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# Nature and Spirituality in the Poems of Joy Harjo

A Research Project

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## Abstract

The current research, titled "Nature and Spirituality in the Poems of Joy Harjo." is based on a well-structured and close reading technique to analyze the themes of nature and spirituality that Harjo employed in her poetry. Also, it pays attention to metaphors, imagery, and symbolism related to nature and spirituality. This research encloses three principle sections, commencing with an introduction to Joy Harjo, recognizing her as an esteemed and renowned Native American poet Laureate in history. It also explored the importance of nature and spirituality in Indigenous cultures, laying the foundation for this research's analysis of Harjo's poetry. Then, the second section focused on animals as representations of nature and spirituality in Harjo's poems. The eagle in "Eagle Poem" and the horses in "She Had Some Horses". Through these animal representations, Harjo invites us to contemplate our relationship with nature and the divine. Additionally, section three is concerned with nature as a source of spiritual insight, portrays the natural world as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences, and analyzes the themes of nature and spirituality in the "Remember" poem. Lastly, this research ends with a conclusion that recapitulates the whole paper, followed by a list of references used to achieve it.

**Keyword:** Nature, Spirituality, Joy Harjo , native Americans, poetry.

## Section one

### *1.1 An Introduction of Joy Harjo*

Joy Harjo is a well-known Native American poet, writer, musician, and activist. She was born on May 9, 1951, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She became the first Native American poet laureate in 2019. Joy Harjo is part of the second generation of the Native American Renaissance, which was a literary movement that started in the 1960s.

Joy Harjo is a poem of the natural world. She uses her understanding of art, music, and language to depict the Native American view of life as relevant to the present time. In her poetry she explores the various aspects of nature that surrounds native society. Harjo's unique poetic voice invites readers to their path of self-discovery, a deeper cultural understanding, and a renewed appreciation for the beauty of life and existence. Her poetry has had a significant impact on both Native American and non Native American writers, she makes Native American literature more widely known.

Furthermore, Harjo's poetry is deeply connected to nature and filled with spiritual elements. She beautifully incorporates nature as imagery, metaphor, and symbolism to delve into themes of cultural identity, belonging, and spirituality. Through the interplay of nature and spirituality, Harjo conveys a powerful message of interconnectedness and respect for all living beings. In the poem "Remember," Harjo illustrates the idea that all creatures and elements of nature are interconnected and equal. She emphasizes that humans might find solace and peace by immersing themselves in the natural world.

Moreover, Harjo's poetry skillfully portrays animals with human qualities, reflecting the Native American culture's deep connection with nature and belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings. In "Eagle Poem," Joy Harjo utilizes the eagle as a representation of spirituality because the eagle is often seen as a sacred

and powerful creature in Native American culture. Also, Harjo uses horses as a representation of nature; due to that, horses are often seen as majestic and free creatures, embodying the untamed beauty of the natural world. The poems mentioned above are three important poems that are supposed to be analyzed in this research.

## ***1.2 The Role of Nature and Spirituality in Indigenous Peoples and Their Influence on Joy Harjo's Poetry.***

Native Americans place a high value on spirituality and the natural world. They have a unique way of experiencing spirituality, not like the way most of people experience it. They derive their spirituality from nature, and some even worship it. They refer to nature as “Mother Nature“ because she embodies kindness in every way (Jasim & Kamal Addin, 2023, p. 293). Also, Native Americans get strength from nature because, for them, nature is a source of power. When they're feeling unwell, instead of going to the doctor, they prefer to spend time in nature. They believe that being in nature brings them both spiritual and physical healing, which can help them live longer (Jasim & Kamal Addin, 2023, p. 295). Furthermore, Native Americans believe that every living thing, including people, plants, and animals, as well as inanimate objects like mountains, rivers, and thunderstorms, have distinct spirits that are a part of the larger soul of the universe. They extend humanity to all beings, including animals and even elements of nature. For them, nature is an interconnected network where every element plays a vital part. They have a long history of coexisting peacefully with nature, and their sustainable lifestyles are based on a great reverence for the planet and its resources (Vanorio, 2020).

Harjo draws a lot of inspiration for her poetry from her Native American identity. Her literary works have primarily focused on Native American souls. Harjo is a poet of exile, and her poetry is deeply connected to her memories and the experiences she has had. Due to her intimate relationship with nature, which is common across Native communities, she uses nature to escape from the memories of being exiled from her homeland and present the oppression of indigenous peoples face at the hands of white society (Salim, 2021, p. 425). In addition to providing inspiration, nature frequently serves as Harjo's starting point to explore her own and collective identity. One distinctive feature of Native American literature is its connection to the marginalization that Native Americans face, which is associated with feelings of aggression, loneliness, and denial of their existence. This marginalization and exclusion is where the quest for identity begins (Telekova, 2020).

What makes indigenous cultures truly unique is their deep connection to the land. In indigenous beliefs, the land is not just a physical space but a living being that holds immense meaning. There is a profound relationship between humans and the land, where it is seen as the keeper of their history, traditions, and spirituality. In this worldview, there is no hierarchy to differentiate value between all living things. Joy Harjo deepens and amplifies that relationship, using nature as a tool for cultural resistance against external forces that disrespect and disrupt that connection. Pushing back against a mindset that sees the land as something to be owned, exploited, or controlled. She honors this sacred relationship, acknowledging the life force within the land and respecting the powers of the earth that nourish and inspire humans (Harjo & Winder, 2011, p. 125). In her poetry, Harjo uses unique strategies to protest against the destruction of nature. One of the strategies is that instead of speaking as the author, she gives the animals themselves a voice, personifying them to rebel against the abuses inflicted by humans. Another strategy is to give animals, plants, and rocks human characteristics. This helps to convey the idea that harming nature

is akin to harming human beings that have feelings, thoughts, and opinions (Mancelos, 2007, p. 70).

In Native American poetry, the relationship between a person and nature is evoked through a conversation between entities that belong to one cosmos. This profound relationship between the individual's body, mind, and spirit is fragmented and incomplete without this conversation. Therefore, in Harjo's poems, the purpose of nature is more than a backdrop and an object of reflection. It becomes an interlocutor and a source of spiritual connection, which then leads to her speaking out (Jossa, 2007, p. 587). For Native Americans, every aspect of nature has a symbolic meaning. For example, flowers, despite their smallness, are considered a gift from the earth, and cheery trees represent healing and purity (Jasim & Kamal Addin, 2023, p. 295). Also, Joy Harjo uses nature to serve as a reflection of her state of mind. The elements of nature in her work, such as the wind, trees, birds, rabbits, and the moon, symbolize different emotions and concepts. For example, the wind is associated with freedom, while trees represent life. Birds symbolize love and singing, and rabbits represent creation. Earth is portrayed as a nurturing mother, and plants are seen as healers. The moon also holds its own significance in her poetry (Hanna, 2023, p. 4).

## Section two: Animals as The Representation of Nature and Spirituality

### 2.1 Eagle as The Representations of Spirituality in “Eagle Poem”

“Eagle Poem” by Joy Harjo is a profound piece of poetry that delves into themes of nature, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of all living beings through vivid imagery and powerful language. Harjo invites readers to take an open and caring attitude toward the natural world around them. Additionally, the poem evolves around Harjo's memory of seeing a beautiful eagle flying over the Salt River in Arizona. The poem's title, initially leads readers to believe it is about an eagle, but it is actually about much more. Rather than the animal, Harjo is more interested in life and spirituality. There is a connection between human life and eagles. The poet said that, although lacking in words or sounds, the eagle's circular motions have a language. It represents the cycle of life and is the sign language of the natural world (Gupta, 2021).

To pray you open your whole self  
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
 To one whole voice that is you.  
 And know there is more  
 That you can't see, can't hear,  
 Can't know except in moments  
 Steadily growing, and in languages  
 That aren't always sound but other  
 Circle of motion (lines 1-9)

The poem begins with prayer and openness. It states that prayers involve opening one's whole self and awareness to the sky, earth, and moon, which helps to connect with the entire world. For Harjo, prayers mean the ability to communicate with the natural world. Harjo encourages us to open ourselves and our awareness to nature because, through nature, we are able to listen to our inner voice, which is the voice of our soul. Also, we can realize that there are broader things and that knowledge

exists beyond what we can see or hear. Knowledge and appreciation for nature are not finite; they grow over time as we make new memories and see new things (Hanna, 2023, p. 434). Furthermore, Harjo challenges traditional conceptions of language. She suggests a broader form of communication and understanding beyond traditional spoken languages. There are moments of insight and understanding that are conveyed through the language of nature, symbols, observations, and motions rather than spoken words. It is tranquil, comforting, and silent.

Like eagle that Sunday morning  
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky  
In wind, swept our hearts clean  
With sacred wings.  
We see you, see ourselves and know  
That we must take the utmost care  
And kindness in all things.  
Breathe in, knowing we are made of  
All this, and breathe, knowing  
We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon within a  
True circle of motion (lines 10-21)

Harjo uses symbolism, which plays a central role in the poem, enriching the poem's meaning and conveying complicated ideas through vivid imagery. One of the symbols is an eagle. Eagles are traditionally seen as messengers or guides in various cultural and spiritual traditions. In these lines, Harjo uses the eagle as a spiritual symbol, representing transcendence, purification, and elevation. Harjo refers to an eagle's wings sacred. The word "sacred" underscores the sacredness and holiness of the eagle. It conveys a sense of spiritual purification and renewal rooted in nature and the eagle's ability to clear away negativity or burdens from our hearts, leaving us refreshed and renewed (Salim, 2021, p. 433). Another symbol that Harjo uses in the poem is the eagle's circle of motion, which symbolizes the cycle of life because it represents the continuous. Just as the eagle's flight follows a circular path, life itself moves in cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. It reminds us that everything is connected and that life is a constant flow of change and renewal. The

eagle's circle of motion captures the essence of this cyclical nature and invites us to contemplate the beauty and mystery of life's cycles (Gupta, 2021). Additionally, throughout these lines Harjo depicts human relationships with nature. She thinks that humans and nature are interconnected. For Harjo, humans are made up of nature, and when we realize how intertwined we are with nature, it leads to a sense of blessing and reverence for the gift of existence. Also, she emphasizes the responsibility that comes with our connection with nature. Encourages the reader to approach nature with the utmost care and kindness. This act of kindness and care encompasses every aspect of life, highlighting the interconnectedness of all things (Çubukçu, 2015, p. 55).

Like eagle rounding out the morning  
 Inside us.  
 We pray that it will be done  
 In beauty.  
 In beauty (lines 22-26).

The poem ended when Harjo used the word "in beauty" twice. Highlights Harjo's desire for readers to seek and pray for beauty, since beauty is something that should be prayed for. This Creek prayer, like other Native American traditions, finds its beauty in its connection to nature and is symbolically linked to the eagle. It invites us to recognize the beauty that surrounds us and to approach it with reverence and gratitude. (Salim, 2021, p. 434).

## ***2.2 Horses as a Representation of Nature in “She Had Some Horses” poem***

“She Had Some Horses” is regarded as the best of Harjo's symbolic poems, with eight stanzas. Each begins with the same statement as the poem's title, to emphasize the multiple meanings of the horses, not just for herself but for all readers (Salim, 2021, p. 430).

Native Americans have a special bond with horses. They rely on them for hunting, warfare, and transportation. They also have a spiritual connection with horses and find power and strength in them. They are interested in horses and know how vital horses are to their continued existence. Horses are essential to Native Americans's lives and cultures, playing a crucial role in hunting and battles. They're not just animals of burden but valued partners and relatives (Hassan& Sadek, 2015, p. 70). Also, Native Americans and horses are not only spiritually connected, but their histories are also connected. When the conquistadors arrived, both horses and Native people faced great hardships. They were killed, forced into servitude, and displaced from their lands. Despite these challenges, both horses and Native people have managed to survive (Parks, 2020).

Harjo's relationship with nature in " She Had Some Horses" is shaped like a conversation between two beings, as the poet looks to nature to rediscover herself and piece together her lost identity. She conveys a sense of feeling incomplete, an existential and spiritual void that the poet can only fill if she reconstructs her life in harmony with the natural world (Jossa, 2007, p. 587). Furthermore, Harjo describes "She Had Some Horses" with ceremonial overtones. In an interview with Sharyn Stever, she said: "The repetition always backs up and reinforces the power of what you've said. And this is probably where “She Had Some Horses” has its power because you have “She Had Some Horses” repeating and enforcing what's been said,

which is what a ceremony does. It's ritualized acknowledgment." Also, this repetition of the horse's imagery in the poem reinforces the idea that the horses represent the natural world. By using this, Harjo invites us to consider the profound relationship between humans and nature and how it can be understood as a dialogue between two beings (Karam, 2020, p.4).

She had some horses  
 She had horses who were bodies of sand  
 She had horses who were maps drawn of blood  
 She had horses who were skins of ocean water  
 She had horses who were the blue air of sky  
 She had horses who were fur and teeth  
 She had horses who were clay and would break  
 She had horses who were splintered red cliff (lines 1-8).

In the first stanza, Harjo invokes a sense of reverence for nature through the use of imagery of horses and other natural elements. She connects the reader to a deeper and broader understanding of the natural world. Horses are often connected to freedom, strength, and wild beauty. The poem's horses stand in for the wildness of nature. A profound appreciation for the complex beauty of the natural world is sparked by Harjo's detailed descriptions of the horses and their interactions with them. Harjo uses ecological imagery, such as ocean water, red cliff, sky, and sand, to highlight the connections between the human and non-human realms. By evoking this sense of reverence, it encourages us to acknowledge the importance of nature to the formation of our identities and perceptions of what it means to be human. The poem encourages a closer relationship with nature and a better comprehension of our place in it (Jaleel, 2023, p. 600).

She had some horses  
 She had horses with eyes of trains  
 She had horses with full, brown thighs  
 She had horses who laughed too much  
 She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses  
 She had horses who licked razor blades (lines 9-14)

In the second stanza, Joy Harjo illustrates the close relationship that exists between Indians and horses in the poem due to their shared physical and mental aspects. She sees them as a species that shares all characteristics with humans. She describes her horses in the poem as they are "with full, brown thighs," "with long, pointed breasts," "laughed too much," and "licked razor blades." (Hassan& Sadek, 2015).

She had some horses  
 She had horses who danced in their mothers' arms  
 She had horses who thought they were the sun and their  
 bodies shone and burned like stars  
 She had horses who waltzed nightly on the moon  
 She had horses who were much too shy, and kept quiet  
 in stalls of their own making (lines 15-21)

Furthermore, in the third stanza, Harjo's description of horses becomes more abstract. She uses the image of horses to express freedom, hope, and the future (Karam, 2020, p. 43).

She had some horses  
 She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs  
 She had horses who cried in their beer  
 She had horses who spit at male queens who made  
 them afraid of themselves  
 She had horses who said they weren't afraid  
 She had horses who lied  
 She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped  
 bare of their tongues (lines 21-29)

Moreover, stanza four depicts the horses' different emotions. Some of the horses cry into their beers, some of the horses are afraid, some lie and some tell the truth were punished for their honesty. This depiction of these emotions suggests that the "horses" are dealing with difficult and upsetting situations in the world they live in (Gilbert, 2023).

She had some horses  
 She had horses who called themselves, "horse."  
 She had horses who called themselves, "spirit," and kept  
 their voices secret and to themselves  
 She had horses who had no names  
 She had horses who had books of names (lines 30-35)

Also, in the fifth stanza, Harjo presents a variety of horses with different identities. Some horses called themselves "horses." while others called themselves "spirit" and kept their voices hidden. There were also horses without names and horses with books of names. This stanza shows the diverse and complex nature of identity and how individuals can define themselves in different ways (Gilbert, 2023).

She had some horses  
 She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak  
 She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who  
 carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts  
 She had horses who waited for destruction  
 She had horses who waited for resurrection (lines 36-41)

She had some horses  
 She had horses who got down on their knees for any savior  
 She had horses who thought their high price had saved them  
 She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her  
 bed at night and prayed as they raped her ( lines 42-46)

Joy Harjo, as a Native eco-poet, attempts to convey the feelings and emotions of the people through nature. Such as hope, fear and sadness. In the sixth stanza, through the use of horses, she examines native peoples who feel suppressed, fear of standing up for their rights, and haunted by their past. Also, she shows their despair and hope through the horses that ready for either "resurrection" or "destruction" (Karam, 2020, 25). In the seventh stanza, Harjo continues the idea of "resurrection" by combining it with a desire for salvation and redemption from external sources.

She had some horses  
 She had some horses she loved  
 She had some horses she hated  
 These were the same horses (lines 47-59).

The poem acknowledges in its last lines how difficult it might be to reconcile divergent emotions and simplify the complexity of reality. It is clear from the lines that it is very difficult to have a conversation with the past or with nature itself. It implies that the desire to connect with the landscape is hindered and feels stuck because the person's sense of self and the world around them is falling apart. In the last stanza. It suggests that the Harjo's relationship with the horses, and by extension, with nature, is both loving and challenging at the same time (Jossa, 2007, p. 592).

### **Section three: Nature as a Source of Spiritual insight**

Nature and spirituality are closely intertwined. The natural world offers a perfect setting for deep reflection, meditation, spiritual contemplation, and self- discovery. By exploring our connection with nature, we can find greater purpose and significance in our lives. All religious beliefs acknowledge the profound impact of nature on our spirits. When we connect with the natural world, we experience God's presence more strongly and have a deeper understanding of God (Plays, 2007).

For instance, in Islam, nature holds great significance. The Quran sees the natural world as a "reminder" that helps us keep God always in our thoughts. Muslims can find inner peace, achieve spiritual insight, and deepen their faith by observing the harmonious balance and order in the natural world (Eaton, 2015). Native Americans receive spiritual insight and guidance as a result of their close relationship with nature. Nature holds a special place in their hearts and souls, as they attribute high spiritual value to it. They find solace and healing in nature, often seeking its embrace to recover from illnesses. For them, nature is like a nurturing mother; hence, they refer to it as "Motherland" (Jasim & Kamal Addin, 2023, p. 293).

#### ***3.1 Nature and Spirituality in “Remember“ poem***

Joy Harjo's poem "Remember" delves into the relationship between humans and nature. It is about remembering our birthplace, our origins, and the importance of gratitude towards the natural world. The poem's central idea is the interconnectedness of all life. Harjo addresses the reader directly by using the second person point of view and uses repetition, particularly with the word "remember," to highlight the importance of our connection to nature and the components that make up our existence (Mediber & Fahim, 2022, p. 16).

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
 know each of the star's stories.  
 Remember the moon, know who she is.  
 Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is  
 the strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
 and the giving away tonight (lines 1-6).

In these lines, Harjo encourages us to remember our relationship with the sky, stars, sun, and moon. The elements of nature have a significant role in Native American culture. For example, the reference to the sky above highlights the significance of the birthplace, not only as a geographic site but also as a link to the earth. The stars are supernatural creatures that have a spiritual influence on people's lives. The moon, seen as a divinity, controls many facets of existence. Also, the sun is honored and revered because it is the center of every living thing. Native American societies mark time with the sun, moon, and stars. Dawn is a significant moment for prayer and rituals. Sunsets mark a change in the day. It's all about recognizing our connection to the natural world and the spiritual significance it holds (Sivrioglu, Ayan, Keles, & Yalçin, 2016, p. 179).

Remember your birth, how is your mother struggled  
 to give you form and breath. You are evidence  
 of her life, and her mother's, and hers.  
 Remember your father. He is your life, also (lines 7-10).

Harjo, in these lines, reminds us to return to our roots, where we were originally connected to the plants, animals, earth, and our parents. She advises us to remember the birthing moment and the mother who gave birth through effort. Native Americans see the land as sacred and regard it as a mother. The poem reminds us to respect our mothers for their sacrifices in giving birth and to treat the earth with the same reverence (Constantakis, 2010, p. 186).

Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
 red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth brown earth,  
 we are earth (11-13).

Furthermore, Harjo represents her idea of identity through the various colors of the earth. She uses the colors red, black, yellow, brown, and white to symbolize the diverse identities of people on Earth and their connection to the land. Despite our different skin colors, we are all part of the same human family, just like how the earth holds different colors. We need to focus on our unity rather than our differences. Harjo highlights the relationship between our skin color and the earth we come from, emphasizing that the land we belong to is an integral part of our identity (Medjber & Fahim, 2022, p. 36).

Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all  
have their tribes, their families, their histories, too  
Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems  
Remember the wind. Remember her voice  
She knows the origin of this universe (lines 14-18).

Also, Harjo presents the idea that plants are not just objects but living beings with their own families, tribes, and histories. She encourages readers to interact dialogically with the plants. She also highlights that in ancestral traditions before modernity and capitalism, plants were seen as essential components of communal life rather than voiceless and inert commodities (Sharma, 2022, p. 5087). Part of Native American religion and ceremony is the concept of communicating with nature and other species. Because of that, Harjo advises the reader to both speak and listen to nature. Harjo states one of the Native Americans' beliefs about nature, which is that every natural element acts as a teacher and gives us wisdom. For example, the wind is seen as a mother figure who holds wisdom about the universe's origins and our journey in life. Nature is like a valuable school that teaches us about the essence of life (Constantakis, 2010, p. 190).

Remember you are all people and all people are you  
Remember you are this universe and this universe is you  
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you  
Remember language comes from this  
Remember the dance language is, that life is  
Remember.(lines 19-24).

In the last lines, Harjo emphasizes the idea that we belong to one another. All people have something in common. Each of us is a part of the others. It is important to keep in mind that the entire cosmos is just like ourselves. Every individual is a microcosm, or a copy of the entire universe. Similarly, the universe is identical to individuals. Also, Harjo emphasizes the dynamic nature of life, where nothing remains static. Everything is in a constant state of change and evolution. According to Harjo, language is a product of this ongoing change and motion. Language is life's dance; it is not apart from the natural world (Constanakis, 2010, p. 187).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper explored the profound role that nature and spirituality play in Joy Harjo's poetry. Through an examination of the Indigenous perspective and a close analysis of specific poems, a deeper understanding emerges of how Harjo's poetry reflects the profound connection between Indigenous people and the natural world. Her poetry serves as a powerful reminder of the healing and transformative power that can be found in our connection to the natural world. Additionally, by examining poems like "Eagle Poem" and "She Had Some Horses," the analysis shows how Harjo utilizes various literary devices like symbolism, metaphor, and imagery to represent these themes. For example, the eagle is seen as a sacred creature in Native American culture, representing strength, wisdom, and connection to the divine. Through the symbol of the eagle, Harjo invites the readers to open themselves to the natural world, to listen to their inner voice, and to recognize the languages of nature that exist beyond words and sounds. Also, by using the imagery of horses and other natural elements, Harjo invokes a sense of reverence for nature, connecting the reader to a deeper understanding of the natural world. Therefore, through the analysis of the "Remember" poem, Harjo invites readers to contemplate their place in the natural world, reminding them of the interconnectedness of all living beings.

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