patriarchal existence, these white men who accept patriarchy see her differently, and attempt to snuff out her newly recognized feminist feelings. When Hattie is left bleeding and dying by the side of the road, it is unknown Indian women that find her. They wrap her naked body in a

blanket and “[tell] her not to be afraid” (Silko 457). Silko shows that, since Hattie has rejected her patriarchal life, the many sisters that exist all around her are there to support her. Hattie drags her sick body to stay with Sister Salt while she recovers. While there, a Ghost Dance is initiated, and Sister Salt promises to pray and dance for her. Hattie said it is “the dancers that [save] her life;” it is her collection of women friends who promise to dance for her that bring back her health (471). The “collective sisterhood” finally accepts her, and brings her body and spirit back to life.

Thus, through her representation of repressive upbringings under patriarchy, positive portrayal of self-determined sexuality, and assertion of the existence of a “collective sisterhood” outside the influence of Western culture, Silko effectively expresses her desire for women to break free from the patriarchal restraints that attempt to control them. She presents females with an alternative life, living as a part of a collective sisterhood that promises to offer them infinitely more independence and happiness than the patriarchal world is able to provide. Sister Salt and the twins find freedom when they reject the restrictions of

accepted patriarchal society, and embrace their free sexuality, dismissing the moral standards like those placed on Hattie. None of them have permanent men in their lives, but they are infinitely happier than Hattie, who struggles to figure out why she is so discontent and alone. Hattie, though, feels her desire for sex and independence growing as the novel progresses. In the end, she leaves her sexless marriage, breaks free of the control of patriarchy, and allows the safety of the “collective sisterhood” to envelop her. She sets herself free, and her sisters are there to welcome her into this new gynocentric world she never knew existed.

Works Cited

- Magoulick, Mary. "Landscapes of Miracles and Matriarchy in Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*." *Reading Leslie Marmon Silko: Critical Perspectives through Gardens in the Dunes*. Ed. Laura Coltelli. Pisa: Edizioni Plus-Pisa University Press, 2007.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Gardens in the Dunes*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2005.