



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.4. 2020 (Oct-Dec)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
EN/14A
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ENVIRONMENT AND IDENTITY, IN THE WRITINGS OF SIMON J. ORTIZ AND MARILYNNE
ROBINSON

Dr. SHAGUN SINGH

PhD from Dept. of English, BHU



Article information

Received:19/10/2020
Accepted: 22/11/2020
Published online: 26/11/2020
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.4.90](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.4.90)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intrinsic relationship between human beings and ecology and how both evolve in the company of one another. The paper also discusses the harmful impact of technology and nuclear projects on our planet earth which puts our existence at peril. It analyzes the disastrous condition of our planet earth due to anthropocentric values criticizing environmental racism and talks about the plight of native people who have suffered physically and psychologically while working in the nuclear project mines.

Key Words: Ecology, relationship, identity, native people, culture, nuclear projects, anthropocentric values.

Nature plays a very significant role in shaping our physical, emotional, moral and spiritual ideas. Since beginning people have identified environment as intrinsic to the development of self. In different cultures of world, landscape was once sacred and treated with care, respect and reciprocity. But, in modern times the delicate balance of nature has been terribly disturbed because man has separated nature from mankind thereby creating a gap between the two worlds. The environment, an extension of self, shows how human and natural world are inter-connected and how both evolve in the company of each other. Unfortunately, this understanding fades away in a civilization of product and profit where patriarchal capitalistic biases exist according to which women and nature are solely for man's consumption and to suit his needs.

The writers Simon Ortiz and Marilynne Robinson in their works examine the contrast between a holistic and an instrumentalist understanding of nature and the fatalness of the latter. Ortiz talks about the intrinsic relationship between a particular place and the person living there, such that the two were mutually identified. In the introduction to his anthology, *Speaking for the Generations*, he writes "The young are frequently reminded by their elders: these lands and waters and all parts of Creation are a part of you, and you are a part of them; you have a reciprocal relationship with them." (16) It is generally observed that property is a social relationship of claim and recognition. The nearby culture of a place includes a long history of its kin and economic opportunities. The idiosyncrasies of language and culture of the place have their underlying foundations in individuals. Robinson also in one of her essays' "Wilderness" writes:

"I started writing fiction at an eastern college, partly in hopes of making my friends there understand how rich and powerful a presence a place can be which, to their eyes, is forbidding and marginal, without population or history, without culture in any form recognizable to them. All love is in great affliction. My bond with my native landscape was an unnamable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all." (Death of Adam: 246)

Both the writers have raised their voice against the exploitation by anti-human capitalists and speak out against technology which has blinded man in his pursuit of profit and loss. These writers are critique of developmentalism and environmental injustices and talk about how subjects experience their place and how that experience is intervened or restricted by thoughts of proprietorship and property. Ortiz in his poems talks about the brutal colonization of native people lands and the consequences of that dispossession while Marilynne Robinson, in her non-fictional work *Mother Country* vehemently criticizes the disastrous condition of our planet earth due to anthropocentric values. The writers have criticized environmental racism and talked about the experiences of those who have suffered physically and psychologically while working in the mines.

Robinson's 1989 book *Mother Country Britain, The Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution*, is a scathing attack on the British Nuclear Plant "a complex called Sellafield, on the Irish Sea in Cumbria, not far from William and Dorothy Wordsworth's Dove Cottage." (Mother Country: 03) This nuclear plant has been once the largest commercial producer of plutonium in the world and involves the crudest methods of wholesale dumping of nuclear wastes into the sea. The book condemns the extraction of plutonium and monopolization of nuclear industry. Robinson views that the nuclear projects do not only ruin and endanger the rural beauty and marine life but also bring utter poverty and suffering to the inhabitants of the area. Robinson's text is an appeal for support in protecting our planet, on the grounds that "all life on earth is inter-connected, dependent upon physical processes taking place in the atmosphere and the oceans" and that "if we damage any part of it we are putting our survival at risk." (Mother Country: 18)

Simon Ortiz, the writer from New Mexico, in his poems talks about the injustice and ignorance faced by the owners and inhabitants of land. His poems are about the indigenous people who have suffered from the trauma of being dislocated from their land, uprooted from their cultural background, their future flanged into darkness of poverty and dreadful diseases. For thousands of years, aborigines and American Indians have owned land and traditionally sustained themselves directly from the earth. But in the late 19th century land development became State's 'greatest adventure and development programme.' The indigenous people (farmers and tribal) became 'anti- development' and obstacles to the country's growth story by refusing to part away with their land.

Robinson in the book *Mother Country* depicts the disastrous consequences of nuclear projects like Sellafield and Fukushima Daichi on environment and how native people are bound to live and work in mines under deplorable conditions. Robinson tries to show how the utilitarian individualistic methodology has diminished the values of traditions and cultural practices. The story narrated to these poor uneducated folks is that the development of their land will bring happiness in their lives. Yet, the truth of the matter is that the owner's land rights are regularly abused and benefits streams into business and spans to just a few individuals. Water tainted with industrial waste, strip mining, radiation exposure causing illness or even death, toxic ground-water killing livestock or crops, and Native lands targeted for waste dumps and landfills are just a few of the problems Native peoples face in their homelands. Thus, we can say that they are deprived from their fundamental and constitutional human rights under the garb of industrial development.

Ortiz has himself worked for sometime in the uranium mines near Acoma, about which he writes in *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land*. The book talks about the Acoma people, who experienced the boom of the uranium mine industry and how they were eventually exploited by anti-human capitalists. In this collection Ortiz provides a historical account of the exploitation of the people and the land along the Grants, New Mexico, mineral belt and voices his ecological, political, and economic concerns for his people and for all living beings. These poems talk about how the Indians were used as cheap, disposable labor to work in the mines which tear and poison the land. The poem "Starting at the Bottom" is about the American Indians who were usually employed in low-ranking, dangerous positions in the mines. Ortiz says that native men worked there nearly thirty years at entry level positions making minimal money not only because advanced positions were reserved for whites but also because these jobs were extremely dangerous.

Another poem "Ray's Story" is about a Muskogee Indian named Lacey who had the hazardous job of pulling from the ore pieces of dynamite, steel, and cable as it came down into the Primary Crusher. Lacey,

ordered not to turn off the crusher because it would slow down production, became entangled in a cable, which pulled him through the crusher, where he was instantly killed. Seeing Lacey crushed up in the machine, the white foreman only said, "Gawd, that Indian was big" (Fight Back 303). Lacey was ultimately blamed for failing to turn off the crusher before removing the cable (303). Here we need to understand that the foreman's reaction towards Lacey's death is one of cold, dehumanizing indifference. Ortiz explains that the motive in keeping the Indians in dangerous jobs was that their deaths could easily be explained and accounted for by directing the responsibility for the death onto the Indian. No one questions the negligence of an Indian while the death of a white man was something the industry had to explain.

At the core, Robinson and Ortiz's works is a protest against dehumanization, environmental plunder, exploitation, oppression and the plight of the people. Both of them have criticized the nuclear projects and other projects related with land acquisition because they are damaging the lives of the residents and deteriorating our natural environment to a greater extent. In reality, the functioning of a nuclear reactor even in best conditions is the gestation of vicious elements which our suave little planet was never meant to contain. The nuclear industry also exercises a kind of 'environmental racism', as the groups that are battered hardest by the impacts of nuclearism are already victims of racism or economic disadvantage.

It became necessary for Natives to work in the mines because their native ways of life and land based survival methods conflicted with government laws and ideas of civilization. In the poem "Final Solution: Jobs, Leaving," Ortiz describes how families were torn apart because their fathers had to move away to find work which resulted in broken families and widespread cultural disintegration. Throughout *Fight Back*; Ortiz voices his impassioned, ecological concerns and describes how industrial and technological advancement has badly affected his homeland and the Native people that inhabited the land. The natives understand earth as a sacred space unlike the Western perspectives where land is seen as a material thing to be bought and sold in a commodity market. Ortiz states to Native cultures I one of interview that "land is a material reality as well as a philosophical, metaphysical idea or concept; land is who we are, land is our identity, land is home place, land is sacred" ((Manley and Rea: 365). This Native concept of land as an identity represents a belief that nature is united with human life, and that it is the sense of place which defines a person's life.

Thus, the dangers of nuclear industry and its impact on our mother planet cannot be ignored. These operations take so much away from communities and in return have only employment to offer as compensation. The cases of social exclusion, restriction of land rights and sovereignty, and environmental degradation suffered by the local residents are the reasons why the prospects for future use of nuclear power should be reconsidered. Robinson poignantly says-

"I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured while we were all bemused by supposed monuments of value and intellect, vaults of bogus cultural riches. I feel the worth of my own life diminished by the tedious years I have spent acquiring competence in the arcane of mediocre invention, for all the world like one of those people who knows all there is to know about some defunct comic-book hero or television series. The grief borne home to others while I and my kind have been thus occupied lies on my conscience like a crime." (*Mother Country*: 32)

Like several other environmental thinkers Robinson also believes that the root cause of environmental degradation is the widening gap between the human and the natural and says- "Humankind has no enemy but itself, and it is broken and starved and poisoned and harried very nearly to death." (*Death of Adam*: 249)

Hence, both the writers share similar concerns about humanity along with nature which is greatly suffering on account of man's immoral and capitalistic greed and aspirations. Ortiz says that "if technology goes against being human, then we have to fight and resist it, and that we need to pursue a creative relationship with technology in order to avoid becoming complacently dependent upon it (Manley and Rae : 371). In an interview, Ortiz expresses his concerns for the future of the human race in the wake of an all-consuming industrialism: "I fight against technological industrialism simply as a human being, because I am a human being and I want to remain human, very close to what human emotions are, very close to what the human spirit is, and hopefully to convey this through literature." (Manley and` Rae: 370).

The writers through their works and as a human-being fight against oppression, colonization, exploitation, industry, hypocrisy and technological progress which is blind, destructive, and dehumanizing. Robinson also reminds us that it is not just enough to say that the earth is our only home and human and non human world are just indistinguishable. Instead we should really act in the interest of a different future than that indicated by the imminent destruction of the planet's ecosystems. Therefore, there is an urgent need to acknowledge nature as a harmonious, purposive 'whole' which will create a foundational ground on which the problems of modern society can be solved if not fully then at least to some extent. She writes:

It is time we developed ways of describing the world which can give us a better sense of its health and prospects. I am not the first to observe that there is, so far as we know, only one living planet. And even if there were another, nothing in our present state of consciousness would save it from the abuse that threatens to kill this one. (*Mother Country*:30)

Today man is suffering and feels uprooted from his roots and finds himself standing at the crossroads making an unsuccessful attempt to maintain a connection with his own self, his heritage, cultural beliefs and traditions within a modern territory. What we need today is a balance between man and nature. The human world should look up to nature with respect and work in reciprocity to the natural world because "Every environmental problem is a human problem. Civilization is the ecology being lost. We can do nothing that matters if we cannot encourage its rehabilitation (*Death of Adam*: 253–54).

Australian theorist Nicole Graham says that "the intrinsic relationship between a particular place and the person or people living there, such that the two were mutually identified." (*Landscape*: 15) Ortiz has talked about such a relationship in the introduction to his anthology, *speaking for the Generations* where he writes that we are all a part of creation having a mutual relationship with one another. His poetry presents a vision of the world in which people and place are fused into one being, a fabric in which the human element is a fragile and relatively powerless thread, in comparison to the great forces of Nature. Robinson's text *Mother Country*, is an appeal for support in protecting our planet, on the grounds that "all life on earth is inter-connected, dependent upon physical processes taking place in the atmosphere and the oceans" and that "if we damage any part of it we are putting our survival at risk." (*Mother Country*: 18)

Thus, the Western ideological constructs of nature have proved to be fatal for both mankind and nature where nature is brutally looted and plundered of its resources just to satisfy human greed. We have separated humankind from nature. Nature which was once our first God and our old traditions and heritage owed great reverence for it is dying today. Modern progress today makes Nature bleed which has some devastating consequences on the ecology as well as on humanity. The perception of giving vital importance to anthropocentric concerns where humankind is regarded as the central and most important element of existence as opposed to other living creatures cannot be justified at all. It is we who have imposed our ideologies on nature and have estimated it wrongly. Therefore we need to redefine associations with nature and learn how to nurture a more spiritual connection with the world and its inhabitants. Robinson and Ortiz in their writings have tried to make people aware of the modern advancement which has promoted plundering of natural resources and exploitation of the native people. The consequences of which are diminished cultural values, economic vulnerability, loss of language and domestic violence. Hence new definition of "progress" and "production" should flourish along with the new ways of perceiving nature too. There is need of respect and value for other living creatures by others. Man should try to understand one's connections with the land as an attitude of reverence, rather than an urge to impose projects upon the land. The new definition of man-nature relationship starts when man again starts to listen to the land, learn from the land, respect the land and return to the land.

Works Cited

Ortiz, Simon. *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing (Volume 35) (Sun Tracks)*. First PB Edition, Second Printing, University of Arizona Press, 1997.

Robinson, Marilynne. *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. New York: Picador, 2005.

..... *Mother Country P.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Ortiz, Simon, and Maurus Chino. *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land (Volume 1, No. 1)*. Literary magazine /First edition, University of New Mexico, 1980.

Manley, Kathleen, and Paul W. Rea. "An Interview with Simon Ortiz." *Journal of the Southwest*. 31.2 (autumn 1989): 362-377.

Graham, Nicole. *Lawscape: Property, Environment, Law*. Routledge-Cavendish, 2010.
