

**RECONNECTIONS OF HUMANS TO ENVIRONMENTAL
LANDSCAPES: EXPLORING THE THEME OF ECO - IDENTITY IN
LINDA HOGAN'S NOVEL *SOLAR STORMS***

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ABSTRACT

Ecological identity is an individual's identity that is involved with nature and her resources. The indigenous people are more attached to the land they live in and they acquire eco-identity in serving as a protective shield to the mother Earth. The Chickasaw tribe of Native America has constantly taken efforts to conserve the environment. This has been incessantly done by them before and after the settlement of white colonizers in the land. Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms* communicates the readers similar experience; the four women in the novel achieve their ecological identity after undertaking the journey for attaining their lost identity. The four women are depicted as marginalised, oppressed and they are deprived of their rights over land. This study explains how the land is personified as a human and how it guides the four women during their journey. The mother Earth takes initiatives in saving the native people who are connected to the land and also saving herself from the exploitation of the Whites. This paper explores how Angel, the protagonist along with her grandmothers searches for their lost eco-identity and strives hard to acquire their individuality and accomplish the same along with their tribal values.

Key Words: Ecological Identity, Chickasaw tribe, protective shield, exploitation of the Whites, marginalised, individuality.

FULL PAPER

INTRODUCTION

Eco-Identity, which is also termed as Ecological identity denotes the humans' association with the environment. The land has become accustomed to provide the humans with all her nourished resources. The humans have also changed from their habitual activities of not only getting benefitted from nature, but also exploiting the mother Earth. The term Eco-identity has been initially termed by Arne Naess, a professor of philosophy, who states that human beings are inter-twined and interspersed with nature and her resources. This is associated with Eco-criticism, which describes the studies associated with man and environment. The indigenous people are those who are attached to the earth and her belongings and those people who are exploiting the land are least concerned about the earth.

The Native American tribal people who have the in-born culture in them and their attachment to nature are noteworthy. The colonizers have abducted the land of the natives and the former is utilizing the resources such as land, water, flora and fauna. Though there has been much repulsion by the people over the Whites, still now the dominion of the Whites continues. This has been found in the works of the populous writer, Linda Hogan. Linda Hogan, being a poet, powerful environmentalist, short-story writer and a novelist belongs to the Chickasaw tribe of Native America. She has portrayed the richness and the value of the land, which she lives on, in her novels. In the novel, *Solar Storms* the novelist depicts the tribal practices, mythical stories and the ancestral oral traditions of Chickasaw tribal people. Linda Hogan is awarded with Colorado Book award for the novel *Solar Storms*.

According to the norms of Chickasaw tribe, the historical facts, land, and the ancestral heritage shape an individual's identity and to acquire cultural identity, the tribal people follow the cultural values imparted to them by their ancestors and teach the same to the next generations. As the Chickasaw tribes are connected to nature, they strive to obtain ecological identity. This is similar to the views of Mitchell Thomashow. In his book, *Ecological Identity: Becoming A Reflective Environmentalist*, he expresses the human's communion with the nature. Thomashow's perspective could be effectively understood from these lines, where:

“Thomashow describes exploring ecological identity as becoming a “reflective environmentalist” on a search to “recover and reclaim the

importance of nature in one's personal development." Delving into ecological identity helps people "understand their motivations and aspirations, to clearly articulate their environmental values, and know how to apply them to professional and personal decisions". (Kelly)

The novel *Solar Storms* portrays the lives of four women who are categorised as marginalised; those who do not enjoy the same privilege as the other group of people. This paper focuses on how the marginalised women of the novel achieve their eco-identity and safeguard their land and its possessions.

ANALYSIS

Angel Iron, the protagonist of the novel is redeemed from the White world to the Native land to live along with her grandmother, Agnes and great -great grandmother, Dora-Rouge in Adam's Rib. She is later taken to her paternal grandmother, Bush who lives alone in Fur Island. Angel Iron has suffered from a nightmarish childhood; she has been bitten by her own mother after Angel was born. Hannah, the mother of Angel had done this ruffian act of biting her own child as Angel resembled Hannah. Hannah was haunted by spirits and this led her to do the same. Later she hides the new-born baby (Angel) amidst the snow-covered tress, which is later found out by Bush and when she tries to safeguard the baby, she misses the baby. Hannah too disappears into the other island.

All the four women join together and undertake a journey of destination in the river with the help of canoes. Each woman possesses a cause for proving their ecological identity. The great-great grandmother, Dora- Rouge, wishes to take up the journey in order to have her last breath in the Fat Eaters Land (her birth land). Dora-Rouge's motive has been to die in the land where she was born. Bush, who served as a caretaker for Hannah, decides to go on with the journey to Fat Eaters Island to know whether dams are constructed by the immigrants. Bush is shown to be a woman who speculates that the native land is in crucial state of getting devastated. Agnes, the grandmother of Angel, proceeds on with the journey to give away her mother to the island of Fat Eaters. Agnes is viewed from the perspective of a daughter who willingly sacrifices her mother to be re-united with nature. The mission of Angel is to meet her mother, Hannah Wing.

The prime objective of the journey taken up by the four women has led to unlock the closed doors of their lives. Dora-Rouge, who lost her husband Luther, has been thinking and

brooding about him and expects her death. She foresees death and waits for it eagerly. Dora-Rouge, who is the great-great grandmother of Angel Iron, is quite deeply attached to the land, the nature, her daughter and her grand-daughter. Being the oldest among all, Dora is fragile and weak that she needs to be carried in a chair all the while from kitchen to the living-room. Agnes has been carrying her mother ever since she had fallen sick. It could be seen from the lines: “*DORA-ROUGE, I think now, was a root and we were like a tree family, aspens or birch, connected to one another underground, the older trees feeding the young, sending off shoots, growing.*” (Hogan 48)

Once Angel comes to live in the native land, she takes up the responsibility of carrying her great-grandmother. This is compared to the cultural acceptance of Angel Iron. Having born to a native woman, and having led her teenage life with the White people, Angel Iron is hospitable and generous to accept her grandmother’s words. She does not presume her great grandmother as a burden but is prepared to start her new life with them. It is found in these lines of the book, where Agnes comments about her: “...she’s the source of both of us.” (Hogan 33) This depicts that the Chickasaw women are physically and emotionally are perfectly in union with nature.

Dora-Rouge develops the insatiable desire to reach her native land and it is mentioned that she has always waited for the appropriate time to get back to her land. She prepares herself both physically and psychologically and orders Angel and Bush to carry her in their journey. From the novel, it is understood that Dora-Rouge is equally knowledgeable to Bush about the nature and their journey which they wish to take through water. Her association with nature could be viewed from these lines: “*Dora-Rouge sang low songs that sounded like wind. She read things in the moving of waters; she saw what couldn’t be seen by us as the land and soundless mists passed by*”. (Hogan 177)

Dora-Rouge is portrayed to possess the loss and retention of eco-identity with accordance to nature. Dora-rouge has acquired the skill of making mutual agreement with the water. When the women prepare themselves to undertake the journey in water, Dora-Rouge signs a pact with water, which states: Se Nay River should allow them to pass it and her life could be taken at stake. This pact saves Dora-Rouge, but her daughter’s life is in danger. In this situation, Dora-Rouge loses her identity and regains the same by reaching the Fat-Eaters Island and ending her last days in her birth place.

Agnes, the daughter of Dora-Rouge, proceeds with the journey to give away her mother to the place where she was born. Agnes had undergone innumerable miseries from her childhood. Ever since, she holds an untold affection over the bear (which was the last species of the land), later taking care of her son, Harold and his successors. The bear has always been considered intimate to Agnes; and she has taken tremendous efforts in trying to save the bear from the ill-treatment of White immigrants. It is symbolically proven, where even after the death of the bear, Agnes stitches its fur as a coat to wrap her with. This implies the friendly and affectionate nature of Agnes with the bear. It could be seen from these lines: “...*First thing every morning Agnes brushed the fur, rocking it in the chair, her dark hair around her plump shoulders. Like it was a baby. And talking and singing things...*” (Hogan 48)

When her son Harold marries Bush (from Fur Island), Agnes warns Harold that he might be facing hardships in future. This induces him to marry another woman, Loretta who is the mother of Hannah. Agnes repents that she has spoiled the life of Bush, who struggles alone in Fur Island. As a result of her deed, she finds out the whereabouts of daughter of Hannah and brings her to the island. Agnes has waited for long time for her grand-daughter and she has faced numerous problems while bringing Angel to the land. The first part of ecological identity of Agnes is to bring back her grand-daughter to the land where she was born. It is to be noted that Agnes loses her identity by losing her entire family members: her husband, her son Harold, her daughters –in-law, Bush and Loretta, her grand-daughter, Hannah, and her great-grand daughter, Angel.

Agnes takes the initiative of bringing back Angel (Agnes’ lost cultural identity) to her native place. She tells stories of their ancestors to her grand-daughter to make Angel understand their sacrifices and great deeds they had done for the welfare of the land. Agnes leads Angel to stay connected to the land and to the lost family of Angel’s. Agnes narrates about the goodness of Dora-Rouge and Bush to Angel, which forces Angel to live with Bush in the Fur Island for many days.

Agnes is well aware of the consequent events before taking Dora-Rouge to the Fat-Eaters land, where the latter anticipates the death of her. She is described as deathly pale, confused and worried over her mother, since she expects her mother to live long. Agnes never considers anyone as a burden in her life; she struggles hard and fights back her problems to keep them close. She takes utmost care of her mother, her son Harold, her grand-

daughter Hannah and her great grand-daughter Angel Iron. When she meets her sad ending during the journey, the family of hers breaks down miserably. It is mentioned that she foresees her death and expresses to Angel that, after her death, her dead physique must be left in the water for the nature to devour on her. Through these lines, her involvement with nature is studied: “*“Listen, if something happens to me, I want you to let me lie out for the wolves and birds; ”*”(Hogan 188). Her absence haunts more and her presence is felt till the end of the novel. Her wish of saving her mother Dora-Rouge, from dying in the Fat-Eaters Island is fulfilled. Her passion and aspiration of bringing Angel to the land and she seemed to the bond connecting three generations. Through this, her ecological identity is also attained.

Bush, the woman who lives solely in the Fur Island, after her husband forsakes her for another woman named Loretta, has a strong control over the land she lives in and over her family members. Bush is described as thin, silent, timid and beautiful and her beauty captivated everyone, but she falls only for Harold. She is a determined woman who is able to sustain as a lone human in the entire land. She lives with the nature, in a house built by her amidst the frozen ice, smelling the direction of the wind. This is expressed in these lines:

“At first when I saw her, I thought she was a deer, thin and brown, smelling the direction of the wind. She was standing at the edge of the island when we arrived, her dark, already graying hair down her shoulders. She seemed rooted where she stood, at the boundary between land and water.” (Hogan 67)

Her house is filled with mosquitoes and she lives in a place where there are no basic amenities. She anticipates living with the nature and natural facilities; she remains fortunate living in the island without even electricity.

Bush has been waiting for long for the arrival of Angel Iron and she treats Angel quite well, by providing her special room, with a cot and satisfying the general facilities. Bush earns her own living by sewing shirts and selling them to LaRue Marks Time, a Taxidermist for money. In addition to which, Bush possesses the power of bringing back the dead animals like turtle to life. Later she sells them to museums and schools with the help of LaRue, who develops a special attraction towards her. Bush earns money by selling the bones of animals. Bush has been one with nature for so many years that all the animals, plants, wind and water know about her.

Bush takes tremendous efforts in trying to save Hannah and Angel, which ends up in vain; she loses them to nature which denotes the loss of her cultural identity. Later she waits patiently for the arrival of Angel and once she arrives, she sets forth to sail to find out Hannah, mother of Angel and to know whether dams are constructed in other parts of the lands. Bush is shown to be a woman who is physically and mentally strong. To save money for their journey, she sells all the furs (that were quite heavy) and keeps the money safe. She is very well trained in paddling canoes and is aware of the current of the water. As soon as, Bush reaches the island, she finds out that Fat-Eaters Island too is abducted by the immigrants for the hydroelectric project. She attends meetings with the immigrants (who are the workers of dam construction), takes photographs, sends it to the newspapers and creates awareness to the outer world of what is happening in the islands. Through her incessant efforts, she instils a positive vibe in the Fat-Eaters Island, which is considered to be her attainment of ecological identity.

Angel Iron, the protagonist of the novel, the bitten child of her own mother, the survival and follower of Chickasaw cultural practices is depicted as the representative of the marginalised women. She is regarded to be the epitome of uniting all the three women who are under variant conditions and ideologies under one roof and planning for a journey of destiny to revive their eco-identity. Angel Iron has suffered from her birth till her childhood. Her childhood life with Agnes and Bush is shown to be satisfying rather than with her mother. This is found from the various photographs of Angel taken with Agnes, Bush and Hannah. When Angel is found with Agnes and Bush, she is happier and not with Hannah. Angel has been portrayed as marginalised within the marginalised. She is born to a Native American woman and she is secluded by her own mother. She could not obtain motherly care and affection and details about her father is unknown to her. She is thrown into the snow by her mother. She leads her teenage life in the land of Whites and she is later found out by Agnes.

Angel's loss and search of her ecological identity is where, there is a situation, Angel is forcibly made to leave her mother and motherland for Angel's survival. Later, Angel returns to the land where her great grandmothers and grandmother live, and they advise her to find out where Hannah is located. Moreover, Angel also possesses the role of bridging the broken relationship of Agnes with Bush. Angel's association and bondage towards nature is expressed in these lines:

“I sensed already that the land on Fur Island, the water, would pull a person in, steal from them, change them, that it would spit them up transformed, like Jonah from the belly of the whale.

As I stepped out of the boat, I nearly lost my balance. It was the land, too, like the water, already trying to take possession of me, to bring me closer. The mud took in my feet and ankles.” (Hogan 68)

After the journey of destination is completed, Angel finds out Hannah and to her dismay, Angel understands that Hannah is in her death-bed. Thus, Angel lives with Hannah till her last breath and also gives hand to Bush for stopping the construction of dams and hydroelectric projects. Angel does all courageous deeds to avert the White people exploitation in the land. Through her continuous struggles, Angel turns out to be partially successful in re-deeming the island of Fat-Eaters, whereas Fur Island is completely destroyed by floods. Angel’s eco-identity is lost when she is secluded by her own mother from her mother-land and her eco-identity is restored when she violently fights against the White people for constructing the dams.

Angel has a significant role to play in the novel since she is portrayed as a woman who is marginalised, scarred and deprived of her mother’s love and affection. The scarred identity of Angel is compared to the disfigured land of the Chickasaw tribe. Initially Angel’s face has been bitten by her own mother. Similarly, the land of Fat Eaters has been disturbed and disfigured by the intrusion of Whites. When Angel returns to her native land and leads her life in Fur Island, the medicinal plants and herbs of the place cures her scars. In the same way, Chickasaw tribal people join together united and fight against the White people for their atrocities in the land and restore the land with the help of ‘cured and transformed’ Angel.

CONCLUSION

The novel centres on these four women who possess their cultural identity initially, but due to the circumstances around them, they part with it and acquire a newer one, which leads them to many troubles. This allows them to connect their identity with the nature. Their search of identity ends when the four women realize that their identity is associated with nature (i.e) ecological identity. Through this novel, the novelist highlights the fact that the women of Chickasaw tribe are concerned about their land and its elements rather than their own selves. The women sacrifice their lives for the betterment of the land. They prioritize the

identity of the land and consider land as a human being. In the method of losing and searching for their identity, the women realize that their identity is associated with the land and since they are oppressed as marginalised people, they struggle to help land attain its identity.

The novelist expresses that nature is a righteous and sole form of woman. She also tells the readers that there is a deep connectivity between women and nature. The nature is referred to a woman since she has the great potential to face any kind of crisis; women like the land absorb all the unwanted particles (emotions) and emit positivity, glory and peace to their surroundings. Women are compared to the seeds of generating culture and they inculcate the strong notion that women are strongly connected to the process of preserving nature and its natural resources and impart them to the younger generations. Thus, the indigenous Native American literature employs some important goals such as the liberation of the people, restoring the heritage of Native people and revitalizes the lost identity of the people and its land.

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