

# ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN INDIAN AMERICAN POETRY

*Adel El-Sayed Hassan, PhD*  
*Sayed Sadek, PhD*

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Foreign Languages,  
Faculty of Arts, Taif University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

This study attempts to give a brief account of the employment of animals as symbols by such eminent Native American women poets as Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan. The animals include those whose images appear with high frequency in Native American culture and literature such as the bear, the wolf, the horse, the turtle, and others. The article analyses and compares the different metaphors of different animals as portrayed by the poets under study in order to relate these symbols to the cultural and psychological meanings in their poems. It also marks the points of difference between the use of animal images by European and Native American poets. This will be conducted by employing eco-criticism, a school of criticism which pays due attention to the equality between animals and humans. The study concludes that the Native American poets believe in the kinship with all creatures and dream of restoring the golden days when all creatures received equal appreciation before the coming of the colonizers.

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**Keywords:** Indian American Poetry, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Silko, animal symbolism

## Introduction

Though almost all cultures of the world use animal symbolism in real life as well as in legends and myths, Indian American literature usually regards animals with high esteem. Indian American people have traditionally regarded the animals in our lives as fellow creatures with which a common destiny is shared. The story of the relationship of Native peoples and horses, for instance, is one of the great sagas of human contact with the animal world. Moreover, in many Native American traditions, the wolf is considered to be the highest spiritual teacher in the kingdom. Animals represent the first beings, the ancient ones, the all-knowing deities responsible for creation and the source of strength and guidance in times of trouble, need, or spiritual

healing and growth. The Native Americans are so much in love with animals to the extent that there are countless numbers of books and literary works that take animal names.

The kinship between humans and animals has been highlighted in multiple critical works on Indian American life and culture. Deloria Jr. (2003) asserts this aspect in her book, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*:

Tribal religions find a great affinity among species of living creatures, and it is at this point that the fellowship of life is a strong part of the Indian way. The Hopi, for example, revere not only the lands on which they live but the animals with which they have a particular relationship. The dance for rain, which involves the use of reptiles in its ceremonies, holds a great fascination for whites, primarily because they have traditionally considered reptiles, particularly snakes, as their mortal enemy. ... Behind the apparent kinship between animals, reptiles, birds, and human beings in the Indian way stands a great conception shared by a great majority of the tribes. Other living things are not regarded as insensitive species. Rather they are “people” in the same manner as the various tribes of human beings are people. The reason why the Hopi use live reptiles in their ceremony goes back to one of their folk heroes who lived with the snake people for a while and learned from them the secret of making rain for the crops. It was a ceremony freely given by the snake people to the Hopi. In the same manner the Plains Indians considered the buffalo as distinct people, the Northwest Coast Indians regarded the salmon as a people. Equality is thus not simply a human attribute but a recognition of the creaturehood of all creation. (pp.88-89)

### **Statement of the Problem**

The future of humanity waits for those who will come to take up their responsibilities to all living things including animals. In this regard, the relationship with animals is so essential to the human community that many cultures of the world make use of animal symbolism to show the affinity between man and animals. This is manifest in Indian American culture and literature which usually show the most profound reverence for all animals. Specifically, Indian American people have customarily looked upon animals as fellow creatures with which they have common characteristics. The main questions of this study are:

1. How far do Indian American people view and venerate animals?
2. To what extent do animals participate in human activities?
3. Do animals pursue intimacy with other species?

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to

1. shed light on the use of animal symbolism in Indian American poetry.
2. show the employment of animal imagery by Silko, Harjo and Hogan.
3. discuss the psychological and cultural significance of the use of animal imagery by the poets under study.
4. demonstrate the clash between European and Native American environmental ethics and values.

### **Methodology**

Three prominent Native American women poets, namely, Silko, Harjo and Hogan will be studied to demonstrate their use of animal symbolism in their poetry. The study focuses on four animals whose images appear with high frequency in Native American culture and literature: the bear, the wolf, the horse and the turtle. It also analyses and compares the different metaphors of different animals portrayed by the poets under study in order to relate these symbols to the cultural and psychological meanings in the poems. An eco-critical approach will be used to display the close relationship between man and animals.

### **Animal Symbolism used by Silko, Harjo and Hogan in their poetry**

Native Americans are a deeply spiritual people and they communicate their history, thoughts, ideas and dreams from generation to generation through symbols and signs. J. Baird Callicott Claims that “the typical traditional American Indian attitude is to regard all features of the environment as inspirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, . . . no less intense and complete than human beings” (as cited in Ambhore, 2012, p. 21). Animals have a very significant historical value as they are given the status and reverence of sacred beings. In the creation myths of the Plains Indians, the animals were created before human beings, and this demands respect and veneration. Native Americans believe that “humans exist in community with all living things (all of whom are known to be intelligent, aware, and self-aware), and honoring propriety in those relationships forms one of our basic aesthetic positions” (Allen, 1989, p. 9). There are even various examples in Native American writing where one can see animals talking with the human beings and vice-versa (Ambhore, p. 22). The following pages attempt to study how Indian deep-rooted beliefs are reflected in their poetry by employing eco-criticism, a critical school that “refers to the practice of animal studies in literary studies which focus on animal representation, animal subjectivity, and animal rights” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 18).

One of the major characteristics of Indian American literature is the conflict between European and Native American environmental ethics and values. A key theme explored by Indians is “the struggle against colonialism and the subjugation of native peoples” (Otfinoski, 2010, p. 70) and the danger of European colonization experienced by the whole world. The colonizer’s mentality “intends to destroy the well-established system. It is utterly money-oriented and selfish” (Ambhore, 2012, p. 25). One of the most quoted pithy remarks among Indian Americans reads: “When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money” (as cited in Ambhore, p. 25). Nothing is more tragic or pitiful than the statements of Indians who have survived to see their sacred lands torn up and desecrated by a people of an alien culture who, driven largely by commercial interests, have lost the sense of protective guardianship over nature. According to Bear (2006), “I know of no species that was exterminated until the coming of the white man. . . . The white man considered animal life just as he did the natural man life upon this continent as pests” (p.165). Like Bear, Beidler (2002) points to the white men’s vicious attitude toward nature and animals: “The white man’s attitude that . . . animals are merely objects made for him to destroy carries over also into his attitude toward smaller animals and insects” (18). It has become obvious that the white man has destroyed all natural things in his continent. Between him and the animal there is no understanding and they (animals) have learned to evade his pursuit, for they cannot live on the same ground. Contrary to the selfish imperialist thought, “combining spiritual intuition with environmental activism, Hogan asks blessing, grace, and courage from her totemic guardians—bear, wolf . . . , etc.” (Lee & Velie, 2013, p. 344).

Since the bear represents the most frequent presence in Indian American poetry, it will be our first station in Native animals. Bears figure prominently in the mythology of nearly every Native American tribe. It is considered a medicine being with impressive magical powers, and is a symbol of strength and wisdom to many Native Americans. As bears continue fighting after being seriously injured, Native Americans often believed they were capable of healing their wounds. Moreover, “the bear is one version of human. . . .The human is not above the bear, . . . . A bear is best known by a number of ancient names such as—Old Man, Grandfather, Wise One, Courage Maker, Healer, . . . etc.” (Lincoln, 2009, pp. 221-22).

Bears and Indians have lived together on the continent of North America since time immemorial. “Both walked the same trails, fished the same streams . . . , harvested the same berries, seeds, and nuts” (Rockwell, 1991, p.1). In addition, “Bears are like people except that they can’t make fire” (Rockwell, p. 7). Affinity with the bears has been so widely recognized

to the extent that many plains and southwestern tribes “would not eat bear meat because they believed it was like eating a person, a relative” (Rockwell, p. 4).

The belief in self-transformation and rebirth is common among Native American tribes. This can be seen in “Story from Bear Country,” a poem from *The Remembered Earth* in which Silko (1979) displays the spiritual transformation people may undergo. The poem is an account of a boy’s adoption by bears and his subsequent return. The poem describes the allure of the bear’s summoning:

The problem is you will never want to return  
Their beauty will overcome your memory  
like winter sun  
Melting ice shadows from snow  
And you will remain with them  
locked forever inside yourself  
your eyes will see you  
dark, shaggy and thick. (p. 209)

“Here the metamorphosis of man into bear might, ” as Gish (2001) notes, “be seen as the transforming act of creation itself” (para. 17 ).

Silko’s “Story from Bear Country” suggests “a double transformative process-from human to bear and back again” (Krumholz, 1999, p. 80). The bears exerted all kinds of efforts to try to convert the boy to their kingdom. Silko (1979) uses vivid images throughout to guide the reader through a wilderness where bears are waiting to call people into their world:

Don’t be afraid  
we love you  
we’ve been calling you  
all this time  
Go ahead  
turn around  
see the shape  
of your footprints  
in the sand. (p. 210)

As soon as the bears ‘call people into their world,’ some actually join them, giving up their families and human lives. The poem states that once people follow the bears, they exhibit no desire to return to the human world, finding the animal company a world much more comfortable than that of humans. The call of the bear is irresistible as the boy is introduced to the beauty and richness of the bear world. It is so exciting that ‘The problem is / you will never want to return’ Once you walk too far into bear country, once you identify too strongly with another, you lose track of those that are left behind, including your original self. The beauty of the bears is so seductive

that it ‘will overcome your memory / Like winter sun / Melting ice shadows from snow.’

It is worth mentioning that “Story from Bear Country” represents an image of change for native peoples, “focusing on the transformation motif of human to bear in the traditional myth” (Haseltine, 2006, p. 82). This transposing of the bear into a human serves, as Haseltine notes, as “cultural and personal resistance” against “predatory colonization and assimilation through transcendence into a cosmic order, not bound by human history or law. (p.82)

Notably, the transformation from human to bear can happen quickly, especially for a child who has yet to learn the ways of humanity. The life of a bear can seem just as natural as the life of a human. In the absence of human schooling from his family, the naive child has found a new family in the bears. At a certain point in the work, both man and bear become synonymous with one another, man developing eyes that will see himself as the bear, ‘dark shaggy and thick.’ The transformation is recounted again and again in the poem (Kryhoski, 2002, p. 183). The fact is that the child is already close to being part of the bear family, or rather half-human half-animal.

The intrusion of the medicine man with his spiritual healing skills is mandatory. This is because he alone possesses the power to bridge the gap between worlds in which identity may be trapped and incessantly transformed. The loss of memory of one’s humanness is an escape into the beauty and attraction of being a bear, and so the bear priests must sing songs of equal beauty to tempt the bear-boy back to his past memories about humanity:

But the others will listen  
because bear priests  
sing beautiful songs  
They must  
if they are ever to bring you back  
They will try to bring you  
step by step  
back to the place you stopped  
and found only bear prints in the sand  
where your feet had been (Silko, 1979, p. 210)

In cases when people do get trapped in bear country, the poet informs readers that ‘bear priests,’ or medicine men specifically knowledgeable of bear magic, would be sent out to rescue them. Native Americans maintain a profound relationship with the natural world, believing animal spirits to be as unique and important as human spirits, each with their own powers and wisdom. The bear priests dress in their bear claw necklaces and paint their legs black to take on aspects of bear in order to be able to facilitate

communication with the bear community and restore the lost boy. With their medicine bags, the bear priests are chasing you. Their job is to retrieve you, to recall you to yourself ‘step by step,’ but you have already seen ‘only bear prints in the sand / where your feet had been.’ “The listener should now be wondering, is it too late to return?” (Smith, 2002, p.180).

Although the medicine man managed to get the boy back to humanity, the boy still keeps some of his bear-like qualities, which alienates him from the other children. The boy, particularly in this poem, is likely to stand for a new generation of Native Americans, who seem to have lost all connections with their heritage, and consequently are wanting in this sense of identity and belonging.

Silko’s “Story from Bear Country” serves as a cautionary tale. The child who wanders off, assumes bear aspects, and is ultimately recovered by the medicine man is never the same after that. He is no longer like the other children. He has been trapped and “his forging of kinship with bears has been gained at the terrible cost of alienation from both groups” (Smith, 2002, p.182). Silko seems to send a message of warning to all Native Americans, asking them to pay attention to schooling their children in their ancestors’ culture and history.

The wolf is also one of the most recurring animals in Native American poetry. It is an animal that figures in much of Native American writing, both contemporary and traditional. The importance of the wolf as a metaphorical, mythical, and actual figure in the literature of the Indians can be seen and felt everywhere. The meaning of the wolf image is to symbolize direction and leadership and it signifies strength and endurance. Many American Indians regard themselves as descending from wolves, and thus worship the wolf as both a god and an ancestor. Native Americans incorporate wolves into their myths, legends, ceremonies and rituals, portraying them as ferocious warriors in some traditions. They also associate the wolf with creativity, fertility and protection. Wolves do carry important characteristics. For instance, in the Paiute story “Wolf Creates the Earth,” it is evident that “Wolf possesses god-like abilities to create, an ability that might seem an attractive power for a writer who sees her role in life as creating worlds on the page” (Rader, 2000, p. 140).

For Native Americans, there exists a strong and intrinsic relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world. All are alive; all have spirits; all need each other for survival. Indeed, in “Four Mountain Wolves,” the land assumes human and animal aspects, for instance, “yellow-eyed wind” and “howling wind” (as cited in Rader, 2000, p. 140).

Basic to Native Americans is their close relationship with animals in general and the wolf in particular. Animals are considered part and parcel of their life. In this regard, Silko’s “Four Mountain Wolves” is not just a

portrayal of wolves traveling south in a ceaseless quest for food; rather, wolves were very important to many Native American tribes as a source of spiritual inspiration and as a wise creature to imitate. However, the American government's attitude toward nature in general and the wolf in particular is hostile. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, it sought to exterminate the wolf, ignoring most Native American tribes' affinity with the animal. The four wolves, representing the four seasons of the year, are forced to depart from their native home by the harsh winter.

One of the most prevalent and most critical themes of American Indian expression is the ability of Native American peoples to survive. Despite government orders of removal and the massacres of women and children, American Indians have managed to put up with their misfortunes in a dignified way. It might be argued that in "Four Mountain Wolves" Silko aligns the wolves with the situation of contemporary American Indians. Like the wolf, Native Americans often feel alienated from America, "yet, through spiritual and natural renewal and through cultural practice and preservation, they manage not only to survive, but to keep moving with power and authority" (Rader, 2000, p. 141). For Native Americans, cultural survival can be achieved through invigorating their connection to nature in general and the land and animals in particular.

Another example of the significance of the wolf in Native American poetry is expressed by Hogan (1993) in "The Fallen," a poem from her *The Book of Medicines*. Here the poet explores the deterioration of maternal images into those associated with dissolution, this time using the image of the Native animal. The poem is a kind of meditation on the wolf's symbolic role in Indian cultures:

In our astronomy  
the Great Wolf  
lived in the sky.  
It was the mother of all women  
and howled her daughter's names  
into the winds of night. (p. 42)

The Great Wolf "watches over the earth like a mother over a daughter and sings songs of healing and nurture" (Cagle, 2006, p. 91). Thus the speaker describes the wolf in very intimate terms, regarding it as a sincere maternal figure or a relative. However, unfortunately, 'the new people' look down upon the wolf as something to be feared and eradicated when it comes too close to human life:

But the new people,  
whatever stepped inside their shadow,  
they would kill,



whatever crossed their path,  
they came to fear. (Hogan, 1993, p. 42)

Obviously, the poem emphasizes that once the balance between human life and the natural world is lost, it becomes impossible to restore (Sadek, 2013, p. 66). New mythologies, whether ‘science’ or ‘stories,’ treat the wolf as a devil rather than a mother, ignoring the capacity of the wolf’s song to heal (Smith, 2003, pp. 130-31). As Hogan (1993) notes,

In their science,  
Wolf was not the mother.

Wolf was not wind

.....

In their stories  
Wolf was the devil

.....God's Lucifer. (p. 42)

Instead of viewing the wolf as a mother, a guardian of human daughters, Euro-American society has perverted the image until it has come to suggest danger, not protection. The speaker cannot restore the primeval relationship between humans and the natural world as the new people seem to have severed all connections with regenerative forces.

Maternal images are used by Hogan (1993) to deal with hope and aborted promises. “The swollen belly,” a symbol often associated with pregnancy, becomes an image not of rebirth but of aborted promise. Its enlargement also recalls the swelling caused by extreme malnutrition. The “dried up nipples of a hungry world” (p. 43) cannot provide the sustenance and nourishment needed to sustain life. These feminine, maternal images have again been fully converted into images of destruction, malnourishment, and barrenness (Cagle, 2006, pp. 92-93).

The co-existence of humans and animals manifests itself in Harjo’s *Wolf Warrior*. In this work, Marjo rebels against the devastation of the environment. She allows the animals themselves to protest against their exploitation by humans. Further, she demonstrates humans’ strong affinity with animals, particularly wolves. *Wolf Warrior* relates the story of a young Native American who makes up his mind to camp on Mount St. Helens accompanied only by his dogs. One night, a group of wolves pays a visit to the young man. In the American Indian mythology, wolves are not looked upon as hazardous animals but as creatures endowed with special wisdom. The wolves communicate with the young man without speaking, reminiscing about the good old times when they would wander freely on the vast planes. They grumble about the fences that preclude migration and they lament the lack of food. Listening carefully to these memories and reflections, the young man promises to tell his Native American fellows (Mancelos, 2007, pp. 69-70).

The intimacy between humans and animals in *Wolf Warrior* shows most clearly in the young man's warm and kind reception of the wolves:

The lead wolf motioned for her companions to come with her and they approached humbly, welcomed by the young man who had heard of such goings-on but the people had not been so blessed since the church had fought for their souls. He did not quite know the protocol, but knew the wolves are relatives and offered them coffee, store meat, and fried potatoes which they relished in silence. (Harjo, 1994, p. 145)

Black Elk has formulated Indian philosophy in the following statement: "We regard all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has influence, which can be given to us, through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive;" therefore, "all the four-legged animals, and the winged peoples" must be treated equally (as cited in Brown, 1989, p. 59; p. xx). In addition, Black Elk has a firm belief that "Peace . . . comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers" (as cited in Brown, p. 115). If this indicates anything, it indicates the close connection between humans and animals.

The close relationship between human and animal is nowhere so evident or potent as in the case of the horse. In this regard, Native Americans adore horses, taming and counting on them for hunting, warfare, and moving from place to place. Furthermore, they find strength in horses and connect with them spiritually. Their interest in horses goes beyond that of using them as animals of burden. They ultimately come to realize the importance of horses for their existence. As West (2006) notes,

The horse is a respected comrade, loved and admired for its bravery and grace. Among the Indians, horses were integral to life and culture. They were partners in the hunt and the battle and providers of swift movement when the need arose. Indeed, our survival often depended on the presence of horses. (p. 5)

Hogan believes that animals and human beings used to be the same kind of people as they understood each other. Moreover, when the world was young, the animals, people, and birds lived together peacefully and in friendship. In those early days of the world, in some locations, animals and humans were equal and, it was said, they spoke a common language, across species bounds. These very ideas are openly expressed by Hogan (2014) in her "Affinity: Mustang," a poem from *Dark. Sweet.: New & Selected Poems*. The poem reflects Hogan's philosophy and her strong belief in the unity between humans and nonhumans, represented by the horse in this poem whose first lines read:

When we walk together in the tall grasses,  
I feel her as if I am walking with mystery,

with beauty and fierce powers,  
as if for a while we are the same animal  
and remember each other from before. (p. 233)

Thus, there is a strong feeling of intimacy on the personal as well the historical level between the lady and the horse. The speaker fully identifies with the physical and the spiritual aspects of the horse.

Other lines travel back in history to remind readers of the dilemma of the Indian Americans and their suffering, along with their horses:

Some days I sing to her  
remembering the Kiowa man  
who sang to cover the screams  
of their ponies killed by the Americans  
the songs I know in my sleep.  
Some nights, hearing her outside,  
I think she is to the earth  
what I am to her,  
belonging. (Hogan, 2014, p. 234 )

The horse reminds the woman speaker of the tragic history of the Trail of Tears when a large number of the Indians as well as the horses carrying them have been killed by the merciless colonizers.

The lady and the horse kept these almost familial ties for long and spent their time singing together. We have vivid, life-like maternal images of the pregnant horse. But the unhappy incident of the death of the horse's infant before birth shattered their lives. However, the speaker tries hard to give the horse a new hope and to calm her down.

Sometimes it seems as if we knew each other  
from a time before our journeys here  
In secret, I sing to her, the old songs  
the ones I speak in my sleep.  
But last night it was her infant that died  
after the kinship and movement  
of so many months  
Tonight I sit on the straw  
and watch as the milk streams from her nipples  
to the ground. I clean her face.  
I've come such a long way through time  
to find her and  
It is the first time  
I have ever seen a horse cry.  
Sing then, the wind says,  
Sing. (Hogan, 2014, p. 234 )

Harjo (1983) also keeps this familial connection with horses, regarding them as a species that has all aspects of humans. Her horses are “with long, pointed breasts,” “with full, brown thighs,” “laughed too much,” “danced in their mothers’ arms.” They are “much too shy,” “said they weren’t afraid.” They are also linked to Native Americans as they “whispered in the dark,” and “were afraid to speak” (pp. 61-62). This indicates the feeling of intimacy between Indians and horses as they share physical and mental characteristics to survive the ruthless attacks of the European colonizers.

Turtles play positive roles in the folklore of many Native American tribes. In the creation myths of some tribes, the Great Spirit created their homeland by placing earth on the back of a giant turtle. This is why some contemporary Native Americans refer to North America by the name “Turtle Island.” Turtles are a symbol of the earth in many different Native cultures. They are associated with long life, protection, and fertility. In some tribes, a newborn girl’s umbilical cord was sewn into a figure in the shape of a turtle as a totem to ensure her health and safety. In other tribes, turtles are often associated with healing, wisdom, and spirituality. Commenting on the turtle’s patent role in the creation of the earth, Sam D. Gill states:

All over the Americas tribes told about the creation of the world in stories that said that in the beginning there was nothing but an expanse of water. The first beings were perched on the back of a water turtle. Among these beings were animals who took turns diving into the water to try to swim to the bottom, where they might get a bit of soil to use in creating the earth. Animal after animal attempted the task. Each was gone longer and longer. Each returned exhausted, almost dead, and without any soil. One animal was finally able to bring up just a tiny bit of soil beneath its claw. The earth maker took this bit of dirt and made the earth out of it. But the whole earth still rested on the back of the turtle. (as cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 66).

Hogan’s (1987) collection, *Calling Myself Home*, opens with poems that draw upon the turtle as a metaphor of the human ability to gather wisdom from animals and the earth. In the first poem, “turtle,” the turtle must be ritualistically summoned as the opening line states, “I’m dreaming the old turtle back,” and the turtle emerges from the world of water and silt (p. 3), almost typical to a birth process. The light that shines through the turtle’s eyes as it emerges has the potential to wake up a sleeping world. The turtle then offers his shell, a shield of armor and sustenance, to humans as a sign of endurance and a connection to history. Shells serve in various contexts as rattles, vessels, and/or shields and play a significant role in ceremonies and rituals.

The poem continues, stating that we should wear the turtle shell on our backs “like old women / who can see the years / back through his eyes”

(Hogan, 1987, p. 3). The poem ends by telling women that putting on the turtle's shell will allow them to remember and connect to the ancient past. The turtle shell serves to reinforce the protective, nurturing role of the culture bearer (Montgomery, 2009, p. 184). In fact, this poem commemorates the relationship between women and the generative power of turtles:

Wake up, we are women.  
The shells are on our backs.  
We are amber  
the small animals  
are gold inside us. (Hogan, 1987, p. 3)

This stanza exemplifies a plurality of voices as the voices of both ancient and modern day women blend together and thus major elements of heritage are passed smoothly from one generation to the other.

The recurring image of the turtle, “with its hard, perhaps almost petrified exterior and soft, living interior, becomes a type of representation of the Native American who has had to develop metaphorical external defense mechanisms in order to preserve the life of their ancient rituals, songs, and ceremonies” (Montgomery, 2009, p. 82). Like turtles, the Indians need to learn never to give up hope but to keep fighting hard for their survival against the evil forces that conspire to uproot them from history.

The Native American poems that take place in the sea reflect the conflict between the Indian Americans and the Europeans as the poems reflect the ugly face of imperialism. In most of Native American works, the characters, if Native, are usually drawn as innocent, simple folk, who strive to maintain or return to traditional ways. By contrast, the white world surrounding the main Native characters is portrayed negatively; the inhabitants of that world are thoughtless, careless, ignorant, cruel, and greedy. ...The protagonist rebels against whiteness; refusing to assimilate. (Allen, 1996, p. 9)

In “Hunger,” Hogan situates the poem in a historical framework that allows the speaker to tell of the early period of the colonial settlements that eventually caused American Indian cultural genocide (Dreese, 1999, p.15).The image of the colonizers hungering after the riches of water is skillfully drawn. As the poem proceeds, Hogan (1993) compares the abuse of dolphins to the ill-treatment of Native women.

Hunger was the fishermen  
who said dolphins are like women  
we took them from the sea  
and had our way with them. (p. 17)

The poem conjures the image of colonial settlers crossing the sea in quest for that which will gratify themselves. Therefore, in this poem, sea

creatures are connected to Native Americans. Both are exposed to endless repression.

In the second part of the poem, Hogan (1993) makes use of maternal metaphors to highlight the consequences of the abuse of dolphins/Native Americans. The sea is represented as the figure of a generous, pregnant woman who is fertile and oblivious to the maneuver of the man who waits until the night falls to rape her:

It is the old man  
who comes in the night  
to cast a line  
and wait at the luminous shore  
He knows the sea is pregnant  
with clear fish

and their shallow pools of eggs. (Hogan, p. 17)

The rapacious old man insists on depriving the sea of its fertility and regenerative powers. This is another proof of how the creative possibilities of sea creatures have been manipulated to serve the covetous needs of the colonizers.

Another example of this European attack on sea creatures/women is in Hogan's (1993) poem "Harvesters of Night and Water." It begins with the image of men sailing on a boat in the middle of the ocean violently striving to catch a resilient octopus. The merciless men (colonizers) exert their utmost effort to destroy nature in order to imprison the free creatures with "impotent nets/ limp as poverty/ that when it ends/ takes more than it needs" (p. 22). They behave like thieves who appear only at night to steal and ravish all beauties around them:

In midnight  
The circle of light in the boat  
is filled with men and white arms  
with ropes moving like promise  
and nets pulling up the black and icy waters. (p. 22)

The men keep shooting, screaming, and terrifying the tender sea creatures in order to get what they need. Hogan depicts the verbal violence that often accompanies humans' raids into animal-inhabited terrains. The fishermen in the poem, who roughly attempt to haul an octopus into their boat, are unable to listen to the subtler language of this sea creature (Love, 2003, p. 82). At last, the octopus fights back the forces of evil that conspire to take it away from its eternal habitat:

His many arms  
fight hard, hold fast and tight  
against the held boat,  
in struggle with air and men. (Hogan, 1993, p. 22)

The men insist on capturing the octopus with their grappling hooks for economic benefit as “it will sell for two hundred dollars,/ it will be cut into pieces...and used again” (Hogan, p. 23). The clever octopus finally manages to escape by the skin of its teeth.

Although the octopus is represented as silent, “perhaps silenced (the fishermen seem to drown out any sounds it might make), the female narrator expresses a desire to communicate the complexities of its life to the fishermen” (Love, 2003, p. 83). The speaker who watches the events in the poem is distressed by the vehement and painful manner in which the men attempt to catch the octopus:

I want to tell them what I know,  
that this life collects coins  
like they do

and builds walls on the floor of the sea. (Hogan, 1993, p. 23)

The fishermen cannot recognize “the verbal and nonverbal connections between themselves and the nonhuman, sea-dwelling creatures they are struggling to claim and kill” (Love, 2003, p. 83). This indifference to other forms of life has created a vicious world in Hogan’s view. “The men who are harvesting the night in the seas that she navigates in her poetry fail to acknowledge and respect sea creatures that surround them” (Montgomery, 2009, p. 139).

It is Harjo, along with Hogan, who can be regarded without doubt as the Native American poets who celebrated the animal kingdom most. Despite the grim reality of life for many of her fellow native women, Harjo has an optimistic view of the world throughout her poems. Both Harjo and Hogan stressed the Indian belief that all animals are equal to humans and should be treated with respect in scores of their poems which mark the transformative visions of Native American poets, from hopelessness to hope, from death to survival and rebirth.

In “Anniversary,” a poem from *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo (2000) rejoices in the wholeness of all creatures. The title of this poem is suggestive of its celebratory claim, for anniversaries refer to joyful occasions. The poem attempts to relate how the world started and when humankind emerged. It depicts the natural world developing from stars and galaxies to birds and fish to, finally, human race. All creatures, as the poem suggests, experience transformation. Humans are transformed from dust into creatures; the earth and seas are transformed as well. Similarly, Animals go through transformations. “The shy fish” suddenly becomes a creature of the land. He walks “out of the ocean onto dry land, / just like that, to another life” (p.106). The first sea creatures became earth-dwelling. Fogs and insects begin to inhabit the world together with humans. Harjo continues marking the growth of the universe, showing that at this point “a bird or two were

added,” including “the crow of course to / joke about humanity,” as well as another bird which is looked upon as “beautiful” despite its vague identity (p. 107).

The poem also entails that the seeds of the human race were planted in the story of the universe. But in the beginning no creature existed as a free, individual entity; therefore, “there was no separation” between humans and the stars, planets, galaxies, or any substance rotating together in space. All elements of nature existed as one unified whole. As “Anniversary” draws to its end, the “manner” in which “we became” the human race becomes evident. Although fire is not always conceived of as something graceful, in this poem it suggests that the explosive beginnings of the universe led to the notable creation of human race. In addition, “we” stems from “the waving grass,” which serves as metaphor displaying the human connection to all living things, including animals as well as planets (Harjo, 2000, pp.106-07). In this sense, Harjo “continues the tradition of erasing boundaries when she discusses the lines between contemporary and traditional stories” (Leen, 1995, p. 4).

In her “Eagle Poem”, a poem from *Mad Love and War*, Harjo (1990) celebrates the human association with the eagle and refers to the healing and purgatory power of the bird as well as its “sacred wings.” The poet feels blessed and honored by likening herself and other humans to the eagle:

We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon within a  
True circle of motion,  
Like eagle rounding out the morning  
Inside us. (p. 65)

Again, this reverence for the eagles stands in contrast with the Euro American economic attitudes that keep hunting the eagles, regarding the bird as a natural resource to be plundered.

The Native American poet and environmental activist Hogan holds that boundaries are all lies. This seems to be the motto adopted by the poet all through her writings. Despite, or perhaps because of the various intertwined concerns and reflections that Hogan weaves together in her writing, she stubbornly clings to her concern for breaking boundaries. “And why shouldn’t she? She’s had to break so many. Hogan weaves her boundary-breaking imperative throughout her poetry. it means daring to throw off inner and outer constraints that divide humans and nonhumans” (Ackerberg, 1994, p 7).

Hogan expresses her deep concern over the death of animals. Like Her ecological poems, she portrays all living things, including humans, as part of the wholeness or unity of the universe. In “Missing the Animals” a poem from *Eclipse*, Hogan (1983) emerges as an activist who displays



concern for the loss of species. With its bleak vision of human beings as the only mammals left on the planet, “Missing the Animals” issues a stark ecological warning:

So many have escaped  
space disappears.  
The planets fill up  
with loud gunshots killing death,  
a wing beat  
going out an open hole in space.  
The air holds nothing  
like a silent cage, no roars. (p. 13)

The poem begins with the pronouncement which implies that the animals are fleeing the planet in large numbers. Hogan employs images in ‘space disappears,’ ‘open hole,’ and ‘silent cage,’ which emphasize the emptiness and loss (Gholap, 2011, p. 407).

The last poem of the section is closely related to the first, keeping on Hogan’s comments on the relation of humankind to the animal kingdom. In this poem, she petitions humans not only to recognize their humble position among the creatures of earth, but also to advocate for fellow creatures that cannot advocate for themselves (Gholap, 2011, p. 407). In *Eclipse*, Hogan (1983) dedicates the poem “V. Who Will Speak?” to Chief Lyons:

If all the animals came from the hills,  
if all the fish came from the rivers,  
and the birds came down from the sky  
we would know our lives,  
small,  
somewhere between the mountain  
and the ant.  
We would see what we do pass by  
and return  
around earth's curve. (p.42)

This poem breaks down hierarchies, positioning humankind as one species among many, not as dominant, but again as ‘small/somewhere/between the mountain and the ant.’ Humankind is neither the mightiest nor the minutest entity on the earth, but one species among many groups that populate the earth. In the introduction to a collection of writings on women’s spiritual development, Hogan writes: “it is an honor for us to give back to the earth, to care for animals, plants, people, minerals, to fight with all our will, politics, and the many forms of education we have earned in order to preserve life inside and outside ourselves” (as cited in Carew-Miller, 1994, p. 37).

In “Naming the Animals” Hogan criticizes “the Biblical Adam’s presumptuous naming of the animals” (Blaeser,1997, p. 564). In the same poem, Hogan (1993) attacks man’s imperialist attitude of naming the “wolf, bear, other/as if they had not been there/ before his words, had not/had other tongues and powers/ or sung themselves into life/ before him” (p.40).

From the environmental perspective, animals have been pursued to the point of extermination and this indicates the ugliness of genocide. The genocidal impulse implicit in the moneymaking endeavors in Indian Territory reaches its fullest expression with the war on bats (Casteel, 1994, 52). In “The Bats,” one of Hogan’s collection of nature essays entitled *Dwellings*, the author uses the example of a bat relying on instinctive sonar to help it maneuver and survive, and compares the bats to Native Americans who also seem to be trapped between two worlds and cultures and must rely on the whispering voices of ancestors to help them navigate in a world that often seeks to silence them. Just as bats move about at dusk, in the in-between world of day and night, Hogan suggests that Native Americans also exist in an in-between world of ancient tribal traditions and postmodern culture. (Montgomery, 2009, p. 180)

Following in the very steps of the bat, Hogan suggests that Native Americans must “rely on ancient voices that speak from within; inaudible to some, they provide a traditional, authoritative compass for those who are willing to listen” (Montgomery, p. 180).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have analyzed the Indian belief in the interconnectedness of all creatures—human and nonhuman—through a brief analysis of selected Indian American poets and poems. In the final analysis, we can say that the Indian American poets are a deeply spiritual people whose philosophy is purely environmental and gives due respect to all elements of nature. All kinds of animals—domestic and wild—have been represented by Native American poets in a very exceptional way. While European colonizers are money-oriented, legalizing the ruthless killing of helpless animals for their own benefits, the Indians believe in the unity of all beings that inhabit the earth and celebrate the existence of animals as family members. Animals represent an objective correlative of the Indians as both of them suffer together and need typical defense mechanisms in order to survive. Native American poets try to restore the golden days of the past when animals and people spoke a common language and lived together peacefully and in friendship.

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