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Decolonising Nature: Indigenous Eco-Consciousness and the Rejection of the Anthropocene in Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* and *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*

Shushrut Ranjan Pattanayak
Research Scholar,
Department of English and Foreign Languages,
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University,
Amarkantak (Madhya Pradesh, India)
E-mail: shushrutpattanayak@gmail.com

Dr. Santosh Kumar Sonker
Associate Professor & Head
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University,
Amarkantak (Madhya Pradesh, India)
E-mail: drsantosh.igntu@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Joy Harjo's poetry collections, An American Sunrise and Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings, sit squarely at the intersection of Indigenous eco-consciousness and decolonial ecology. This paper explores that dynamic. Scholars often frame the Anthropocene as a universal human problem, but this Eurocentric view misses the mark. Instead, I argue that Harjo's poetics correctly identify ecological collapse as a symptom of much more specific forces: settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and historical dispossession. Grounded in Mvskoke (Creek) epistemologies, her work tears down the artificial wall between nature and culture, treating the Earth not as a resource, but as a sentient web of relatives. By looking at themes like blood memory, the trauma of the Trail of Tears, and "trickster capitalism," this study shows how Harjo uses sonic kinship and the botanical imagination to work through historical wounds. Harjo's vision for planetary healing demands a complete overhaul of environmental ethics, suggesting that true ecological justice simply cannot happen without Indigenous sovereignty and genuine respect for nature.

Keywords: *Indigenous Eco-Consciousness, Decolonial Ecology, Anthropocene, Joy Harjo, Native American Poetry, Environmental Justice*

Introduction:

Today, the ecological crisis is usually discussed through the lens of the Anthropocene—a proposed geological epoch driven by the idea that humanity, as a whole, has permanently altered the biosphere. Atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer originally built the Anthropocene framework around the concept of the noosphere, focusing on the sheer scale of human technological and cognitive influence over the Earth (Davis and Todd 761). But critical geographers and Indigenous theorists like Heather Davis and Zoe Todd push back against this. They argue that the Anthropocene is highly political, not just a neat geological boundary. When mainstream science pegs

the start of this epoch to the Industrial Revolution or the mid-century Great Acceleration, it misses a massive historical reality. The actual, physical reshaping of the Earth's atmosphere, geology, and biosphere kicked off centuries earlier, driven by the intertwined forces of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade (Davis and Todd 764). Shifting the timeline to begin with colonialism exposes an unavoidable truth: the genocide of Indigenous populations, the aggressive extraction of global resources, and our current climate catastrophe are ideologically linked (Davis and Todd 770).

Scholar Kyle Powys Whyte complicates this narrative even further with the idea of "ancestral dystopias." Look at mainstream environmentalism: it constantly leans on post-apocalyptic sci-fi tropes to warn us about a terrifying, uninhabitable future. Yet, as Whyte points out, these warnings quietly erase Indigenous peoples. Why? Because Native populations have *already* survived the apocalyptic destruction of their societies, ecosystems, and traditional lifeways at the hands of colonizers (Whyte 225). For Native communities, the current era isn't a looming threat; it is an ongoing, lived dystopia. Because of this, Indigenous climate responses don't stem from a place of impending dread. Instead, they operate on a continuum, conversing with both ancestors and descendants. They draw on traditional knowledge to navigate a world that has, in a very real sense, already ended once before (Whyte 226).

Joy Harjo's poetry lives exactly in this space of surviving an ancestral dystopia. You won't find her mourning some vague, generalized environment. Instead, she documents the highly specific, localized violence inflicted on the land and its original caretakers (Hanna 296). By weaving her ancestors' forced removal together with modern ecological ruin, Harjo makes a clear argument: we cannot heal the Earth without decolonizing its territories. Her poems act as a profound assertion of Mvskoke place-thought, a philosophical framework showing that bodies, thinking, and the land itself are completely inseparable (Davis and Todd 770).

To truly grasp how Indigenous eco-consciousness breaks away from mainstream environmentalism, we have to recognize this deep conceptual split. There is a wide gulf between the Eurocentric narrative of the Anthropocene and the decolonial ecology championed by Harjo and her academic peers (Davis and Todd 763; Whyte 225). Because of this, trying to comfortably fit Harjo's poetics into the traditional box of Western "nature writing" simply doesn't work. Her engagement with the environment is inherently political, deeply historical, and inextricably bound to the physical survival of the Mvskoke Nation.

Cartographies of Dispossession and Memory:

To comprehend the ecological vision presented in the literary works, one must first confront the historical trauma of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, unlawfully signed by President Andrew Jackson to force southeastern Indigenous nations from their ancestral homelands (Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 9). The resulting historical migrations systematically severed the Mvskoke, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole peoples from the specific ecosystems that sustained their spiritual

and physical existence. The removal was an act of profound ecological violence, disrupting a balanced relationship with the biosphere and replacing it with an agricultural and economic model based entirely on relentless extraction.

In the poetic exploration of this forced migration, the landscape is never rendered as a passive backdrop. Instead, the Earth functions as an active, sentient witness to historical atrocities. The concept of blood memory operates throughout the text, suggesting that trauma and memory are embedded not only within the human genetic code but within the soil, the rivers, and the trees themselves (Hanna 296). Returning to the ancestral homelands in the Southeast requires confronting the spectral presences of those who perished, as well as the enduring grief of the land that was violently repurposed for capitalist expansion.

> "Do not return,
> We were warned by one who knows things
> You will only upset the dead.
> They will emerge from the spiral of little houses Lined up in the
> furrows of marrow" (Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 16)

Through these verses, the narrative highlights the peril of disturbing spaces where profound injustice occurred. The geography of the American South is covered in the remnants of Mississippian mound-builder communities, which serve as physical markers of an advanced, sustainable civilization that predated European arrival by centuries (Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 29). Despite the imposition of modern highways and infrastructural development, the energetic and geophysical memory of the Mvskoke people remains indelible. The poetry challenges the settler-colonial myth of a pristine, uninhabited wilderness, revealing instead a deeply humanized space that was violently emptied by military force.

The survival of the Mvskoke people in the aftermath of this apocalypse is a central thematic current. The poetry documents the methods of endurance utilized by Indigenous communities in the face of ongoing cultural erasure and systemic poverty. Urban environments, often perceived in literature as the antithesis of the natural world, become new sites of resistance and community building, demonstrating that Indigenous presence cannot be relegated solely to historical or rural contexts (Bryson 172).

Spatial Violence and the Rupture of Reciprocity:

The literature further interrogates the psychological and ecological toll of this forced displacement by mapping the dissonance between physical geography and spiritual belonging. J. Scott Bryson posits that a vital component of ecological poetry is the tension between the desire to cultivate an intimate knowledge of a specific, localized environment and the simultaneous recognition of the vast, unknowable wildness of the broader universe (170). For Harjo, this tension is severely

complicated by the historical reality of exile. The violent rupture from the ancestral ecosystems of the Southeast created a generational disorientation, a severing of the reciprocal bonds that had governed Mvskoke life for millennia.

The resultant psychic fragmentation is depicted not merely as a loss of property, but as an existential freefall. The disconnection from familiar flora, fauna, and waterways leaves the human subject untethered from the grounding forces of the natural world, forcing individuals to navigate a hostile settler-colonial geography without the traditional anchors of place-based knowledge (Bryson 171).

> "Someone will lift from the earth
> Without wings.
> Another will fall from the sky
> Through the knots of a tree". (Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 14)

This imagery perfectly encapsulates the vertigo of displacement. The loss of territorial sovereignty equates to a loss of gravitational certainty, wherein the fundamental laws of nature are disrupted by the chaos of colonial intervention. Yet, even within this disorientation, the poetry insists on the persistence of ecological connection. The rivers, though geographically distant, remain ancient thoroughfares of memory, and the physical bodies of the survivors continue to carry the elemental composition of their original homelands. The poetry thus functions as a restorative cartography, utilizing language to bridge the violent geographic divides imposed by the American government and mapping a return route through the medium of ancestral storytelling (Hanna 296).

The Trickster Anthropocene and the Commodification of the Earth:

If the Anthropocene is an inadequate descriptor for the current era, the concept of the Anthropocene offers a much more precise framework. This term identifies the relentless drive for profit, resource extraction, and the aggressive commodification of nature as the true engines of planetary ecological collapse. The literature actively deconstructs the capitalist ethos, utilizing traditional Indigenous storytelling to diagnose the spiritual sickness that allows human beings to view the Earth merely as a repository of raw materials (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 17). Within Mvskoke traditions, trickster figures frequently serve to illustrate the dire consequences of hubris and behavioural imbalance. By employing the trickster archetype, the poetic narrative shifts the blame for environmental destruction away from humanity, placing it squarely on the specific ideologies of greed and unchecked consumption. Harjo's trickster allegory—where natural elements are manipulated to build a creature of bottomless appetite—delivers a scathing critique of colonial capitalism. Utterly lacking in spiritual grounding or any sense of reciprocity, this being mirrors the history of European expansion across the Americas. It is a trajectory defined entirely by the theft of land, lives, and resources. Here, the narrative pinpoints the precise engine of ecological ruin: a complete break from

the ethical duties required to share a planet.

"Then he had a taste of gold and he wanted all the gold.
Then it was land and anything else he saw.
His wanting only made him want more.
Soon it was countries, and then it was trade.
The wanting infected the earth".

This mythological sequence captures exactly how individual greed scales into global imperialist trade networks. By describing this wanting as a contagious infection, Harjo highlights the sheer pathology of Extraction. Harjo doesn't treat this destructive urge as a normal step in human evolution. Instead, she casts it as a violent rupture from the world's original balance. The true tragedy of this trickster creation? Its absolute sensory deadness. It literally cannot hear the Earth's warnings. It completely fails to grasp how the biosphere knits itself together. Operating purely on blind consumption, this figure acts as a dead ringer for modern industrial societies—cultures that have historically brushed aside the catastrophic environmental fallout of their own economic engines. She writes

"We could no longer see or hear our ancestors,
Or talk with each other across the kitchen table.
Forests were being mowed down all over the world.
And Rabbit had no place to play.
Rabbit's trick had backfired.
Rabbit tried to call the clay man back,
But when the clay man wouldn't listen
Rabbit realized he'd made a clay man with no ears". (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 16)

Sentient Landscapes and the Botanical Imagination:

Decolonial ecology hinges on a premise that the West often dismisses as radical: non-human entities are sentient beings. They carry their own agency, speak their own languages, and possess inherent rights. Think about mainstream environmentalism for a moment. It usually clings to a deeply human-centred perspective, fighting to "save nature" mainly so our descendants can keep harvesting its benefits. Harjo's poetry shatters that viewpoint. She demands a massive recentring, asking us to view humanity as just one fragile thread woven into a vast, interdependent web. In Mvskoke philosophy, kinship bleeds far past human bloodlines. The family structure expands to embrace the animals, the plants, the rivers, and even the atmospheric phenomena that make life on Earth possible.

This intense zoological and botanical imagination drives Harjo's literature. She challenges readers to accept something profound: flora and fauna carry their own distinct cultures and navigate incredibly complex histories. When the modern world refuses to acknowledge the personhood of

nature, Harjo's poetry frames that failure as a devastating lack of spiritual comprehension. Trees, for instance, step forward in her work as ancient witnesses and loyal companions. They endure intense suffering and engage in deep communication—but only with those who are willing to stop and listen. When modern society fails to see the personhood of the natural world, the poetry frames this as a catastrophic lack of spiritual and poetic comprehension. Trees, for example, frequently appear as ancient witnesses and steadfast companions. They are capable of intense suffering and deep communication, but only with those who are willing to listen.

> "Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist,
> dark earth Between sunrise and sunset—
> I cannot walk through all realms—
> I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark—" (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 118)

Wanting to transmute from a human into a botanical entity reveals a deep longing for rootedness. It represents a desire to permanently integrate back into the biosphere. At the same time, it exposes the sheer alienation of modern human life, which has been violently severed from the Earth's grounding, continuous cycles. By insisting that the natural world can communicate, Harjo's poetry actively fights back against the capitalist urge to objectify the landscape. Flora and fauna are not just inanimate resources sitting around waiting to be extracted. They are living poems. They demand active listening, deep respect, and ethical engagement (Hanna 296).s

Ecological citizenship is central to this entire understanding. To be a true citizen of the Earth community, one must acknowledge the complex bond tying all living things together. Here, the poetry functions almost as a survival manual for future generations. It insists that we can only survive collectively if we completely reject hierarchies that put humanity at the top of the pyramid. If we are made of the exact same elemental light and ancestral energy as the forests, rivers, and stars, then destroying the environment isn't just vandalism. It is an act of profound self-mutilation.

Planetary Restoration and Futurity:

Ultimately, these texts do much more than just document trauma and ecological ruin. They build a highly sophisticated framework for actual planetary healing and conflict resolution. If we want to address the legacy of settler colonialism and the climate catastrophe it caused, simple acknowledgment won't cut it. We have to fundamentally restructure our political and interpersonal ethics. Harjo's poetry lays out concrete ground rules for fixing humanity's fractured relationship with the Earth. Crucially, she insists that we can never achieve true justice by relying on the exact same legal and economic systems that caused the violence in the first place.

Real resolution means consulting the original keepers of the land. It means actively honouring the natural laws that actually govern the biosphere. The political treaties and documents used to steal Indigenous territories are stripped down and exposed for what they are: tools of violent coercion. They

are fundamentally incapable of creating genuine peace or long-term sustainability. Instead of these hollow documents, Harjo's work proposes a decolonial ethic built on mutual trust and shared sustenance. It demands unwavering respect for the inherent rights of the more-than-human world. If there is going to be any real reconciliation, the animal nations and land spirits have to be treated as active stakeholders. This decentres the human perspective entirely, proving that you cannot separate environmental justice from Indigenous sovereignty.

This decolonial eco-consciousness culminates in an all-encompassing benediction—a blessing meant to restore the sanctity of the whole planetary body. The poetic voice doesn't claim ownership or dominion over the land. Instead, it recognizes that human beings are woven directly into the physical substance of the environment (Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 106). The settler state's arbitrary borders, property lines, and fences simply dissolve. In their place is a deep spiritual identification with the landscape itself, one that honours the sacredness of every single geographical feature.

> "Bless this land from the top of its head to the bottom of its feet
> From the arctic old white head to the brown feet of tropical rain
> Bless the eyes of this land, for they witness cruelty and kindness in this land
> From sunrise light upright to falling down on your knees night"(Harjo, *An American Sunrise* 106)

Mapping the Earth both geographically and anatomically highlights a dual reality: the biosphere is extremely vulnerable, yet deeply resilient. By blessing the destruction of land alongside its creation, Harjo acknowledges the terrifying, uncontrollable power of natural forces. Yet, she maintains absolute faith in the Earth's ability to renew itself. This operates as a stark rejection of the capitalist drive to master and subjugate the environment. In its place, the poetry offers a model of humble submission to the planet's eternal cycles.

Conclusion:

When poetry, Indigenous epistemology, and environmental activism intersect, they create a vital counter-narrative to the limiting, mainstream discourse of the Anthropocene. By staring directly at the structural violence of settler colonialism and the ecological devastation it caused, Harjo's work exposes how flawed it is to blame a generalized "humanity" for the state of the Earth. The specific trauma of Native displacement and the broader climate crisis are tied together. Because of this, it becomes irrefutably clear that environmental justice is a pipe dream without total decolonization.

By calling on Mvskoke traditions, trickster allegories, and the reality of ancestral dystopias, Harjo systematically dismantles Anthropocene ideologies. She exposes Extraction and capitalist greed for what they truly are: spiritual aberrations that have ripped humanity out of the ecological web. To fix this, we need a massive reawakening of ecological citizenship. We have to recognize that plant, animal, and elemental nations have their own agency and sentience. In the end, Harjo's literature acts

as a sort of transformative technology. It uses the rhythms of traditional songs to heal historical wounds, guiding the wandering human spirit back to the ceremonial fire. It offers us a concrete blueprint for surviving the current planetary crisis—and it all starts with the humble, necessary work of making kin with the Earth.

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