



Reclamation of place and identity: Joy Harjo's Postcolonial eco poetics

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Place is vital to an individual as well as a community, it creates identity, a sense of connection with the environment and a purpose in life. Ever since the beginning of industrialisation and colonisation man has been trying to erase the place of his fellow beings in order to exploit it. Edward Said in his iconic work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) delves deep into the spacial politics which is the base of all colonial enterprises. "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (Said 6).

Indigenous people know the vagaries of climate and environment in the regions they live for centuries. Robert L. Thayer life-place as "a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms . . . and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. (Thayer 3)

What happens to the people and also the bioregion when this connection between man and nature is severed by colonialism or globalisation is the perennial question ecocritics have been asking themselves for long. How can it be countered, rectified or solved? American poet Joy Harjo's poems and performances are studied widely for the patterns of struggle she has adopted as an active member of the Muskogee Nation to embody the voice of indigenous people against colonisation and imperialism. Mishuana Goeman says: "The rich intertextuality of Harjo's poems and her intense connections with other and awareness of Native issues- such as sovereignty, racial formation, and social conditions- provide the foundation for unpacking and linking the function of settler colonial structures within newly arranged global spaces" (Goeman 69-187).

An internationally renowned performer and member of the Creek tribe of the Muskogee Nation, Harjo was born to a Creek father and a Cherokee-French mother. Graduated from the University of New Mexico and the University of Illinois she worked as professor in various colleges in the US. As a renowned poet Harjo served three terms as the poet laureate of the United States. She published many books of poetry including highly acclaimed memoirs and children's books.

Harjo's poetry reflected Creek beliefs and myths and in dealing with the oppression her people faced with the coming of colonisers she tries to portray the oppressed communities of the world in general. She can hardly see separation among men, nonhuman, sky, trees, creeks and earth. Before colonisation, man lived peacefully in his life-places as he knows the connection among all living and nonliving things where a mother knows how to weave out history from wet tall grass. Harjo sings in "Remember:"

it is the only way
i know how to breathe
an ancient chant
that my mother knew
came out of a history
woven from wet tall grass
in her womb
and i know no other way
than to surround my voice
with the summer songs of crickets
in this moist south night air
Oklahoma will be the last song
i'll ever sing (Harjo lines 9-21)

As an activist, Joy Harjo was in the forefront protesting against Robert's Frost's reading of 'The Gift Outright', which sanctioned the official history about the Native Americans, at John F Kennedy's presidential inauguration in 1961. Harjo played a key role in the 'Returning the Gift Festival' held in Norman, Oklahoma, where hundreds of Native writers gathered to defy Frost's erasure of history through his celebrated poem. Harjo is worried that the story of indigenous people are disappearing from the American story and new ones made and propagated by the colonials taking place. Her preference of performance to poetry itself can be seen as the reflection of Harjo's fear of the printed word as a member of the Indian group, who have lost a world, their life-places, for the signs their leaders put on paper during the long history of colonisation. As Harjo has observed, "with many indigenous people, words on paper are suspect

because they've been used to sign away land and take away children. They're still being used in courts of law to steal" (Harjo 38).

In many poems the detestable attitude of the coloniser in torturing the Natives who resisted the attempt to exploit the land. Postcolonialism attempts to draw attention to the twin abuse of the colonised people and their lands. Social justice and environmental justice are so intricately linked, the postcolonial critics say, that they cannot be separated. Responding to the killing of "Ken" Saro-Wiwa, Nigerian writer and environmental activist Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (9[42]) says: "If one of the axioms of postcolonial ecocriticism is that there is no social justice without ecological justice, then that axiom is no more clearly illustrated than in the nightmarish events surrounding the death on 10 November 1995 of Nigerian writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was tried and executed along with eight of his Ogoni kinsmen for a crime he did not commit.

Joy Harjo's poetry draws voluminously from Creek myths and beliefs. According to them, Craig Womack describes it, "the nation was born when the earth opened up in the West near the Continental Divide and spit the people up from below its surface. The quest to discover the origin of the sun" forced the people eastward "until they reached the Atlantic and could travel no more," finally leading them "to settle in the area of the Chattahoochee River in Alabama" (Womack 26). The colonial project to expand the US territories over the homeland of the Natives finally led to the Battle of Tohopeka in 1814 when one thousand Muskogee were killed. The treaty the Natives were forced to sign moved the Creek to Oklahoma.

But in Harjo's poetry Oklahoma returns again and again as poetic muse. She sings, "oklahoma will be the last song / I'll ever sing" (*How We Became Human* line 9).¹⁴ Harjo explains in an

interview that she is connected psychically; there is a birth cord that connects her. But she doesn't live there. The pathetic picture of Creeks living in Alabama in the most wretched state haunts her poems. The local people began to exploit and torture the poor Creeks in sales of food and liquor. By that time the Natives were completely cut off from nature and all sources of nourishment. Along with their life-places even their native languages were fast disappearing. Noam Chomsky says that "Language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in language" (Chomsky 8). The demise of the Native culture became nearly complete when The Indian Relocation Program was implemented in the 1950s when Natives were offered the freedom to leave the reservations and integrate themselves in the mainstream. Townsend explains that the old people can now die on the reservation" but they want the young ones to move to the city, intermarry, forget their traditions, and disappear"7[523].

How displacement or forceful migration from a place affects the true identity of the Natives has been the focus of many writers like Harjo. Often the studies gives stress to the humanitarian grounds and the loss of cultural identity at the peril of the loss of natural environment due to displacement. Mardossian complaints that migrant narratives emphasises on "movement, rootlessness, and the mixing of cultures, races, and languages" leaving behind the question of place. This ecological element is highlighted in postcolonial ecological narratives.

The main objective of postcolonial ecocriticism is to fight against and critique the homogenisation of spaces, which is a colonial and capitalist project. The impossibility of discussing colonialism without paying attention to the rampant ecological destruction has been pointed out by many ecological critics. Richard Grove in his *Green Imperialism* (1995) avers that: "modern environmentalism, rather than being exclusively a product of European or North

American predicaments and philosophies, emerged as a direct response to the destructive social and ecological conditions of colonial rule” (Grove 486).

One of the methods by which the poet Joy Harjo resists the colonialist attempts to reclaim and restore the Native Indian culture is through myths. Invoking a place which is home to her people involves, Harjo says, attending to something more than land—but of the land— a long tradition of myth making and story telling of ongoing history that form them. Native mythologies and stories displaced and dispersed from the life-place have to be retrieved and retold as necessity.

Jim Ruppert, sees mythic space as ”the fusion of the individual, the . . . landscape and a particular sensibility about the nature of existence on the planet” (Ruppert 27). The sensibility arises from the Native American world-view which includes nonlinear time and ”a vision of continuance or connectedness of all beings” (Ruppert 27). Harjo in her poems creates the mythic space by leaping from one reality to another, sometimes from the material plane to metaphysical plane with ease.

In “New Orleans” Joy Harjo paints the image of a woman struggling to the remnants of her culture in history and also in the place where she lives:

“This is the south. I look for evidence

of other Creeks, for remnants of voices,

or for tobacco brown bones to come wandering down Conti Street, Royal, or Decatur.” (New Orleans lines 1-4)

The poet is in search of her people, Creeks, of remnants of voices lost or dispersed, of forgotten myths. But sometimes the retelling of myths need a new vocabulary, a new syntax. In many

poems Harjo switches tense midway upsetting the linear flow of narratives and time, where ordinary language wouldn't suffice to create the mythic space. In her first volume of poetry, *'What Moon Drove Me to This?'* we can see the struggle to express the impediments in communication. Silence, miscommunication, lost signals, curious forms, terse lines all reflect the struggle to express the impossible. In "Are you still there" we see the poet attempting to communicate through telephone. But she fails.

'hello'

is the gentle motion of a western wind

cradling tiny purple flowers that grow near the road

my voice stumbles

towards the laguna

returning over sandstone

as it passes the canoncito exit

but my voice is caught

shredded on a barbed wire fence and flutters soundless

in the wind (Harjo. In Mad love lines 18-25)

Her journeys across the American continent inspite of having deep roots in her lost homeland tempered Harjo's poetics which revolved around the questions of translocality and indigeneity. In the work where her poetry collaborated with the colour photographs of Stephen Strom titled *Center of the World* (1989) the place is not necessarily locatable in geographic terms even though it points to lost places of the Natives: "My house is the red earth; it could be the center of

the world. I've heard New York, Paris, or Tokyo called the center of the world, but I say it is magnificently humble. You could drive by and miss it. Radio waves can obscure it. Words cannot construct it, for there are some sounds left to sacred wordless form. (*Secrets 2*)”

The postcolonial project of writing back to centre and decentralising it is evident in Harjo's poem. She points towards secrets emanating from her chosen locus in contrast to prominent cities of culture suggesting that those who "look with the mind of the swirling earth near Shiprock" manage to "become the land, beautiful" (50). She argues from the outset of the poem that "the landscape forms the mind" (2) and that "this earth has dreamed me" (4), acknowledging her agency is sanctioned by topography.

In "3 AM," Harjo presents an exasperating experience.

"the attendant doesn't know
that third mesa
is a part of the center
of the world
and who are we just two indians
at three in the morning trying to find our way back home.”

These people are ghosts from the past, refugees from an alien culture subjected to absolute fragmentation in Albuquerque airport, a symbol of modernity and moral nature. The attendant is at a loss to get these Indians to their destination who are "trying to find a way back" to the "old oraibi, third mesa" (43).

“the flight attendant doesn't know that the third mesa
is part of the center
of the world” (43).

The flight attendant cannot help them find their third mesa, but only through their determination they can return to the land. They are trying to cross the mythic space that the attendant cannot see.

Through her poetry and musical performances Harjo tries for a re-assertion of the tribal self. Even though Harjo too leaves her homeland like the rest of the Creeks to new places like the Hawaiian archipelago she relates to other oppressed populations throughout the American continent and used her poetry and musical performances to express her solidarity. She connects African Americans to Native Americans in the poem "Anchorage," and saw in them a larger "fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival / those who were never meant / to survive" (32).

Harjo's works detail her journeys and her quest to find a sense of place. She uses the aid of memory and myths to re-excavate the lost tales and culture. As a postcolonial ecopoet Harjo resists the Eurocentric attempts to epistemologize and ontologize the world-as-a-whole. Such universal histories or grand narratives that situate every place as equal with Europe as the centre have to be repelled through literature and art. While postcolonialism stresses on the re-imagination of the history of a colonised place, theories of ecocriticism focuses on the return to nature or the conservation of a pristine place. Harjo through her innovative language, her memories, her myth relentless making of myths, resists both the Human/nature and the West Other binaries. The intensional elisions and erasures of regional histories, places and ecology are resisted throughout her career as a performer because she knows the implication of who wields the agency to produce knowledge about colonised people and from what space and location, and with that sort of politics.

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