

Poetics of Environmental Justice in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

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Abstract

This paper analyses Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (1991) as a critique of mainstream environmental practices. In particular, the paper explores the concept of Environmental Justice within the context of Native American communities in the U.S. Environmental Justice movement refers to environmental racism and inequality towards the marginalized groups. Silko's novel illustrates this problem in the context of Native American tribes. The novel explores an unequal environmental treatment of the Native American tribes through the discussion of uranium mining and highlights its traumatic impact on the indigenous people. The study utilizes a conceptual framework based in Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice drawing on the works of Cheryll Glotfelty and Joni Adamson respectively. The relationship of indigenous literatures and environment brings to fore the emergence of Environmental Justice approach which traces how indigenous American communities are "othered" in mainstream environmental practices.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Native Americans, *Almanac of the Dead*, Indigenous people

Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Laguna Pueblo writer and her novel *Almanac of the Dead* significantly contributes to cultural and environmental debates, raising concerns of environmental justice for

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the indigenous communities in the U.S. The environmental justice discourse vigorously emerges in the works of many Native American writers and has become a significant part of present-day environmental movement. Silko's depiction of issues like uranium mining in *Almanac of the Dead* sets a clear context for this. Native tribes in the U.S. are federally recognized sovereign communities; however, they are largely marginalized. These indigenous groups suffer from a number of environmental hazards due to the uranium mining sites which are located close to the Native American reservations. Silko in the novel writes about these indigenous communities "suffering from the impacts of border militarization and rising levels of toxicity connected to transnational corporate agribusiness and extractive industries" (Adamson, 2013, p. 177) set up by multinational corporations. Uranium mining projects exacerbate the degradation of ecosystems and increase the vulnerability of people who are often involuntarily displaced and are located near these sites, i.e., Native American reservations. The arid land, which is the most suitable for such projects, becomes a death zone for people living close to it.

"Environmental Racism" commonly occurs in many societies, affecting people of color and race, but this paper mainly discusses its effects on the Native American communities. Many indigenous tribes face environmental risks due to the physical location of their reservations. Big corporations have established mining industries close to the Native American reservations, polluting the environment of these areas. The toxic environmental practices raise questions about the permeability of environmental boundaries between the human and the more-than-human, forming the category of the environmental *Other* vis-a-vis environmental racism.

Ecocriticism

Cheryll Glotfelty's idea of Ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, and the concept of Environmental Justice by Joni Adamson in *The Environmental Justice Reader*:

Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy are the two postulates selected to design the conceptual framework of this study. Ecocriticism provides the theoretical lens to analyze the issues of environment in literature, and environmental justice further identifies the environmental risks posed to the marginalized communities with environmental degradation and contamination. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm 1999, p. xviii). Ecocriticism deals with the following questions: “How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?” (Glotfelty & Fromm 1999, xix). Environment is an important category in the current literary debates, in addition to gender, race, and place. Environment is not studied in isolation in a literary text; human relationship with the environment is also a crucial factor in this study. Human culture and its practices determine the well-being of the universe and the environment surrounding us.

Human intrusion in natural settings has led to the extinction of many species. Humans initiated projects and schemes that have destroyed natural surroundings. Industrial ventures have raised risks for engendered species, prompting concerns for environmentalists. This is why ecocriticism works to draw attention to this area where humans need to learn about the hazardous effects of their actions. The selected theoretical lens of Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice highlights the rise in environmental degradation and elaborates on how environmental crisis experienced by marginalized communities is reflected in contemporary literature. This study not only helps inform our view about how modern practices shape the environment, it also shows how mainstream environmental policies are benefiting a few groups and are biased towards marginalized communities. Glotfelty shares that it is important to see “what view of nature informs U.S. government reports, and what rhetoric enforces this view?” (Glotfelty & Fromm

1999, xix). In this context, Native American narratives need to be studied to see the problems indigenous communities face, contrary to the mainstream environmentalist perspective.

An important ecocritic and professor of literature at the Southwest Texas State University, Scott Slovic writes about this phenomenon: “This new enthusiasm for the study of ‘literature and environment’ in the United States is not only a reaction to the impressive aesthetic achievement of American nature writing, but an indication of contemporary society's growing consciousness of the importance and fragility of the nonhuman world” (Adamson & Slovic, 2009, p, 5). In this regard, Native American tribes share a spiritual connection with land. For them, all things present in their surroundings, i.e. mountains, plants, trees, animals, birds, rivers, plains and soil, etc., hold a sacred place in their lives. Native American identity is formed with respect to their connection with the land. They have a mindset shaped by their setting and environment. These tribes have dwelled in a natural setting since the beginning of the American continent; therefore, their life is deeply connected with their environment. They have constructed a strong environmentalist imagination which resonates with the stories shared in their works.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice

Literature is an important medium to analyze these ideas as novels share stories of human interaction with nature. Ecocriticism explores the connection between human culture and environment within a social sphere. However, Ecocriticism has also consistently remained a white movement, focusing mainly on mainstream environmental discourse. This discourse ignores a multicultural perspective which draws our attention towards Environmental Justice debates. Joni Adamson, American literary critic, offers insights into this multicultural perspective of Ecocriticism. She focuses on the need to study the literature of marginalized groups to understand their perspective coming out of their indigenous landscape. The concept of “Environmental Justice Poetics”

discussed in *The Environmental Justice Reader* reflects an interest in literature that “radically expands both the mainstream nature-writing canon and environmental justice discourse” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 9). Adamson finds that Native American writers are playing an important role in the environmental justice struggle by imaginatively reframing “issues of environmental racism” in their works (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 9).

The conceptual framework selected for this paper facilitates a reading of the texts in contrast to the dominant white environmentalist discourse. The “fictional accounts of actual environmental justice struggles” form a new postcolonial environmental discourse of the silenced group (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 10). Native American writers bring to fore their struggles by highlighting environmental degradation in their imaginatively constructed stories to raise their voice against environmental injustices. The strategy to employ environment-based-narratives in Native American literature is a way forward to a revisionary movement of environmentalism.

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism is a term that was coined after a report published by the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CR) in 1987. According to the report, race is a prominent factor in environmental issues. The Reverend Benjamin Chavis, who coined the term “environmental racism,” defines it as a form of policy-making and enforcement of environmental laws and regulations that causes “poor and people of color communities suffer a disproportionate health risk” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 4). The report explicates that majority commercial waste sites are determined by race factor. It is documented in the report that “60 percent of African American and Latino communities and over 50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in areas with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 4).

Chavis defines environmental racism as:

“racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement” (Adamson 2001, p. xvi). As a matter of fact, many Native American sites and locations are being used to dump commercial waste which is contaminating their land and soil. Native Americans live on the reservations, “with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites” which can have hazardous effects on their health and environment. As a result, many authors of these marginalized communities have started voicing resistance through their writings (Adamson, 2001, p. xv-xvi).

This paper does not study environment merely as a backdrop of stories; it sheds light on the ecological justice concerns, raised through an ecocritical lens. Many Native American writers have focused on environmental racism in their works and have protested against various forms of unequal protection from environmental risks. For Native Americans, environmental issues are not located somewhere outside in nature or wilderness: “they are right at home, where people live and work” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 3). Their stories are not constructed in beautiful natural settings but on reservations and borderlands which are a contested terrain. According to Adamson, they write about a “middle place” (Adamson, 2001, xvi) which is not a garden, but it integrates between civilization and wilderness. Middle places are local, contested sites; these are places of unromantic setting and environmental damage. For Native American authors, these are their home-places with cultural destruction. These are places of their struggles and cultural survival, and they make readers recognize them through their literary writings.

It appears that contemporary Native American writers highlight environmental justice issues to raise a concern for their cultural survival. Native American writers display a connection between nature and culture, placing their stories in a cultural context. Their approach intertwines culture and environment in such a way that it seems part of their unique identity. They utilize a complex writing style intentionally to resist a translation of mainstream environmentalism. They create their own way of writing about nature which cannot be read as a continuation of American transcendentalism.

Poetics of Environmental Justice

Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein define the concept of environmental justice as “the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 4). Adamson believes that environmental justice is about giving rights to people “to benefit equally from a safe and clean environment” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 57). The idea of environmental justice works against the “disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p.4) in poor communities and communities of color who are affected by environmental degradation every day. The advocates of the movement ensure protection of their right to live without any risk of environmental degradation and to ensure “equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 4).

Environmental Justice activists establish themselves differently from mainstream environmental organizations, aligning with marginalized groups. The movement questions and confronts governments and big corporations and criticizes industrialization and capitalist ventures to assure “foundational importance of ecological integrity to a community’s sense of well-being” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 5) regardless of any difference of race and class. The term ‘justice’ is intentionally chosen to highlight social justice concerns and environmental issues of

minority and low-income groups. Environmental justice highlights patterns of environmentally destructive practices and “socially unjust activities” (p. 7) in marginalized communities and “also identifies resistance movements working for community and environmental survival” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 7). These practices are deliberately targeting those who are weak, “affecting their cultural, economic and environmental futures” (Adamson, Evans, & Stein, 2002, p. 5). For a Native American, environment includes “the places in which we live, work, play and worship” (Adamson et al., 2002, p. 4). The new trends in Ecocriticism seek to take a profound interest in indigenous cultures as their communities are facing environmental toxicity endangering their environmental and cultural survival.

The roots of Environmental Justice movement can be traced back to many other such movements in the United States, i.e. the Civil Rights movement, Women's movement, etc. Many of the early ideas of environmentalism were taken from these movements. For this reason, the history of environmentalism is inspired by “W. E. B. Du Bois, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Cesar Chavez and among others” (Adamson & Slovic, 2009, p. 6). In 1991, a set of seventeen “Principles of Environmental Justice” was created in Washington, D.C., during First *National People of Color Summit* and its preamble demanded the right to “secure our political, economic, and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression resulting in the poisoning of [our] communities and land and the genocide of [our] peoples” (qtd. in Di Chiro 307).

According to Native American writers, the fight against colonization has to begin by advocating the cause. Simon Ortiz believes that they “have to be responsible to their source, it’s an advocacy position in a way, to be able to continue as who we are, to sustain ourselves and to be nourished by our cultural source, then you have to be an advocate, but an advocate that is responsible” (qtd. in Adamson, 2004, p. 58).

Gerald Vizenor, an Anishinaabe writer, shares his conviction that “words hold power—not only in the metaphysical sense, but also in the political sense” (Lawson, 2002, p. 105). This prompted Native American writers to devise methodologies for resisting the rhetorical strategies of the dominant culture. Power lies in creating the discourse. Native American authors are now doing it through writing stories. Their literary writings and cultural productions work to develop an understanding of the experience of living with the effects of environmental racism, and their stories express environmental struggles they face every day, offering an insider perspective, imaginatively conveying the intricacies of their societies. Adamson indicates that for Native American authors, their environmental problems are intricately connected with issues of European colonialism in America. Native American writers have tried to align and alienate from the colonial experience through their literature. This is also resistance because it resists the attempts of oppressors to erase or eradicate their tribal cultures. Writers have resisted false or one-sided histories and ideologies imposed upon their cultures. Resistance literature seeks to critique and interrogate those ideologies.

This research study identifies the ways Native American writers have adopted and adapted concepts from their own tribal cultures, and used them in their literature despite attempts to erase their cultures. This research also highlights how key concepts of Native American oral tradition have continued to exist in the present day via their literature. Native American writers have employed environmental ethics and aesthetics in their texts, such as songs, stories, and prayers, to enliven their centuries-old culture in contemporary writings. In this way, these writers are demanding an end to five hundred years of injustices and their right to social, cultural, spiritual, political, and ecological self-determination. Native American novelists like Silko are playing an important role in the Environmental Justice movement by taking the challenge of speaking first. It is the power of words, stories, and images which are utilized to reinforce and enliven the environmental concerns.

Textual Analysis

Leslie Marmon Silko is a renowned Native American novelist. She attempts to highlight the relationship of environment and society in her novel *Almanac of the Dead* (AOD). Silko discusses various parts of the United States, mainly the Southwest i.e. Tucson, Arizona and New Mexico where indigenous tribes were moved involuntarily, after the Westward expansion. Silko foregrounds environmental issues of Native American communities through an ecological imagery of these reservations. The novel clearly sheds light on the topography of these reservations and creates a “Native imaginary” exhibiting a close relationship of indigenous people with their land.

Almanac of the Dead tells many stories with a wide array of events which take place in 500 years, and all these events relate to land and environment. The setting subverts our romantic perception of nature as pure and clean; rather, it invites the reader to see a contested terrain where nature is filled with environmental hazards. The *Almanac of the Dead* shows territories which are open-pit uranium mines and borderlands, and its stories present indigenous characters suffering from the effects of devastating droughts, poverty, and toxic mining. Health issues are common; several medical problems and illegal trade of human organs are brought to attention. AOD shows Laguna Pueblo community suffering from chemical exposure because of uranium mining. As the government extracts uranium from these areas, the indigenous workers are forced to work on these plants. The main character Sterling states, “So the Tribal Council had gone along with the mine because the government gave them no choice, and the mine gave them jobs” (Silko, 1991, p. 34).

Silko also traces the economic hardships of these workers who constantly come in contact with the toxins and face health issues due to chemical exposure in their jobs. Ward shares: “Indians are the most disadvantageous group as they solely depended on land and traditional economy for livelihood, which is declining each day. The land became futile with uranium reserves and ironically, the

uranium exploration on the reservations provided a full time employment to the Native population” (Ward 2015, p. 3). Though it temporarily helped boost economic conditions of the tribe, a heavy price was to be paid in the form of health issues. Silko who is part of the Laguna tribe says about this issue: “Public health and quality of life quickly deteriorated as the Jackpile’s open-pit grew to within 200 yards of Pagate village; at midday every day the village was pelted by ‘potato size rocks’ from the pit blasting” (Silko, 1991, p. 127- 132).

Uranium Mining and the Environmental Risks

Leslie Marmon Silko discusses uranium mining as a significant issue in the novel. The discovery of uranium near Pagate Village made the indigenous people more vulnerable. The Congress had allocated reservations to the Native Americans, but all mineral resources are administered by the state. Uranium and oil discovery in the indigenous reservations attracted more whites to the area. Oil companies drilled wells and pumped millions of barrels of oil. Uranium mining also brought large corporations to the indigenous territories, and open-pit mines became a habitat of Native American Laguna Pueblo tribes. Despite their objections, the U.S. government initiated the mining project. As Sterling notes: “It had been 1949 and the United States needed uranium for the new weaponry, especially in the face of Cold War” (p. 34), and mining left “acres of ruined earth at the open pit” (Silko, 1991, p. 35). This political oppression by the federal government affected Laguna Pueblo on physical and psychological grounds.

Hundreds of toxic waste sites were located near the reservations. In this whole process, ground water, air, and land were contaminated, which had hazardous effects on the health of the residents of the area. It also damaged acres of land, rescinding fertility. The companies were negligent in cleaning the waste of their industries as there were no laws made to protect environment in indigenous lands. Silko gives a description of the work conditions on mines

through Sterling: "Sterling had already gone away to Barstow to work on the railroad when uranium had been discovered near Paguate Village. . . . In the end, Laguna Pueblo had no choice anyway" (Silko, 1991, p. 34). Native American rage and protest over mining was not given any heed nor did they find any solace in government justifications. Many Native American tribes face similar environmental issues today. The 1970s energy boom with excessive extraction of natural resources, pipelines, and roadbuilding has affected the fragile environment of the area. The continuing development in the field threatens wildlife, natural vegetation, and human life. This is not only affecting health but also contributing to social changes; changing jobs, diets, attitudes, lifestyles and landscape itself.

Hazards of Nuclear Waste

Mineral extraction has raised many questions of environmental balance and economic development for many communities. Lewis writes: "Beginning as early as 1900 with the discovery of oil on Osage land, nonrenewable resource development has unleashed some of the most environmentally destructive forms of exploitation" (Lewis, 1995, p. 431). The poisonous effects of uranium have trickled down to all spheres of life. Tribal land, air, water, health and life, are all threatened by mining, drilling, machinery, and piles of tailing. Mining ventures of government corporations make life worse for the indigenous people. In *AOD*, Sterling provides the description of the mine:

He tore a cuff on his pants crawling through the barbed-wire fence that marked the mine boundaries. Ahead all he could see were mounds of tailings thirty feet high, uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rains to springs and rivers. Here was the new work of the Destroyers; here was destruction and poison. Here was where life ended. (Silko, 1991, p 760)

Lewis shares the same idea, “Despite efforts by pan-Indian organizations like the Council of Energy Resource Tribes to balance use and protection of resources, mining and oil and gas exploration has scarred thousands of acres with minimal protection for inhabitants” (Lewis, 1995, p. 431). Native American tribes face various potential environmental hazards on the reservations. Radioactive pollution is the biggest and the most serious threat they face today with uranium mining. The indigenous mine workers get exposed to a very high scale of radioactivity while working in uranium mines. A large number of native tribes suffer from health issues due to the exposure of uranium radiation, while working in mines or during cleaning up nuclear waste. Moreover, the mills processing radioactive material dump the waste in indigenous areas. As a report in 1959 says: “Radioactive mill tailings dumped on the banks of the San Juan River crept into that drainage, and in 1979 a United Nuclear uranium mill tailings pond near Churchrock gave way, spilling its 100 million gallons of sludge into the Rio Puerco River” (Lewis, 1995, p. 433). The exposure of the radiation has transferred to many people this way, and they suffer a high level of fatal diseases like cancer and respiratory ailments. Many children suffer from birth defects due to radiation exposure. Therefore, the death rate has increased dramatically in the areas adjacent to mines.

Many indigenous tribes are protesting against the practice of land abuse; for them, land is a sacred entity, and they share a spiritual connection with it. Carrie Dann, spiritual and land rights activist, remarks: “What happens underneath the skin of our mother when the nuke is exploded? She can get cancer under the skin too from all that radiation” (qtd. in Lewis, 1995, p. 434). For them, earth is living, and this treatment gives her pain. A character Yoeme points out: “The white man had violated the Mother Earth” (Silko, 1991, p. 121). Native Americans endure a traumatic experience along with the physical devastation owing to an emotional attachment with land. Despite several protests, indigenous people still face many environmental hazards today. Therefore, a daunting ecological concern appears in their writings, and many Native American

writers, like Silko, have sought to express this dissent through the poetics of environmental justice in their literary writings.

Mining and Water Contamination

Many reservations face the water contamination issue: “The 7,000-acre Anaconda Jackpile uranium strip mine at Laguna Pueblo has contaminated both land and water. In 1962, uranium mill tailings at Edgemont, South Dakota, washed down the Cheyenne River into the Pine Ridge Reservation” (Lewis 1995, p. 433). Mining also affected groundwater in shaft mining; in 1970s, the area was so deeply strip-mined that groundwater seepage became an issue: “When the mine’s owners pumped the now-irradiated groundwater into tailing ponds, it just drained back into its aquifer and contaminated the reservation’s only source of surface water” (Ward 2002, p. 144). Toxic waste contaminates water and many tribes who depend on migratory salmon in Columbia River for their livelihood suffer with food and safety issues. This is not only causing health problems, but also leading to a huge environmental backlash. Radioactive contamination has polluted land, air, water, and life. While poor indigenous tribes suffer with shortage of water, major cities of the U.S. enjoy drinking filtered water which overlooks the need to provide clean water to indigenous groups. The Barefoot Hopi says that “while all this is happening, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado—all southwestern states will run out of drinking water” (Silko, 1991, p. 619).

Eco-Warriors

Historically, many indigenous tribes have been oppressed by the white population, and they have remained unnoticed and unrecognized in mainstream environmental discourse. Today, they struggle against this environmental inequality through their narratives. Writers like Silko illuminate this concern for environmental justice through several stories in the novel. This poetics of environmental justice helps build a political and cultural

narrative for these indigenous groups. In the novel, Lecha and Zeta, twin sisters of Yaqui descent, are shown organizing an “Army of the Poor” in the American Southwest as the government erases historical record of their “Yaqui ancestors, who were harassed, killed, forced into slavery, dispossessed of their lands, and inducted into European or Mexican systems of socialization” (Adamson, 2001, p. 142).

AOD discusses the formation of an army of homeless people who want to bring an end to human rights abuses and the unjust expropriation of indigenous lands. Silko writes that Native Americans are gathering in the Mexican state of Chiapas under a campaign named “Green vengeance-eco-warriors” (Silko, 1991, p.725). The movement is preparing fatally ill people to become human bombs as part of their resistance efforts against environmental destruction. Employing the poetics of environmental justice in the novel, Silko constructs the term of “eco-warriors” (Silko, 1991, p.726) or those who aim to defend their environment. In a Hopi performance, the Hopi states:

The eco-warriors have been accused of terrorism in the cause of saving Mother Earth. So I want to talk about terrorism first. Poisoning our water with radioactive wastes, poisoning our air with military weapons’ waste --- those are acts of terrorism! Acts of terrorism committed by governments against their citizens all over the world. Capital Punishment is terrorism practiced by the government against its citizens. United States of America, what has happened to you? What have you done to the Bill of Rights? All along we Native Americans tried to warn the rest of you (Silko 1991, p.734).

Adamson points out that “[t]he novel seems uncanny for having anticipated an event of major importance to the emerging international environmental justice movement. The novel’s mention of “a ‘people’s army’ that is gathering in the Mexican state of Chiapas and calling for an end to human rights abuses and to unjust

expropriation of indigenous lands” (Adamson 2001, p. xvi) is a significant warning for the world.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the issue of environmental justice as represented in Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* to propose an inclusive or multicultural approach towards environmental policies and practices. Many indigenous people have been affected by colonial oppression and displacement; however, they have also been consistently facing environmental “Othering”. Silko challenges this unequal environmental treatment of Native American tribes and questions the environmental discourse that excludes the indigenous groups from mainstream environmental movement. Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* offers the perspective of Native American people, which is crucial in understanding their connection with their environment as well as the damage being done to it. Therefore, the novel is a significant study to understand social and environmental poetics of environmental justice through literary texts. In doing so, it also challenges the mainstream white ecocritical scholarship by foregrounding the Native American experience.

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