

Remedy for Environmental Issues: Relevance of native Literature in Contemporary Times

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ABSTRACT

Environmental degradation is probably the most burning topic of contemporary times. With the occurrence of floods and droughts, the issue of global warming gets accentuated. Human beings are probably facing a seemingly intractable problem that has been created themselves. Problems of pollution, global warming, and extinction of species are getting worse with every passing day. All these problems bring more focus to Native literature. One considered ‘stone-age’ people; Natives are now considered environmental philosophers. They developed wisdom that is relevant even today. This paper studies Native literature and tries to re-establish the importance of their philosophy in contemporary times.

Keywords: Native, environment, nature, white

INTRODUCTION

The last century has been the most fertile century for the literature written by subalterns. The literature written by the marginalized communities has made its presence felt across the globe and has brought much-desired attention to the plight of these communities. The people who were unaware of the conditions of the Native people have been enlightened by the literature written by the world. The people who were branded as ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’ have retrieved their identity as human beings. Now they are projecting their unique worldview in front of the world. People across the world are now realizing that their religious beliefs are more coherent when compared to their beliefs. The philosophy of living in harmony with nature is more beneficial for the planet when compared to the modern lifestyle that thrives on waste and materialism.

The otherwise marginalized societies and philosophies are now making a comeback. In this case, the literature written by Native American writers is very important. The Native Americans were pushed to the margins by the Europeans and were branded as stone age people who were incapable of building a civilization. They were branded savage by the Whites only because they lead different life. Pal in this case points out:

Noble savage at the same time is a grudging acknowledgment and the little admission, confession and a token of praise grudging bestowed on the Natives who were not at all ‘savage’ but had a distinct way of life, inexplicable, incomprehensible and inimitable because the White mind could only live by self-gratification, ownership and possessions. (Pal, Perpetrator 2)

The people were branded uncivilized because they were different. The Europeans who landed on the shores of the Americas were Christians and they were trained not to acknowledge any other belief system. However, the Native American literature has exposed that the current ecological problems are due to the religious beliefs of the Whites. The Whites believe that Man is the most supreme creature and everything else including the living and non-living things for him to be exploited. This belief of the White man emanates from the scripture:

And God said, “Let us make mankind in our image
according to our similitude
and let them rule over the fish of the sea and birds.(Cited in Brett 33)

These lines from the scripture gave absolute powers to the Whites and to exploit the natural resources and to hunt the animals for sport. This sport of killing animals for fun pushed many animals to the verge of extinction. The White man inspired by the above-quoted lines of the Gospel believed that man is not a part of the ecosystem. The man stands above all the other beings.

This attitude has to be contrasted with the attitude of the Natives who believe that Man and all the other creatures is part of a divine plan and all the things even the stones have been arranged according to a divine plan and man has no right to alter this plan. They believe that the survival of all animals and human beings is interconnected and this relationship between the animals, flora and fauna, human beings, and non-living things is called “The Sacred Hoop” (Allen 56).

The animals were killed by the Natives, but only for food. Even the hunt showcased the symbiotic relationship between human beings and animals. Silko writes about the hunt:

The Antelope merely consents to return home with the hunter. All phases of the hunt are conducted with love: the love the hunter and the people have for the Antelope people, and the love of the Antelope who agree to give up their meat and blood so that human beings will not starve. (Yellow Woman 26)

The Antelope and human beings share a special relationship and both of them care for each other. The Antelope gives his life for human beings, later the dead body of the human beings is used as fertilizer by the plants which help the animals in surviving. A poem by a Native Indian makes clear:

When I die, I must give life
To what has nourished me,
And give it to plants... (Indian 11)

This lifestyles of the Natives allowed the ecosystem to remain intact. It is interesting to note that modern scientists have also started respecting Native wisdom. The modern man has become the butcher of Earth” (Guha 179). Who has plundered mother earth for his personal gains and in some cases this plunder has disfigured the planet beyond repair. Pal rightly comments about this modern man; “This marauding butcher has created problems that look intractable. The world is battling with pollution of all kinds; pesticides and insecticides have entered the food chains; large species of animal kingdom are being pushed towards extinction; global warming is posing a new threat to the existence of human race” (Ecological Degradation 430).

The problem of ecological disaster is not restricted to the Americas only. All the countries where the people have adopted White ways are struggling to contain natural disasters. The Native communities were the guardians of nature; for then everything was divine. However, the introduction of Christianity changed everything. The people changed under the influence and the environment-friendly practices nurtured over the ages were shunned. All these factors paved the way for an intractable environmental problem:

Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be God; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name and courted the intercession and guidance of IyemojeOsha, mermaids and other spirits and Gods that dwelt in Water bodies. This changed when the Colonialists came from Europe and introduced the Bible, which then prised Omi-Ala’s adherents from it, and the people now largely Christians began to see it as an evil place. A Cradle besmeared. (Obioma 25)

In the above passage, Chigozie Obioma, the celebrated Nigerian novelist describes how a clean river has become a drain because of the influence of Christianity. The people stopped worshipping Om-Ala and started neglecting it because it was declared unchristian by the missionaries. The neglect of the people turned a clean river into a drain. This kind of example is available in all the Native literature written across the world.

The relationship between nature and natural objects is one of the biggest casualties in the colonial era. The respect for the natural world took a beating under the influence of Christianity and the world was thrown into chaos which is evident from the impending natural disaster.

The recent theories propounded by psychologists prove that there exists a deep relationship between ecology and the human unconscious. In fact, according to recent research, the increasing cases of madness are due to the degradation of

the environment. The groundbreaking work of an American philosopher. Theodore Roszak has led to deeper understanding of the relationship between the human mind and the environment. He defines ecopsychology:

Just as it has been the goal of previous therapies to recover the repressed contents of the unconscious, so the goal of ecopsychology is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies with ecological unconscious. The other therapies seek to heal the alienation between person and person, person and family, person and society. Ecopsychology seeks to heal more fundamental alienation between the person and natural environment. (Roszak 320)

According to Roszak, all these things are happening because man is violating earth again and again without refraining. The materialistic White man does not care for anything except wealth. The poisonous ideology of gaining maximum wealth is playing havoc with the life of the people and is sapping the life out of the planet. One of the most destructive activities started by man is mining. Huge monstrous machines gnaw into the breast of mother earth and make her hollow. The transformation of the landscape around the homes distresses not only the Native people but also the Whites. Glenn Albrecht writes that he started getting distress calls from the people when the coal mining companies started digging around the homes. He coined the terms “psychoterratic illness” and “Solastalgia” to discuss the impact of the destruction of landscape on the human mind. He defined Solastalgia:

The pain or sickness caused by the loss of or inability to derive solace connected to the present state of one’s home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under assault (physical desolation). It can be contrasted to spatial and temporal dislocation and dispossession experienced as nostalgia. Solastalgia is the “live experience of the loss of the value of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home. (Albrecht, Glenn, “Solastalgia: a new Psychoterratic illness”)

The theory of solastalgia emanated from the distress calls made by the White people living in Hunter Valley Australia. The incident shows that even White people are vulnerable to the madness that is due to the destruction of the landscape. The Whites may have developed amnesia about their pagan past, but their relationship with mother earth is still intact in their unconscious. They may pretend to be immune to the destruction caused by them to earth; but in reality, they cannot escape the consequences. The destruction of the earth and environment is affecting them also, but they do not know about it.

The Whites in their greed keep on violating Mother Earth, but the Natives have not forgotten about the importance of the planet and they still treat it like a mother. Native American spiritual leader Ed McGaa writes:

With this sacred pipe
You will walk upon the Earth
Which is your Grandmother and Mother.
All your steps should be holy. (1)

It is clear that earth is mother to all the creatures it sustains them and allows to grow further. However, the Whites have developed amnesia about their past and have started treating their mother badly. Mining has been compared to rape by the Native Australian writer Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson):

They did approach mining operations as if it was a sexual act, hard thrusting without a care for the woman beneath without a care for the Universe, the land beneath. We’ll fix it when we are done with her, much like the battered wife syndrome. (570)

Another noted Aboriginal poet points out the same thing in her poem:

The miner rapes
The heart of earth
With his violent spade
For the sake of the greedy trade. (Walker 197)



It is clear that the Native philosophy does not allow the violation of the earth for money. The spiritual connection between the mother and her progeny is still intact in the case of the Native. This relationship between the earth and the living things is visible in the Whole body of Native literature. All the living beings are the Children of the earth which is why human beings and all the other animals and living beings are related to one another.

Native literature offers an alternative philosophy, a different way of living on the planet. This alternative lifestyle will not only keep living beings safe but also will replenish Mother Earth.

One of the fallacies that have been developed by the Whites according to the Natives is about the ownership of land, but for Natives ownership of land is beyond question. In her novel, *The Game of Silence*, Louise Erdrich writes: “When the Chimoookomanag opens up the earth they believe they own it just like a kettle, just like this deerskin, just like this knife!” (21).

It is clear that this kind of idea is not accepted among the Natives. The Native people believe that earth cannot be owned. It is rather the earth that owns the people. In *Ceremony*, old Betonie tells Tayo: “They only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don’t mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain” (118). The mountain old Betonie is referring to is Mount Taylor which is considered sacred by the Natives. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the natives did not have any idea of ownership of land. Because it was not possible according to the Native philosophy. Children belong to the mother, and not vice versa. Centuries of colonization have not diluted the idea. The Natives still believe that the earth is the mother and they are the children. The idea of ownership of the earth is profane to the Natives.

The relationship between Mother Earth and the Natives is enumerated by Louise Erdrich in the novel *The Birchbark House*. In the novel, the writer tells the readers that Mother Earth provided them with everything they needed. In the novel, Erdrich tells the readers: “All winter long Omakayas’s family lived in a cabin of sweet-scented cedar at the edge of La-Pointe” (6). The statement points out that the people used the things available around them in an intelligent way. They took wood from the forest to make their cabins, but this wood was taken from the tree in such a way that it did not harm the tree. Nokomis addresses the tree as “old sister” and seeks her permission to take the skin to make her cottage: “We need you skin for our shelter” (7). Before taking the bark she offers “sweet and fragrant” tobacco to the tree to show her gratitude (8). In the novel, the owl is referred to as “grandfather” (13) and bears are called “brothers” (28) and humans are called “animals” (32). The words used by the writers show the close relationships between human beings and animals sure that the fragile ecosystem stays intact. The Bear occupies a special place in the Native philosophy because it looks like human being. Louise Erdrich writes: “Nokomis had told her that the bear must be addressed with the greatest respect, a treasured relative, that the bear had human qualities and nobody quite understood the bear. But the bear understood humans quite well” (34-35).

In fact, animals are not treated as distinct from human beings. The especially has a special place in Native life. It is the Whites who do not respect the animals and plants. They have detached themselves from the natural world and this precisely is the problem. Leslie Marmon Silko writes:

Then they grow away from the earth
then they grow away from the sun
then they grow away from the plants and animals.
They see no life
When they look
they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive.
The deer and bear are objects.
They see no life. (*Ceremony* 125)

Silko further writes that connection with the natural world can bring back sanity of the people. This point has been backed by philosophers like Glenn Albrecht and Theodore Roszak. His novel *Ceremony* is in fact a case study of how sanity between man and nature. In the novel, Silko shows how a medicine man Betonie reestablishes the connection between Tayo, the protagonist, and the natural world.

The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next, closer he painted blue, and moving towards him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains, and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range. (131)

Betonie sends Tayo on a journey to complete the Ceremony and during this journey, Tayo reestablishes his connection with the natural world and his sanity is restored.

The relationship between animals and human beings is strong and deep. In difficult times, animals even help human beings by sacrificing themselves. In *The Birchbark House*, Louise Erdrich's readers come across the situation where Omakayas and her family are on the verge of starvation in the winter. On the verge of starvation, Nokomis the matriarch sees a vision and she tells:

"Take the small path to north, that lead past the fish camp", said Grandma, gesturing slowly. She squinted. Looked deeper into her dream. Nodded slowly. "When you come to the tallest of the trees, go Howard the lake, then around the rocks and back into the trees. There the buck will wait for you". (182)

The most important word in the above quotation is "wait". The word shows that buck sacrifices his life for saving his human relatives from starvation.

The animals not only sacrifice themselves to save human beings, but they also tell the secrets of nature to human beings. The bears, for instance, act as medical teachers for human beings. The Natives learn about the medicinal properties of the plants by observing the bears. In *The Game of Silence*, Erdrich writes:

She said that bears used plants to heal themselves just like humans. It was important to watch them very closely to see what plants they ate and which they avoided. (228)

It is clear that if bears vanish from the earth, then human beings will not be able to learn more from bears. This makes clear that if animals like bears become extinct then human beings will also be one step closer to extinction. Moreover, with the devastating activities of the Whites, the important trees and herbs will also become extinct. In this way, the existence of human beings will be in jeopardy.

Thus Native literature not only educates human beings about the dangers that are posed by ecological degradation but also deliver a stern warning. The Native literature makes clear that all the living beings form a "sacred hoop" and if one portion/ingredient of the hoop goes missing then the whole of the hoop will get disturbed. It will disturb the whole chain which will ultimately lead to the extinction of human beings from the planet.

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