

Botanical Imagination in Joy Harjo's Poetry

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Abstract

Joy Harjo (May 9, 1951) is a Native American poet, playwright, musician and artist. Harjo also is the first Native American to serve as the poet laureate of United States of America. Joy Harjo is a member of the Muscogee nation, a state recognised American tribe based in the state of Oklahoma. Harjo was born in Tukso Oklahoma and as a student excelled in her studies. Soon after completing her high school at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Harjo went to study at the University of New Mexico. Harjo have authored nine books of poetry namely; *An American Sunrise* (2019), *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (2015), *In Mad Love and War* (1990). Harjo have also edited several widely read anthologies of native poetry including the Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry. The paper is an endeavour towards understanding the representation of the plant kingdom in her poetry. Harjo's poems consider the plant kingdom not just mute lifeless conscience deprived spectators but a vibrant agency which is capable of freeing human beings from materialistic fetters.

Keywords : Plant, Imagination, Botany, Poetry.

Introduction

Joy Harjo's poems take into consideration the diverse facets of the natural world that surrounds the inhabitants of the native society. In an era where the depletion of natural resources has become the norm, Harjo's poetry reveals the healing effects of the natural world of trees and plants. In the midst of the despair that surrounds the technocratic world, the trees, flowers and fruits emerge as redeeming agents. The vegetal life Harjo believes can arouse hope in individual, communities and societies. Unlike the animal world, the vegetal life has for long been relegated to a sphere where it is has been considered to be devoid of vitality, energy and life force and as such has been dehumanized to a certain extent. However plants since times immemorial have played a significant role in the development of human civilizations. In an epoch where technology reigns supreme, the modern human beings conscience often negates the role of the vegetal world in our lives. In the urban technocratic world the significance of the vegetal world is actively repressed and the vegetal world is often considered to be a mute spectator of things unfolding in time and space. Harjo's poems on the other hand consider the plant kingdom not just mute lifeless conscience deprived spectators but a vibrant agency which is capable of freeing human beings from materialistic fetters. Her belief on the vibrant nature of the vegetal world stems from the Native American ideas of kinship and respect for the other-than-human. Harjo narrates:

I remember Oklahoma springs in childhood. I felt like a small plant and knew myself as part of the earth. I'd get up before anyone else. I liked the smell of the medicine of plants [...] The front [yard] was carpeted in clover patches and dandelions. I knew these plants intimately and practically lived in them in the spring and summer. (Harjo and Winder, 110).

Representation of the Plant Kingdom in Harjo's Poetry

Joy Harjo in her writings do not merely use plant imageries in the symbolic sense but as a manifestation of life force pulsating with hope. In her poem "The Book of Myth" instance Harjo writes that "every day is a common/miracle of salt roses, of fire in the prophecy wind" (Harjo, 18–19). Harjo's poetic stance do not engage with the vegetal world as an inert space where in a rather symbolic manner articulation of human emotions takes place but as delves into plants as living beings who like their counterparts in the animal world are passionate and hopeful. Harjo's poetry draws from native American myths, fables and stories surrounding the plant kingdom. As an ecological poet, Harjo positions the other-than-human— including the plant—as a counterforce to the alienation, placelessness, despondency, and resentment of life in contemporary technocratic society, especially for Native American people (Bryson, 170). There is also an attempt on the part of Harjo to deconstruct the technological influences that have marred the relationship of the native Americans with nature. Yet her poetic stance does not lament the loss of this essential connection between nature and human beings but is reverberant with hope. The vegetal world in the poetry of Harjo is filled with optimism for the future. Notwithstanding the deconstruction of technological fundamentalism apparent throughout her verse, vegetal nature for Harjo is reverberant with hope. The plant is a source of optimism for the future. Life for Harjo is bound with the rather intricate fabric of nature. Her poems while talking about the hope that is inherent in the natural world also foregrounds her tribal identity which is supposedly in part carved out of the numerous interactions that the members of a native society have with the botanical environment. Harjo as an inhabitant of the muscogee tribe seeks to bring out the bio-social relationship that natives have with the natural world. Harjo also attempts to negate the dehumanization of plants in the modern technocratic world. For instance in her poems she delves into the rather artificial manner in which crops like corn are sold in the market driven global economy. The corn as a crop, Harjo argues embodies the hopes and aspirations of the muscogee tribe and as such is inextricably tied to the lives of the people of the community. The modern market driven economy by processing the corn into products like sweetener dilutes the very cultural significance of the crop. Native communities celebrate the harvesting of the corn and their communal life is revolves around the

vitality of the corn as a staple food. Whereas the factory processed corn no longer contains the essence of the community which celebrates its harvest but its consumption in the form of corn based sweetener aids the spread of lifestyle epidemics like diabetes. This dehumanization of the corn from a cultural symbol to that of a fast moving consumable good is what Harjo laments in her poetry. Harjo nullifies the utilitarian belief that plants are mere products of consumption and are bereft of emotions and feelings. Harjo argues that the botanical domain is an omnipresent force in the lives of human beings and as such is capable of influencing our bodies, minds and spirits. There is a strong yearning on the part of the botanical world for a kingship based on shared beliefs, values and trusts with the animal kingdom.

In her poem “Remember” first published in the collection *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo humanizes the plants as beings with their own family, tribe, community and histories. She writes “Talk to them,/listen to them. They are alive poems” (Harjo,307, ll. 15–17). She entreats the readers to approach the plants as living beings with their own communal identities and engage in a dialogic manner with the plants. She further argues in the poem that there is an inherent desire in the vegetal world for interaction with the non-plant world. She posits that in ancestral traditions that existed prior to the intrusion of modernity and capitalism plants were not viewed as inert voiceless commodities but were considered to be an integral part of the communal life.

Harjo’s next poem “Are You Still There,” portrays the complex web of telephone cables circulating the deserts of New Mexico. The lifeless telephone wires can be read as a discourse of capitalist progress. The post modernist capitalist infrastructure of communication in the form of wires and towers are juxtaposed with the plant life in the deserts. The endeavours to juxtapose symbols of capitalist progress like the highways, telephone cables, bridges with the blossoms of flowers that are growing in abundance by the side of the road. The juxtaposition of the inanimate life less man made infrastructure with the vitality of the flowers points towards the all pervading nature of the vegetal world. Like the telephone cables that circulates through the desert, the purple flowers too add encapsulate the desert in its blossom and vibrancy. The poet writes;

Hello
is a gentle motion of a western wind
cradling tiny purple flowers
that grow near the road
towards laguna
I smell them
as I near the rio puerco bridge
my voice stumbles
returning over sandstone

(Harjo, 49, ll. 9–17).

The purple flowers that abound the deserts of New Mexico impart appealing sensory experiences in an otherwise barren space dotted with hypermodernistic features like the highway and the telephone cables. The blossoming of the flower in a landscape marred by the heavy presence of hypermodern infrastructure points towards the inextricable tie that human world has with the plant kingdom.

Harjo’s more recent poem “Insomnia and the Seven Steps to Grace” (2014) articulate the ability of the plants to understand the toils and struggles of the human world. Plants according to Harjo are not just minute spectators to the hardship that human beings encounter in their lives but actively take notice of the events unfolding in the human world. They are important witnesses to the societal transactions. Harjo argues in the poem that the vegetal world is negatively influenced by the marginalization of certain of women, natives and the indigenous in the society and as such emerges as a healing mechanism. The drop of berry, the sweet cornmeal, and the juicy fruits heal the cankers that have affected the society. Life sustaining sensory exchanges with plants—eating and tasting cornmeal, feeling the sensation of berry stains on lips, apprehending the flickering tree of life—thus have the potential to heal those (including the plants) who have been dehumanized by the neocolonial apparatus.

The poem “It’s Raining in Honolulu” written about the vitality of the natural phenomenon of rain also dwells on the liveliness of the vegetal world. As the mist comes:

Each leaf of flower, of taro, tree and bush shivers with ecstasy.
And the rain songs of all the flowering ones who have called for the rain
Can be found there, flourishing beneath the currents of singing. Rain opens us, like flowers, or earth that has been thirsty for more than a season.

(Harjo, 35,II.1-4)

In this extract, Harjo frames the taro, tree, and bush as entities capable of joy and pleasure in response to the arrival of rain. The plants are not presented as the silent constituents of the poetic narrative but are affected participants who join the speaker in cathartic renewal. Spiritual purification takes shape through the symphonization of rain, plant, and song. In the final line, the hope for regeneration, flourishing, and resistance through the will to plant seeds bears implications for Indigenous people in neocolonial

societies: “We will plant songs where there were curses” (Harjo, 35, l. 11). For Harjo, the hope of plants resides in their countering—through their very being—the dehumanizing forces that, for instance, tend to render the complex world of sensation one-dimensional and homogenous. Vegetal nature defies metaphorization by enacting hope in space and time.

Conclusion

Joy Harjo’s poetry focus on the ability of the plant to symbolically represent, materialize and enact hope in a world ridden by conflict and violence. In the midst of the conflict infested technocratic society it is the plant kingdom that asserts positive values of tolerance, peace and fulfillment. In a time where the fault lines of the rather fragmented human society are clearly visible plants usher in hope with the promise of not only through fulfillment of material human needs but also through its healing mechanism. Plants have the capacity to heal tormented human souls. It is in their all embracing shade that the conflict driven hyper modern society must return seek solace. Harjo moreover argues that while selflessly supplying hope to humans and other-than-humans, the plant also has needs, wants, intentions, and desires—intimated by the science of neuro-botany—that are not contingent on the poet’s figuring of hope in their image. The poet thus endeavours to resist the unilinear understanding of the vegetal world. Human beings the poet argues must resist the rather conservative view of appreciating plants as objects of aesthetic pleasure and must realise that both the species are mutually dependent. Harjo botanical imagination entails a world view where plants must be seen as living beings with emotions, desires and hope and not just means to achieve human ends. She elevates plants to rational beings that have in them the ability to direct human lives and without whom human life will cease to exist.

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