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Rethinking Environmental Issues through Literature, Language, Culture, and Education

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Human and Nature Interactions in *A Song for Turtles in the Gulf*: A Study of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Human and nature can't be separated. Human depends on the resources of the nature. The act of human taking advantage from the nature should be balance with the act of keeping and maintaining the nature itself. The aim of this research is to describe the human and nature interactions, especially to the Native-American society as reflected in the poem *A Song for Turtles in The Gulf*. Native-American as indigenous people have a strong sense of belonging to the nature. Human-nature interactions talk about how nature is viewed and treated by the society, how is the relations of the characters in the poem with the nature and how does the poem educate people about conserving nature and critic toward nature's destruction. To reveal human and nature interactions in the poem, the researcher uses ecocriticism theory. Ecocriticism is used to find out the contributions of literary work in educating people about conserving nature and preventing the destruction toward nature. Textual analysis method is used to find out the relations between human and nature in the poem.

The researcher hopes that this research will contribute to give awareness to the people about the importance of conserving nature and respecting indigenous people especially Native-American, who treated nature as a sacred habitus.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Environment, Native-American, Nature*

Introduction

Characters Perspective toward Nature in The Poem

Song for The Turtles in The Gulf is written by Linda Hogan, a poet, novelists and environmentalist. Linda Hogan was a Chickasaw, one of Native-American tribe. Chickasaw was known as one of *The Five Civilized Tribes*, which adopted a lot of European lifestyle. The other tribes are Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole. Chickasaw was also known as 'hard to defeat' tribe. They were strong and often won the battle with other tribes. The first encounter of Chickasaw and European was in 1540, when Hernando de Soto, an explorer from Spain, explored the south-east part of the continent. The purpose of this exploration was to find gold and the route to China or Pasific coast. De Soto met *minko*, the leader of Chickasaw to ask for protection. Chickasaw welcomed and allowed them to stay in the village. But, this good relationship didn't get along because later on they involved in the battle.

Chickasaw believed to *Aba' Binni'li' (Sitting or Dwelling Above)*, also known as *Inki Abu (Father Above)*. Same with other Native-American tribes, Chickasaw believed to the power of nature. There were four things that they called as "Beloved Things": cloud, sun, a bright sky and *He who Sitting Above*. Chickasaw believed to *Aba' Binni'li'* who dwelt above the uncontaminated earth. He was the creator of animals and plants. Chickasaw called land as mother, the sky as father, plant and animal as sibling. Lauter said "*the proper relation between humans and the earth should be one of familial and personal respect, a relation honorable because of kinship derived from a common beginning* (Lauter, 1994:24).

In the other side, white people (European) viewed nature as something that could be exploited by human. This issue was discussed by Linda Hogan in her poem, *Song for The Turtles in The Gulf*. White people's perspective toward nature made them put their own agenda above the concern of nature, plant and animal. Linda Hogan brought the issue of British Petroleum existence in Mexico Gulf as a form of human exploitation toward nature. Hogan depicted herself as the character who represented indigenous people of America.

Hogan started her poem by depicting the beauty of the nature and the deep relationship between human and nature. "*We had been together so very long you willing to swim with me..*" showed that Native-American had a close relationship with the nature since long time ago. They taught their descendant to love nature by telling the myths from generation to generation. Native-American also took something for nature for their daily need, but they took it without destroying the nature and they also did some efforts to conserve nature.

In her poem, Hogan depicted turtle as the representation of nature. She described turtle as a part of the beauty of nature. Mexico Gulf has been a house for 22 species of sea animals like dolphins, whales, sea mammals and turtles. The kinds of turtle in Mexico Gulf are Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), green (*Chelonia mydas*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). "*..myself merely small in the ocean of splendor and light..*", Hogan depicted human as a small thing compare to the wide of the ocean and all the creatures inside it. She described nature as something marvelous, beautiful and great. For Native-American, turtle was the symbol of a good health and long life. Animal symbol in Native American was believed as the representation of guardian and helper spirit.

In the other side, Hogan depicted British Petroleum as the character who exploited nature for the own business. British Petroleum built oil drilling named *Deepwater Horizon* in Mexico Gulf. It was known as the deepest oil drilling in the history. But, on 20 April 2010, there was explosion in that drilling that cause the biggest oil spill in the world. It caused hundreds of sea creatures died, one of them was turtle. In her poem, Hogan wrote "*I see the man from British Petroleum lift you up dead from the plastic bin of death, he with smile, you burned and covered with red-black oil, torched and pained..*" Hogan depicted British Petroleum as the one who could smile after seeing the destruction of the sea. It showed that the natural resources exploitation by the company just

because of profit, without caring to the nature. The smiling expression showed that there was no guilty or regret feeling from the company itself. In their perspective, nature was created to fulfil human needs and satisfaction. In this kind of perspective, human positioned themselves higher than nature. That's made them take many things from the nature.

Discussion

Human-Nature Interactions in the Poem

Native-American had a close interaction with the nature since long time ago. People cannot separate nature with Native-American belief. Native-American often sit, lie down and barefoot walk as the direct way to touch and feel the power of nature. Native-American believed that the power of nature could heal them from disease. For them, the only way for people to be healed was by restoring their relationship with the nature. Native-American still go hunting, but they just take from the nature as necessary, in order to conserve the animal. Their focus is keeping the balance of the nature. They learn to live in harmony with the nature. If they take something from the nature, they should do something in return.

In *Song for The Turtles in The Gulf*, Hogan depicted a close and intimate relationship between herself as Native-American with the nature. "*We had been together so very long..*" showed that human-nature interaction has been made since long time ago. Human had a harmonious life with nature. In her poem, Hogan described her experience swam with the turtle in Mexico Gulf. It reflected that Native-American always involved nature in their daily life. Both of them are two unseparated entities. Human and animal do an activity together is a usual thing and has become daily life of Native-American. They highly appreciate the nature and put an effort to conserve it. Contrast with British Petroleum as a representation of white people (European), their relationship with the nature has profit-oriented intention. They built *Deepwater Horizon* at Mexico Gulf to get the oil from the earth as much as possible. The more they drilled oil from the bottom of the ocean, the more they gained profit. If this kind of project was done without any agenda to conserve nature, it would end with nature destruction. The oil spill was the proof of the greedy character of the human.

The response toward nature destruction was different. British Petroleum didn't feel guilty and regret for the death of thousand sea animals. In the other side, Hogan as a representative of Native-American, showed her sadness "*..all I can think is that I loved your life. The very air you exhaled when you rose..*". This sadness feeling came out from her love to nature, especially turtle. The familial relationship of Native-American with the land, sea, cloud, plant and animal, made them feeling lost when they saw thousands of sea animals died. Nature which they conserved and kept, has been destroyed by white people. In her sadness, Hogan deplored the beautiful creature such as turtle should die because of human exploitation. In her poem, Hogan showed her admiration to the turtle by describing the beauty of the mosaic growth of shell and the beauty of its movement. This kind of beauty couldn't be understood by European, because their interaction with the nature has profit-oriented intention. The way Hogan admired the nature reflected the way of Native-American admired the nature.

Hogan said "*How can they learn the secret importance of your beaten heart, the eyes of another intelligence than ours..*" to show the importance of turtle in our earth. Hogan also said that intelligence was not only owned by human but also turtle. Human shouldn't feel superior than animal. Plant and animal should be well-treated, not just as object of exploitation. Nature was very important and should be respected. Hogan ended her poem by apologizing to the nature because of what human has done for them. It was the result of the lack of human's understanding about what should they do toward nature. They should keep and conserve it, not destroy it.

Education Value about Conserving Nature and Criticism toward Nature's Destruction

Linda Hogan's poem *Song for The Turtles in The Gulf* is a criticism toward nature's destruction by British Petroleum. The exploitation of the nature caused the big case of oil spill in Mexico Gulf. It contaminated the sea and all the sea creatures inside it. Thousands of sea animals such as dolphins, whales and turtles became the victim of this disaster. It needs dozens of years to restore the condition of Mexico Gulf. The oil spill problem can't be solved in a short time. It means there will be more turtles and sea animals will become the victim. Explicitly, Hogan blamed British Petroleum as the one who should responsible of the destruction and implicitly, Hogan criticized human who just thought about profit from the nature without caring for them. Human should consider the impact of their projects and behavior to the environment. It will better if their project followed by the agendas to keep and conserve the nature.

Through her poem *Song for The Turtles in The Gulf*, Hogan tried to educate people about the importance of keeping the balance of the nature. Hogan waken up people's awareness by realizing the consequences of natural resources exploitation. The death of thousand turtles and sea animals are the consequences of human exploitation. By writing her poem, she also invites people to feel the sympathy of what happened to the turtle in Mexico Gulf. She educates people that the beauty creature such as turtle shouldn't be the victim of human's intention toward nature. She invites us to admire and respect the nature like what Native-American usually do. The sympathy of Native-American toward nature should be our sympathy too. The oil spill in Mexico Gulf is just a small example. In the other side of the world, there are more environmental problems which is done by human. That's why, people need to take care and conserve the nature.

If human take something from the nature, they should do something in return. We should keep the nature as inheritance to our next generation. The poem has become the way for Hogan to remind nowadays people about what had happened in the past. She reminds us not doing the same in the future. It is a proof that literature can be a tool to educate people in conserving nature. People should learn something from the case of oil spill in Mexico Gulf.

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