



Displacement and Eco-Cultural Identity Dysfunctions in the Poetry of Joy Harjo

Roselyn M. Jua, PhD, Gespa Nkemze Azekeng

The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

***Corresponding Author:** *Roselyn M. Jua, PhD, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon*

Abstract: *Native American literature in general and the genre of poetry in particular exhibits a people whose cultures have close ties and affinities with the natural environment. These people, by their very nature, are beings whose ontology is knit with the natural environment. It is in this context that with the advent of European settlers of the Americas, and the subsequent displacement of native Indians from their ancestral homes, the latter see this as a genocide on their cultural identity. This paper considers American Indian Removal from their ancestral lands as forceful migration, and thus, treats the plight of the natives as having an ecological undertone. The paper adopts this view giving that the change in/of environment is paramount in identity conception and construction to American Indians. We borrow from the framework of ecocriticism to analyse and interpret the poetry of Joy Harjo, in order to unravel the kind relations that govern native-nature coexistence. The paper demonstrates that the displacement of natives affects their entire fabric of living, such as beliefs, performing of rituals, veneration of shrines, oral performances, among others. Though the hopes of actual recovery from this genocide on their cultural identity are slim, Harjo's personae engage in acts of remembering the past as a way to indemnify themselves. The paper concludes that the plight of migrants in general and that of American Indians in particular can only be understood if it is treated as an ecological problem.*

Keywords: *Displacement, Culture, Identity, Environment, Nature, Native*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study considers the displacement of American Indians as a forceful migration that has affected their identity. The subject of migration in works of literature has often focused on cultural identity, the humanitarian ordeals, which immigrants go through. In most cases, the natural environment is not given attention as a factor that plays into the migrants' plight. Put differently, the severing of the human and nature bond is scarcely treated as a possible cause of the migrants' predicaments. Mardorossian [1] captures this observation, when sheavers that, migrant literature places emphasis on "movement, rootlessness, and the mixing of cultures, races, and languages. The world inhabited by the characters is no longer conceptualised as 'here' and 'there'". The effacement of place in the discourse of migration is indicative of the little attention is paid to the ecological component in migrant narratives.

Ng [2] further observes as Mardorossian [1] that a central thematic concern to migrant writers is exile and rootlessness. Nonetheless, Ng goes further to state that, rather than treat their exilic conditions as something negative, writers have tended to create a new culture which combines the experiences of homeland and those of host communities. Paraphrasing Edward Said, Ng notes that, "the experiences of exile have contributed to a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture thanks to the works of exiles, émigrés, refugees—they had similar cross-cultural and transnational visions to bring in their host countries".

Ng [2] is concerned with the possible hybrid cultures that can emerge from the submergence of emigrants into their host communities. Going by the submissions of both Mardorossian [1] and Ng [2], it is obvious that focus has been on the cultural identity and humanitarian conditions of migrants, to the complete neglect of the role which the environment plays. Studies as these are relevant and applicable, but they do not constitute a definitive scope of the migrants' struggles. By centring on the

migrants' identity and economic/humanitarian conditions, these critics imply that migrants would be better off, and would feel at home in their host communities, if these ends are met. Their view does not take into consideration the unbreakable bond that is supposed to exist between people and their home environments. They lose sight of the fact that the ecological bond has both cultural and psycho-physical implications which cannot be filled in estranged environments, even when such environments are economically promising.

Although words like 'rootlessness' and 'homelessness' are used to depict the conditions of migrants, there is neither an explicit or implicit link to nature as a defining factor in migrants' identity. Buikema [3], seems to create an avenue for wider perspectives within which nature can be given prime importance when dealing with migrants. Although Buikema [3] does not provide any repertoire of what these "variety of forms" consists of, it is inferable that nature or the environment as an ecological web plays a primordial role in migrants' quest for selfhood. With particular attention on the poems of Joy Harjo, this research assesses how the displacement of American Indians affects their cultural identity, their religious beliefs. The essay, therefore, intends to demonstrate that American Indians have special relations with their environment. Thus, the research is guided by the following objectives: the paper shows that the displacements of American Indians from their ancestral land has a negative bearing on their identity and selfhood. Also, the work shows that Harjo engages her personae in acts of remembering as a strategy to reconnect and reconstruct the native-nature symbiosis. With these objectives, this paper advances the argument that Harjo's poetry represents the relationship between the exilic conditions of Native Americans and their attachment to their environment. The migrants' ordeals should be studied as an environmental/ecological crisis. If it is thus viewed, we aver that no economic affluence accruing from the host nation can fill this ecological breakdown. The theoretical posture adopted in this essay is the theory of ecocriticism, precisely the notion that place or a particular environment plays a central role in the configuration of one's sense of selfhood or identity. We borrow from Wendell Berry's submission that "in order to know who you are you must first know where you are" (qtd in Dreese 4[p1]).

2. ECOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN AND CULTURAL IDENTITY EROSION

In order to comprehend why and how American Indian ecological breakdown has a genocidal dimension within their cultural identity, it is imperative to consider philosophical or metaphysical assumptions that inform American Indian relations with nature. Annie Booth and Harvey Jacobs bring to light this bond by juxtaposing it with European settlers' when they submit that, "American Indian cultures adapted their needs to the capacities of natural communities; the new inhabitants, freshly out of Europe, adapted natural communities to meet their needs" (qtd in Dreese 4[p6]). This submission under scores a relationship between Natives and nature which is motivated by mutual respect and dependence. Commenting on nature writing as genre, Lindsey Claire Smith [146] claims that "American Indian literature does not contain many texts that are especially characterised as eco-writing or that respond neatly to its accepted conventions". Quoting Daniel White, Smith [146] reveals that "To many Native American authors, the nature-essay form may imply an artificial division between the human and nonhuman compartments of the world... traditional native peoples have never needed to leave town to seek out an experience in nature; nature *is* their town". If the eco-writing genre is an artificial division, White thus submits, like Dreese [4], that the human-nature bond is something natural to American Indian cultures. It is on the strength of the naturalness of this bond that its eventual breakdown is seen to be an assault or an effacement of Natives. This section of the paper seeks therefore to lay bare the ways in which and through which American Indians are affected as a result of the breakdown in native-nature symbiotic existence.

Harjo's poetry [6] paints a vivid picture of effects of Removals on the generations of American Indians who experienced Removal. Across her over eight volumes of poetry collections, she keeps alive the memory of Indian Removal; with the hope of reconnecting Natives with their lost past, a past which remains central to their conception of selfhood. In the poem "The Road to Disappearance," published under the 2019 volume titled *An American Sunrise*, Harjo, in a tone that is apocalyptic mourns the effects of Removals on American Indians survival thus:

"The Indians will vanish" has been the talk of the older Indians ever since the white people first came to mingle among them. They seemed to prophesy that the coming of the white man would not be for their good and when the step toward their removal to a country to the west was just

beginning, it was the older Indians who remarked and talked about themselves by saying, “Now, the Indian is now on the road to disappearance.” This had reference to their leaving of their ways, their familiar surroundings where their customs were performed, their medicine, their hunting grounds and their friends... (*An American Sunrise*, 47henceforth abbreviated as *Sunrise*)

The arrival of the settler was a premonition and a metaphor which conveys an interruption. This interruption is takes an apocalyptic dimension; with the effects of physical death which brings an end to existence itself. This settlers’ intervention is materialised with the implementation of the Removal Act. To the Natives, cultural extermination is a direct outcome of Removal, which brought the severing of ties between the Natives and their ancestral lands. The environment (nature) becomes for the Natives, a definitive criterion for identity and existence. Both their existence and effacement are a function of the place they find themselves in. Life itself and meaningful existence is when people live in their ancestral environment, where the bond between the living and ancestral spirits needs to be maintained, cultural practices carried and the environment providing sustenance. Cut from the environment, the Natives describe themselves as “facing the evening of ... [their] existence”.

Indeed, the premonition of a possible physical and cultural annihilations expressed by American Indians especially as coded in the metaphor of “disappearance” and “facing the evening...,” comes to a reality, as revealed by Kenneth Townsend [7]. Quoting an anonymous commentator, Townsend [213] reveals that the Creeks in Alabama lived “in the most miserable and wretched condition it is possible to conceive. Many of them Skeletons and their bones almost worn through their skin”. Townsend [213] goes further to state that “local Alabamians soon speculated in Creek lands and defrauded the Creeks in sales of food and liquor. Starvation hit many Indian homes”. The misery and starvation is a direct result of disconnection from nature. This disconnection from ancestral lands implies Natives are completely cut from their source of nourishment.

The existential question of the American Indians equally extends to the possible disappearance of native languages. It is the American linguist, Noam Chomsky [8] who underscores the cultural rootedness of a language when he avers that “Language is not just words. It’s a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It’s all embodied in language” (<http://translationcommons.org>). Townsend [523] captures the practical effacement of native cultures when he writes that: “Christianity, the English language, and mainstream values and behaviour [...] quickly supplant[ed] Indian spirituality, native languages, and tribal values”. The disappearance of natives’ ways of living become more evident in the 1950s under what was known as Indian Relocation Program, where Natives were offered the chance to leave the reservations and be integrated into the mainstream society if they wanted to. Alluding to an anonymous native source, Townsend [523] again reveals that “[t]he old people can die on the reservation, but they want the young ones to move to the city, intermarry, forget their traditions, and disappear”.

In her poem “In 1990 a Congress”, Harjo [6] is yet concerned with the existential threat that American Indians faced and still face, as a consequence of settler incursion into their land, and their subsequent displacement from their lands of birth. She writes that:

We met together to gain insight and strength and ponder how we would continue to move forward past the massive destruction and disrespect of the earth mind, body and spirit, and to continue our sovereignty as Native nations. In the women’s circle, a striking Bolivian Indian woman in a bowler hat stood up. She welcomed us, and noted that she was surprised at all of the Natives attending from the United States.

“We thought John Wayne had killed all of you.” (This was not a joke.) (*Sunrise*36)

The poet’s material for her subject matter relies heavily on memory of the past, as a result most of her poems sound as though they were historical narrations. Through this unique technique, she re-enacts the past into the present, with the hope of charting a path for the future. In the preceding lines, she employs a historical event to convey the extent to which native existence was threatened with the advent of European settlers. The unfeigned surprise of the Bolivian Indian woman who finds it hard to believe that there remained a remnant of American Indians despite the annihilation efforts of a certain John Wayne, is a telling evidence of the physical and cultural assaults that American Indians have known for centuries. Indeed, it is nothing short of a miracle that Indians from that part of the world had survived, and going as far and mobilising to champion for the continuity of their cultural identity.

Evidences to this survival miracle are yet brought to the fore in one of Harjo's poems [6], where the poet exploits another seemingly historical event to sound her message across. She maintains this view in her poem "Anchorage," first published under the 1983 volume titled *She had Some Horses*, and later recollected under the 2001 volume titled *How We Became Human, New and Selected Poems: 1975 – 2001*. The lines that follow concur to this:

And I think of the 6th Avenue jail, of mostly native and black men, where Henry told about being shot at eight times outside a liquor store in L.A., but when the car sped away he was surprised he was alive, no bullet holes, man, and eight cartridges strewn on the sidewalk all around him. Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it, but also the truth. Because who would believe the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival those who were never meant to survive?(*How We Became*44)

Harjo builds a collective memory for American Indians by giving isolated events and individual experiences of her fellow Natives, a larger representation. John's story about how he narrowly escaped death, whether authentic or fictitious, has to be examined in line with the general perception of Natives by settlers. The very fact that the 6th Avenue jail is made up of "mostly native and black men" indicates that possibility of a dehumanising treatment they are likely to be subjected to. Using this prison episode to relate to a larger question of settler's inhumanity to Natives, tells well the tale of survival by miracle, not only for John, but for American Indians as a collective people. Like the Bolivian woman who could not comprehend that there was left native people in the United States, so too is John's survival story. The persona provides an important input when she wonders aloud that "...who would believe the fantastic and terrible story of all or survival...?" This tells informs on the genocidal threats to which Natives were exposed as a result of settler's presence.

The theme of exile and emotions of nostalgia characterize the history-oriented messages of Harjo's poetry[6], a strategy which the poet benefits from in order to underscore the identity crisis which/that American Indians have to endure as a result of their being rooted out of their lands of birth. Such is the concern in poems like "3 A.M.", "The Last Song", "Grace", "Letter from the End of the Twenty First Century"—all from *How We Became Human*; and in "Exile of Memory", "Mvskoke Mourning Song"—all from *An American Sunrise*. The poem "Exile of Memory" is an attempt to recuperate a dispossessed people, whose symbiotic bond with their environments was severed as a result of settler intrusion. This symbiotic relationship existed at several levels: Natives and their ancestors; Natives and their environment with all its compositions; and among the different tribal groups. The speaker laments on the breakdown in this bond between the Natives and their ancestors in the following lines thus:

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
And walk the land.
There will be no place in memory
For what they see
The highways, the houses, the stores of interlopers
Perched over the blood fields
Where the dead last stood.
And then what, you with your words
In the enemy's language,
Do you know how to make a peaceful road
Through human memory? (*Sunrise* 16)

The relationship between the living and the death in the American Indian philosophy is one that is cherished and protected because the dead play a vital role in the survival of the living, especially during crisis such as famine, disease, war, disasters, etc. The continuity of this communion between the living and the dead entails that the former, at regular intervals, perform certain rites in order to appease the latter. With settler incursion, and the subsequent displacement of the Natives, there is in the first phase a physical alienation. And with the eventual transformation of the land for industrial activities, the ancestral shrines became profaned, creating not only a deep chasm between Natives and their ancestors, but also generating hostilities between the two. Indeed, in the nature of things, it is not allowed for everyone to approach a sacred place; only ordained and consecrated individuals are accepted perform rituals for mediation. Contrary to this requirement, the settler who is both a stranger to the land and to the cultural realities violates all protocols and converts the land to something not more than a material reality that can be measured in monetary returns. Hence, exile of memory is therefore a lamentation about the irreparable damage brought on Natives, as result of their ejection from their ancestral land.

The Natives are the more burdened with guilt, stemming from the fact that they are assimilated, transformed, and forced to imbibe the settlers' cultural values at the expense of their own identity. With the foreign language of the settler as his own language, the Native does not have the required communicative ability to dialogue with the ancestors— "And then what, you with your words/ In the enemy's language, / Do you know how to make a peaceful road /Through human memory?" The exile of memory for the Natives becomes more of estrangement from the self. It is not only the physical removal from their places of origin that constitutes the exile, but their successful conversion into the culture of the "enemy":

The children were stolen from these beloved lands by the government.
Their hair was cut, their toys and handmade clothes ripped
From them. They were bathed in pesticides
And now clean, given prayers in a foreign language to recite
As they were lined up to sleep alone in their army-issued cages. (*Sunrise* 19)

Children's hair, toys and handmade clothes are all cultural marker. The goal of depriving the children of these cultural symbols points to the settlers' efforts to sever American Indians from their cultural roots. The very fact that emphasis is on the conversion of children is indicative of the settlers' intentions to wipe off any surviving trait of American Indian existence with respect to culture and identity. The instrument of religion, specifically Christianity becomes significant in bringing about the assimilation of Natives into the settler culture. The pedagogics of cultural assimilation is observable in the way children "recite" prayers in "a foreign language".

At another level, the exile of memory is defined by a breakdown in the relationship that American Indians enjoyed with the ecosphere prior intrusion of settlers. Harjo [6] writes that:

The old Mvskoke laws outlawed the Christian religion
Because it divided the people.
We who are relatives of Panther, Raccoon, Deer, and the other animals and winds were soon
divided.
But Mvskoke ways are to make relatives. (*Sunrise* 25)

The preceding lines bring to the fore the argument as to the role of Christianity as culture religion in fostering environmental degradation. In juxtaposing Christianity with American Indian beliefs, the persona traces the fact of her alienation to the advent of the Christian religion. The monistic worldview of American Indians entails the unity or symbiotic existence between humans and the non-human worlds. The speaker's denouncement of the division brought about by Christianity is an indirect rejection of the Indian Removals. The speaker's disapproval of Christianity on its dualistic conception of humans and nature is justified when one considers the biblical creation story, which endows the first human, Adam with unquestionable powers and control over the nonhuman sphere. Thus humans, from this line of thought, do not see any intimate connection with the nonhuman world,

apart from the material economic and cultural ends that this nonhuman sphere can provide. Anthropocentric oriented ideas such as the one propagated in the bible is said to have fuelled most capitalist owners of multinational corporations, whose activities contribute the greatest fraction to the degradation of the nature.

The history of colonial incursions has it that, Natives who resisted this ideology were faced with brutal counter resistance from the colonisers. Most often the economic interest of the colonizer was more important than the humanity of the Natives, who could be exterminated so as to achieve the desired economic goal. This heinous attitude of the colonizer is glaring in Harjo's poetry, where she invariably uses the life experiences of her grandfather Monahwee as a motif to convey the plight of American Indians. In *An American Sunrise*, grandfather Monahwee features emblematically in at least six different poems: "My Great-Aunt Ella Monahwee's Testimony", "We Follow the DNA Spiral of Stories", "My Aunt Lois Harjo told me", "The Southeast was covered", "One March", "My grandfather Monahwee" and "My great-grandfather Monahwee". In her poem "We Follow the DNA Spiral of Stories", Harjo [6] presents Monahwee as an environmental martyr, whose death is as a result of his fight to protect the eviction of his native tribes from their lands by the Jackson administration. She captures this thought in the following lines thus:

When I got there with time in time, the earthworks planted for defense of heavy logs had been broken through by Andrew Jackson's troops. In the hellish fire and smoke of battle, we could not keep hold of the front line. We were no match for their numbers, their guns, their cannons. Time in these lands as we knew it was over and we fought the intruders and the terrible weight of knowing with everything in us. My grandfather Monahwee was shot seven times, and when Jackson's troops pronounced victory and retreated, he crawled to the edge of the Tallapoosa River and rolled into the bloody current as soldiers bayoneted the dead and stole booty. (102)

The scenario in the preceding passage is revealing of the monstrosity of colonizers in their desperate attempt to take over native lands. While the colonizers consider native lands as property to be owned, natives were treated far worse. The twin abuse of the Natives and their lands is what postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to draw attention to, arguing that for there to be justice in our society, we should first and foremost seek environment justice. The killing of Monahwee, whose only crime is that he stands against injustice to his native peoples and their lands, echoes the Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa whose death was not unrelated to similar circumstances as Monahwee's. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin [42] trace Saro-Wiwa's death to his environmental advocacy thus:

If one of the axioms of postcolonial ecocriticism is that there is no social justice without ecological justice, then that axiom is no more clearly illustrated than in the nightmarish events surrounding the death on 10 November 1995 of Nigerian writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was tried and executed along with eight of his Ogoni kinsmen for a crime he did not commit. [...] Saro-Wiwa describes the struggle in terms of two simultaneous wars, one an 'ecological war' fought against Nigerian-based multinational oil companies, principally Shell and Chevron, and the other a 'political war' aimed at nothing less than an extermination of the Ogoni people by systematically dispossessing them of their fundamental human rights and locally generated wealth.

The general outcry from those who pass for environmentalists or ecocritics has been the inconsiderate exploitation of natural resources, especially fossil fuels by multilateral corporations. With activities of these companies, who operate with the backing of neocolonial powers, whose role carefully fit into the colonialist paradigm, the Natives have more often than not borne negative externalities as a result of the excesses of these companies. The situation in the Niger Delta for which Saro-Wiwa fought and died, has rather aggravated after more than twenty-five years. The same holds true for American Indians who are exposed to nuclear leakages, exploitation of their lands for mining and other industrial activities.

3. REINVENTING ECO-CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH REMEMBERING

As stated earlier, place or location, to American Indians, is pivotal to their sense of selfhood. The physical environment contributes both physically, spiritually and psychologically to one's identity. Thus, seeking a (re) connection with the ancestral environment, for American Indians is an existential question. This section focuses on how Harjo's personae engage in acts of remembering as a strategy

to reconnect with their ancestral ways and their lost environment. Giving that Natives have for long been alienated both spiritually and physically from their environments, we seek to show how the effects of alienation are mitigated through the technique of memory. Through this strategy, the poet reconnects both psychologically and emotionally with the lost past. Writing on the role which the act of remembering brings to bear on one's identity, Maurice Halbwachs¹⁰[134] submits that "[a]ny inhabitant for whom these old walls, rundown homes, and obscure passageways create a little universe, who has many remembrances fastened to these images now obliterated forever, feels a whole part of himself dying with these things and regrets they could not last at least for his lifetime". In essence, the environment to such a person is not just an external element, detached from the him; it is rather a constituent component of his identity such that existence cannot be thought of out of that familiar environment.

The implications which the environment brings upon one's identity, as evident in the foregoing paragraphs, is the *raison d'être* for Harjo's memory technique [6], a technique which ensures that the Native, whose ancestral lands were lost in the process of settler incursion, be relived through acts of remembrances. In her poem "Singing Everything," Harjo reconnects to the past as a strategy to bring back to life the cultural reality of American Indian, a culture which is inherently rooted in nature. This is seen in the following lines:

*Once there were songs for everything,
Songs for planting, for growing, for harvesting,
For eating, getting drunk, falling asleep,
For sunrise, birth, mind-break, and war.
For death (those are the heaviest songs and they
Have to be pried from the earth with shovels of grief).
Now all we hear are falling-in-love songs and
Falling apart after falling in love songs. (my italics) (Sunrise 64)*

The opening line of the preceding excerpt is reminiscent of the traditional oral storytelling technique of *once upon a time*. This technique which is typical of oral tales, appeals to a certain vague past. The catalogue of events/activities that used to be sung about, such as planting, growing, harvesting, eating, death, etc. recalls a communal history of a people whose identity is quickly fading or has gone oblivious. The reason behind the obliteration of these cultural practices lies in the fact that the native environments were defamiliarised, altering their way of living. As a consequence, Natives were physically exiled from their ancestral lands, to start life elsewhere. The maze within which this pristine way of life is lost is suggested in the shift in themes of the songs: "Now all we hear are falling-in-love songs and/ Falling apart after falling in love songs." The flip-flop echoed in these lines is telling of the instability which characterises modernist cultures of European settlers. Such an atmosphere of instability, insecurity and uncertainty is a product of the rupture or dysfunction introduced by the modernist dualism that creates and sustains an unbridgeable chasm between the human and the nonhuman spheres. This conception is foreign to American Indian. Hence, the persona reconnects to the past by reimagining the ancestral land with its cultural practices so as to rebuild a sense of self. This act of re-imagination underscores the impact of one's ancestral environment in the conception and construction of selfhood. Neil Evernden concurs with this centrality of place in a people's selfhood when he argues that "there appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in some ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a 'sense of place,' a sense of knowing and of being part of a particular place"(qtd in Dreese 4[1]).

Harjo seems to favour the view that the American Indian Removals constitutes a form of exile. However, her preoccupation is on the ecological implications of such exiles. This is nowhere articulated than in Eloisa Valenzeula-Mendoza's¹²[vii] Ph.D. thesis "Tending to the Past: the historical poetics of Joy Harjo and Natasha Trethewey". Based on Toni Morrison's concept of recovering the "unwritten interior life", she posits that the historical poetics [the act of remembering or re-memory] entails for Harjo to shed "light on the weight of Native American histories for the descendants of survivors while contesting the myths that abound within popular culture regarding

Native peoples”. Harjo’s persona is unequivocal about this in the poem “The Southeast was Covered”. The poem captures the city of Tennessee in the aftermath of settler incursion, with devastating transformation. But the speaker refuses to let go the past, writing that:

The Southeast was covered with Mississippian mound builder cities and communities a century before Spanish arrival in the Southeast. The Southeast is still covered with the remains of mounds. There are even mounds on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. These mounds might be leveled by shovels, tractors or hate, but they will show up on any energetic geophysical map. They continue to exist in memory, in memory maps. (77)

Part of the settler wisdom lies in their strategy of effacing the history of the colonised subjects. This is partly done through renaming, not only the colonised, but their environments as well. Hence, they resort to describing native peoples and their lands as lacking in value and meaning, prior to the settlers’ arrival. The persona in the preceding seeks to challenge this claim by settlers. The finger print of native civilisation is coded metaphorically in the image of the *mound*. The repetitive use of this word, indicates how resistant native cultures remain in the face of settler destructive incursions. These mounds are not just mere structures; some of them were used for ceremonial purposes and burials. Thus, keeping them in the memory is not just a mere romantic urge to be identified with nature. The memory of such places and structures reconnects the Native with the rituals and the deities that incarnate such shrines. These rituals, to the American Indian, are a trademark to their selfhood and existence. The separation of these Native communities from these structures is tantamount to a robbery or assault on their selfhood.

The destructiveness of settler presence is suggested by the poet’s choice of words: “shovels, tractors or hate”. The imagery of shovels and tractors speak of environmental transformation through the help of modern equipment. This recalls of the destructive/transformational effects of industrialisation, the excavation of land for minerals, among others. The environment is defamiliarised, and as a result there is both a spiritual and physical disconnection between the natives their environments. The word *hate* points to prejudices and stereotypes which the settlers associate with native peoples. Writing elsewhere on the experiences of Natives, Harjo [6] is categorical that:

We’ve been exiled and disappeared in our own country. A big part of that misty sense of history has to do with the disappearance of fact and the history of how this country came about. Think of Africa without black Africans...How many [Native American] tribes don’t have any of their original lands, or just hold pieces of them? It’s a struggle to hang on to it. I think we are in a kind of exile. (qtd in Eloisa 16)

It is evident that the physical as well as the mental environment is indispensable for American Indians to assert their selfhood or identity. It is an existential call for the native people to seek identification with their past, and most importantly to their ancestral lands. Even though it is impossible to recover such lands in their pristine state, it should be kept in the memory– “They continue to exist in memory, in memory maps”. The idea of memory is fundamental to effecting any substantial change on environmental crisis. In this light Lawrence Buell 13[1] stresses that the success of environmentalists does not depend on some advanced technology or “arcane new science but on a state of mind: on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives”. By retaining the memory of their bond with the environment, American Indians ensure a sustained attitude which should give birth to eco-friendly behaviours as well as policies.

4. CONCLUSION

The plight of American Indians cannot be dissociated from the fact of their displacement from their ancestral environment. This displacement was a form of migration. Hence, the cultural identity issues surrounding American Indian identity is an outcome of the breakdown in the ecological bond between American Indians and their environment. Although the effects of such a displacement are irreversible, Joy Harjo’s speakers engage in remembering their past through folktales, dances, rituals, in order to reconstruct an alternative identity for American Indians.

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