

Ecological Grief and Anxiety: The Voice of Native American in Joy Harjo's Selected Poems

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Article Info

Submitted: 15th October 2024
Revised: 7th November 2024
Accepted: 18th November 2024
Publish: 30th November 2024

Keywords: anxiety; ecological grief; indigenous, native American

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DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.24843/JH.2024.v28.i04.p07>

Abstract

The arrival of European colonizers led to the disruption of the nature and ecosystem. As the indigenous people with a close relationship to nature, Native Americans express their grief and anxiety about the condition of nature through literary work. The study presented in the present article aims to scrutinize three selected poems by Joy Harjo "Remember", "Praise the Rain", and "I am a Prayer" to see how the poet expresses her ecological grief and anxiety. The lines and stanzas of each poem are analyzed using the theory of intrinsic elements and the five stages of grief by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The researchers use a descriptive qualitative method and employ a psychological approach to reveal the speaker's suffering in the poem psychologically in which she feels grieved because of the loss of nature. The findings were that there were five stages of grief portrayed in the poems implicitly, that is, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The speaker's grief and anxiety can be seen from the personification, repetition, and imagery used in the poems. Joy Harjo offers a different way to experience the stage of ecological grief and anxiety. She invites us to honor the journey of grief with empathy, wisdom, and a profound appreciation for the natural world. Harjo invites a deeper awareness that is both accepting of past wounds and open to future possibilities. The acceptance of grief is a crucial step toward reconnection. It is only by accepting the grief of what has been lost that one can truly remember, appreciate, and care for what remains.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people have a deeply rooted understanding of nature compared to modern people. Indigenous people have a long history that predates the Last Glacial Age, which ended about 24,000 years ago. They therefore have a diverse range of traditions and customs (Bellwood, 2022: p.129). They have to understand nature more than as a source of sustaining life but as a source of spiritual harmony and balance. Native American beliefs about nature are deeply rooted in the idea that all elements of the natural world are interconnected and sacred. There are numerous Native American tribes, and while each has its own rituals and traditions, many of them share traits, such as a love of animals, a belief in stories, a respect for the natural world, and distinctive clothing (Utter, 2001: p.32). Many Native American cultures view the Earth, animals,

plants, and even celestial bodies like the sun and moon as living beings that possess spirits. This worldview emphasizes harmony, respect, and balance with nature. Native Americans protect nature from environmental degradation and human exploration by developing traditional ecological knowledge that encompasses understanding the ecological cycles, sustainable land management, sustainable hunting and gathering practices, and plant medicine.

Ironically, the majority of ecological harm is caused by humans. They believe that they are the universe's center. They believe that all of nature's resources belong to people. Even if it means harming nature, people are free to alter the environment in any way that serves their own interests. For example, humans exploit and pollute the environment in order to achieve their economic goals. This viewpoint, referred to as an anthropocentrism perspective, holds that human needs come first because humans believe they are superior to nonhumans (Barry, 2005). Anthropocentrism, according to Buell (2005), is the human belief that one's needs come before those of other non-human beings. They asserted their superiority over nonhuman species.

The arrival of European colonizers led to the disruption of the ecosystem, depletion of natural resources, logging, mining, and the extraction of oil and gas impacting both the environment and the livelihoods of indigenous people. According to Canby (2015), the US government's long history of persecuting Native Americans through legislation like the Indian Removal Act has broken their spiritual ties to the natural world. Over time, numerous commercial laws were passed that established boundaries between tribal and non-tribal territories and classified Native American tribes according to various criteria (Kempf, Olson et al., 2023). The natural world has always been kind to humans, but because of our wrongdoings, it is now deteriorating and using its power to exact retribution. According to Rahman, Haque, Arafat, Bhattacharya, and Akter (2022), this suggests that humans and nature are out of harmony, with the former failing to demonstrate the latter. Being a living entity, nature reacts to human actions and exhibits the ability to both accept and react to mistreatment.

Native Americans express their grief and anxiety about the condition of nature through the literary work. Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and a celebrated Native American poet, views nature through a deeply spiritual and interconnected lens, which is reflective of Native American beliefs. In her work, Harjo often conveys the idea that nature is not separate from humanity but is an integral part of the human experience. Her writing celebrates the sacred relationship between all living beings, emphasizing the interconnectedness of life, the land, and the spirit.

Harjo uses unique strategies to protest against the destruction of nature that is by giving the animals themselves a voice, personifying them to rebel against the abuses inflicted by humans. She also gives animals, plants, and rocks human characteristics. This helps to convey the idea that harming is akin to harming human beings who have feelings, thoughts, and opinions. This research will focus on analyzing the three poems "*Remember*", "*Praise the Rain*", and "*I am a Prayer*". Considering the background of the study above, this research is worthy of investigation to find out how the poet contemplated ecological issues throughout her poems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of previous literature contains a summary explanation (sourced from books, articles, slides, etc) of the topic discussed by the researcher. The study related to ecology was conducted by Novita Dewi in 2022 with the title *Ecological Lamentation and Advocacy in Eka Budianta's Selected Poems*. The research focused on scrutinizing

6 (six) selected poems by Eka Budianta to see how the poet has dealt with ecological debate throughout the years. This study concurs that literature can partake in exposing global climate change as well as advocating sustainable living in a way often ignored in ecological praxis that only celebrates concrete results.

The study of Joy Harjo's literary work was conducted by Navarro in 2019. The focus of the study is on resilience in the Native American memoir *Crazy Brave*. The objective is to uncover the mechanism through which Harjo managed to defy the hardship she faced during her upbringing and eventually claim her voice and construct her identity. Navarro argues that Harjo's work is a means through which she recalls her wound thus making the start of the healing process possible; it is a strategy for cultivating resilience promoting the pursuit of liberation, emancipation, and communal building.

Another study on Joy Harjo's poem was conducted by Shiva Prasad Sharma in 2022. The focus of the study is on the botanical imagination depicted in Joy Harjo's poem. The findings of this study are Joy Harjo's poetry focuses on the ability of the plant to symbolically represent, materialize, and enact hope in a world ridden by conflict and violence. Plants can heal tormented human souls. Harjo's botanical imagination entails a worldview where plants must be seen as living beings with emotions, desires, and hope and not just means to achieve human ends.

While there have been numerous studies conducted on the works of Joy Harjo, there has been a gap in the exploration of emerging Native American voices, especially in the realm of poetry. The topic of ecological grief and anxiety is one such piece that has not been frequently studied in academia, particularly in the context of Native American literature. While the existing studies focus on themes such as symbol, trauma, and resilience, this study highlights the subtleties of ecological grief and anxiety in the writing of indigenous people.

The research will use the theory of eco-anxiety and ecological grief, as follows:

a. Eco-Anxiety

Eco-anxiety refers to various manifestations of anxiety that are significantly connected with the ecological crisis.

"While "eco-anxiety" is not a specific diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), some people are experiencing high levels of stress due to climate change, with symptoms such as panic attacks, obsessive thinking, loss of appetite, and insomnia. According to Yale and George Mason University researchers, the percentage of Americans extremely concerned about climate change has increased by more than half in the last five years, to 26%" (Clayton, 2017)

People experiencing eco-anxiety might feel persistent worry, sadness, helplessness, or anger. For Native Americans, eco-anxiety can arise from their experience as they watch their sacred lands and ecosystems suffer under the pressures of climate change, pollution, and other forms of environmental harm. The desecration of sacred land impacts their spiritual practices and cultural continuity, leading to feelings of fear, anger, and loss. Younger generations within Native American communities are particularly vulnerable to eco-anxiety. They often see the impacts of environmental harm on their communities firsthand and may feel an acute sense of responsibility to protect the land, while also feeling overwhelmed by the challenges that lie ahead.

b. Ecological Grief

Eco-anxiety and ecological grief are closely related to emotional responses to environmental changes and ecological crises. Eco-anxiety can turn into grief when the feared environmental changes actually occur. Grief, according to Stroebe (in Patricia et al., 2018), is both an emotional and a physical psychological reaction to a loss. According to Rodriguez in Fauziah & Kahija (2017), grieving is a complex process with biological, psychological, spiritual, and social elements. Ecological grief is the emotional response people have to the ongoing or anticipated loss of ecosystems, species, landscapes, and natural environments due to environmental degradation and climate change. In revealing the ecological grief and anxiety of the poems, the researchers will use five stages of grief by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

1. Denial

In the context of ecological grief, denial involves refusing to acknowledge the extent of environmental destruction or the impact of climate change. Denial serves as a protective mechanism, shielding people from the overwhelming truth of environmental degradation and allowing them to maintain their current way of life without confronting the implications.

2. Anger

Anger emerges as individuals begin to confront the reality of ecological destruction. People might feel enraged at the lack of action by those in power, at the greed and exploitation driving environmental damage, or at societal systems that prioritize profit over ecological well-being. This stage is a normal response to witnessing the destruction of ecosystems and feeling powerless to stop it.

3. Bargaining

In the bargaining stage, individuals may attempt to negotiate ways to reverse or mitigate the damage being done to the environment. Bargaining is an attempt to regain some control and delay the full emotional impact of the ecological crisis by believing that there are still ways to prevent the worst outcomes.

4. Depression

Depression is the stage where individuals fully recognize the scale and consequences of ecological destruction. This awareness can lead to feelings of hopelessness, despair, sadness, and grief. People may experience eco-anxiety—a sense of dread about the future of the planet—and feel overwhelmed by the knowledge that many of the changes are irreversible. This stage is about mourning not only for what has already been lost but also for what may never be recovered.

5. Acceptance

Acceptance involves coming to terms with the reality of ecological loss and finding ways to move forward constructively. It does not mean giving up on efforts to protect the environment but rather understanding that some losses are inevitable and irreversible.

METHOD AND THEORY

The researchers will use a psychological approach to learn the speaker's suffering in the poem psychologically in which she feels grieved because of the loss of nature. Warren and Wellek (1948) reflect a psychological approach to literature. This means studying how the author's mind and the process of creating the work are influenced by psychology. It also involves thinking about how psychological theories play a role in what authors write. It is a way of looking at literature through the lens of psychology, exploring the connections between the mental processes of authors, the creative act of writing, and the impact on readers.

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative which used documentation as the data collection technique. Punch (2000) explains that the descriptive method sets out to collect, organize, and summarize information about the matter being studied. According to Fraenkell and Wallen (2012), qualitative research was defined as a research study that investigates the quality of relationships, activities, situations or materials. There are two sources used, namely primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of this research are *Remember, Praise The Rain and I am a Prayer* by Joy Harjo, a Native American poet. Words, phrases, and intrinsic elements in the poetry that explain the ecological issue, especially about grieving and anxiety are sorted as the data. To support the primary source and to enrich the discussion, journals, articles, and book reviews, as well as a short history, of the cultural, and sociopolitical condition of Native Americans, are used as the secondary data.

The technique for data collection is conducted through several steps. The researchers read and comprehended each line and/or stanza of the poem. In the next step, the researchers analyze the intrinsic elements of the poem and then interpret them to get the implied meaning. Next, the researchers analyze ecological grief and anxiety by employing five stages proposed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross'. "In *On Death and Dying* (1970), Dr. Kubler-Ross first introduced and explored the now-famous idea of the five stages of dealing with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Poetic Devices Analysis of Joy Harjo's Selected Poems

1. Repetition

Harjo uses repetition to stress her intention. In the poem *Remember*, Harjo repeats the word '*Remember*' fifteen times to remind humans about nature. The words '*Earth, Mother, People, Universe, and You*' are also repeated to reflect the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

In *I Am a Prayer*, Harjo uses the phrase '*I am a Prayer*' thirteen times to stress the Native American position as a prayer for nature. She delivers her prayer about the end of the natural destruction. In the third poem *Praise the Rain*, the word '*Praise*' is used fifteen times to remind humans to appreciate nature. '*Praise the rain*' is used three times to remind humans about the significance of nature.

2. Personification

Figurative language, which is defined as nonliteral meaning, increases the emotional effect of poetic expression (Sinaga and Marpaung, 2023). Personification is the attributes of human feelings or characteristics to abstraction or to inanimate object. (Barnet, 1987) Harjo uses personification in her poems to show that nature can act as a

human. Native Americans treat and respect nature as their family. They believe that the raven can talk, clouds make rain songs, and the flowering ones need a drink. In *Remember*, Harjo personifies the star as a human who has stories, the earth as a human who has a particular skin color, and the plants, also as a human who has tribes, families, and histories.

*Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the **star's stories**
Remember **the earth whose skin you are:**
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember **the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too.***

In *I Am a Prayer*, Harjo personifies flower as a human who needs a drink, clouds as a human who can make songs, fire as a human who arrived to care, the wind as a human who can breathe, the moon as a human who wears a shawl and mountains as a human who agreed to lift our eyes to see.

*I am a prayer of rain in the desert **when the flowering ones need a drink**
I am a prayer of clouds **when few make rain songs**
I am a prayer of **fire who arrived to care for humans**, then was misused to destroy*

*I am a prayer of **wind, whose breathing** carries seeds, pollen, and songs to feed the generations
I am a prayer of **moon who wears the night as a shawl** to hide that which should never be spoken
I am a prayer of **mountains**, those tall humble ones **who agreed to lift our eyes to see**
I am a prayer of poetry speaking the soundlessness of the dead who return to speak in prayer*

In *Praise the Rain*, Harjo personifies the raven as a human who can talk.
*Praise the rain; the seagull dive
The curl of plant, **the raven talk***

3. Imagery

An image is a language used in a such a way as to us see, hear, feel, think about or generally understand more clearly or vividly what is being said or the impression that the writer wishes to convey. (Croft & Cross, 2000) Joy Harjo uses visual and auditory imagery to let the reader feel nature. Harjo invites the reader to get closest to nature by seeing and hearing the sounds of nature. She invites us to see the seagull dive, the bear sleep, red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth, and brown earth.

3.1 Visual Imagery

According to Perrine, visual imagery is the type of imagery that is the most frequently occurring. It is described as the type of imagery that suggest or represent a mental picture. It appeals to the reader sense of sight by describing what the speaker

sees (Perrine, 1977, p. 50).

*Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth, brown earth, we are earth.*
(Remember by Joy Harjo)

*I am a prayer of ocean when there is no more blue
I am a prayer of moon who wears the night as a shawl to hide that which should
never be spoken*
(I Am a Prayer by Joy Harjo)

*Praise the rain; the seagull dive
Praise the dark, the moon cradle
The sky fall, the bear sleep—
Praise canoe, the fish rush
The hole for frog, the upside-down—*
(Praise the Rain by Joy Harjo)

3.2 Auditory Imagery

Auditory imagery is the type of imagery that represent a sound. It appeals to the reader's sense of hearing by describing what the speaker hears (Perrine, 1977, p. 50).

*Remember the wind.
Remember her voice.
She knows the origin of this universe.*
(Remember by Joy Harjo)

*I am a prayer of clouds when few make rain songs
I am a prayer of poetry speaking the soundlessness of the dead who return to
speak in prayer*
(I Am a Prayer by Joy Harjo)

The curl of plant, the raven talk
(Praise the Rain by Joy Harjo)

B. The Stages of Grief and Anxiety in Joy Harjo's Selected Poems

1. Denial

Denial is a stage of grief to avoid the painful acknowledgment of this destruction. In "**Remember**," Harjo calls on the reader to acknowledge their ties to the earth and nature, it also implies the denial that often occurs when people forget or ignore these connections.

*Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.*
(Remember by Joy Harjo)

2. Anger

Joy Harjo channels her anger and frustration of the natural destruction into something constructive, that is by prayer. A prayer invites listeners to approach conflict in a sacred, thoughtful manner, transcending the anger to find a path forward.

*I am a prayer of ocean when there is no more blue
I am a prayer of clouds when few make rain songs
I am a prayer of fire who arrived to care for humans, then was misused to destroy
I am a prayer of grief, when life gambled with death and gave up families
I am a prayer of forever making a path of beauty through the rubble of eternity
I am a prayer with children on my back roaming the earth house of destruction and
creation
I am a prayer without end
(I Am a Prayer by Joy Harjo)*

3. Bargaining

Bargaining is the phase when humans struggle to find meaning related to loss or anxiety. Related to the loss by nature's destruction, 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.

*Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
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.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of this universe.
(Remember by Joy Harjo)*

4. Depression

In a poem entitled 'Remember', Harjo repeats the word 'Remember' fifteen times as a sense of desperation—a fear that these connections are slipping away, lost to forgetfulness and modern disconnection.

The poem's imperative to remember reflects anxiety and sadness about the possibility of complete disconnection, indicating a deep emotional burden tied to the loss of this sacred relationship. The repeated urging to remember hints at a fear of losing these connections forever, which reflects an underlying grief for what may already be lost.

5. Acceptance

Harjo embraces grief as an inevitable, yet deeply meaningful, part of life, one that can guide us toward a more profound connection with the world around us. She acknowledges the pain of loss while also embracing the idea of healing and transformation. Harjo's poems do not simply dwell in sadness; they also explore how accepting grief can foster resilience, understanding, and ultimately a renewed relationship with nature.

*Praise crazy. Praise sad.
Praise the path on which we're led.
Praise the roads on earth and water.
Praise the eater and the eaten.
Praise beginnings; praise the end.
Praise the song and praise the singer.
(Praise the Rain by Joy Harjo)*

CONCLUSION

Joy Harjo's selected poems capture the strong emotional and spiritual ties between Native American identity and the natural world and provide a thoughtful analysis of ecological grief and anxiety. Her poetry preserves traditional ecological knowledge and cultural history while simultaneously illustrating the terrible effects of environmental degradation on Indigenous populations. Harjo's selected poems reflect the anguish and sadness surrounding the loss of ecosystems, and sacred sites, and the disturbance of peaceful coexistence between humans and the natural world, as seen through the prism of ecological grief. Furthermore, Harjo's poetic language emphasizes the tenacity of Indigenous communities and the significance of recovering spiritual ties to the land and cultural tales. Her portrayal of ecological distress draws attention to larger environmental movements.

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