

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S  
*GARDENS IN THE DUNES***

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to investigate the environmental concern in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*. Environmental problems have compounded during the last few decades due to rising pollution, depleting green cover, increasing over consumption, frequent oil spills, nuclear hazards and increasing toxicity. Green activists, ecologists, environmentalists and academicians have at various points and places, been expressing concerns about increasing environmental degradation. As, art and literature are not immune from socio-cultural ecological scenario and in fact mirror it, they invariably become vehicles for articulating these concerns. Ecocriticism as a new critical discourse it analyzes literature's engagement with ecologically vital issues and has repeatedly highlighted the need for rediscovering our relationship with the environment around. Contrary to the anthropocentric focus of modernism; ecocriticism has highlighted the possibilities of art and literature in helping to recreate a symbiotic relationship of humans with biotic and a biotic components of the environment. Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryl Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is "the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment." (xviii)

**Key Words:** Environment, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Laguna Pueblo, Native American

The relations between stories, voices, and self-identities are significant in everyday life because narrative construction is a basis for understanding. Today's culturally diverse contexts, for people conceptualize self-identities and worldviews through stories. Since narrative is the core of identity formation, I am particularly interested in a story, which can enhance humanity's creativity and imagination for a deeper understanding of the self, others, and the world about us. I believe the transformative power of literary engagements; Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* is such a narrative with which we can celebrate multiple voices and cultivate spirituality and holistic perspectives of the environment, as opposed to human-centered worldviews and global market-oriented mentalities in modern industrialized society.

Educators and practitioners who promote healing of human relationships as well as human relationships with nature have acknowledged the importance of raising our environmental consciousness for prospects of world peace. Ecocriticism is based on the idea that the core of the

environmental crises exemplifies the human alienation from the natural world; suggesting the environmental issues should be a major concern of literary studies and analyses. Social and environmental crises are recreated through narrative based on human-centered- materialistic, mechanistic, and dualistic worldviews. A counter narrative describes how humans have lost a cosmological sense and interconnectedness with the natural world within a process of scientific revolution and industrialization. We all need a new story to change and grow. The key question may arise around how we tell a creative story for constructing hope and how we interpret narrative.

I intend to undertake a Native American novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1996) by Leslie Marmon Silko, which is strengthening the concern for environmental conservation. By applying Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* to this critical reading practice, I explore the significant links between an ecocritical literary analysis and transformative learning in education. Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, of mixed Laguna and Polish ancestry. *Gardens in the Dunes* is at first glance as different from her earlier novels as one could imagine. Formally, it draws attention to the Victorian novel with its descriptive realism and interlinked plots. The general trend of criticism of the novel has been to focus on ways in which the whole story deals with ideas of agency and of representations of Native Americans. I approach it from an ecocritical perspective and explore its depiction of a range of practices in relation to gardening and horticulture and its valuing of ancient legacies. I also discuss what I see as a disjunction between certain narrative trajectories and the ability of the gardens in the dunes.

*Gardens in the Dunes* explores a stunning array of natural landscapes including the American Southwest, Long Island, Brazil, England, Italy, and the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean. Silko's riveting descriptions of the plants and landscapes indigenous to each of these places and in some cases, those artificially transported to territories to which they are not native reveal captivating idiosyncrasies and political beliefs of the people who belong to each of these lands. As Ellen Arnold, wrote in 1999, "*Gardens in the Dunes* . . . draws on elements of the naturalist tradition to build an exciting tale of adventure, intrigue and mystery . . . the novel challenges and reshapes those conventions into something that is distinctly indigenous" (40). Daniel Moerman agrees with this assertion, and adds, "I know of no other novel in which plants, and peoples' attitudes toward them, play such a central role" (41). Indeed, as in all of Silko's novels, the imagination with which she details various natural environments discloses the ideals and attitudes of the four primary cultures represented in the book: Native American, white American, British, and Italian

Denise Cummings points out, "It is not coincidental that *Gardens in the Dunes* ends where it began, back in the old gardens; there, an image of growing life emerges out of old scars and wounds" (46). Indeed, the novel's gardens are the primary source of joy and rebirth in the novel. As in *Ceremony* and *Almanac*, Silko creates a Native American landscape in *Gardens in the Dunes* that is hot, dry, and dusty with sparse water sources. Their environment is very spacious, wild, and uncultivated, supporting only the growth of desert plants.

The beginning and the end of a young Native American girl named Indigo whose journey is to offer a visionary view of sustainable agriculture. *Gardens in the Dunes* deals with Native American political issues but the legacies teases out the ruins of good practice, known as husbandry are about gardens as a point of intersection of (non-human) nature and culture. Indigo's hybrid garden functions both as a signifier of indigenous agency and as that centre of meaning where it is one earth, one garden, one humanity. Indigo, the child who becomes a young woman and who is our observing vehicle for most of the novel tells not of how we control the

earth but of how two different kinds of agency that of the human and non-human gets to know and accommodate to each other.

This is a very powerful message. Husbandry is the old term for the process, defined by the OED as the care and breeding of plants and animals, and more recently as the management and conservation of resources. I see the latter part of the definition as a redundancy, for it is what husbandry has always been. Human beings have not consistently taken good care of their environments. However, we would not be here today if there were not legacies of sensitivity and common sense. In this regard, of which, to use Simon Schama's words, there are 'veins beneath the surface'. The events of *Gardens in the Dunes* take place somewhere between the late 1890s and the First World War. This setting, a time when a robust economic vision licensed a cavalier approach to management of the natural world as resource, makes an excellent vehicle for reflection on practices today. Not only the time in which it is set, but parallel plotting and an interpolated narrative give the sense of a broadly scoped nineteenth century realist novel.

The central character, Indigo, has been brought up leading a sheltered life with her grandmother, mother and sister, out of sight of the Indian police, in the dunes of the Mojave desert, with occasional sojourns in the town of Needles (California) where the family camped on the riverbank and sold baskets to tourists at the train station. At a Ghost Dance with disciples of Wovoka, Indigo and her sister are separated from their mother and after the death of their grandmother at their hiding place in the dunes. Thereafter, Indigo is captured by the Indian police, sent to an Indian school in California but she runs away and finds protection with a woman, Hattie, from the North East, newly married to a botanist and plant hunter, Edward. A second narrative thread involves Indigo's sister, Sister Salt. This sub-plot could make a novel in its own right. Its setting is the large dam project. Its trajectory takes Sister Salt to motherhood through her relationship with a black cook, Candy. This story also involves a female Mexican revolutionary who steals Candy's savings. Candy is last seen in pursuit of her. Sister Salt returns to the dunes with her baby.

Edward's backside story of an unfortunate journey to Brazil to steal precious orchids is told in a long interpolated narrative. Indigo is the principal focaliser of the novel. The novel is narrated in the 'third person' is an over-simplification, for Silko is highly practiced in the subtle arts of the 'storyteller' and makes abundant use of free indirect discourse. The trajectory of the novel might best be called a garden tour.

Moreover, there is a strong sense that the person who reads, like Indigo, is on excursion. Already well-known with the sustaining plants that grow in the gardens in the dunes, we now come across Edward's Californian citrus (a fruit from such a tree) orchard where Indigo has taken shelter and where Hattie is planning a decorative garden. Ian Tyrrell, in his comparative study of Californian and Australian Horticulture in his book- *True Gardens of the Gods*, explains the moral and somewhat utopian underpinnings of the development of Californian horticulture as against pastoralism and agricultural monocultures and discusses the connection of this small-scale vision with the impulse to create gardens, involving both aesthetics and acclimatization. In the light of Tyrrell's discussion, we might see this episode in Silko's novel as a picture of the Californian horticultural development. Surrounding a citrus orchard, Edward's morally-toned but practically disgraceful hunting for non-endemic species to acclimatise and Hattie's aesthetic venture and higher sense of moral purpose for her life in California. Edward is about to set out on another mission, this time to Corsica, to steal *citrus medica* cuttings. The highly protected Corsican industry at that time thrived on the growing popularity of candied citrus peel, made from this particular variety of citrus. After encouraging the director of the Indian school, Hattie

persuades Edward that Indigo should go along with them. In addition, here begins the garden tour. Before going aboard for Europe, they stay with Hattie's father in Massachusetts. We introduced to his experimental farming practices and, right next door, to the elaborately landscaped gardens of Edward's sister, Susan.

In England, the party stays with Hattie's Great-Aunt Bronwyn who lives near Bath, surrounded by a mystical garden inherited from her English grandfather. On the way to Corsica, they spend some time in Italy with Laura, a friend of Hattie's and an amateur archaeologist, in her classical but equally mystical garden. The Corsica expedition proves to be as ill-fated as we by now have come to expect Edward's enterprises to be. Edward ends up in jail for the attempted theft, and eventually dead, thanks to a fraudulent Australian doctor, he meets on the voyage to Corsica and who convinces him into digging up meteorites in the Arizona desert, where he falls ill. *Gardens in the Dunes* explores a range of legacies of connection with the earth through ways of working with it. Silko says in a note added to the Scribner edition of the novel, "Nearly all human cultures plant gardens, and the garden itself has ancient religious connections. For a long time I have been interested in pre-Christian European beliefs and the pagan devotions to sacred groves of trees and sacred springs." (4)

These English and Italian gardens have a kind of integrity missing in those of Edward's wealthy sister Susan on Long Island. Susan's estate represents the European 'landscape' tradition as conspicuous consumption. When the party visits on their outward journey, Susan is in the process of demolishing spectacular Italianate gardens that have just reached their maturity, in order to replace them with gardens in the English style. The visitors witness the moving of two great copper beech trees from a nearby farm to Susan's garden. Having grown up in the gardens in the dunes with her grandmother, Indigo has a strong animistic sense of the nature of things. Hers is the perspective that mostly guides the reader throughout the story. Susan too has her rituals. Before the Italian gardens disappear, she presents her 'Masque of the Blue Garden,' a society ball under the full moon but with no resonances, nothing like the meaningful connections Indigo and Hattie will find in Bronwyn's Bath garden.

For Susan and Edward, plants, far from having souls, as they do for Indigo, Hattie, and Bronwyn, is 'exquisite tokens' (Ryan 127). Therein lays the difference between the motivations behind the gardens of Bronwyn and Laura and the gardens in the dunes and those behind Susan's gardens and Edward's commercial botanizing. While many aspects of Susan's garden are entrancing to Indigo, this garden will clearly never be a model for her of what a garden should be. Laura's formal garden has, like the gardens in the dunes, old bones and is, as well, recuperated by the presence of ancient sculptures, by its 'wilder' spaces, and by ancient botanical connections behind its formality. This garden, too, we seem to be being told, has indigenous roots. The gardens in the dunes begin and end the novel. Here is a glimpse- Grandma Fleet told them the old gardens had always been there. The old-time people found the gardens already growing, planted by the Sand Lizard, relative of Grandfather Snake, who invited his niece to settle there and cultivate her seeds. As Sand Lizard warned her children to share:

The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals, in gratitude for their restraint in sparing the seeds and sprouts earlier in the season. Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. A few choice pumpkins, squash, and bean plants were simply left on the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth. Next season, after the arrival

of the rain, beans, squash, and pumpkins sprouted up between the dry stalks and leaves of the previous year. (*Gardens* 14-15)

Old Sand Lizard insisted her gardens be reseeded in that way because human beings are undependable; they might forget to plant at the right time, or they might not be alive next year. Moreover, indeed they are visionary gardens, the mythic and emotional heart of the novel. However, the point of these gardens seems to me precisely that they are not presented as lost, as an object of nostalgia, something to be laboriously and perhaps hopelessly striven after. They thrive. They may suffer, there may have been attempts to destroy them, but seeds, vestiges, persist to flourish again under good conditions, which include good husbandry.

Here we are surely invited to read a metaphor for Indian survival but certainly not an allegory, for this novel persistently links the survival of all sentient beings with the survival of the earth. The one may suggest the other in the fiction but, actually, signifier and signified are inseparable. Barbara K. Robins, drawing on a discussion between Vine Deloria Jr. and Dan Wildcat, describes indigenous husbandry as require ‘sophisticated transferrable of knowledge and a moral sensibility concerning one’s relationship to all other beings within one’s environment’ (40). Indigo’s journey was not a healing but one of growth. In addition, she is to be the agent of change in the rituals and in the husbandry of the gardens. Being ingenious and resilient, she looks and listens with attention wherever she goes and she gathers: information, seeds, corms and plants some of Edward’s orchids.

When Indigo and her sister, with whom she is reunited, and her sister’s baby return to the dunes, the old rattlesnake who lived by the spring has been slaughtered and the gardens wrecked. Indigo and Sister Salt perform a ritual with the bones of the dead snake, burying him next to their grandmother. Soon, a younger snake appears at the spring and so ends the novel. Suzanne Ruta says of *Gardens in the Dunes*, in her review in the *New York Times*, that, “instead of voices, it has agendas” (Wikipedia). James Barilla discusses the sophistication with which Silko rings thoughtful changes on the topic of introduced species. ‘Silko’, he writes, “proposes that the value of collecting, and appropriation more generally, depends upon the status of the trader” (168). The information of Silko’s argument lies in details easily missed: that, for example, Edward takes cuttings (the *citrus medica*) whereas Indigo collects seeds and corms though she does hang on to one or two of Edward’s orchids. As Barilla says, “Seeds are symbols of biological sovereignty and wildness; cuttings represent the transformation of the plant into commodity” (168).

Moreover, the book, overall, he suggests, is utterly postmodern in its view of invasiveness: Yet to enter this garden in the dunes, the narrative is to experience novelty at its most intense in both the postmodern and preservationist sense, since the garden is both remote from murderous Euro-American settlers, and an incorporation of their ideas and genes. Newness has invaded the oasis. The desire for novelty demands that the process of maintaining native species and controlling invasive offer opportunities for newness and creativity to enter while also preserving a sense of the past, and it is an ambivalent, postmodern preservationist impulse that shapes the narrative of the garden space.

The ‘irony’ of Silko’s vision, then, as Barilla concludes “Is that it accepts the traditional biological naturalisms of place while shifting the focus to the validity of human cultures moving permanently out of their appropriate geographic ranges’ (172). I believe this is contained in the ‘gardens in the dunes’ that so quietly draw together the deep and multiple threads of meaning of the novel that seems to be all multi-faceted surface and description.

Indigo responds to the gardens in their entrancing functional beauty; the liveliness of the detail in the narrative is so abundant, so generous. Moreover, it is because I believe with Barilla

and Ryan in the strength of the book's environmental message that I feel it important to address what seem to me serious weaknesses in the novel's fabric. The points with which I take issue potentially undo what so often seem a forceful multicultural message, one of reconciliation, and ultimately ecological. Susan, as Ryan says, "Leaves nothing as it is" (124). In addition, her garden creation is all about conquest. There is no room in this narrative to see that this does not necessarily apply completely to the landscape tradition, as she is the only representative. The tradition is not only represented by its worst excesses and this novel is not *Almanac of the Dead* in its compelling bleakness. At the heart of my sense of misjudgment in *Gardens in the Dunes* is that, while change becomes a significant feature of the gardens in the dunes, Bronwyn's and Laura's gardens are simply paths to the past, and of the possibility of either Susan or Hattie's father learning from Indigo that there is no hope. The only potential agent of change within the non-indigenous American context, Hattie, has left the country.

Aunt Bronwyn was an avid follower of the theories of Gustav Fechner, who believed, "Plants have souls and human beings exist only to be consumed by plants and transformed into glorious new plant life". (Silko, *Gardens* 240)

Thus, the textual analysis of *Gardens in the Dunes* focused from the ecocritical perspective. I had also tried to explore how the text can address social and environmental injustice by looking at issues around military power and nuclear threat, which Silko identifies as root causes of human conflicts and environmental destruction. Hence, I build up connections between the text and context to discuss the impact of violence and destruction on the protagonist's psyche and the landscapes. However, Silko's indigenous perspective is significant to a deeper understanding of the novel in terms of raising awareness of social problems and environmental consciousness.

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