



# Nature and Native Canadian Identity: An Ecocritical Reading of Jeanette Armstrong's *Whispering in the Shadows*

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**Abstract:** In the native cultures of the world, Nature has an important role to play. There is no concept of “owning” the land. These are animistic cultures where Nature forms an integral part of one’s identity. As opposed to this, the capitalistic culture that we are surrounded by today, thrives on exploiting Nature. Because of the uncontrolled exploitation, and the resultant climate crisis, most of the contemporary writers today are engaging with the environment, and the degradation that it is subjected to. The present research makes an ecocritical analysis of Jeanette Armstrong’s novel, *Whispering in the Shadows*. Armstrong is a Native Canadian, professionally recognized as a novelist and an environmental activist among her other roles. Her own Okanagan background contributes to the analysis of this novel. The paper looks at how Nature forms a focal point in establishing a Native Canadian identity.

**Keywords:** Nature, Capitalism, Climate Crisis, Eco-criticism, Indigenous.

Nature has always been a part of literature, whether as a backdrop, prior to industrialization, or as actively foregrounded in the contemporary literature. According to Dana Philips, “Nature is complex; nature is thoroughly implicated in culture and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature.” Today, it extends beyond being merely used as an objective correlative, having been developed into a distinct genre in itself.

The attitude to Nature can be broadly categorized along two oppositional lines, material and emotional. While the former is associated with a colonizing and capitalist mindset, the latter is connected to the indigenous people around the globe. Industrialization in Europe spurred a colonial expansion and an untamed urge to tame the wilderness in the settler colonies. The metaphor of “frontier” used in the American literature is an example. As against this, there has always existed an emotional and ancestral bond in the indigenous people towards Nature.

It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that the damage to Ecology was given a serious consideration. With a pressing concern of climate change, Ecology has today become a major part of the academia as well as policy making. In the field of literature, Ecocriticism has been formulated as a theoretical framework to analyse texts, and study the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 17). It engages with questions such as, how has the Nature been treated in the given text? What is

the ideology of the writer? How has the attitude towards Nature been presented and analyzed? What are the ecological issues that have been raised? Is there a possible solution offered?

Ecocriticism was officially heralded with the publication of two seminal works, both published in the mid-1990's: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. Since "the environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven", Ecocriticism has been evolving by incorporating multiple theories such as Marxism, Gender and Postcolonialism (Buell 11). This has helped it to have a wider scope in its analysis of the texts.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the indigenous people in what is now called as "Canada" were able to satisfy their material and spiritual needs through the natural world around them. They shared a syncretic relationship with Nature that stood at the root of their cultural practices. Today, the historians have grouped the First Nations in Canada according to the geographical areas that have existed. These six groups are: Woodland First Nations, Iroquoian First Nations, Plains First Nations, Plateau First Nations, Pacific Coast First Nations, and the First Nations of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins. They are all connected by their culture, which is shaped by their environment. The deep respect that the First Nations held for Nature was reflected in their festivals, songs, dances, and ceremonies. However, all of this was hugely impacted with the arrival of the Europeans. A relationship based on commercial and military interests was soon replaced by one based on dependency. As the First Nations' military role waned, the British administrators set out to "civilize" the indigenous population with a missionary fervour. The indigenous people were forced to give up their traditional ways of life.

Many assimilationist policies were legislated, and these had no understanding of the indigenous peoples' culture. The Indian Act passed in 1867 gave a greater authority to the federal department into the Indian affairs. Oddly, it was based on the premise that the Crown would take responsibility of the indigenous people by acting as their "guardian" until they were able to fully integrate. Along the same lines, the residential schools were given a focus in 1883 as primary vehicles for "assimilation" and "civilization". These were hugely underfunded, and the children were forced to abandon their traditional language and culture.

In all the amendments of the India Act that happened between 1876 to 1927, the indigenous people were never consulted. There were many such controlling acts and policies that were ruthless in nature. Events such as the Oka crisis of 1990 and others forced the Canadian government to amend their policies. In the recent times, the government was called on to acknowledge the decades of mistreatment and abuse of children in the residential schools, and a public apology was made in 2007. Today, the National Aboriginal Day has been made a part of the annual nationwide "Celebrate Canada!" festivities. This may have come after a long struggle, but it plays an essential role in drawing the world's attention to what the indigenous people have been through.

Jeanette Armstrong is a Canadian author, educator, artist, and an activist. She was born and brought up on the Penticton Indian reserve in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. Armstrong has lived on the Penticton Native Reserve for most of her life and has also raised her children there. In 2013, she was appointed Canada Research Chair in Okanagan Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy. She is best known for her involvement with the En'owkin Centre, and has written about topics such as creativity, education, ecology, and Indigenous rights. Her 1985 work *Slash* is considered the first novel by a First Nations woman in Canada. It was commissioned by the curriculum project, for use as part of a grade eleven study in contemporary history. This novel explores the history of the North American Indian protest movement through the critical perspective of central character Tommy Kelasket, who is eventually renamed Slash. Tommy encounters intolerance in an assimilationist school system and racist North American society, but his family encourages him to be proud of his Okanagan heritage. Eventually, he becomes an activist for the Aboriginal rights. According to Armstrong *Slash* provides a personalized account of the origins and growth of Native activism since the 1960s.

As an activist, Armstrong is an advocate for the rights of indigenous people. Her research focuses on the revitalization of indigenous communities and culture. She is also a part of the Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Okanagan Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy, and her aim is to bring awareness to the stories of the Syilx Okanagan first nations communities, which pertains to a large amount of indigenous knowledge that is overlooked and majorly inaccessible. As a campaigner for Aboriginal rights, Armstrong serves as an international observer to the Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations.

*Whispering in the Shadows* is the second novel written by Jeanette Armstrong. It was published in 2000. Penny Jackson, the main protagonist of the text comes from the Okanagan tribe just as Armstrong herself. She spends her childhood and teenage in the reservation, gets married to a character called Francis, leaves him, struggles to get a job for herself, gathers the strength to enroll herself for higher studies despite the poverty, and eventually gets engaged in environmental activism through her paintings. It is through her diary entries, letters, monologues, and conversations that we get an insight into the life of Native Canadians.

In the text, we see that Nature forms the primary defining factor of Native Canadian identity. From the inter textual poem serving as an epigraph at the outset “draw(ing) attention to the physicality of land and the human connections it facilitates” to Penny Jackson’s almost mystical descriptions of Nature as being a part of her very existence make the presence of Nature itself as a dominant part of the narrative. She sees it as a living entity. Through various instances such as Penny’s morning sun rise rituals with her Tupa, the anthropomorphizing of blue jays, huckleberries, yellow bells, and everything around speaks about the indigenous peoples’ connection with the land.

The poem “Moonset” by Pauline Johnson used in the beginning sets the tone of the novel. Throughout this poem the Nature is rendered a vivid quality through the use of literary devices such as synesthesia and personification. The word “shadowland” in the poem becomes crucial, if looked at critically. In a literal sense, this word means an indeterminate borderland between two places. However, given the context that this poem is placed against, it can be seen as a metaphor for the indigenous people who find themselves as stuck between a culture that is lost to them and a culture that they cannot completely become a part of. The last lines of the poem, “I may not all your meaning understand/ but I have touched your soul in shadow-land” suggest a nostalgia of the lost world that is rooted in Nature (Armstrong 5). However, this lines also convey a sense of remanence, an assertion that no matter how hard one might try, the roots cannot be completely cut off. The second poem titled as “frogs singing” has a folkloristic texture to it, paralleling indigenous peoples’ culture. Through the line, “my sister did no dream this”, the speaking persona makes it clear that Nature is not an abstract entity, or a romanticized notion for them, but very much a part of life (Armstrong 6).

In the novel, Penny Jackson can be seen as representing Nature. The description of her obsession with the colours and painting in the first chapter uses metaphors of consumption, of love and madness. In the first episode, she desperately wishes to paint the surrounding snowbank as it exists in its natural texture. She says, “What do I want to get it like that for anyway? Why? It’s talking to me that’s why. It’s singing. It sounds like an under-the-breath Indian song” (Armstrong 7). Further on, she gets taunted by her friend Roberta, according to whom Penny’s words do not make sense most of the time. She tauntingly tells Penny, “Why don’t you think of normal stuff, like how that cool guy Michael has a new car” (Armstrong 9). Penny’s maddening obsession with colours, and the fact that nobody around her understands her can be read as metaphorical in representing a Natural world that others do not understand. It suggests that the Material world sees the Natural world as abnormal or as not making any sense. For Penny, painting therefore metaphorically becomes an escape from the material world, and this retreat finds her in peace, solace and comfort which is incomprehensible to others.

The text has a number of instances that show how important it is for the indigenous people to pass on their culture and traditions, and to ensure that the younger generation forms a deep connection with the mother earth. The “circle of friendship” in the novel is an example of the conscious efforts that are made to preserve this inheritance. Manuel Antonio Vitaro, an Indian from Bolivia in the novel makes a speech at the Friendship circle, wherein he says, “We have one agenda, no? *Pache Mama*. We are hers like the flowers. We are only

healthy if *Pache Mama* is. This is what our political and economic agendas strive for. It is Pache Mama yearning to see her all her flowers bloom healthy” (Armstrong 33).

It is important to note that, the effort is not only to keep alive the traditions, but also for a greater good- to protect Nature from the materialistic or the capitalistic forces that the West represents. For them, Nature becomes a duty and a responsibility despite the fact that they are ruthlessly disenfranchised of their lands by the settlers. The text makes a very clear distinction in terms of the attitude towards Nature between the Indigenous people and the settlers. In one instance, Jim, an activist that Penny meets at the camp in five valley coast of Vancouver island questions why wouldn't the natives if given a full control, think of making profit out of the land in order to come out of their poverty. To this, Penny replies,

“It seems to me what you just said is the real problem. They haven't devastated any of their lands in the thousands of years of living here. Why would they do it now? I don't think there's enough research on the fact that native people understand real sustainability and practice it even on the small reserves left of their homelands” (Armstrong 109).

One can therefore see that the land does not mean an inanimate object to be seen in terms of exploitation and profit making but, there is a symbiotic relationship, a spiritual bond that that the native people share with the land. Sustainability, a key term in the quote becomes a major takeaway for anyone concerned with ecology.

In conclusion, this novel at every point juxtaposes a culture that is grounded in Nature; a world, where sustainability ensures an ecological balance. It presents an alternate future for a present that is beset by a severe ecological crisis. Indigenous narratives of Ecology such as this novel play a central role in bringing about a change and spurring environmental activism.

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