



A Reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as a Post-colonial Eco-critical text

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ABSTRACT: Since the turn of the twenty-first century a growing amount of scholarship has focused on the correlations between postcolonial studies and environmental criticism or eco-criticism. Despite the numerous ethical and political connections of global social justice and ecological crisis, postcolonial and eco-critical approaches have historically remained distant from one another. The emergence of postcolonial eco-criticism as a theoretical perspective much recently, however, has aimed to move beyond the mutual unease that has characterized the relationship of these two critical perspectives, formulating a more ecologically aware post-colonialism and a more politically conscious eco-criticism. Postcolonial Eco-criticism thus examines environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where the very supremacy of the 'human' over the 'non-human' world is questioned; at the same time posing questions such as what precisely, is meant by the word 'nature'; and whether the examination of "place" should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender, or race which finds sufficient prominence in postcolonial studies. In keeping with this perspective, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, challenges the assumption that nature is merely a thing for humans to appropriate and misuse. In this novel Silko alludes to the history of Uranium mining and the widespread, indiscriminate effects of that industry—which informs the imperial occupations of forcefully acquiring of tribal lands and its subsequent misuse.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, conquest, Eco-criticism, ecology, environment, nature, Post-colonialism

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the twenty-first century a growing amount of scholarship has focused on the correlations between postcolonial studies and environmental criticism or eco-criticism. Despite the numerous ethical and political connections of global social justice and ecological crisis, postcolonial and eco-critical approaches have historically remained distant from one another. The emergence of postcolonial eco-criticism as a theoretical perspective much recently, however, has aimed to move beyond the mutual unease that has characterized the relationship of these two critical perspectives, formulating a more ecologically aware post-colonialism and a more politically conscious eco-criticism. Postcolonial Eco-criticism thus examines environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where the very supremacy of the 'human' over the 'non-human' world is questioned; at the same time posing questions such as what precisely, is meant by the word 'nature'; and whether the examination of "place" should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender, or race which finds sufficient prominence in postcolonial studies. In keeping with this perspective, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, challenges the assumption that nature is merely a thing for humans to appropriate and misuse. In this novel Silko alludes to the history of Uranium mining and the widespread, indiscriminate effects of that industry—which informs the imperial occupations of forcefully acquiring of tribal lands and its subsequent misuse. The paper thus aims to undertake a post-colonial eco-critical analysis of the novel and illustrate the ways in which the imperial tendencies and projects of the colonizers inform the disastrous environmental consequences which, in the perspective of the indigenous, is actually the result of a disconnected, non-reciprocal relationship with the land. The paper examines this through the analysis of specific characters and the attitudes they exhibit towards the 'non-human' world and suffer alienation through their failure to live in peace with the earth.

II. DISCUSSION

Amid the complexity of multiple, non-linear narratives and numerous sub-plots that deliberately resist easy conclusions, *Almanac of the Dead* sheds light, on a continuing European pattern of terrestrial and ecological conquest in the indigenous homelands of the American Southwest, Central, and the Caribbean Islands. Despite the novel's ambiguity and broad scope, Silko invariably links her ecological narrative to Tucson, Arizona, and, the candid description of the town in the text's frontpiece, as Home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other crimias well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars (Pg.12).categorizes the kinds of characters through which she conveys divergent cultural attitudes towards nature.Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Eco-criticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*writes, "The so-called animal turn in humanities and social sciences has inevitably informed recent developments in post colonial eco-criticism, one of whose tasks is to ask what makes us human in the first place—what elevates us above other animals, or rather what we arrogantly believe gives us the right to separate their lives from ours. It is easy to see why the animal turn might attract post colonial, for, as Kari Weil puts it, animal studies 'stretches to the limit questions of language, of epistemology, and of ethics that have long since been raised in post colonial studies: how to understand and give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating it or distorting it ; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say.'"They further state that, " 'Hegemonic centrism' accounts... for those forms of institutionalized *speciesism* that continue to be used to rationalize the exploitation of animal 'others' in the name of a 'human and reason centered culture that is atleast a couple of millennia old' ." The western definition of humanity depended—and still depends—on the presence of the 'not-human': the uncivilized, the animal and animalistic. European justification for invasion and colonization proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as 'spaces', 'unused', under-used or empty'. The very ideology of colonization is thus one where anthropocentrism underlying Euro-centrism is being used to justify those forms of European colonization that see 'indigenous cultures as "primitive', less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature' as something natural. More usually, however, ideas of animal treatment and land use initially formed in Europe led colonial administrators and settlers to a facile belief in the apparently limitless resources of the settler colonies. Such places, after all, were apparently untamed, unowned and, above all, *unused*; and, accordingly, settlers set about rendering them productive and profitable through imported methods rather than by accommodating them, to local circumstance."Out of the myriad bunch of characters present in the novel, the characters of Leah Blue and Menardo appear significant in terms of ecological criticism as well as in terms of capitalism and its role in the evolution of "whiteness" in the Americas. The term 'whiteness' is perceived by critics Killingsworth and Palmer as a 'sign of alienation from both the land of the "New World" and its original human inhabitants.' In one of the text's sub-plots, Leah—an ambitious and unscrupulous European land developer—plans to create a 'city of the twenty-first century' Venice, in the desert surrounding Tucson. Because the grand designs call for the construction of artificial waterways and fountains, Leah must obtain approval to divert thousands of gallons of water from deep well aquifers to the proposed gated community. Doing so entails disrupting the fragile ecosystems of Tucson's desert landscapes and therefore prompts Leah to exploit her husband's relationship with the corrupt Judge Arne in order to bypass environmental land use laws. Leah's mode of perceiving nature, under the rule of private property and money, is a real contempt for, and practical degradation of nature and Silko works to illuminate this way of thinking throughout Leah's narrative. Leah's distaste for the ecosystem is clear: what possible good was this desert anyway? Full of poisonous snakes, sharp rocks, and cactus! (pg.374)The resemblance between Leah's attitude toward the environment, and that of her presumably non-indegenous peers, suggests that she is continuing the long cycle of ecological conquest of the colonialists without regard for the outcomes: Leah knew she was not alone in this feeling of repulsion; most people who saw the cactus and rocky hills for the first time agreed the desert was ugly. In her dream city, the water lilies and cattails, the giant cypress trees and palms, would soothe their eyes, and people could forget they were in a desert. (pg.375)However it becomes clear, as the narrative progresses, that her vision contributes nothing to the overall social and ecological system, but instead appropriates labor and nature for its own sustenance. Infact, Leah openly acknowledges that she is in the real estate business ...to make profits, not to save wildlife or save the desert. (pg.375)

If Leah's quest underlines the hollowness of the imperialistic projects, which actually serve no good but exploitation both materially as well as ecologically, then the mestizo insurance baron Menardo represents the forces of whiteness that seek to strengthen those links. Menardo overcomes the social malady that is born of his mixed ancestry by passing himself off as a white man. He marries a rich, white, educated women, and the business of the Universal Insurance Company—which insures wealthy property owners against natural disasters. His most lucrative service, however, provides his clients with access to a paramilitary organization equipped with arms from Tucson and trained to battle indigenous insurgents determined to reclaim their ancestral lands in Central America. In this context, Menardo illustrates the ecologically destructive nature of capitalism and in turn

colonialism. In the jungles of Mexico, during the first wave of the insurgency, 'Indian squatters' make their homes on the hillsides of coffee plantations. The squatters have one goal in mind to make a thing unprofitable and watch the white man leave. However Menardo's armies protect the capitalist's assets by destroying the squatters' homes and allowing the farmers to replant thus enabling capitalist dominance over the environment.

On a small scale, the furrowed and manicured rows of the coffee plantations continue to encroach upon the lush, natural foliage of the hillsides that once sheltered the squatters' villages. Securing the capital from these plantations frees the plantation owners from the need to invest across the border and instead they funnel their profits into much larger areas of 'downtown Mexico City' complete with the

...immensity of wealth behind the towers of steel and concrete and glass, built on this empire for European princes (pg.33)

Menardo's contribution to the expansion of such capitalistic and colonialistic projects ensures perpetrating of violence against the environment and the persistent squatters in order to also protect the Universal Insurance Company's capital. Menardo, who regards the squatters as separate from humanity and part of the environment, shows them the same contempt that capitalists such as Leah Blue hold for the Tucson desert: The Indians were worse than insects that breed and

... swarm over the land ... thicker than weeds (pg.36) In contrast to the non-indigenous imperialistic invaders is posited the character of Sterling—the aging, urbanized, Laguna Pueblo railroad worker recently returned to his ancestral homelands; and his relationship to Maahastryu, the giant sandstone snake whose reemergence from an abandoned uranium mine on the reservation heralds the return of the tribe's protector and evokes the Laguna creation stories in which 'all human beings, with all animals and plants, emerged at the same plane and at the same time', in the narrative marks a significant suggestion put forward by Silko. Robert M. Nelson asserts that the correlation 'between the life of the individual and the life of the land' in Native American literatures—represented here by Sterling and Maahastryu, respectively—is 'one of intimate and "indivisible" reciprocity'. For the critics Killingsworth and Palmer, this reciprocity is signified by 'brownness'; in contrast to the state of 'whiteness' characterized by alienation, 'brownness is characterized by 'adjustment and assimilation to the land.' As a result of his boarding school education Sterling had: never paid much attention to the old-time ways of the Laguna... because he had always thought the old beliefs were dying out. (pg.50) Formerly, he had profited from a depraved existence made possible by railroad barons intent on conquering their environments, at a time when 'talk about religion or spirits had meant nothing to Sterling.' Upon his return to Laguna, however, Sterling is charged with protecting Maahastryu from a menacing Hollywood production crew filming on the reservation. When he fails to prevent the outsiders from desecrating the snake, the Tribal Council attributes this to his indifference to Laguna epistemologies and banishes him from the tribe indefinitely. Serving his exile among the other urban exiles of Tucson, Sterling views Maahastryu as part of his nightmare of placelessness, rather than as an integral piece of Laguna epistemology that might ground his identity within the environment of the reservation. The answer to Sterling's survival lies in establishing the value of human accountability to the land—rather than succumbing to the non-Laguna concept of human ownership of the land—as a worldview that sustains indigenous and non-indigenous populations alike. Rinda West observes that, because Sterling 'rose from the land', he owes his survival to 'continuing reverence for the land.' Sterling's ability to foster a reciprocal consciousness begins with his final return home. Taking up residency in an abandoned sheep herder's shack, the old man finds magazines that 'referred to a world Sterling had left forever; the world outside the reservation...' As Nelson comments, he is not 'conquering the land or... living in spite of it, as he did in his years with the railroad, but is finding ways—sometimes 'traditional', sometimes 'innovative', and sometimes a creative blend of the two—to live *with* the land, holding and being held by the life that precedes and survives the life of any individual, as well as the life of any culture. While in search for answers to all the chaos, Sterling makes an interesting find. While cooking at his home his eyes fall on some ants carrying underground some of the spilled beans he had cooked. Although apparently appearing insignificant, the image triggers his memory of oral traditions that describe the 'connection' between human beings, ants and snakes:

... the old people believed the ants were messengers to the spirits, the way snakes were. The old people used to give the ants food and pollen and tiny beads as gifts. That way the ants carried human prayers directly underground. (pg.51) Sterling continues to offer beans to the ants, and even though he

... Couldn't think of a prayer to say ... the success of the ants had lifted his spirits. (pg.52)

Although this is a small step for Sterling, the act suggests that he is beginning to shed his passive skin of indifference to Laguna epistemologies by taking an active part in the intermediary role the ants play in connecting him to the earth. After meditating on the meaning of his past and his former belief of the uselessness of the old ways, Sterling's experience with the ants indicates that he accepts the endurance of the earth and its spirit beings as part of his own existence. Important to the eco-critical reading of Silko's novel, is Rachel Stein's premise that Sterling's plight in the novel is symptomatic of his complicity in the non-indigenous culture's 'ethos of detachment from nature that has decimated the Laguna tribe and the natural and social worlds.' A critic Lois Owens citing a Greenpeace essay, reports that: 'Nearly 100 percent of all uranium used in the production of

nuclear weapons by the U.S. government is extracted from Indian lands using Native workers.' Owens continues: 'Uranium extraction has resulted. . . in more than one thousand open and abandoned uranium mines on Indian land today, with no federal effort to clean up the sites that leak deadly radon gases and spread radioactive dust through Indian country.' Sterling thus ultimately realizes that his personal circumstances are 'only part of something larger'—the violent and destructive forces intrinsically linked to the Uranium mines that blight the natural environment of the Laguna Pueblo reservation. Sterling's final act in the novel is to physically move towards Maahastryu, as his path meanders through the wastelands of the uranium fields. Earlier, his lengthy employment with the railroad saved him from being involved in the controversy that marked the United States Government's need to mine Native American reservations for weaponry during the Cold War. Now, where 'mountains of grayish-white tailings loomed. . . Sterling was reminded of the stub left after amputation when he looked at the shattered, scarred sandstone that remained; the mine had devoured entire mesas.' (pg.66) Thus, moving through the mounds, Sterling also becomes a witness to the post-atomic legacy: the uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rain to springs and rivers', occurs within the uranium-blighted space. On a broader scale, Sterling's awareness of the devastating implications of uranium mining in this specific environment is simultaneously measured against his knowledge of the tribal elder's memories of the United States government's infamous Trinity nuclear testing site near Laguna Pueblo. Sterling remembers that . . . before the end of World War II, the old folks had seen the first atomic explosion—the flash brighter than any sun.(pg.68)

Thus in contrast to the non-indigenous characters' attitude of mastery over the land in the novel, and over all of the natural world in the broader context, Sterling comes to the realization of a different world-view suggested through his memory of oral traditions which suggests the connection of humans with nature which is marked by reciprocity.

III. CONCLUSION:

Literatures in recent times seem to have undertaken new directions. Concepts of globalization have begun to replace both post-modernism and post-colonialism as central categories for thinking about contemporary literatures. Indigenous works are no exception. These literatures have seen to broaden cultural perspectives, and to encourage alternative ways of perceiving the world, while encouraging readers to consider global issues of environmental abuse, by revisiting the beginnings of colonial and imperial occupations, thereby suggesting the inextricable link between issues concerning post-colonial strain of thought and eco-criticism as a discipline. In this context Silko's *Almanac of The Dead* provides ample scope to be read as a post-colonial eco-critical text. From the indigenous perspective of Silko, the implications of local and transnational catastrophe are inseparably related for us as global citizens and also suggests newer ways of reading Native American works. Significantly towards the end of the novel the Laguna Pueblo elders voice this awareness with simple clarity: . . . leave our Mother Earth alone. . . otherwise terrible things will happen to us all (pg.106).

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