

Ecocritical Reading of Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem" & "Remember"

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ABSTRACT:

Joy Harjo is a renowned Native American poet whose poetry resonates with themes of survival, identity construction, spirituality, and man's reconnection to nature. She merges the personal and collective histories, and blends music, myths, and memory to celebrate the traditions of her ancestors. She dedicates her poetry to talk about injustices against her indigenous people. Past studies dealt with themes of oppression and identity reconstruction in Harjo's poetry, yet the investigation of the Natives' reconnection to nature in the selected poems via Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) is not done. Thus, the aim of the current article is to explore the revitalization of the indigenous voice of Harjo's people in her 'Eagle Poem' and 'Remember' in light of the above-mentioned framework. Methodologically, the article conducts a textual analysis guided by some assumptions of the framework. The article concludes that Harjo's celebration of the landscape and ecological concerns resonate with the struggles and resilience of her marginalized people, which shows her poetics of the interconnected vision of identity and nature.

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Introduction

Joy Harjo (1951-), a Native American poet, musician, and playwright. She becomes an iconic figure and indigenous voice of the literary Native American Renaissance in the 20th century. Her poetry discusses imperialist and colonial issues. She addresses her readers to realize the wrongs of the past committed against not only her Native American people but against the marginalized people around the world. Her dedication to defend the rights of Native Americans generates her belief that the environment could teach the indigenous people the ways of preserving their identity via the spiritual connection to nature. Dreese describes the natives' struggle saying:

The identities they construct through their literature and stories would not be complete without the accounts of colonization and suffering that have led to the internal and external struggles they continually face today, such as the loss of the self and racism. (2002, p.44)

This struggle is reflected in Harjo's poetry as well as reflecting the poetics of resistance and survival. One of these modes of resistance is the celebration and reconnection to nature. Her poetry is a witness to the role of environment in retelling the stories of resilience through its vivid representations. Glotfelty says that "nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body" (1996, p. xxiii). Moreover, Glotfelty stresses the relationship between nature and culture saying:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (p. xix)

As a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Harjo's poetry views nature as a holy living entity, which reflects her indigenous perspectives towards nature. Her poetry has deep connection with the natural world. She merges themes of nature with themes of survival, history, resilience and identity. She utilizes her poetry to bridge the gap between man and his environment to regain her indigenous identity and culture, which are deformed by the former narratives of the White man that erased Native history. Nature is represented in her poetry as an active participant in shaping the human life through its interconnectedness. Sally Michael Hanna says that nature in Harjo's poetry "represents the full expression of divine presence. Elements of nature often appear in Harjo's poetry to express certain emotions or dispositions and sometimes emerge as characters playing on her cosmic stage" (2023, p.4).

Harjo's poetry stands as a call for humans to protect nature from the anthropocentric views that degrade the natural world causing cultural disintegration. For her, nature has the power of teaching man survival and resilience. Through vivid representation of natural elements such as animals, birds, skies, and rivers, she reminds her readers to have an eco-consciousness to the spirituality of these elements. She calls for the reconsideration and reconnection between man and his nature. In her poems, she urges humans to revere nature again as it was revered

by her native ancestors, consequently, spiritual reunion will be achieved by the indigenous people.

Discussion

Joe Harjo merges her native traditions and culture into the Western culture in her writing style to create a world that reflects her indigenous voice. Dreese states that "The poetry of Joy Harjo highlights this creative ability and resistance in the manner in which she manipulates poetic conventions and ideas of time and place to create a world distinctly her own" (p. 38). Mancelos says that Harjo "celebrates the natural surroundings of Oklahoma and other states; who brings together her emotions and prayers with the cycles of nature (day and night, dawn and dusk, the seasons of the year); who converses with the animals and plants and listens to legends and myths of the earth" (p. 70).

In her "Eagle Poem", appeared in the collection *In Mad Love and War* (1990), Harjo interconnects the vision of humanity and nature to celebrate the spiritual communion, reverence, serenity, and unity of the natural life. The poem starts with a prayer inviting the reader to be conscious to the natural surroundings; sun, sky, earth, and moon, through which he will be able to bend and communicate with the entire world. Prayer to Harjo is an act of communion with nature (Hanna, 2023, p.434). At the beginning of the poem, she describes nature as a scared entity in which prayers and invocations are directed to:

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you. (1-3)

The speaker, through the prayer, advocates a holistic relationship between man and his environment. The natural scene is perceived as an integral part of human existence that should be acknowledged and appealed. All the natural elements 'earth', 'sky', 'sun' and 'moon' are intertwined to voice nature and its spiritual connection to human's life. Harjo represents nature as a means of getting an access to the psyche of the human being through which spiritual understanding is achieved. Jamil states that Harjo's prayer:

would sweep our hearts clean. And in moments of mystical illumination,
we learn That we must take the utmost care/ And kindness in all things,
for every creature is part of the same fabric, and shares in the truly
essential things in life. As well, birth and death are part of life journey, yet
all should be done in beauty, without hyphenation or segregation. (33)

The language of the poem suggests that every single human contact is harmonious with the cyclic motion of the natural elements:

And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion. (4-9)

These lines show that human beings have limits of perception that they cannot see grandeur of the creatures and cannot communicate with the natural surroundings. The reference to "languages that aren't always sound" highlights the earth's numerous ways of communication whether through water, wind, or motion. William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" says that poems are like green plants that preserve the universe:

Poems are green plants among us; if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its Path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system. (Glottfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. 111)

The eagle's circles of motion remind the readers with the ecological cycles such as the interconnectedness of life and death:

Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings. (10-13)

This cyclic motion of the Eagle is celebrated by the Native culture as a reminder of the cycle of life. The eagle flies in a circular motion making arcs that stand for the life of a human. The same as the eagle making its arcs in the sky, people have to go through the course of this life up to the end of this course.

Here, the poet uses the word 'sacred' to describe this creature of nature, which stands for Grace as the messenger of God himself. The circular flight of the bird is a reminder of humanity of life and death. The eagle's wings are sacred because it flies in a circular way above the river high in the sky as if it is the overseer of the creation; a characteristic for to the creator only. When man learns to cope up with his problems, he will feel at ease just like the eagle. So, people need to learn from the eagle the spirit of freedom.

The eagle's flight in circles represents the life cycle that connects the creatures of the natural world to human beings. The eagle, here, is a good example of the indigenous connection with nature. It is a symbol of spiritual guidance and transcendence for Indigenous people as it transcendentalizes the mundane with its flight in a circle motion that speaks of itself connecting the cycle of life and the natural world. The eagle teaches the indigenous people the spirit of resilience and preservation through which they maintain their culture amid the colonial discourses designated to eradicate their existence.

Harjo reveres this wild creature 'the eagle' because native cultures celebrate their traditions to protect their identity from the colonial outsiders. This respect and appreciation "for the eagles stands in contrast with the Euro American economic attitudes that keep hunting the eagles, regarding the bird as a natural resource to be plundered" (Hassan & Sadek, 2015, p. 76). Thus, she calls this bird "sacred" and links it with humans whose duty is to protect forms of life, which in turn teach them acts of survival in the face of threats. Banerjee states that Harjo's poetry "reflects the spirit of resistance of the Native American Renaissance. It embodies the ethos of the Red Power movement and the Renaissance in its emphasis on the reclamation of the Native American identity and landmass from the clutches of the colonial invaders (2021, p. 75). Harjo uses circles in the poem to stand as a symbol of representation of the connection

between all the creatures and the cycle of life. She associates these circles with the recurrence and completion of life. She employs the eagle's circular flight to highlight this idea. She compares the path of man's life to the journey from birth to death:

.....we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty. (19-26)

Harjo ends the poem with the repetition of the word "in beauty" twice to call the readers to direct their prayers for beauty, which is reflected in every single natural element. The eagle's flight invites the readers to adopt a non-human-centric view that aligns with the ecocritical values. Harjo necessitates an ecological awareness and familiarity of the indigenous people with the traditional ecological knowledge that reveres the natural world. Salim (2021) clarified that beauty is perceived by human beings through their prayer; the Creek Native American prayer, which is made beautiful through its connection to the eagle.

Likewise, in "Remember", a poem from her 1983 collection *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo addresses her indigenous people stressing the importance of "remembering not only the history and colonial oppression but also their cultural traditions, community practices, "protocols," and people, Native Americans keep their culture alive in a world that continues to try to stamp them out (Hinrichs, 2023, p.47). Navarro states that Harjo uses the poetics of memory that "is prominent and allows us to rediscover the voices and presence of others who have been previously silenced and rendered invisible, giving them new meaning in our present (2022, p.161). In this poem, she focuses on memory to remind the natives of the interconnection between human beings and nature:

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night. (1-6)

The repetition of the word "remember" in the above lines shows Harjo's celebration of the natural elements; stars, moon, dawn ...etc, which is a reminder for people to remember the blessings and gifts of nature and the urgent need to preserving them. Astuti & Iskarna elaborate on this idea saying that Harjo "depicts some path to becoming more human by reminding the reader to be respectful and thankful for the gifts we have been given and to not take them for granted" (2024, p.514). The poet relies heavily on images taken from the natural scene and relate them to the path of man's life to show its diversity and colorfulness, such as the stars, the moon, the sunset, and the sky:

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of

her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth. (7-13)

Harjo compares the color of the earth to the color of man's 'skin', mentioning then the different colors exist; red, black, yellow and white earth, which represent the interconnectedness between nature and the various races of humankind. She exploits this natural phenomenon as a poetics to remind her readers that though the colors of soil are different, they belong to the same Mother earth, which indicates the shared origin and destiny of human beings. Therefore, she tries to put an end to the anthropocentric thinking that gives superiority and privilege for man over other natural elements.

Susmita Paul states that Harjo addresses the readers directly to call them to remember every single moment of their life in the natural world, and to cherish these moments with their minute details. She calls them to be aware to the diurnal course of the day and the night (2011, p. 332) and to remember:

the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems. (14-16)

These lively images taken from the environment are signs of the lively and healing power of nature. Therefore, the repetition of the word "remember" in most of the lines stresses the significance of contemplating these images to remind her people with all the blessings and gifts provided by nature which stand as a great guide to teach man how to live and adapt to his world, "Being aware of where and whom one comes from becomes a necessary tool to the appropriation of one's right to an existence based on community bonds and knowledge" (Navarro, 2022, p.146).

These lands were created in beautiful harmony, so all people should live in peace, love, and harmony. Also, she continues to mention the creatures, trees and animals, that have tribes and families like us. We should "Remember" all these creatures and think about the way they live in peace. She ended the stanza by describing them as if they were poems. Metaphorically, all creatures are poems that we can analyze and draw lessons from. William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" says:

A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow. Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life. Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever-generative twin matrices, language and imagination. (Glottfelty and Fromm, 1996, p.108)

The act of remembering stresses the need for reconnection to these natural elements via contemplation in the sound of the winds and its voice, to know the origin of this universe.

Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She
knows the origin of this universe.

Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.
 Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.
 Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
 Remember that language comes form this.
 Remember the dance that language is, that life is.
 Remember. (17-24)

Harjo addresses the readers to remember their sense of assimilation and integration with their world "you are the whole world and the whole world is you", which is a soft reminder to all people to listen to the voice of the earth to preserve it and consequently preserve their heritage and culture from erasure due to the colonial discourse. A healthy peaceful environment reflects its serenity and calmness on its abiders. Neil Evernden states in his "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy" that:

the question of the role of the environment in the life of the individual is now transformed. Rather than thinking of an individual spaceman who must slurp up chunks of the world-"resources"-into his separate compartment, we must deal instead with the individual-in- environment, the individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment. (Glotfelty and Fromm,1996, p.97)

All these poetic images call for the preservation and sustainability of the natural world. So, through contemplation in the natural surroundings, man would have a better understanding of his environment and his self.

Conclusion

The study explores the ecocritical elements in Joe Harjo's "Eagle Poem" and "Remember" following the ecocritical concepts introduced in Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Thus, the study concludes that Harjo's utilization of the natural elements is her vital poetics to regain the voice of her indigenous people, which is long silenced by the discourse of the White man. In her "Eagle Poem", Harjo introduces her poetics of the urgent need to reconnect to the ancestor's roots and heritage via the symbolic implications of 'the eagle', which preserves the indigenous people's identity. Likewise, the study concludes that Harjo's employment of the natural elements in "Remember" entails the interconnectedness of man and nature through celebrating these elements as 'They are alive poems' that remind the indigenous people with their history and identity. Thus, 'Remember' is a call for respect for nature to enjoy a life of reconciliation and reconnection with the self.

قراءة نقدية بيئية لقصيدي جوي هارجو "قصيدة النسر" و"تذكر"

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ملخص البحث:

جوي هارجو هي شاعرة أمريكية أصلية مرموقة يتردد صدى شعرها بموضوعات البقاء، وبناء الهوية، والروحانية، وإعادة اتصال الإنسان بالطبيعة. تدمج في شعرها التواريخ الشخصية والجماعية، وتمزج الموسيقى والأساطير والذاكرة للاحتفاء بتقاليد أسلافها. تركز شعرها للحديث عن الظلم ضد شعبها الأصلي. تناولت الدراسات السابقة موضوعات القمع وإعادة بناء الهوية في شعر هارجو، لكن لم يتم بحث إعادة اتصال السكان الأصليين بالطبيعة في القصائد المختارة من خلال كتاب غلوتفلي وفروم* قارئ النقد البيئي: معالم في البيئة الأدبية* (1996). لذلك، يهدف المقال الحالي إلى استكشاف إحياء الصوت الأصلي لشعب هارجو في قصيدتها 'قصيدة النسر' و'تذكر' في ضوء الإطار المذكور أعلاه. منهجياً، يجري المقال تحليلاً نصياً مسترشداً ببعض افتراضات الإطار النظري. يخلص المقال إلى أن احتفاء هارجو بالمنظر الطبيعية والاهتمامات البيئية يتردد صده مع نضالات وصمود شعبها المهمش، مما يظهر شاعريتها في الرؤية المترابطة للهوية والطبيعة.