

NATIVE, NATURE AND NEGOTIATION: AN ECO-LITERAL STUDY OF CONCILIATION OF PAST AND PRESENT WITH REFERENCE TO LESLIE SILKO'S NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION *GARDENS IN THE DUNES***Sulagna Mohanty**Department of English and Humanities, Amrita School of Engineering, Coimbatore.
E.mail: sulagna2008@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The indigenous cultures all over the world are strongly interwoven with a range of natural components. All these indigenous and aboriginal worlds including Native Americans are known for their holistic tradition as they love and revere a variety of ecological elements such as the Mother Earth, foliage, waterway, deep marine, and downpour. In the Native American fiction *Gardens in the Dunes* by Leslie Marmon Silko, the author weaves a spectacular narrative to convey the story of nature, home, mother, memory, exile, and return. Silko portrays this strong bonding while depicting the close relationship between Nature and various Native American characters. As the Native American culture believes in the deep bonding between its nature and its community members, their varied forms of farming and gardening become integral to their cultural identity. The recurrent recollections of Indigo's mother, her Grandmother Fleet, Sister Salt, and above all, the image of the Old Garden represent the recreation and reconstruction of her cultural memory and its association with the Mother Nature. The protagonist Indigo's love for gardens brings back the mythical memory of the Biblical 'Garden of Eden' which is the 'Garden of God' as described in the Book of the Genesis. The displacement of Indigo from her indigenous garden becomes a representation of the man's dissociation from nature and Indigo's homecoming to her native garden denotes man's perpetual longing to reconcile with Mother Earth. Thus, this paper seeks to analyze the re-establishment of a negotiation between old and new, past and present and most importantly the man and the nature in the backdrop of colonization with reference to *Gardens in the Dunes* by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Keywords: Nature, Indigenous, Mother Earth, Nativity, Ecology.

"We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all."

-Vandana Shiva

The indigenous cultures all over the world are strongly interwoven with an assortment of pagan components where the aboriginal populaces including Native Americans are known for their holistic tradition as they love and revere a variety of ecological elements. As the Native American culture believes in the profound union between nature and its community members, their varied forms of farming and gardening become integral to their cultural identities. Leslie Marmon Silko, the Laguna Pueblo author, poet, storyteller is known for her signature storytelling style and for using it as a mode of resistance against the imperial cultural hegemony. Along with other postcolonial artists, historians, and philosophers, writers Silko tend to share immense responsibility for the cultural memory systems of their communities while focusing on the prominence of nature in the lives of Native Americans. In her postcolonial fiction *Gardens in the Dunes* (henceforth GD), Silko weaves

a spectacular narrative to convey the story of nature, home, mother, exile, displacement, memory and homecoming. The recurrent recollections of the protagonist Indigo, her mother, Grandmother Fleet, Sister Salt, and above all, the image of the Old Garden represent the recreation and reconstruction of her cultural memory and its alliance with the Mother Nature. The protagonist Indigo's love for gardens brings back the mythological reminiscence of the Biblical 'Garden of Eden' as the 'Garden of God' as depicted in the Book of the Genesis. The displacement of Indigo from her indigenous garden becomes a representation of the man's dissociation from nature and Indigo's homecoming to her native garden denotes man's perpetual longing to reconcile with Mother Earth. Thus, this paper seeks to analyze the re-establishment of a negotiation between old and new, past and present and most importantly the man and the nature in the backdrop of colonization with reference to *Gardens in the Dunes*.

In the afore-mentioned text, the storyteller acts as a historian as she discusses the political, historical events of her time along with the telling of the tale of the Native American girl Indigo. The text

revolves around three women, the Native American Indigo, her Sister Salt and Indigo's White guardian Hattie, their perpetual longing for their roots in the backdrop of 20th century. The fiction covers a range of geographical landscape starting from Southwest America to England, Brazil, Italy, Long Island, and the Corsica Island. Indigo, a girl of around eleven, and her family happen to be one of the last few survivors of the imaginary Sand Lizard people, who have been gardening and cultivating in the invented riverbed of Colorado for a long time. Being "driven from their homelands to exile on federal reservations in the United States" (Willard 140) young Indigo is separated from her mother, Sister Salt, and Grandmother Fleet, forcefully taken to a boarding school, and finally takes shelter in the garden of a white couple Edward and Hattie. Meanwhile, in the road trip to Europe, Indigo is exposed to a completely new world of white people, and beautiful Victorian gardens. When Edward gets killed by one of his partners and Hattie chooses to stay with her aunty in England and Indigo comes back to her old garden to be reunited with Sister Salt.

The text opens with a visually rich scene of two Native sisters playing in the rain. As Silko describes, "The rain smelled heavenly. All over the sand dunes, datura blossoms round and white as moons breathed their fragrance of magic" (GD 13). By creating a sensory imagery in the opening sentence of the text, Silko succeeds in taking the reader 'down the memory lane' when things were different from the contemporary times, thus regulating the reader to a Native-American landscape sans the colonial experience. Being significantly influenced by Native myths, the history of gardening, and her contemporary political set-up, Silko takes up the themes of redressal and affirmation in the text. As a note to her aforementioned text, Silko confesses that,

Seed catalogs and garden books are favorites of mine ... Nearly all human cultures plant gardens, and the garden itself has ancient religious connections. For a long time, I've been interested in pre-Christian European beliefs, and the pagan devotions to sacred groves of tress and sacred springs. My German translator gave me a fascinating book on the archeology of Old Europe, and in it I discovered ancient artifacts that showed that the Old European cultures once revered snakes, just as we Pueblo Indian people still do. So I decided to take all these elements- orchids, gladiolus, ancient gardens, Victorian gardens, Native American gardens, Old European figures of Snake-

bird Goddesses- and write a novel about two young sisters at the turn of the century (Silko, Author Note, 480).

Silko's fascination for gardens establishes her close association with Nature, as a Native American. Like Silko, Indigo is lost when she comes across the pictures of the beautiful gardens of Europe. Silko asserts that "Indigo lost interest in the costumes when she saw the pictures and diagrams of Renaissance gardens; she spent the rest of the afternoon in the library, kneeling on a chair while Hattie browsed the shelves for other books of gardens and architecture" (GD 177). Indigo's love for garden evokes her close rapport and connection with nature.

Likewise, the Native American way of farming has its own distinct repute. As the Native American culture believes in the bonding between its community members, it also applies the same to its form of gardening and farming. Indigo's love for gardens brings back the mythical memory of the Biblical 'Garden of Eden' which is the 'Garden of God' as described in the *Book of the Genesis*. As the image of Eden Garden is generally associated with the mythology of Adam and Eve, this garden also symbolizes love, passion, and sexuality. There are different kinds of gardens shown in the text. These gardens belong to different culture, different lifestyles, and different timelines. There is the Native garden of Grandmother Fleet and Indigo, the Victorian garden of Mr. Abbott, Hattie' father, and the aesthetically decorative garden of Susan, Edward's sister. These gardens are also representative of different kinds of sensibility as the motives behind cultivating a garden differs from each other. If for Grandmother Fleet and Indigo, cultivating garden is a way of life, for Mr. Abbott, it is a sense of possession and for Susan, cultivating a garden boosts her sense of aesthetic satisfaction. Similarly, cultivation of seeds too differs from each other in case of every garden. Where Indigo's Native garden is used for cultivating grains and wild flowers, the garden of Mr. Abbott and Susan are more about cultivating flowers. It comes as a sharp contrast because in the sand desert where Indigo lives, it is infeasible to waste water on sophisticated flowers. However at the end of the text, Indigo comes back with seeds from Europe which she cultivates in her garden. This act of Indigo can be seen as a means for survival and continuity irrespective of the conflicting geo-political circumstances at home. It also spells the Native American sense of humility and acceptance of perspectives other than theirs.

Apart from providing a meaning to the lifestyle of the characters, the gardens in the text also give a mythical interpretation to its existence. The Garden of Eden is also synonymous with paradise and dislocation from Eden can be considered as being banished from the paradise as it happens in the case of Adam and Eve. Simultaneously, it can also refer to the Native people's idyllic existence in their 'gardens' before the colonial forces intruded and corrupted it forever. Moreover, the lovemaking between Edwards's sister Susan and her Scottish gardener in Susan's garden can be referred as a focal point for considering garden as a symbol of passion and sexuality. As Indigo wanders through the garden of Susan, she catches Susan and her gardener being together. As Indigo watches on,

Susan picked a lily of the valley and gave it to the gardener, who did a most amazing thing: he kissed Susan on the lips. Indigo took a deep breath as her heart beat faster. She knew Colin was Susan's husband, not the gardener, and she knew the laws of white people; men and women don't touch unless they are husband and wife. That's what the dormitory matrons and boarding school teachers emphasized again and again; girls stay out of one another's beds, and the boys too (*GD* 191).

As Indigo remembers the things she was taught in the boarding school about white man and woman and their relationship, the irony of the action of Susan and her gardener comes as a critique on western culture and its so-called importance on Christian values like virtue and chastity. Silko, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, criticizes the biased and partial education being imparted to the Native American children in the boarding schools. Since colonization, the concept of centre and periphery remains in the background-associating the Natives with physicality and the Europeans with intellect. But such long-held norms and clichés are parodied in the text as the Native girl Indigo witnesses the sexual liberties taken by the liberal minded European Susan. Likewise, the lovemaking between Susan and her Scottish gardener comes as a contrast to the Victorian Christian belief on the institution of marriage. The indigenous Indigo, however, looks at it from an aesthetic perspective where she imagines both of them as beautiful marble statues in the garden. Having inherited the Native aesthetic sense of body, Indigo purely believes in physical pleasure. As Silko goes on describing the emotions of Indigo, she writes,

Indigo was fascinated and wanted to see as much as she could. No wonder Susan wanted the English gardens with all the shady shrubs and groves of sheltering trees where two lovers might hide ... She was surprised how bright white their nude bodies appeared; if they had not been wiggling and bouncing around so much, they might be mistaken for marble figures taken down by the workmen. So the marble figures served a purpose after all: who would notice two more reclining among so many other nude figures in the gardens? (*GD* 191).

Indigo's fascination and appreciation for European artifacts gets a new meaning after she encounters Susan and her gardener lover in the former's English garden. Similarly, for the Native Americans, the garden is synonymous with paradise along with the snake-guardian. Dislocation from their paradise has created a traumatic memory for the Native American collective psyche. Contrary to the popular Christian belief, in Indigo's paradise, the rattlesnake is a guardian unlike the Satan in the Garden of Eden. Both Indigo and Hattie fall for gardens as they both are deeply influenced by their respective cultural traditions. Indigo is moved by her Native culture and Hattie is more interested in the early Christianity which is somewhat pagan by nature. As Silko describes the love of Indigo and Hattie for gardens, she writes as follows,

Indigo lingered over books with pictures of gardens with water splashing from fountains and statues and even a long stone wall covered with spouts of gushing water. Hattie pointed out what appeared to be extensive stone stairs built for a great cascade of water to a long pool below ... They looked at the books together and Hattie pointed out the French gardens and Italian gardens, but Indigo did not see a great deal of difference between them-except the French gardens seemed so empty while the Italian gardens were populated with stone figures of animals and people (*GD* 178).

The fact that European culture was once upon a time based on Paganism is reaffirmed through Hattie's character. Hattie almost becomes a western parallel of the indigenous Indigo. Silko through Hattie tries to bring about reconciliation and harmony between two seemingly disparate cultures. The garden of the Native Americans also symbolizes Mother Earth or Mother Nature that celebrate fertility and prosperity. Here, the feminine image represents the figure of Mother Earth which points to goddess worshiping in Native American and Pre-Christian traditions. Such a scenario also brings forth the concept of a matriarchal society which can be

identified, specifically, with the Native American traditions. For Native Americans, Mother Earth is the source of their life on whom they are significantly dependent. Interestingly, much like ancient Indian tradition where one can find powerful female imageries such as *Durga* and *Kali*, Native Americans too believe in images of femininity which would bless them forever.

In the text, Indigo's garden is protected by the niece of the Snake-goddess a popular mythical figure from Mesoamerican mythology, as 'Quetzalcoatl' or the 'Feathered Serpent.' As Silko puts it beautifully,

Early the other morning when she came alone to wash at the spring, a big rattlesnake was drinking at the pool. The snake dipped her mouth daintily into the water, and her throat moved with such delicacy as she swallowed. She stopped drinking briefly to look at Sister, then turned back to the water; then she gracefully turned from the pool across the white sand to a nook of bright shade. Old Snake's beautiful daughter moved back home (*GD* 477).

The Snake-Goddess is also featured in the Native American Maya traditions, where it is known as 'Kukulcan' or 'Gukumatz.' Interestingly, the figure of 'Feathered Serpent' in Native American traditions symbolizes cultivation, fertility and the renewal of vegetation. Along with the images of the gardens and Mother Earth, Silko explores the image of the Messiah as well as she has previously done in *Almanac of the Dead*. Both sister Salt and Indigo are closely related to their gardens. Being close to nature, the lives of these two sisters are constructed with relation to their love for gardens- gardens that symbolize Nature and Mother Earth in the text. Silko describes it thus: "After the rains, they tended the plants that sprouted out of the deep sand; they each had plants they cared for as if the plants were babies" (*GD* 14). The relationship that Native Americans share with their gardens goes back to very old times. They inherit their gardens as they inherit their cultural values and traditional stories. Indigo remembers-

Grandma Fleet told them the old garden had always been there. The old time people found the gardens already growing, planted by the Sand Lizard, a relative of Grandfather Snake, who invited her niece to settle there and cultivate her seed (*GD* 14-15).

It is interesting to note that while the mythical story of the Sand Lizard brings back lost

memories and folk tales, the image of the snake guardian is Native American as well as European. In fact, this image is also found in other Native cultures such as the Indian and the African. Indigo's garden also nurtures a rattlesnake which supposedly protects this indigenous family. In the climax, the reader comes to know that the white people who come to the old garden in search of the Sand Lizard people kill this rattlesnake. But then, the old dead snake is replaced by a new and beautiful snake that comes back to the garden when Salt and Indigo come back to their home. Here, the return of the rattlesnake and the return of the two sisters is parallel as both of them come back with their own stories of struggle and survival. Their stories are connected and they are the mirror images of each other, symbolizing the exploitation of nature and its revitalization. Silko confesses to Thomas Irmer that:

When I wrote Ceremony I realized that this old story is still very relevant, even now, even though these old stories take place in the past they have meaning now. Oral literatures of the indigenous populations worldwide contain these kinds of valuable insights. When Sigmund Freud wrote his Interpretation of Dreams, he began to respect folklore. You can look at the old stories that were told among the tribal people here in a north country and see that within them is the same kind of valuable lessons about human behavior and that we need them still (Silko, Irmer, 1).

When the memories of Sand Lizard culture keeps on emerging in the mind of young Indigo, her identity of her Native self keeps shifting. Her exposure to her own ancient tradition as well as Victorian Christianity creates a double consciousness that results in hybridizing the identity of her Native self. Therefore, the ever-shifting sense of communal identity of Indigo, and Salt, for that matter is highlighted by Silko throughout the text. When towards the end, Hattie chooses to stay in England with her aunt after the death of her husband Edward, Indigo comes back to her old garden to be reunited with Sister Salt.

Indigo's homecoming not only with the new knowledge imparted by white people but also with black glisoliolus corns and contraband orchids and her cultivation of these European seeds in her Native garden symbolize the path of mediation she desires to adopt. The intermingling of Nativity and Modernity results in an assimilation of which Indigo happens to be a postcolonial product. The mixed-blood identity of the Native Americans here is thus put into negotiation where they counter-narrate the legacy of

colonial exploitation but concurrently keep hold of their primitive bonding with Mother Nature, integral to their cultural identities.

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