

Resuming Gynocratic Principles: Cultural Reterritorialization of Native Traditions in Linda Hogan's Fiction

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Abstract

Native Americans' cultural system has been utterly undermined in the early colonial conquest and the later neo-colonial expansion. Cultural annihilation is primarily caused by the forced cultural assimilation, especially by the white government's practice of eradicating native traditions and beliefs. To rebuild the native culture system, Native American writer Linda Hogan attempts to employ the pre-colonial gynocratic principles in her literary creation, thus reterritorializing their cultural identity among the modern natives. This paper reveals how Hogan effectively resumes the ancient gynocratic principles by portraying a series of typical female images in the woman-centered native community, with an aim to fight against cultural assimilation guided by the white male-dominated western metaphysical epistemology.

Keywords: Linda Hogan, gynocratic principles, cultural annihilation, native traditions

1. Introduction

In the postcolonial context, cultural fragmentation among Native Americans is often discussed in terms of the annihilation in a cultural level, especially the eradication of native values. As Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist (2004) argues, cultural fragmentation "has resulted from the incessant disruption of Native life-ways through the violent dislocations imposed on tribal peoples by colonizers" (p. 201). In particular, the changes in native people's values produced by the colonial exploitation and cultural invasion are reflected in their daily lives, and part of the postcolonial condition manifests itself in a cultural alienation chiefly involving an elimination of tribal traditions in the native community. But how to remove the cultural alienation from the modern natives and regain their tribal traditions?

Linda Hogan, as a Native American writer, gives heed to the historical wrongs and cultural harms inflicted upon her people since the European colonization of North America. Confronting the issue of cultural fragmentation, Hogan attempts to reconstruct the native people's cultural identity by resuming some traditional native values and gynocratic principles are taken as her typical tenet in the cultural reterritorialization. Paula Gunn Allen (2003), a native critic coming from a gynocratic society of the Laguna Pueblo, once "places women and ritual at the center of the tribal universe as the nourishing source through which American Indian cultures have survived the genocide perpetrated by Euramerica" (qtd. in Pulitano, p. 12).

Although many other native writers try to employ the gynocratic principles in the cultural reterritorialization (Woolford, 2014, p. 10), Hogan is still viewed as the unique one who successfully rebuilds a series of female images that fit with some ancient tribal laws (p. 97). And in her fiction, *Mean Spirit* (1992), *Solar Storms* (1995), *Power* (1998) and *People of the Whales* (2008), Hogan's attempt of resuming the traditional gynocratic principles has been proved to be an effective strategy against western ideology, and of reconfiguration of cultural identity in the modern native community. This paper is intended to focus on the strategy of gynocratic principles employed in Linda Hogan's literary practice reflected in her two novels, *Solar Storms* and *People of the Whales*, thereby foregrounding the significance of native traditions in reconstructing the modern native cultural system.

2. Resuming Gynocratic Principles

According to Donelle N. Dreese (2002), all these destructive dichotomies-culture/nature, humans/animals, man/woman-nurtured by western metaphysical ideologies are the typical structures that lie at the root of subordination and the exact structures that the gynocratic principles are trying to dismantle (*Ecocriticism*, p. 9).

Therefore, the gynocratic agenda has always been employed by native writers as a powerful strategy against cultural annihilation through “healing these artificial separations and challenging existing power structures” (p. 9). As is exposed in Linda Hogan’s fiction, the commodification of women and animals are always caused by native men’s internalization of western colonizers’ metaphysical ideologies (Hellegers, 2015, p. 9). To address these problems within the broader system of patriarchy and anthropocentrism, Linda Hogan posits that the colonial models have brought a pressure and even devastation to American Indian women and the indigenous habitat as a whole and these models thus have to be dismantled through the means of referring to the valuable cultural heritage: the gynocratic principles.

The native critic Paula Gunn Allen uses the term gynocratic or gynocentric to define some typical characteristics of woman-centered communities in a Native American past. She establishes this notion in order to challenge western patriarchal constructions of gender identity by going back to the native past for the indigenous cultural essence. Her book, *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), is the collection of essays addressing gender issues chiefly from an American Indian perspective. It begins with an introduction to the role of “a mother or grandmother” in the tribal tradition:

In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. (Allen, p. 11)

First and foremost, in this pre-colonial gynocratic system, femaleness or femininity is the central cultural value in the native community for women are usually celebrated in social structures, law, custom and other traditions. In other words, there are some elder women, like some grandmothers who often take the role of spiritual leader in the tribe. Besides, from these women leaders, the whole nation has obtained their capacity to survive the 500-year colonization for they are the heirs and carriers of tribal traditions that are taken as the fires of life. Next, just like Allen elaborates: “I am not talking about matriarchy, and I won’t use that word. It tends to mean that women dominate, because patriarchy means that men dominate” (Eysturoy, 1990, p. 101), her notion of gynocentrism here is meant to highlight the balance and mutual respect among genders “as well as in the larger context of harmony and interconnectedness characterizing the tribal universe” (Pulitano, 2003, p. 23). Last but not least, women are named “thought”, which implies that these women are full of wisdom, mental capacity and temperament so that they are capable of leading the Indian nation out of hard times. In the creation of all female characters in her fiction, Linda Hogan’s intention is highly in tune with Allen’s gynocratic principles in an attempt to fulfill her imaginative but intentional cultural reterritorialization.

In the first place, Hogan designs the typical images of elder women leaders in a tribal community who are brave, strong-willed and celebrated in the social structures (Zhang & Zhang, 2014, p. 224). They are Belle Graycloud in *Mean Spirit*, Dora-Rouge, Agnes and Bush in *Solar Storms*, Annie Hide and Janie Soto in *Power*, and Ruth in *People of the Whale*. Most of them are grandmothers who also take the multiple roles of medicine women, healers or even matriarch of the tribe. Given that they are usually believers of cultural wisdom and tradition, in most cases, the survival of a whole tribal community or the healing process of main young characters heavily depend on them. This also suggests that they are the inheritors of cultural heritage as well as the guarantees of the cultural continuance for they are obliged to pass on the ancient cultural essence to the young generation.

2.1 Dora-Rouge: The Tribal Inheritor of Passing Ancient Beliefs and Magic Skills

Dora-Rouge is the great-great-grandmother of the young protagonist Angela, an abandoned native girl with a scar on the face in the novel, *Solar Storms*. Dora-Rouge is an expert on plants and animals, with which she can communicate freely in a mythical way. To help Angela to recover from her trauma, Dora-Rouge attempts to impart her traditional knowledge to Angela by teaching her to sing the animal-calling songs and to recognize the herbal plants. In this way, Angela can be fully drenched in the native nature views and thus be truly united with such natural elements as land, water and wild animals, which will be helpful in leading to her ultimate recovery from alienation and separation. Most notably, Dora-Rouge has once taken advantage of her ancient magic of speaking to water to save their lives during the four-generation-women canoe journey. Because the dams constructed by the hydroelectric project have reinvented pathways of rivers, at one impassable point near the Se Nay River, they discover that “[t]he water of two rivers, forced into one, was deeper and wider than it should have been, hitting the walls far up the sides and spreading out wherever it could in other places, taking down trees” (*Solar Storms*, p. 192). Being extremely helpless and desperate, Angela and her grandmother Bush find it

impossible to pass the fierce and charging dark currents when Dora-Rouge proposes that she would talk to the churning river and convince it to let them pass safely (p. 193). As the spiritual leader of the tribe, Dora-Rouge can receive the dialogic message from other natural spirits and she is thus aware that the water god Mishebeshu is cross with dam construction, river diversion and other attendant environment degradation such as flooding and toxic water, and his rage is reflected in the violent currents of water. Then according to what she and Bush have watched when Dora-Rouge is operating her communication with the water god, Angela recounts:

Dora-Rouge ...sat on the bank of the river and spoke. We could only see her lips move. We heard nothing she said. But after a while she nodded at us. "It will let us go," she said loudly, and that was the final word. Before we placed the canoes in to the fierce, charging dark water, Dora-Rouge said a prayer, opened her hand, and tossed tobacco into it. Her eyes were closed, a high-pitched song coming from deep inside her. (*Solar Storms*, p. 193)

Observing the magic interactivity between Dora-Rouge and the water god, the young protagonist Angela is startled by the occult power of her great-great-grandmother but more importantly is convinced of the existence of interconnectedness between nature and humans. Instructed by Dora-Rouge with ancient stories and magic skills, Angela is willing to embrace the native cultural heritage that plays a crucial part in fulfilling her healing process. In practice, her acceptance of those cultural laws from Dora-Rouge simultaneously brings forth her psychological renewal and transformation. For instance, while imparting the knowledge herbal plants to Angela, Dora-Rouge then discovers that Angela is actually a "plant dreamer" who is talented in associating herself with trees, grass and vines in the wilderness. As for the magic interaction between her and plants during the canoe journey, Angela explains: "I saw vines creeping forward... I knew how they breathed at night, and that they were linked to us in that breath. It was the oldest bond of survival" (p. 171). In her traumatic past, she had lost the knowing of this link between herself and plants. However, enlightened by Dora-Rouge after her return to her hometown, Angela once recognizes that roots of these vines and plants are "like the seeds of hydrogen and the seeds of oxygen that together create ocean, lake, and ice. In this way, the plants and I joined each other. They entangled me in their stems and vines and it was a beautiful entanglement" (p. 171).

This kind of spiritual intercourse between Angela and plants seems not new for her but the oldest way of survival mastered by ancient natives yet forgotten by her and other modern natives. Retrieving this dialogic capacity immediately provides her with the magic power to heal her wound and trauma both physically and psychologically (Schaumberg, 2019, p. 40). Obviously, merging with all these natural elements in the local place, such as land, water, plants allow the protagonist Angela to repair broken bonds between humans and nature, thereby catalyzing her ultimate renewal and transformation. Thus, Angela remarks, "we (grandmothers and Angela) were strong and we were articulate in the languages of land, water, animal, even in the harder languages of one another. I'd entered waters and swamps, been changed by them" (p. 193). At this point Angela begins to recognize reciprocal relationship between her and her grandmothers who also takes a role that mirrors the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, land and water.

Through the image of grandmothers, Linda Hogan tends to employ the gynocratic principles as a strategic response to the binary structure of western metaphysical ideology. As successors and carriers of the native cultural heritage, grandmothers in this women-centered community are obliged to help their native people survive the cultural annihilation by returning to Native American worldviews—a non-dualistic knowledge system. By replacing the Judeo-Christian worldview with a Native American nature view, Hogan breaks the boundaries between humans/nature, white God/native gods, science/myth, and other dichotomous terms and creates a transformative and interconnected epistemological pattern that challenges Western patriarchal conventions.

2.2 Bush: The Social Activist of Protesting Against Racial and Environmental Injustice

According to the definition of "Thought Woman" involving the gynocratic principles, Linda Hogan then arranges another type of native women in her fiction, who are independent, strong-willed and perceptive. Though they are not the spiritual heads in the tribe, they usually possess so strong leadership and tribal awareness that they are good at organizing people to participate activities as social activists. As for Hogan, creating such a dominant woman image in a postcolonial discourse is to dismantle the stereotypical male-leader image primarily pervasive in the patriarchal narrative justified by the western ideology. Bush in *Solar Storms* is such a native woman activist in her tribe. Notwithstanding her role of failing to give birth to any child as a woman, Bush still plays an essential role in rescuing her tribe out of dilemma. In her story of Creation, Paula Gunn Allen (1986) explains, "Creation does not take place through copulation. In the beginning existed Thought Woman and her dormant sisters, and Thought Woman thinks creation and sings her two sisters into life" (*The*

Sacred Hoop, p. 16). Rather than defining woman as the traditional maternal role, Allen here tends to expand the scope of maternity to incorporate other features of original thinking or creative thinking. “The power is not so much the power to give birth ... but the power to make, to create, to transform” (p. 29). The practice of relocating women without referring to the traditional image of a devoted mother in light of the gynocratic principles in Hogan’s fiction is a radical attempt to fight against the male-dominated western metaphysical epistemology.

Bush, an Oklahoma Indian woman, is originally married to Harold Iron who dislikes her and then secretly marries Loretta Wing. As an abandoned woman, Bush does not decide to live in grief but treats her life with love, smile and confidence, which impresses Angela heavily at their first meeting: “[s]he (Bush) was one of the women who had loved me. Between us there had once been a bond” (*Solar Storms*, p. 22). Bush’s affectionate image immediately makes the scarred girl recover her sense of belongings to the tribal community. Besides, “Bush was a brooding type of woman... She had no need or use for social graces. Complex and simple at the same time, she was the right woman for the island of frogs, the island of feral children and wolves, of healing milk” (p. 75). Bush is a nature custodian as well as a “Thought woman” who is heavily involved in social concerns instead of social graces. Once she learns about the news of dam construction in the boundary waters, she immediately initiates the four-generation-woman canoe journey that is criticized as “the crazy adventure” by the tribal men to Two-Town to “see what was happening to the water, to see if ... (she needs) to help the people” (p. 75). While arriving at the destination, Bush discovers that Two-Town, a “raw and scarred place” that has survived the early fur trade is now facing the environmental damage in dam construction promoted by the white government. Confronted with the fallen people and endangered animals tortured by the greedy capitalist, Bush feels extremely heart-broken and becomes lost in her grief, and thus raises the question: “how do conquered people get their lives back?” (p. 226)

This question is actually the one haunting Linda Hogan for years throughout her writing career. And her advocacy seems to be perfectly in tune with Paula Gunn Allen’s claims of the world order “arranged in harmony with gynocratic principles” (*The Sacred Hoop*, pp. 13–14). Within the woman-centered Native American community, people would not surrender so easily but struggle to survive the devastation and ruin confronting them. As for the strong-willed Bush, in her painful search for an answer, she suddenly realizes that “the protest against the dams and river diversions was their only hope” (*Solar Storms*, p. 226). Although many desperate native men rely on alcohol to drink away their hopelessness, Bush still unites her female family members: Dora-Rouge, Agnes and Angela to complete their adventurous canoe journey to Two-Town and plans actively their strategy of protesting against the dam construction. These brave women, taking the role of woman warriors, are meant to use their wisdom and strength to put a stop to the white developer’s project of rerouting river, flooding lands and other untold devastation inflicted on the native habitat (Jespersen, 2010, p. 278). “In this sense, *Solar Storms* treats matrilineage as gynocratic principles of cultural resistance against Western domination of Native American tribes and land” (Schultermandl, 2005, p. 76). Here, Hogan intentionally juxtaposes these women’s experience of the canoe journey with their fighting for the protection of habitat to prove that “[i]t is not so much through their return to a pristine land within their tribal territories but rather through their activism for the preservation of the tribal lands” (p. 69). As a result, these native women’s choice of taking the role of “Thought woman” would highly urge the white government to make some response to their request and effectively help them sustain their cultural identity. Just as Paula Gunn Allen (1986) attests, “physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy” (*The Sacred Hoop*, p. 3).

2.3 Ruth: The Woman Warrior of Sustaining Gender Harmony and Kinship

Last but not least, Hogan’s employment of the gynocratic strategy in her cultural reconstruction practice has been graphically reflected in her creating of the third type of native women in the fiction, who are graced with the inclinations of mental capacity, temperament, benevolence, courage and perseverance so that they are capable of sustaining gender harmony and balance in the patriarchy-dominated white culture. And Ruth in *People of the Whale* is such a good case in point. Based on the pre-colonial cultural values, the early tribal community is always nurtured by a powerful and traditional gender identity and gender harmony. Yet, “[t]he loss of traditional life-ways have generated problems between Native men and women throughout North America” (Lundquist, 2004, p. 233). The series of land Acts, the Dawes Act in particular, not only remove native ancestors from homelands, but also impose a model inherited from the European hierarchical system and make men the heads of Indian families. Essentially, it has promoted a European approach to marriage and family among native households and divested native women of the power and status they used to have in the native community. The European colonization has separated the native Indians from their homeland and furthermore has alienated native

men from women, thereby bringing forth the disruption of their attachment to the place, the family and the community (Smith & Holland, 2016, p. 71).

In this postcolonial discourse, Linda Hogan attempts to use the pre-colonial female principles to dismantle the western male-dominated cultural system and restore the traditional gender harmony and kinship. In the last novel *People of the Whale*, Ruth and Thomas, a young couple of a marine tribe—A'atsika in the Northwest Pacific Coast, are enjoying their joyful marriage unless Thomas is recruited to join the Vietnam War. As descendants of the whale tribe, Thomas and Ruth, both inherit a working intimacy with the ocean and whales. Thomas' grandfather, Witka is a legendary whale hunter of the tribe and his grandmother is one of the whale-singers who sing the whale toward them. Ruth is pregnant when Thomas leaves, and when he fails to return after the war, Ruth raises the son Marco on her own and sends him to the old tribal people for picking up traditional knowledge and skills. To Ruth's delight, Marco is later found to possess the old gift of communicating with whales. Years later, traumatized by the war experience, Thomas is reluctant to go back to America but remarries a Vietnamese woman Ma who saves him and gives birth to his baby girl named Lin. Though he chooses to stay away from his home, Thomas is still haunted by his history as an American soldier. He carries too many things unbearable for he is actually "a container of history, pain, convictions, beliefs, memory, sins and courage" (*People of the Whale*, p. 180). Tortured by his war memory, Thomas has to confess his terrible experience one day:

I killed my own man. I looked at their faces, I looked at the children they were going to kill, the women they were going to hurt, and I shot the Americans, those men. They looked so white. It was like it was happening to us Indians. They were going to kill the children. One of them was going to rape a little girl. It was like us, our history, like one more group of murders. (p. 255)

Thomas, as a member of Native Americans who used to be victims of colonial violence in the history, shares the similar fate and shows great sympathy with these Vietnamese in the present war. And ultimately, he cannot help saving the children and women from violence by killing his comrade in the battlefield. His identity as both the colonized and the colonizer keeps splitting him so greatly for years as the aftermath of Vietnam War that he is afraid of returning to his country. "He comprehends the immensity, the pathos of the tragedy that shaped him and all his actions" (p. 256) for he doesn't want to be remembered as an American who kills children and women. Yet he cannot get out of his inner wound of killing his country fellow either. As a result, he becomes a breaker who is still afraid of living because it takes courage to live and to have happiness (p. 256). One of his fellow veterans, Dwight is a breaker too, who willingly joins the American colonizers in exerting colonial violence on Vietnamese people who shares the same misfortune as that of his Indian people. Influenced by the Euro-American masculine ideologies that are prone to treating animals, women, and marginalized people as commodities, he takes objectification and aggression toward whales, which marks his alienation from and betrayal of native ideologies based on harmony, balance, equality and reciprocity (Huang, 2016, p. 17). When Thomas returns home to join the whale hunting hoping to reclaim his identity as the descendant of a tribal whale hunter, Dwight also actively organizes the whale hunt but is chiefly motivated by economic interests from the whale slaughter. Dwight discards their tribal belief in whales as well as abandons his pregnant girlfriend. He "had always been jealous of Thomas, a small part hating him, his buddy, his friend" (*People of the Whale*, p. 174) because "Thomas had been the one that could hear the low rumbling of the whale" (p. 296). Therefore, in Vietnam he scapegoats Ruth for her betraying of Thomas and being pregnant with other man, and after returning to American he murders Thomas' son, Marco in the whale slaughter in an attempt to break Thomas' lives. Then, Ruth says, "Dwight is heartless. The man without a heart. The liar about the whales" (p. 253).

Confronting these broken native men infected with western masculine ideology, Ruth is brave and courageous enough to help them regain their regard for animals and connectedness with their community. She organizes the tribal meeting to discuss the issue of whale hunt, aiming to put a stop to their commercial ends proposed by Dwight but truly resuming the traditional tribal ceremony of whale hunting. Though she is calm and gentle, she is honest and "talks that strongly" (p. 222) and always adheres to tribal laws firmly. Being an obstacle to Dwight's desire for money and fortune, she is disliked and even hated by Dwight and the gang of his commercial fellows (p. 222). When she hears that her son Marco has been secretly murdered by Dwight, she feels heart-broken but is not resentful towards Dwight and his gang, for she still tries to save her broken clans back to the tribal community, thus recovering the intimate kinship within the tribe.

By engaging in a native world view that everything is connected, Hogan arranges the woman image, Ruth to restore the lost kinship and gender balance in the modern era. In this sense, *People of the Whale* is "a story that reflects the gynocratic cosmology of prepatriarchal communities in which women are central to the harmony, balance, and prosperity of the tribe" (Pulitano, 2003, p. 36). As for the nearly-broken family relation caused by

the imperial war, Ruth is still capable of repairing it with her benevolence, forgiveness and patience. When her husband falls into the victim of the war, imprisoning himself in his hut, Ruth never interrupts his quietness but silently tends on him, patiently waiting for his recovery from the wound. She loves her husband so deeply that when she meets his illegitimate daughter Lin, she never complains about her husband but even treats Lin as her child with love. This is reflected in the narrator's account:

Ruth loves the girl already because she is the child of Thomas. She looks at her and sees him. She's not the kind of woman who would be bothered by the other woman, the mother of Lin. Thomas, she realizes, was never her own. She tries to think of how to deal with Thomas and all of the pain that is about to hit him. (*People of the Whale*, p. 223)

Ruth here behaves like a goddess who tends to use her love and temperament to heal the secular pain and separation. No matter what kind of mistakes Thomas has made, she will forgive him without any excuse and render good for evil in an attempt to return him back to the tribal community. She is the real guardian of the whale tribe's cultural heritage and thus will not hesitate to resist any economic and cultural exploitation, in particular in the name of development. This brave and strong-willed woman is not only the protector of her family but that of her tribe and her marine habitat. When her husband Thomas recovers from his trauma, he cannot help praising Ruth like that: "He carries her in his thoughts, the vision of how she stands straight and has cared for his own daughter better than he has. ... He thinks, out of all the warriors he has known, she is the true one (p. 251).

Woman warrior is the title of Ruth bestowed by her husband and tribal people for her bravery, perseverance and maintenance of tribal culture in the face of economic and cultural exploitation (Huang, 2016, p. 20). Through the creation of the woman warrior, Hogan's notion of gynocentrism here is meant to highlight the balance and mutual respect among genders as well as the harmony and interconnectedness characterizing the tribal universe, which is playing a key role in dismantling the western masculine system and thus preserving native cultural laws for good.

3. Conclusion

In a word, the practice of constructing a female-centered community in light of the pre-colonial gynocratic principles in Hogan's fiction is proved to be a radical attempt to fight against the cultural assimilation guided by the male-dominated western metaphysical epistemology. In her fiction, Hogan has created a series of female images who essentially adhere to the traditional tribal laws and beliefs. By taking the roles of tribal inheritor, thought women and woman warrior, these female protagonists utterly fulfil the task of passing on the tribal beliefs, resisting against racial discrimination, and restoring traditional gender harmony and kinship.

In this way, the pre-colonial gynocratic principles once observed by the native are now proclaimed as the strategy to dismantle the western masculine system, and further preserve the native natural views and cultural laws. Confronted with the devastation and ruin to their land and tribe, native women, on the one hand, attempts to plan and organize strategic activities to fight against economic exploitation. On the other, they learn to resume some traditional customs and principles to rebuild their cultural identity, thus ensuring their survival out of the physical and spiritual annihilation. In this way, Hogan intentionally stresses the power of native values and tribal traditions for they are capable of reconstructing the human mind in light of indigenous cultural system and further remolding modern natives' cultural system and ensuring their survival of the cultural genocide.

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