

Reframing the Land and the Native Self: Interdisciplinary Observations in Contemporary Postcolonial Texts

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Rob Nixon, a postcolonial ecocritic, poses a critically crucial question: “What would it mean to bring environmentalism into dialogue with postcolonialism?” (233). The paper makes a modest attempt to address a few issues that would in turn help answering the question. Environmentalism or ecocriticism, which suits our literary jargon, is one of the many emerging schools of criticism of the present. It plays a vital role in the ecological recasting of the canon by employing various analytical strategies and theoretical approaches and has gradually diffused itself in addressing various cultural phenomena. One significant area that it has recently started shedding light on is the question of the interconnectedness between ethnic identity and one’s environment. Further one has to focus on issues of the “ecological Indian” stereotype created by the Western framing.

In order to simplify certain critical premises, we shall as a first step look at the available, established stereotypes of the aborigine and his affiliation to the land drawn majorly by the ecological Indian image. Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* defines the Ecological Indian as

a representative of a primitive people ... dwelling in harmony with nature sustaining one of the most widespread and seductive myths of the non-European ‘other’. Natives, irrespective of their geographic locations are the locus classicus for this assumption (Garrard 121).

The dominant prevalent image is that the Ecological Indian in nature understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth’s harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt. The metaphor of ‘primitive’ is unique because it transforms a geographical differentiation into a historical and evolutionary one, so that Indians or aborigines can be seen as being ‘behind’ Europeans in an inevitable progression from a natural to a civilized state. Since all contemporary societies are, in a sense, as modern as each other, this metaphor of the primitive can be seen as an ideological mystification. Today’s ecocritic from native dominion goes a step further and questions the monolithic, standardized image of the ecological Indian and the land. He or she tries to disrupt the constructed universal continuum of the native self and land.

Furthermore, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, considered as the most significant pioneering work in the field consists of only two Native American writers. But still, the essays offer a clear expression of the Native American ecological inclination. It describes how the scientific, objective discourses in Western literature are in contrast to the great mythic and ceremonic cycles of the natives.

Paula Gunn Allen in her “The Sacred Hoop” talks of the following ideas. There are vast differences in some basic assumptions about the universe and therefore, the basic reality experienced by the tribal peoples and by the Western is not the same. She says, “...the rules that

govern traditional American Indian literatures are very different from those that govern Western literature...” (260). Similarly the aborigines view space as spherical and time as cyclical whereas non-natives understand space as linear and time as sequential. More complex are their choices of belief systems regarding places. A general categorization of the types of places are as follows: places of communication with the universe, places that can only be visited in dreams, places of origins, places visited or evoked during a physical journey and spaces of fear. All these are points of rooted belief systems which are valid but the native writers themselves recognize they are to some extent outdated to fight against the present environmental destruction.

The other essay by Leslie Marmon Silko titled “Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination” from the same reader throws light on how ceremony, a ritual signifying important activities in one’s life is intertwined with the earth and its environment. It focuses on how every human identity is linked with all the elements of creation through the clan, which were named accordingly; the Sun clan, the Corn clan or the Clay clan. Silko mentions at one point that, “Location or place always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives.” (269). Their die-hard conviction was that survival depended upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings, but among all things – the animate and the less animate, since rocks and mountains were known to move, to travel occasionally. Their oral tradition contained stories about the creation and emergence of human beings and animals. Other subjects of their stories include animal and human interaction or even more, the foreign invasion and destruction of their natural phenomena.

A significant point one cannot overlook is that while the other essays, all by mainstream American writers discuss present-day environmental calamities and their causes and effects, we find these two essays dealing with traditional knowledge and belief systems standing in stark contrast to the others both subjectwise and structurewise.

This kind of representation is by itself a major issue of contention. Natives and aborigines have definitely moved far beyond and employ a thorough critique of both colonization and globalization. Now that there is a large and growing literature dedicated to engaging with Indigenous peoples' ecological knowledge and given the increasing recognition that Indigenous people have contributions to make to conservation programs, it is possible for dialogical movements between ecology and literary studies to become more of an established part of scholarship than has yet been the case. One explanation that can be given is a detailed account of traditional ecological knowledge becomes indispensable in order to contextualize certain basic views of land. It can also be considered as a gesture of resistance to the established Western academic modes of representation.

The popular coding of the “Ecological Indian” is undergoing a drastic change, thanks to postcolonialism and its paraphernalia, interrogating the basic romanticized pattern of land affiliation they hold. Ecological imperialism is a new shift in focus, varying from the usual political, cultural milieu. Therefore the history of colonization has to be considered, at least, in certain areas in ecological terms. European imperialism is not solely an ideological or even just a human phenomenon; on every continent, environments with similar climates to Europe were invaded by a ‘portmanteau biota’ including domestic, feral and wild animals and plants as well as epidemic and epizootic pathogens. As dealt in detail by Alfred Crosby in Ecological

Imperialism, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, it was extremely rapid, near-total and incredibly destructive.

It is much evident at the present times from the politicized environmental struggles in the third world countries how a revamping of ideologies – from the earlier romanticized to the present political and activist has taken place in the environmental front. Environmental activists from the third world countries – one seminal example being, Ken Saro Wiwa, the Ogoni author held prisoner without trial and later executed for his environmental and human rights activism in Nigeria. A novelist, poet, memoirist, and essayist died fighting the ruination of his Ogoni people's farmland and fishing waters by European and American oil conglomerates. His distinctive attempt to fuse environmental and minority rights is a remarkable example of the shift from the romantic claim and lament for the land to more pragmatic activist grounds. This sort of activist behaviour has been necessitated by the current impacts of globalization and its indiscrete consequences worldwide.

When we try to trace out a common link between the three above-discussed native representations, though from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, the points of convergences are: The methods they employ to discuss environmental issues are not that of open resistance but a strategic renegotiation. They offer alternative perspectives of seeing the land than a direct contrasting with the Western ideas. Now coming back to answering Rob Nixon's question, "What would it mean to bring environmentalism into dialogue with postcolonialism?" we get to learn a simultaneous twofold outlook. It can be seen that that their view of the land is no longer romantic but has undergone thorough politicization and intentionally or unintentionally combines indigenous ecological value systems with modern forms of representations. It helps them go a step beyond where they self-interrogate certain vital assumptions of their selves.

Thus the postcolonialism filter offers a new perspective to revisit ecological history, the interrogation of the myth of Ecological Indian and clear space for present global concerns. The earlier enframing attitude of the colonizer is largely under revision and the reframing of both the identities of the sacred land and the ecological Indian is under rapid construction. Environmental racism is politically interrogated by applying postcolonial theory to ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism is definitely more than a wild mixture of development studies, environmental history and aboriginal/native anthropology or ethnic study. Moreover, post colonialism and ecocriticism, in their critique of colonization and globalization, address the violence afflicted on both humans and nonhuman environment by Western policies. Both are concerned with the lives and the treatment of aboriginal or indigenous peoples.

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