

Identity in "yellow woman" by leslie marmon silko

Sociology, Identity



"Yellow Woman" by Leslie Marmon Silko is a story about a woman who goes on a journey with a man. On this journey, the narrator, who is assumed to be the woman, is plagued by questions of who she is and if the stories of her culture about what she may be becoming are true. She struggles to find herself and what she wants because she wants to be herself but at the same time, see if she is becoming what her culture's stories call the "Yellow Woman. Although the woman struggles to identify her and who she is, she also wants to identify as the Yellow Woman. In other words, the narrator knows who she is, but she wants to be someone else too. In "Yellow Woman," the narrator has an internal conflict about whether or not she is the Yellow Woman. In the beginning of the story, the narrator assumes that she is the Yellow Woman, having met a man similar to the man mentioned in the stories of her culture; "But I only said that you were him and that I was Yellow Woman" (Silko, 603).

Although the narrator told the man she was the Yellow Woman, on the morning after she meets him, she tries to deny who she is, saying, "I have my own name and I come from the pueblo on the other side of the mesa" (603). Obviously, the narrator does not know who she wants to be. She knows that the way she met the man, whose name is Silva, emulates the way the Yellow Woman once met a man in the stories of her people. She knows that she can leave Silva, as she gets ready to in the beginning of the story, but because of her doubts, the woman stays whenever he tells her to.

Silva has a powerful hold over the narrator, causing her to question herself. In the beginning of the story, when the narrator wakes up, she prepares herself to leave Silva where he is and go back home. When she tells him that

she is leaving, Silva reminds her that she is "coming with [him]" (602). He reinforces her self-doubt through manipulation, making her believe that she is the Yellow Woman. Silva also brushes off any indication that the narrator may have a different life than from being the Yellow Woman.

When the narrator says, "I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial, like they say," (603), Silva just tells her to get her things and go with him. The narrator goes with him, but when they are at what is assumed to be his house, she asks if he uses the same tricks on other women (604). Silva acts like he does not understand what the narrator is talking about. The narrator seems to be asking for self-reassurance, saying, "these stories couldn't happen now," (604) alluding to the stories about Yellow Woman.

Silva replies with, "...Someday they will talk about us, and they will say, "Those two lived long ago when things like that happened," (604) implying that he believes the narrator is the Yellow Woman and that what they are doing is how things should go. Silva does not allow the narrator to talk or move past her thoughts about doubting that she is the Yellow Woman. Because of Silva's lack of communication and refusal to talk about how she could be something other than the Yellow Woman, the narrator stays with him. She stays with him to try and figure out if she is the Yellow Woman or not.

By the end of "Yellow Woman," the narrator goes back to her home and her regular life. After Silva has a run-in with a "white man" (607), the narrator goes back to her home where her mother was telling her grandmother "how to fix the Jell-O, and [her] husband...was playing with the baby" (608). Even

if she goes back in the end, she does not deny how her journey looks to her culture and how it is connected to the history of her culture. She talks about how her grandfather used to tell her stories about the Yellow Woman (606) and how they happened long ago (603).

The narrator justifies that she is not the Yellow Woman, saying, "...she is from out of time past and I (the narrator) live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw" (603). She justifies who she is because she knows the stories about the Yellow Woman and she knows what happens at the end of those stories. Although she knows the ending of those stories she does not know what happens at the end of hers. The stories she heard about the Yellow Woman happened at a different time than hers.

There are many differences between the story she is living and the story her grandfather used to tell her. The narrator goes back and forth, thinking she is the Yellow Woman and thinking she cannot be the Yellow Woman. The facts are right in front of her, but her knowledge of the history of her culture confuses her beliefs. Initially, the narrator denies herself to be the Yellow Woman. But, by the end of "Yellow Woman," she wants to be the Yellow Woman. There is a lot of alternating of her beliefs. While she was with Silva, she tries to deny to him and herself that she is the Yellow Woman.

While walking back to her home and real life, the narrator says she "felt sad at leaving him" (608). When she gets closer to the area where she had met Silva, the narrator says she "wanted to go back to him - to kiss him and to touch him" (608), implying that she was beginning to like Silva and accept herself as the probable Yellow Woman. At the end, the narrator

acknowledged that she had become the Yellow Woman through circumstance. The theme of identity is very important in "Yellow Woman" as well as in the story "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker. "Everyday Use" is about a young woman who goes to visit her family, who says she has always been and wanted to be different from her family. In "Yellow Woman," the narrator struggles to find herself and in the end acknowledges that she had been the Yellow Woman for a while. And although she had been the Yellow Woman for a little while, as she walks home, she struggles to hold onto that bit of her who was the Yellow Woman. She did not want to be the Yellow Woman in the beginning of the story, but by the end, she wants to hold onto that part of herself who had become the Yellow Woman.

In "Everyday Use," Dee struggled with the life she was born into (Walker 316). She was not happy with it and tried to get away from it at every opportunity. Although she does not identify herself with her family's beliefs and customs, Dee tries to take her mother's quilt to hang because, to her, they signify her heritage. Dee struggles with her identity within her family, but outside of her family, she boasts mightily about her heritage, although not where she comes from. In both stories, both women struggle to find themselves and in the end try to become and be someone other than themselves.

An identity is something many people long to have. What many do not realize is that by living, they already have an identity. In "Yellow Woman," the narrator struggled with herself and her culture's stories. In the beginning of the story, the narrator wanted to be no one but herself. She met a man, and thought she had become the Yellow Woman in the stories of her people.

When she awoke the next morning, she believes she made a mistake and tries to go back to her real life, her assumed real identity. But, the man makes her doubt herself. The historical contexts of the stories about the Yellow Woman also make her doubt herself.

In the end, although the woman goes back to her real life, she wants to identify as the Yellow Woman. Her identity to herself has become intertwined with the Yellow Woman. Identity is important, but if one is not allowed to develop an identity, or differentiate oneself from another identity, then people may become accustomed to identifying themselves in ways others want them to identify. If another identity is greatly preferred or desired, then one may change oneself into that identity and that is not fair to those who want to be their own people.