

Symbiosis versus parasitism: Differential views of nature in linda hogan's people of the whale

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Abstract: Indigenous People have a harmonious relationship with their surrounding environment. They possess knowledge of equitable and sustainable use of Nature and its resources. The polar opposite of this grateful relationship with Nature is the attitude that treats nature and its resources as instruments for fulfilling wants without caring about the loss incurred. This paper aims to illustrate the juxtaposition of two contrasting representations of nature- the indigenous perspective and the exploiters' perspective in Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*. The indigenous perspective sees nature as their saviour. Nature is at the core of their identities. On the other hand, exploiters see nature as exotic and thus find it adventurous to explore. Such explorations are mostly greed-driven which compromises the natural balance. For this greed-driven exploration, these exploiters can go to any limits. They can subdue the original connections of the indigenous people with nature and misinterpret them as being the real agents of damage to nature. The exploiters come to know the best utilization of a particular natural produce through the tribals. Then they start capitalizing it thus causing a large-scale disruption and imbalance. The exploiters pose as saviours of nature. The conflict that ensues from such juxtaposition eventually leads to the damage of nature on a much larger scale.

Keywords: Symbiosis, Parasitism, Tribal perspective, Nature, Capitalization of Nature

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples share a historical connection with a given geographical area, which in most cases is their habitable space of existence. They maintain and flourish their cultures, beliefs and knowledge systems, along with their identity around this space of their dwelling. They familiarise themselves and pass on the same system of knowledge to the next generation. This connection builds their traditional view of nature as a living relative that grows, adapts, and lives with them. Indigenous groups mostly identify with one or more elements of Nature as being culturally significant.

In the novel, *People of the Whale*, Linda Hogan's characters refer to themselves as being related to the whales. Their identities were created around the whales and activities related to them. They were traditionally linked to the whales- they revered it, they worshipped it for their sustenance, and begged the whales for their lives. They respected the natural

elements, even if they used it for their purpose. “Look how we are suffering. Take pity on us. Our people are small. We are hungry.” (Hogan 21) Whales heal them and respond by offering itself for their sustenance. This is followed by an elaborate tradition of paying tributes and praying to the whale for its sacrifice.

The A’atsika people, the titular ‘People of the Whale’, attributed origin, ancestry and survival to the ocean and most significantly to the ‘whale’.

...the people knew they had come from the caves out in the ocean, come out on strands of seaweed, some carried, with their stories in their arms and on their backs or carried on the fins of the water animals, and the story of the whale, their ancestor, was one of these. All their stories clung like barnacles to the great whale, the whale they loved enough to watch pass by. They were people of the whale. They worshiped the whales. Whalebones had once been the homes of their ancestors who covered the giant ribs with skins and slept inside the shelters. The whales were their lives, their comfort. The swordfish, their friends, some-times wounded a whale and it would come to shore to die, or arrive already dead. It was an offering to the hungry people by their mother sea and friend, the swordfish. (42-43)

They utilized every part of the whale. Baleen was used to make baskets; bones were marked and preserved as souvenirs. They believed that whales bring light as they used the whale oil to light lamps. “...they used whale fat to see in the dark. The people say the whale always brings light. It enlightens. The whale is illumination.” (111) However, an international moratorium had brought their tradition to a halt.

The A’atsika people are deeply bonded with their surrounding natural elements and hence use the resources judiciously. They live in a symbiotic relationship with their environment. For them, their lives are inextricably linked with their biosphere. Contrary to this view is the exploitative mindset of the ‘outsiders’ of their culture. In this novel, the outsiders are the Americans. They do not comprehend the culture and practices of the indigenous people, although they share the same nationality. They have differential views regarding how they view nature. These Americans view nature as a resource to be controlled and exploited. This has a deep connection with the colonial past because the colonisers had the same viewpoint. This exploitative mindset has been considered to be the parasitic relationship with Nature in this article. The motives behind such thinking include profit, resource extraction, and

consumerism and they see whales, forests, land, and natural resources as commodities. To the great astonishment of the A'atsika people, there is a nasty conspiracy by the Americans to sell the whale meat to Japan by tricking the people into believing that they were reviving their traditions.

Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale* offers a portrayal of Indigenous thought centred on reciprocity, interdependence, and deep respect for the natural world. In contrast to modern capitalist societies which often treat nature as a set of resources to be exploited, the Indigenous community in this novel sees itself as part of a broader ecological whole. This connection is best understood as symbiotic where both people and nature play essential roles in sustaining one another. Through the depiction of the A'atsika people and their cultural practices, Hogan conveys that human life cannot be separated from the environment, and that ecological harmony depends on reverence, accountability, and gratitude. The whale stands as a central symbol of this mutual relationship. Far from being seen only as a marine animal, the whale holds sacred significance within the community's spiritual and cultural life. It embodies lineage, memory, identity, and the continuity between generations. The bond between the people and the whale extends beyond physical need into the spiritual realm. Whaling is not treated as mere subsistence or economic activity but as a solemn practice shaped by ethical duties and collective care. The whale serves as a living link between ancestors and the present, reinforcing the idea that humans and other beings are deeply intertwined in a shared existence.

This perspective stands in stark contrast to Western anthropocentric views that prioritize human dominance over nature. The A'atsika relationship with whales is based on respect, not control. Traditional hunting follows precise cultural guidelines that honour the whale's spirit and acknowledge the gravity of taking a life. These rituals reflect an awareness that using natural resources carries moral responsibility. Hunters do not frame their actions as victories over nature; instead, they express humility and recognition of their reliance on the natural world. Through these customs, Hogan presents a worldview rooted in coexistence rather than conquest. The ocean also plays a vital role in shaping the novel's ecological vision. For the A'atsika, the sea is not a passive setting but an active, living force that influences their culture, beliefs, and sense of self. Daily rhythms align with the movements of the tides, and practices such as fishing, navigation, storytelling, and ceremonies arise from long-standing interaction with marine environments. The ocean provides food and sustenance, but it also

offers spiritual insight and preserves collective memory. Hogan consistently underscores how the people's identity is shaped by their ongoing relationship with the waters around them.

Place itself is fundamental to Indigenous ecological understanding. Land and sea are not objects to be owned, traded, or commodified. They are regarded as kin, living entities that share in the life of the community. This view directly opposes dominant Western concepts of property and resource use. Rather than seeing the land as something people possess, the Indigenous worldview holds that people belong to the land. This sense of belonging fosters a duty to protect the environment, as ecological harm endangers both human and non-human life.

We live on the ocean. The ocean is a great being. The tribe has songs about the ocean, songs to the ocean. It is a place where people's eyes move horizontally because they watch the long, wide sea flow into infinity. Their eyes follow the width and length of the world. Black rocks rise out of the ocean here and there, lending themselves to stories of sea monsters that might have consumed mere mortals. Several islands along the coast are tree-covered green jewels. The nearby fishing towns are now abandoned, as is the sawmill in disrepair, the forest missing. Down the beach a ways to the south, white piles, shining piles of clam and oyster shells were left behind by the earlier people, the Mysterious Ones, who were said to have built houses of shells, perfectly pieced together. These places truly existed, the secret places where houses were made of shells. (9)

Traditional ecological knowledge further illustrates the depth of this reciprocal relationship. Passed down through generations, this knowledge comes from close observation, lived experience, and sustained engagement with local ecosystems. The community understands seasonal changes, animal behaviours, oceanic patterns, and the limits of the environment. Such awareness supports sustainable practices that prevent overuse of resources. Instead of maximizing extraction, they take only what is needed. This principle of restraint reflects an understanding that ecosystems are fragile and must be preserved for future generations. Hogan presents this traditional knowledge as a meaningful alternative to modern systems driven by profit and consumption. The community's environmental ethics are grounded in exchange: nature provides for people, and in return, people have a duty to protect and nurture the natural world. This mutual responsibility maintains ecological balance and

ensures long-term survival. The novel suggests that environmental crises often stem from imbalances caused by greed and domination. By highlighting Indigenous wisdom, Hogan invites readers to question common assumptions about progress, development, and human superiority.

Another key theme is collective responsibility. Environmental stewardship is not left to individuals alone but is woven into communal traditions and social structures. Oral stories, rituals, and cultural practices pass down ecological values across generations, teaching younger members their role in maintaining harmony with nature. Preserving cultural knowledge thus becomes inseparable from preserving ecological health. This view of the people clashes with the anthropocentric view and is clearly depicted in the novel when the people discuss regarding the whale hunt as planned by some members of their tribe. “We're a tribe. We don't have private meetings and you've been having too many of them here of late.’ Wilma took a seat in the room before the men, her bag in her hand. “You see these chairs. They are not empty. Your ancestors sit there. They are listening to you.”(67) Moreover, the novel rejects the Western tendency to separate humans from nature. Indigenous cosmology sees humans, animals, plants, water, and spiritual forces as interconnected parts of a single web of life. Every element affects the whole, so harming one part ultimately harms the entire system. Hogan’s narrative consistently shows that human well-being and environmental well-being are interdependent.

CONCLUSION

The novel presents a powerful vision of Indigenous ecological harmony through its exploration of sacred bonds, ancestral knowledge, shared responsibility, and cultural continuity. The whale, the sea, and the land are portrayed not as inert resources but as active participants in community life. Hogan tries to preach compassion and collective responsibility to a world which has become bereft of it leading to many inhumane consequences such as wars and destruction. If the Indigenous collectivity becomes global, lots of problems will be abetted. Their spiritual association with Nature and its elements should be promoted to prevent the ecological crisis being faced globally. By emphasizing reciprocity and connection, Hogan challenges human-centered worldviews and offers an alternative ethic rooted in respect, balance, and sustainability. The novel ultimately suggests that human survival does not depend

on mastering nature, but on nurturing a respectful and enduring relationship with the living world.

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