

An Ecocritical Reading of Water Symbolism in a Selection of Two Female Native American Poets

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Abstract

This paper offers an ecocritical and narrative reading of a selection of poems from both Harjo and Hogan. It explores native American legacy and their sense of hope and revival expressed in their poetry. The selection of poems discussed in this paper expands our understanding of narrative, with its plot, time and perspective as basic constituents and how it gives way to multi-focality, timelessness and blurring of main and marginal in the plot covering both anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives without overlooking issues of representation, human cognition and multiple levels of agency. Adopting ecocritical and narrative approaches relocates nature and spirituality, with focus on water symbols, in the centre of artistic expression not overlooking stylistic and textual properties at the representation of human consciousness. Forms of artistic expression offer to expand the oral-tradition and legacy of Native Americans yet in “English” and poetic form.

Keywords: ecocriticism - Linda Hogan- Joy Harjo- Water Symbolism- Native American Poetry

Introduction

Markku Lehtimäki highlights a chasm between ecocriticism and narratology. Ecocriticism works on decentering human frames of references with a shifting focus on nature and its agency and an activist agenda (Glotfelty 12). In reference to literature, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (xviii). It explores interconnection between text and the larger physical world. Narrative on the other hand is guilty of a focus on fiction as an autonomy non-connecting to reading and writing in real world contexts (Love 20). Narratives evoke discourses, perspectives, objective (distanced) frames, and consequently, what Meir Sternburg terms “restrictive anthropocentric bias”. Human action and human consciousness as well as basic tenants of literary theory, such as plot, characterization and point of view shift functionality in environmental writings to which an appreciation of the natural world is coupled with human diversity in

order to denounce the white man culture and technology dominating, polluting and destroying the world.

Reference and representation, as pure narrative preoccupations are hardly tackled. Mimesis as configuration or making of the plot is the more prominent aspect of ecocriticism. Concepts of nature and modes of storytelling can be linked through the human mind and the physical world. Ursula Heise raised a methodological concern with the argument that literary fiction is a product of human language offering biased epistemology. Anthropomorphic views of nature seem to be inevitable when ecocriticism and narratology come together in relation to presenting consciousness and point of view such as personification of landscapes or projecting mental states on creatures.

Our evolved cognitive adaptations create art, fiction and narrative in keeping with our biological origins and basic goal of surviving nature and our physical environment. Ecocriticism therefore shifts from expressing nature-based narrative in literary form into a deeper cognitive process. This is how “evocriticism”, as put by Brian Boyd in 2009, provides a theoretical frame for knowing about the world and surviving it (Sayed 70). Adding the cognitive to the literary, an evolution to ecocriticism is claimed and it becomes the roots for the much contested implications of the term “evocriticism” (Harold 20). Darwinist implications offer to explore the conflicting nature of man and nature whereas evocriticism insists on a pure cognitive and psychological understanding of agency and intention in nature that would unfold in literary expression.

However, an affective connection between the reader and the nonhuman natural world can best be expressed in experimental modernist poetry (Love 12). Bonnie Costello defends the power of poetry that imagination and abstraction draw us towards nature and resolves the paradox innate in aesthetics and ecocriticism: man is part of nature, and yet it is his construction (125). The human mind is traditionally an “inside” in consciousness representation and the natural world as an “outside”. I propose to explore water symbolism in Joy Harjo’s poetry and Linda Hogan’s in ways that can generate new insights into reading the natural world and its role in constituting the human experience itself. An evocritical approach is attempted to reconcile narrative structure and meaning offering thematic and emotional unpacking of water symbols in poetic narratives within their cultural, ideological, philosophical and ethical dimensions.

In an attempt to explore the connection between man and nature through literature as an expression for existence, ecofeminism will be the perspective of analysis that examines the connection between female poets and nature (including the past legacy and present modern world as their physical context). Ecofeminism, coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, refers to the larger feminist movement with its implications on social change and activism. However, for the purpose of analysis in this paper, ecofeminism combines ecocritical interest in literature and the feminist perspective of tipping power balance in favour of the weaker side of the conflict. If the white European man has been the center of the conflict over nature's resources, ecofeminists join voices of the oppressed and the objectified, nature and woman, in order to voice a perspective of their own in terms of literary expression.

The emotional connection with nature is best expressed in poetry (Love 12). The unique cultural experience of Indian Americans and their sense of their own legacy is intertwined with a vivid perception of nature as the thematic locus of their literary imagination and expression. The selection of poems in this study covers the work of two female Native American poets, who deploy an ecofeminist perspective, yet voice different attributes and themes. Although both poets tap on water images and symbols, reflecting its centrality for native American legacy, Joy Harjo voices an optimistic spirituality that combines modern cities within the bigger context of nature in contrast to Linda Hogan's consistent sense of bitterness over the loss of legacy to colonial aggression then to modern city set up. This paper aims at exploring ecocriticism through applying an ecofeminist reading of a selection of native American poetry in an attempt to reveal the alignment of feminist and nature experiences as a result of colonization and modernization as well as explore the ecocritical perspective of placing consciousness in nature (which sets native American literary work off from the narrative perspective with anthropocentric bias).

Features of ecofeminist reading explored entail lamenting the degradation of environment and aligning it with the oppression of women. It reveals building an intrinsic connection between American Indians, women and animals on the negative side of civilization, offering a new discourse of cohesion prevalent in pre-colonial era in order to counter the colonial and pragmatic discourse about nature. Moreover, the female poet believes in weaving nature, art and legacy in an attempt to construct an egalitarian, non-hierarchical, non-pragmatic world (Sadek 83).

Historical Background of a Literary Movement

A preoccupation with the environment emerged during the second half of the previous century as a result of environmental challenges and threats. Global warming, pollution, deforestation and climate change as well as war chemical residues all across the globe shifted attention to the urgent question of the welfare of man and the improbability of the “good life” amidst a devastated natural context for living.

Environmentalism, hence, is about the physical constituents of land, water, plants and animals as agents in the physical context of man; and, it is also about ideals, rules and patterns of human interaction with their surroundings. Accordingly, green ideas or environmentalism seeks to reform existing human behavior towards nature and natural resources as well as seeks to shift the cognitive perception of man from the pragmatic view of the world to foster a caring and inclusive coexistence with nature (Uekoetter 9).

In an attempt to shift the ideological paradigm in handling nature, environmental thinking bifurcated into anthropocentricity and biocentricity. Anthropocentricists focused on the drawback of human intervention in nature and highlighted the destruction of the bio-context of the white European man with the industrialist pragmatic mentality. A post-colonial association generated an interest in tipping the balance of power through dismantling power grip of major colonial and industrial knowledge paradigms and proposing agency to nature and its creatures. Biocentricity, on the other hand, took on an aesthetic perspective where nature is celebrated for its own sake as a moral value (Sayed 75).

The common denominator of both, anthropocentricism and biocentricism, is an awareness of nature-based challenges and a need to create an epistemology for understanding its challenges and an activism to counter the negative impact of industrialization and pollution. Ecocriticism, a field owned by literary critics and historians alike, reflects an interest in ethical, philosophical and literary works. Historian Donald Worster explains:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that

understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. (Worster 17)

The history of environmentalism dates back to the earliest voices on the harmful effects of the Industrial Revolution on nature. Mining, forest cleansing, draining lands and displacing species were alluded to. In 1848, Henry Thoreau wrote *Walden*, a book on the experience of living in the woods near Walden Pond, Massachusetts. The spiritual value of the wilderness was voiced by the naturalist John Muir who called the US government to preserve some wilderness areas, but was not supported by politicians and businessmen. Since then, a division of beliefs around nature exists: some value the spiritual and moral value of nature, whereas others just reduced its existence to mere economic and pragmatic value.

The birth of the environmentalist movement is marked by the publications of two books: *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and *The Silent Spring* (1962). The first book by Aldo Leopold discussed the ethical responsibility of preserving nature and shifting awareness into co-existing instead of exhausting its resources towards the mid twentieth century. *The Silent Spring*, on the other hand, by Rachel Carson discussed the negative impact of insecticides and after being attacked in media and by chemical industries, the realities in the book were confirmed and the DDT was officially banned in 1962.

The Earth Summit was held in 1972 among developed countries only to be followed by the UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) in order to discuss the drawbacks of industrialization and overuse of natural resources. The summit exposed the chasm between first and third worlds in terms of natural resources exploitation and divide in socio-economics which is only growing until today. The term “sustainable development” was coined in 1983 by the Chairperson of the UN World Commission on Environment. Then, the importance of applying regulations to reduce the emissions of carbon dioxide in order to counter global warming was first discussed in 1992. While many countries signed the agreement to control carbon dioxide emissions, the USA and KSA were concerned with the consequences of signing up for such measures, given that their economies depend on oil. The fourth Earth Summit in 2002 voiced the promotion of renewable energy resources for developing countries, yet again, it was not approved by the US and Japan mainly along with other countries depending on oil (Sayed 70). Therefore, environmental sustainability and economic growth were not just on different planes with a gap

in between. Rather, economic “rationality” as put by Jan Hancock, is the root cause for environmental assets transforming nature into products and means for capitalist growth (161).

Rubin Patterson makes a clear statement of the challenge, “the environment cannot sustain capitalism and capitalism certainly cannot sustain the environment” (74). The industrialist background of capitalism and the European concept of the Chain of Being places man on top of the hierarchy and nature on the bottom perpetuating a sense of entitlement and control over natural resources and marginal world peoples. Hence, capitalism sets out to promote industrial production and trade rather than satisfy social needs or environmental sustainability. Karen Bell posits, “[c]ompanies have to make short-term decisions based on what will help their business to survive, even if this harms society and the environment” (2). Dutch attempts to use renewable energy sources were marginal compared to the heavy British coal mining and industrialization followed by thriving oil trade. Economic hegemony goes hand in hand with oil-powered industries and military forces. The implication is: money-centered capitalist pursuits inevitably destroy the environment and harm socio-cultural traditional constructs linking the pursuit of energy sources and raw materials to colonial practices.

Grove points to the colonial impact on environment (as less powerful and subjected to the full control of the colonizer) by discussing an awareness of the harmful impact of European economics on the peoples and “environments” of the colonized (3). The “commodification of nature”, as Murphy puts it, took the locus of conflict between highly industrialized powers and developing countries to “land” (11). Suddenly, the struggle over land meant that economic surplus would flow from the periphery back to the core through engineering powerful trading and banking systems that would pose challenges on the weaker side of the capitalist game and perpetuate economic growth for the already powerful.

“Environmental racism” as proposed by the American environmentalist and philosopher Dean Curtin is “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other” (Curtin 80). It includes colonial practices of deforestation, transportation of animals and crop, slave trade, mining, drilling for oil and the massive burning of fossil fuels leading to global warming and socio-economic harms that were only extended by military and economic pressures. Nixon refers to Lawrence Summers, former president of the World Bank and his plan for the poorer world countries to “export rich nation garbage, toxic waste, and heavily polluting industries to Africa” (2).

Environmental racism of oppressing both the underprivileged and their natural context for capitalist and colonialist concerns places environmental writings into a larger post colonial discourse. The non-white man shares the marginality of the oppressed with all the termed “different” social, racial entities.

If post-colonial writings of dismantling the grip of the oppressor and their discourse made the early environmentalist writings, eco-criticism evolved with a concern with native land and language similar to post-colonial writings. An Indian historian Ramachandra Guha refers to the need to interweave post-colonial and ecological issues together as means of challenging imperialist socio-economic practices (Huggan and Tiffin 23). Post-colonialism as a point of departure for ecocriticism retain issues of oppressive discourse, cultural hegemony and activism to tip power place in favour of the less privileged. With time, ecocriticism carved a literary expression unique in its formality and themes. Hybridity and cross-culturalism gave way to wilderness and natural purity; displacement to a concern with land as locus of continuation; transnationalism to a nationalist land and language based perspective of ecocriticism; and finally, the postcolonial tendency to review history gave in a sweeping sense of timelessness of nature experiences in ecocritical literary writings (Sayed 73).

Ecocriticism explores the literary impact nature has on the production of knowledge and our understanding of the world. True to its post-colonial roots, eco-criticism confers agency over the oppressed, nature in this case, and highlights man-animal interdependence in mythologies of creation and other significant epistemological frames in native cultures. It is not uncommon to interweave literary writing to activism in native American literature, Australian aboriginals and African writings. And forms of artistic expressions challenge to produce genres of their own embracing long living oral traditions, mythology and storytelling themes and techniques alongside with technologies of writing and “English” language. Therefore, canonical narrative discourse building perspective and representation was not well integrated with its objective or “framing” implications. An anthropocentric bias extended by a literary structure of plot, timeline, main and periphery, did not capture the spirit of the environment based themes and traditions of knowledge and critical production. Accordingly, I chose to turn to poetry from Native American cultures, with strong autobiographical and emotional aspects in an attempt to explore the literary mediation of the timeless experience of nature as well as native American ecocentric thematics. Human action and human consciousness are not central to the environment but are rather part of it without claiming power over it and allows nature to constitute human experience.

Attempts at tackling ecocritical narrative fall short from embracing the quickly developing concepts of “evocriticism” and other literary efforts to interweave the human and the natural as states of consciousness and timelessness together in order to denounce the white man culture and technology dominating, polluting and destroying the world. Personification of scenery and contemplating the power of rejuvenation from distance, as depicted in Romantic writings and narrative fiction evolved into a cognitive expression about nature with incorporating survival and biological needs to nature. Brian Boyd in 2009 proposed evocriticism as a theoretical frame for knowing about the world through a human mind that owes its structure to the evolution itself in an attempt to align human consciousness to its bigger pure environmental set up.

Evocriticism attracted an understanding of literary Darwinism placing literature within arguments of natural selection. However, for the purpose of this paper, evocriticism helps unpack the agency of nature suggested by ecocriticism, but on a deeper cognitive level with man and nature closely interacting with biocentrism as a point of departure. Through an affective connection between the writer, reader and the nonhuman natural world, the human mind abstains from being the traditional “inside” in consciousness representation to a “nature” as an “outside”. I propose to explore water symbolism in a selection of poetry by Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan via feminist ecocriticism in order to probe its poetic narrative form and themes within their native American cultural, ideological, philosophical and ethical implications.

Water Symbolism in Native American Culture

Water is a vital resource and has a deeply rooted spiritual connection with nature. Multiple native American folk tales reveal a vital role for water in the myth of creation as well as reiterates its “shared” significance among the other three elements of life, vital for energy and wellbeing: air, fire, soil and water. The human body is a physical creation and is made of and governed by the four elements. Maintaining balance among them ensures physical as well as psychological well-being.

Thought to have healing and cleansing powers, water symbols express a range of meanings including life and death, strength, change, healing, dreaming and unconditional love. Its form, flow, clarity and smell are connotative of omen and health. Interpreting meaning of water symbolism varies from tribe to tribe, yet to all Native Americans water is highly cherished.

Water is also a common Native American symbol in writings, oral tradition and art, sharing ideas of power and timelessness through generations. It visually looks like two parallel lines, and the way they are presented reflect its meaning. For example, if drawn like a flow then represents continuity of life (Anderson 57).

Water Imagery in a Selection of Poems from Joy Harjo

Joy Harjo's poetry flows in English, full of images and visions. Her writing is strongly spiritual reflecting the essence of a number of Native American myths. She also writes of social issues, feminism (native American woman) and nationalist (particularly the plight of Native Americans in the United States). She weaves an extended sense of time around historical and present representations alike in realistic-mythical and autobiographical short writings. C. B. Clark has accurately described the scope of Harjo's work, saying that she "recalls the wounds of the past, the agony of the Indian present, and dream visions of a better future for indigenous peoples" (qtd in Sadek 71).

"The Flood" is typical of Joy Harjo's poetic prose writing, short and deeply visionary. Realistic modes of cars, a six-pack, and a convenience store interweaves with deeper elements of a mythical water monster and centuries of legend and history. The biocentric heart of the poem is a sixteen-year-old woman and a sea-monster in a narrative that is hardly linear. She walks in the lake and the city a number of times referring to different points of time and places in the old and modern settings. She is carrying her sister to draw water, seek life, and gets seduced by an evil spirit in disguise, then she struggles with signs of health and illness, drives a car and watches herself walk out thirty years later.

Typical of the evocritical approach, structured narrative dissipates into captures from memory, emotions and imagination to produce a new sense of time and existence. No objective or distanced retelling of the story, it is realistic and mythic expanding time and expression to give an account of the self and nature conferring power on the sea monster and the rain.

Joy Harjo's piece "The Flood" is one that is full of imagery but for the sake of analysis in this paper, the focus will only be water symbols as a central theme in native American mythology and literary expression. She starts with a visit to the lake, then the second stanza "When I walk the stairway of water into the abyss, I return as the wife of the watermonster in a blanket of time decorated with swatches of cloth and feathers from our favorite clothes" (Harjo, *The Flood*). The lake is unfathomable, full of secrets and tradition. It refers to the strength of generations, communication and tribal responsibility, and of timelessness. Her human existence is first defined in the mythical bonding with

water, then “I had surprised him in a human moment” when the body wishes to be acknowledged and turns into fire. The voice of the narrator is multiple women, three instances of her walking into the lake, and the point of view is blurred in the collective female voices of her sister, mother, old lady retelling myths and her three different selves. The Sea monster takes the center of events and Harjo is trying to capture its mythological existence through points of view, blurred sense of time and “victimhood” to his powerful existence. The lake is hardly presented as water source, but rather an image of “drought” is aggravated by the heat and fire in her body as well as “brimming sky” and “empty jar”. The juxtaposition between water and drought reflect her feelings of bewilderment and inbetween-ness of myth and reality. “A world I could no longer perceive, as I had been blinded with a ring of water when I was most in need of a drink by a snake who was not a snake, / and how did he know my absolute secrets, / those created at the brink of acquired language?” (Harjo, *The Flood*).

Water is all enclosing her and she is “blinded” by it in her thirst. She feels her authentic encounter with the sea monster to be so real despite being a myth only pronounced through a sacred traditional language. Now she lives in the modern world with an acquired language, English, yet is part of the water set up in mythology. This is how ecocriticism offers a narrative flow that presents woman and nature within an inclusive mythic-modern experience. “My imagination swallowed me like a mica sky” (Harjo, *The Flood*) points to the affective and imaginative as intrinsic components of ecocriticism. Imagination takes on the colour blue and drowns her like water.

“The power of the victim is a power that will always be reckoned with, one way or the other” flips power bias towards the weak, where woman and nature offer an ecofeminist perspective. It is the game of consciousness to haunt people with possibilities referring to power within as another axis of power than that of the seamonster or the flooding rain at the end of the poem. “The watersnake was a story no one told anymore. They’d entered a drought that no one recognized as a drought, the convenience store a signal of temporary amnesia” (Harjo, *The Flood*). In these lines, she retains memory and feelings of a myth that lives in her authentic encounter with it. Time passes for others, get amnesia, but she has knowledge of the lake and of what they misguidedly consider drought. A sense of loss and vulnerability is communicated through her human consciousness within nature. She feels disconnected, “blinded” and makes a number of entrances to the lake, and nature lies there with no one talking its sacred language of acknowledging its lake. The ending line extends the paradox of power and vulnerability. “It was beginning to rain in Oklahoma, the rain that would flood the world” (Harjo, *The Flood*) we are left to wonder is

nature going to claim power over those who lost their connection to the myth, or is it an allusion to the great flood reminiscent of the native American myth of creation.

The ending line here echoes another short poem where she envisions the end of the world to be a flood with high mountains (powerful nature) can be our last redemption. In the poem entitled, “Morning Prayer”, in the poetry collection, *How We Became Human*, Harjo speaks of power and hope resident in nature.

... I used to believe in a vision
that would save the people
carry us all to the top of the mountain
during the flood
of human destruction....(187).

“Morning Prayers”, “believe” and “vision” reiterate the spiritual aspect of Native American poetry. Although she speaks of the ill omen of human destruction, she announces prayers as hope for survival and stresses the double agency of nature, the flood for destruction, and the mountains for survival. Her poem interweaves human consciousness with the will power of nature. The scene is short, vivid and comprises both narrator and nature together. However, the evocritical approach cannot unpack “human destruction”. From a postcolonial ecocritical reading, nature controls human destiny and wrecks revenge on man. However, the evocritical blending of perspective shows how “humans” embrace and survive nature through using the mountains to counteract the flood. Her short poem is flowing and peaceful although speaks of an urgency to counter “human destruction”. The prayer shows an autobiographical writing style typical of feminist writings although the woman presence was not alluded to. Instead of conforming to the classification in literary writings, Harjo’s style comprises woman and nature perspective intertwined, tapping on both styles: an evocritical expression in terms of blended consciousness and perspective as well as an ecofeminist writing, in terms of theme and embedded female narrator’s perspective.

How We Became Human book also includes “Anchorage”, a poem, dedicated to the activist, mother and artist Audre Lorde. She voices the theme of mythology and creation but to describe the self and the city. Water symbols overtake the city and earth. Spirits “swim” and earth is “boiling”, air above is just “another ocean”. “fish”, “whale” and “seal” exist side by side with the two walking girls considering their choices of clutching to memory and tradition or just leaving behind their emotions and imagination: “speak of her home and

claim her /as our own history, and know that our dreams / don't end here” (31).

Their tradition is personified as the smelling deserted old lady, an image strong and disturbing. An ecofeminist perspective of using three perspectives together is utilized. Harjo maintains evoking flowing water imagery that contain the city scene whether as “ice” or “boiling”. Imagination intrinsic to evocriticism shows the three female perspective merge voices to sense ache and lightness, and the clouds “whirling” above reflect a vivid sense of movement in all elements in the poem. Human consciousness is closely connected with imagination, myth, other sea and air creatures, mobility in earth and sky and the pain of the old woman buried in ache. Autobiographical yet multi-consciousness in expression, the poem is vivid and water symbolism gives it a distinct character to set apart from the modern city as we know it. In other words, while ecocriticism help unravel the agency of nature and the delineation of modern spaces in harmony with mobility, vividness, diversity and inclusiveness of nature and mythology, evocriticism takes the analysis a step further on the level of merging consciousness and carving a narrative tradition that is autobiographical yet also claims an “inside” point of view in reference to nature and city streets.

In her very short poem, the “Invisible Fish”, Harjo reitriates the theme of connectedness to nature, but this time through an ecocritical Darwinist perspective. The “Invisible Fish” might refer to the depth of the unconscious where people allow evolution to replace native American culture with consumerism. However, a paradox arises at the “invisib[ility]” of the fish as it maintains existence in the strong sense of dreamy like imagery and flowing language. An interplay of imagery between the “water”, vivid, carrying fish, yet invisible in “water-worn rock” spells out a hybridity of existence. Transformation of people and land is ominous with cars and trucks “carrying the dreamers’ decendants, who are going to the store” referring to an apocalypse. Land came out of water, and people came out of fish. The fish persists, yet “invisible” referring to the multiple layers of time and existence.

Elements of imagination and emotion show that nature maintains existence as the organic roots of the city. It has a rich narrative experience that sets off the supposedly “objective” Darwinist perspective. Imagery is lively and colourful to set off the cold suggestion of controlling nature and replacing it, as proposed by Darwinism. In other words, the Darwinist proposition that one species inevitably replaces another fails to capture the possibility of full existence for them all, but on different levels of visibility as suggested by Harjo.

The last poem I choose for her is “Praise the Rain” from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* which is mostly an act of emotional hailing for different images of native American culture, animals, landscape, clouds and water. The poem has different emotional states “crazy”, “sad” yet has an unwavering inclusive perspective with “praise the eater and the eaten” in reference to the colonizer and colonized. Then the rain comes back as a notion of hope. In a cyclic structure, the poem opens and ends on praising the rain, not just as a tribal song, but as a call for collective action.

Praise the rain; it brings more rain.
Praise the rain; it brings more rain (150).

The multi-layered narrative flow focused utilizing elements of emotions and imagination spells out the native American side of the story for their colonized land and severed legacy. Harjo puts forward an optimistic inclusive idea of interweaving time into an endless stretch, different civilizations coexisting in parallel worlds, and nature is empowered and expresses its agency from an “inside” point of view. Hence, feminist ecocritical and narrative techniques combine to unpack the richness of Harjo’s poetry.

Water Symbols and Imagery in a Selection of Poems by Linda Hogan

The Book of Medicine is a collection of poems by Linda Hogan voicing her major preoccupation with colonization and loss of American Indian legacy. Unlike Joy Harjo’s overriding sense of peace expressed in merging points of view and extending timelessness and agency over the non-hierarchic presence of human and non human, Linda Hogan has a clear sense of bitterness and conveys a deep sense of loss. Depth of point of view required for an evocritical reading gives is mildly present in Hogan’s poetic narratives, yet a strong postcolonial and feminist ecocritical element is present.

In an ecofeminist reading, there are four common aspects of her poetry. First, she aligns the degradation of environment as a result of colonization to the subordination and oppression of women. Second, she stresses the connection between American Indian, women and animals as a bulk of negative connotations for the three of them. She adopts a post-colonial technique of reviewing colonial history and its prejudiced discourse and destructive practices in order to capture a pre-colonial sense of her culture. Thirdly, she believes that creating art through the experience of loss is the first step to stop the various

forms of oppression that target the vulnerable beings. Finally, she seeks creating egalitarian, non-hierarchical structures (Sadek 83).

The turtle is a significant sea creature in Native American culture for, according to them, it has helped in the creation of earth. According to Indian American mythology, it saved the head of tribe's daughter and has inspired the native American practice of sewing the umbilical cord of a newly born girl to a turtle dummy in order to ensure her health and safety. Drinking turtle blood is also encouraged for the sterile, promising endless fertility (Anderson 60). The turtle stands for wisdom, rejuvenation, life, safety and is strictly connotative of American Indian culture and legacy.

Hogan utilizes the turtle imagery repetitively in her poems. In her 1987 collection, *Calling Myself Home*, she draws on the turtle as means to collect wisdom from the environment. The turtle is representative of man's thinking and observation. It has the power of life, wisdom of the ages and agency through pledging war. The light that shines through the turtle's eyes wakes the sleeping world and it offers its shell as shield of war in a sign of endurance and power. The sense of time in Hogan's poetry is clearly chronological. The moment is the present and calls for connection to the past and summoning the power of tradition and legacy are meant to empower the weaker side of the colonial conflict.

like old women
who can see the years
back through his eyes (3).

The turtle here claims a male gender and stands for warrior-hood. Her narrative perspective retains the traditional correlation between wisdom and old women connotative of the elderly and wise heads of tribe. Sadek discusses Montgomery's double significance of the turtle, both as a nurturing continuation of life and a connection to ancient past.

Wake up, we are women.
The shells are on our backs.
We are amber the small animals are gold inside us (3).

“with its hard, perhaps almost petrified exterior and soft, living interior, becomes a type of representation of the Native American who has had to develop metaphorical external defense mechanisms in order to preserve the life of their ancient rituals, songs, and ceremonies” (qtd in Sadek 73). Taking nature as their traditional teacher, Red Indians learn to combat the imperialist powers

and fight hard for their survival both on the present physical realm and through connecting to their cultural past.

In most of Native American literary work, native characters are typically innocent, simple folk struggling to survive the traditional way in a sharp contrast with the imperialist “white” male aggression and anger. There is no assimilation of existence or points of view. The conflict is perpetuated by the power of resistance the turtle embodies.

Her allusion to the turtle in her 1993, *Book of Medicine*, does not emit power but loss maintaining the idea that death of the turtle speaks the atrocities of colonialism and loss of life. The poem entitled, “Song for the Turtles in the Gulf”, starts with collapsing white man, plastic and “British petroleum” as elements of death. “We had been together so very long/ you willing to swim with me” the initial liveliness of the turtle is mourned. The turtle was vivid amidst the sea, its eternal habitat yet “distortions” happen at the hands of “the man from British Petroleum”. “Dead” and plastic” come in one line to reveal the close connection between colonial money-oriented practices and the negative impact it has on the best of nature. Juxtaposing the “splendor” of the sea before the British come over and “dead/plastic” reflect her sense of pain and deep loss. In the fashion of an old eulogy she proceeds to compare white man impact of “burned”, “pained” and “red-black oil” to the wonderful and rich existence the turtle had before it died in pain. Although the turtle started off as a male warrior, when dead it is referred to as a female, an “old great mother” in order to shift significance and bond with the resources of wisdom and life in native American legacy.

all I can think is that I loved your life,
the very air you exhaled when you rose,
old great mother, the beautiful swimmer,
the mosaic growth of shell
so detailed, no part of you
simple, meaningless,
or able to be created
by any human,
only destroyed (348).

The only time she cares about joining points of view across her existence and the white-man’s is when she gives an apology to the dead turtle. Albeit, she insists on pointing out the difference in perspective: the white man throws the

turtle in sea out of indifference, but she hails the turtle and expresses the honour of putting it back to its glorious abode accompanied by prayers for forgiveness. Again, conferring a feminine gender on it to align its biocentric reality to native American mythology. Also this deepens our sense of opposition between nature and native Americans, on one hand, and the antagonistic and oppressive existence of the white man, on the other. This carries a powerful implication tapping at an ecocritical perspective rich in its feminist and postcolonial allusions.

Forgive us for being thrown off true,
for our trespasses,
in the eddies of the water
where we first walked (349).

In “Hunger,” Hogan alludes to colonial practices as “hunger” in search for the riches of nature. Hunger refers to unquenchable and insatiable need implying vulgarity and aggression subverting the colonial depiction of the native as poor, needy and animal like. The poem refers to colonial practices and laments American Indian cultural genocide (Dreese, 15). The “fishermen” image points to the colonizers whereas “water” stands for the rich environment and the “dolphins” collapse the three identities: animal, woman and the native American. The encounter abstracts colonial practices into a rape scene with all its connotations of aggression, oppression and indecency.

who said dolphins are like women
we took them from the sea
and had our way with them (17).

In the second part of the poem, Hogan expands feminist identity into maternal metaphors. The sea is likened to a fertile, generous, pregnant woman subjected to rape at the hands of the white man metaphorical of colonial exploitation of resources and harming natural life.

It is the old man
who comes in the night
to cast a line
and wait at the luminous shore
He knows the sea is pregnant
with clear fish and their shallow pools of eggs (17).

Depriving the sea of its fertility and regenerative powers is an atrocity intensified by contrasting the “luminous” shore to the darkness of the night. The imperialist is likened to a cowardly thief sneaking to harm when no one is watching.

In her poem, “Harvesters of Night and Water,” the dynamicity of imagery stresses the heroic escape of the octopus after struggling to be free itself from the power grip of white hands trying to capture him. Motivated by money, “it will sell for two hundred dollars, it will be cut into pieces...and used again” (23), the “fishermen” perpetually referring to white men are violent and aggressive posing double challenge on the octopus: sea creature taken to air, and fighting men in order to escape back to the sea. Although the octopus is power and resilient, it tries to communicate with its “language” to no avail.

In midnight
The circle of light in the boat
is filled with men and white arms
with ropes moving like promise
and nets pulling up the black and icy waters.

...
His many arms
fight hard, hold fast and tight
against the held boat,
in struggle with air and men (22).

Love suggests that the octopus was not silent, but was “perhaps silenced” (qtd in Sadek 75). The narrator’s voice is neither autobiographical like Harjo nor distanced like the Romantics. Hogan attempts to capture the full scope of vividness and dynamicity inspired by water creatures and in their power and resilience subverting a baggage of negative connotations usually conferred on the weaker side of the conflict. In this poem, the colonizers lose to the victorious octopus in an attempt to tip the power balance that is greatly skewed in favour of the colonizer. Then she finishes the poem with a double significance to money: pragmatic imperialist motivation and credit for deeds in the hands of the superior power of nature. When man and nature seek “coins”, man get instant money out of exploitation, but nature retains its memory and imagination in order to fight back and walk victoriously and gracefully away.

I want to tell them what I know,
that this life collects coins
like they do
and builds walls on the floor of the sea (23).

Linda Hogan's poems reflect a spirit of glorifying nature, yet it is different from Harjo's inclusive and optimistic voice. Hogan perpetuates the conflict between the colonized and the colonizer through maintaining binary oppositions of colonized-colonizer, man-(pregnant) woman, past-present, prey and predator. Her goal is to create art out of loss and to maintain reverence to American Indian legacy. Harjo, on the other hand, had a different narrative technique and a voice of dreamy blurredness with multiple focal points for narrative perspectives and inclusive agency in possibilities of peace through living the past and the present concurrently. The canonical chasm of biocentric and anthropocentric perspectives merge in Harjo's dreamy poems applying an evocritical shade to ecocritical reading of her poetry.

Conclusion

Employing an feminist ecocritical and narrative reading of a selection of poems from both Harjo and Hogan, reveals a common preoccupation with native American legacy and their "transformative visions of Native American poets, from hopelessness to hope, from death to survival and rebirth" (Sadek 78). This paper has been an attempt to unpack Native Indian belief in the interconnectedness of all creatures—human and nonhuman—with specific focus on water symbols in the selected poems. Adopting feminist ecocritical and narrative approaches relocates nature and spirituality in the centre of artistic expression not overlooking stylistic and textual properties at the representation of human consciousness. Forms of artistic expression offer to expand the oral-tradition and legacy of Native Americans yet in "English" and poetic form.

Between two females poets, reference to water symbols as subject matter of their poetry reveal the commonality of Native Indian legacy and biocentricism as a cognitive form, source of power and spirituality, yet contrasts the optimistic inclusive spirit of Harjo, both in themes and style, to the sense of bitterness and loss evident in Hogan's poems. Water symbols, as rain, flood, ocean, tears and creatures of dolphins, fish, octopus, sea monsters and the famous turtle reflect an intrinsic human bonding with nature as a source of power, consciousness and cognitive force as well as its value and agency that constitutes the human experience itself, working beyond the reductivist colonial pragmatic perspective of nature. The selection of poems discussed in this paper expands our understanding of narrative, with its plot, time and perspective as basic constituents and how it gives way to multi-focality, timelessness and blurring of main and marginal in the plot covering both anthropocentric and

biocentric perspectives without overlooking issues of representation, human cognition and multiple levels of agency.

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