

**Nature's Tapestry: Ecocritical Exploration of Identity in Jeanette Armstrong's*****'Whispering in the Shadows'*****Ms. Veronica Bhonsle****Department of English****Mumbai University****Abstract:**

In aboriginal cultures around the world, where the idea of land ownership is absent and animistic beliefs entwine Nature with one's basic sense of self, the role of Nature is of utmost importance. Contrastingly, modern capitalism thrives on exploiting Nature, leading to unchecked misuse and an escalating climatic problem. Writing about environmental degradation has seen a recent uptick in engagement from contemporary authors in response to this worldwide concern. *Whispering in the Shadows*, a book by Jeanette Armstrong, is examined ecocritically in this study. Armstrong is well-known for being a Native Canadian novelist and environmental activist, and his Okanagan heritage greatly influenced this literary investigation. The study explores how the natural world is a foundation for creating a Native Canadian identity in the story.

**Keywords:** aboriginal cultures, animalistic beliefs, Nature, environment, climatic issues, etc.

Nature has always existed in literature, evolving from a contextual backdrop in pre-industrial times to an explicitly emphasized focus in modern works. This complex link is summarised by Dana Philips (1999), who claims, "Nature is complex; nature is thoroughly implicated in culture, and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature." (578) Nature has become more than just an objective metaphor in contemporary literature; it has developed into a whole genre. The two opposing aspects of the human attitude towards Nature can be broadly categorized as material and emotional. The former is consistent with a capitalist and colonial mindset frequently linked to exploitation and resource extraction. This attitude has historically gone hand in hand with the growth of colonial powers, especially during European industrialization, when the untamed wildness of settler colonies became a target for invasion and control. The "frontier" metaphor, frequently used in American literature to represent the westward expansion and the consequent alteration of the land, is a prime example of this worldview.

Indigenous tribes worldwide have preserved an emotional and spiritual connection with Nature in stark contrast to this materialistic viewpoint. For them, Nature is a sacred force entwined with their cultural identity rather than a resource to be exploited. This

viewpoint represents a peaceful coexistence with the natural environment and serves as a counterweight to the colonizing attitude. Indigenous cultures strongly connect to this notion because they value Nature as a source of knowledge, spirituality, and nutrition. The contrast between these two perspectives on Nature emphasizes the significant impact of cultural and historical settings on literary representations. The portrayal of Nature in literature has changed along with it, reflecting the shifting attitudes and connections people have had with Nature.

The human race did not take the measure of the harm being done to the biosphere seriously until the second half of the twentieth century. Due to the severe Nature of the climate change issue, ecology is becoming a major topic of discussion in academia and policymaking. A theoretical framework called Ecocriticism has evolved in the field of literature to examine writings through the prism of the natural world. Ecocriticism explores the complex relationship between literature and Nature, as Glotfelty (17) explains. It addresses important issues like how Nature is portrayed and treated in the text. The fundamental beliefs underpin the author's narrative how the viewpoint is towards Nature expressed and analyzed. The ecological issues that the text examines are also closely examined, as well as any suggestions for potential remedies. A deeper investigation of how authors interact with the natural world in their creative expressions is made possible by this critical approach, which acts as a bridge between literature and environmental challenges.

With the release of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell in the middle of the 1990s, Ecocriticism established its position as a critical strategy. These works were a crucial turning point in the evolution of Ecocriticism as a discipline. According to Lawrence Buell, including environmental themes in literary studies has been driven more by particular problems than any overarching approach or paradigm. Due to its adaptability, Ecocriticism has integrated several theoretical systems, including Marxism, Gender Studies, and Postcolonialism (Buell 11). Ecocriticism has broadened its analytical possibilities by integrating these various viewpoints, allowing it to interact with texts on a bigger and more thorough scale. This open-minded philosophy has enabled Ecocriticism to transcend conventional academic boundaries, making it the only discipline capable of delving into the complex relationships between literature, the environment, and various sociocultural elements. Ecocriticism has developed into a dynamic and adaptable analytical method that can explore the many facets of texts while illuminating their ecological, social, and ideological implications.

Indigenous peoples living in what is now known as Canada were intimately connected to their natural environs before European settlers arrived, finding satisfaction for both their material and spiritual needs in the embrace of the natural world. Their cultural practices were built on this symbiotic relationship with Nature, which entwined their way of life with the natural world. According to their geographic locations, historians have categorized the various indigenous groups in Canada into six different groups: the Woodland First Nations, the Iroquoian First Nations, the Plains First Nations, the Plateau First Nations, the Pacific Coast First Nations, and the First Nations living in the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins. These tribes are geographically diverse, yet they nonetheless share a shared cultural heritage that has been profoundly influenced by the places they have called home.

The First Nations' festivals, songs, dances, and rites, intimately connected to their surroundings, resonated with their great regard for Nature. However, the entry of European colonizers marked the beginning of a revolutionary and frequently disastrous age. Mutual understanding had formerly characterized the partnership, but business and military concerns increasingly took precedence. This change signalled the change from interdependence to dependency. British administrations developed a fervent missionary strategy to "civilize" the native population as the military importance of the indigenous peoples began to decline. Their old ways of life were forcibly abandoned due to this endeavour. The ensuing cultural upheaval severed the indigenous populations from the land and customs that had characterized their life for generations, with far-reaching effects. The impact of European colonization on the indigenous people's relationship with Nature and cultural practises at this crucial historical juncture signified a turning point.

Several measures were put into place without considering the indigenous peoples' great cultural diversity. The 1867 passage of the Indian Act gave the government agency in charge of Indian affairs more power. Contrarily, it worked under the premise that the Crown would act as the indigenous people's "guardian" before their successful integration. Residential schools were simultaneously given more attention in 1883 and were promoted as the main means of "assimilation" and "civilization." Due to significant underfunding, children were forced to abandon their native languages and cultural traditions by these institutions. Between 1876 and 1927, the Indian Act underwent several revisions, and throughout each one, the indigenous community was purposefully left out of the consultation process. With merciless effectiveness, several governing laws and regulations were put into place. In particular, the Oka Crisis of 1990 and other incidents compelled the Canadian government to reevaluate its strategies. In recent years, increased pressure forced the government to

acknowledge the years of maltreatment and abuse that kids in residential schools endured. A public apology was issued as a result of this recognition in 2007. The National Aboriginal Day is now a key component of the yearly "Celebrate Canada!" celebrations nationwide. Although the road to this inclusion may have been difficult, it is crucial to draw attention to the difficulties faced by the indigenous people. The obstacles undergone over time have aided in raising awareness of the hardships these people have experienced, encouraging empathy, comprehension, and recognition of their history.

As a respected author, educator, artist, and activist, Jeanette Armstrong is a well-known Canadian personality. She has deep roots in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia's Penticton Indian Reserve. Since Jeanette was born, raised, and decided to raise her children on the Penticton Native Reserve, it is clear that she has a strong connection to her native place. In 2013, Jeanette Armstrong was named the Canada Research Chair in Okanagan Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy for outstanding accomplishments. Her involvement with the En'owkin Centre demonstrates her dedication to promoting indigenous education and cultural preservation.

Armstrong's writings cover creativity, education, ecology, and Indigenous peoples' rights. In particular, her 1985 book *Slash* is noteworthy since it is regarded as the first novel written by a First Nations woman in Canada. To be used in a grade eleven modern history curriculum, *Slash* explores the North American Indian protest movement through the eyes of its main character, Tommy Kelasket, who was later given the name Slash. The book explores Tommy's encounters with a racist culture and an assimilationist educational system. However, his pride in his Okanagan ancestry is nurtured by his family's continuous support. Slash eventually develops into an activist who promotes Aboriginal rights. Armstrong claims that "Slash" is a personal and intimate account documenting the beginnings and development of Native action from the 1960s onward. Jeanette Armstrong's commitment to education, culture, and the rights of Indigenous communities is demonstrated by her life and work. She has permanently impacted Canadian literature and society through her many endeavours.

One aspect of Jeanette Armstrong's activism is her steadfast support for the rights of indigenous people. The revival of indigenous communities and their cultural legacy is at the heart of her studies. Her engagement with the Okanagan Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy Canada Research Chair is a testament to her goal of bringing attention to the sometimes underappreciated and inaccessible indigenous knowledge, particularly within the Syilx Okanagan First Nations communities. By serving as an international observer for the

Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Peoples and Organisations, Armstrong's devotion to promoting global awareness and understanding of these important concerns is highlighted.

Published in 2000, *Whispering in the Shadows* is Jeanette Armstrong's second book. Like the main character, Penny Jackson, Armstrong comes from an Okanagan tribe. The story follows Penny's journey from her upbringing on a reservation to her marriage to Francis, her subsequent divorce, and her ongoing battle to find work despite her difficult financial situation. In particular, Penny's willpower inspires her to pursue further education, overcoming the obstacles of poverty. Her persona is further enriched by the environmental advocacy she engages in through her artwork.

The tale, composed of a mix of letters, diaries, monologues, and dialogues, provides a window into the lives and experiences of Native Canadians. The book offers readers a moving look at indigenous people's struggles, aspirations, and identities through Penny's point of view. Because of Jeanette Armstrong's narrative, we may better comprehend these communities' past and current problems by shedding light on their sometimes unreported tales. According to the text, the fundamental component of Native Canadian identity is building a strong bond with Nature. This topic runs throughout the story, and the intertextual poetry that serves as the epigraph immediately clarifies its importance. This beautiful preface immediately highlights the palpable character of the landscape and the complex human connections it produces.

The main character, Penny Jackson, emphasizes the importance of Nature in identifying her Native Canadian identity. Her portrayal of the natural environment as an essential component of her very being lends her descriptions an almost supernatural air. The story portrays this presence of Nature as a tangible, living thing rather than merely an abstract idea. The story highlights some of Penny's traditions, especially the sunrise rites she performs each morning with her Tupa (grandmother), highlighting her deep spiritual and emotional ties to the land. In addition, the poem makes use of anthropomorphism to illustrate how closely related to the environment the indigenous peoples are. Blue jays, huckleberries, yellow bells, and other parts of Nature have human-like characteristics, highlighting the close relationship that the native population has with Nature. Nature is intrinsically woven into the story's fabric and acts as more than just a setting; it is a character in and of itself, directing and influencing the people's lives and reflecting their cultural history. The article emphasizes how indigenous people's close connection to their environment shapes their identity and supports their

spiritual and cultural practises. The novel expresses the complex and enduring relationship between Native Canadians and the place they call home through various literary techniques and narrative components.

The novel's tone and ideas are greatly influenced by the inclusion of Pauline Johnson's poem *Moonset* at the beginning. Using literary techniques like personification and synesthesia helps this poem vividly depict Nature. When thoroughly analyzed, the poem's use of the term "shadowland" acquires significant importance. Although it may technically relate to a hazy border area between two locations, its contextual connotation reflects the plight of indigenous people. They are stuck between a lost culture and one still difficult to accept fully. The poem's last lines, "I may not all your meaning understand/, but I have touched your soul in shadow-land," elicit a tender longing for a time when man and Nature were intimately intertwined (Armstrong 5). These sentences also communicate a sense of perseverance, reiterating that one's connection to one's roots cannot be severed despite one's best efforts.

The second poem, *Frogs Singing*, has a folkloristic feel that reflects indigenous peoples' cultures. The phrase "my sister did not dream this" makes it clear that Nature is an essential part of daily life and not just an idealized concept for them. Both poems invite readers to explore the complex bond between indigenous populations and the natural world. These poems' literary techniques and cultural resonances serve as thematic compass points for the novel, highlighting the significance of Nature as a living presence entwined with identity and memory. Penny Jackson appears in the book as a metaphor for Mother Nature. The first chapter describes her passion for colours and painting, using metaphors of consuming, love, and lunacy. This relationship is clear. This portrayal reflects the close bond that native communities have with the environment.

In the first episode, Penny strongly desires to accurately depict the surrounding snowbank's texture in her painting, demonstrating a profound spiritual connection to her surroundings.

"What do I want to get it like that for anyway?" she asked. Why? That explains why it's talking to me. Singing is heard. The statement shows her intuitive and acute awareness of the natural components around her, "It sounds like an under-the-breath Indian song" (Armstrong 7).

This text illustrates how indigenous cultures frequently view Nature as a living thing that communicates through minute details that require heightened sensitivity. Others, like



Penny's friend Roberta, cannot understand her unusual viewpoints, and they dismiss them. Roberta makes fun of Penny, saying,

"Why don't you think of normal stuff, like how that cool guy Michael has a new car" (Armstrong 9).

This contrasts with the materialistic viewpoint of the majority of society. The connection between Penny and the people around her and the profound grasp of the natural world provided by the materialistic world is symbolized by this disconnect between Penny and those around her. Penny's nearly obsessional relationship with colour and painting is turned into a metaphor, showing how she escapes from the world of materialism and enters the world of Nature. She finds comfort, tranquillity, and solace in painting things that are incomprehensible to others. This narrative dynamic emphasizes the overarching theme that materialistic societies frequently view indigenous perspectives on the natural world as foreign or illogical, and it furthers the idea that Nature is frequently misunderstood and underestimated in conventional thinking.

The article emphasizes how vital it is for indigenous groups to preserve their traditional practices and maintain a deep bond with the planet. This concept is eloquently shown throughout the book, stressing the value of cultural inheritance and the close connection to Nature. The idea of the "circle of friendship," described in the story, is an example of the deliberate measures made to preserve this tradition. The speech made by an Indian from Bolivia, Manual Antonio Vitario, to the Friendship Circle, serves as an example. His message perfectly captures the need to protect ecological health and cultural heritage. We have one agenda, no? he exclaims. Mama Pache. Like the flowers, we are hers. If Pache Mama is healthy, so are we. Our political and economic objectives aim to achieve this. Pache Mama longs to see all of her flowers flourish in good health. The interconnectedness of human existence and the natural environment is emphasized in Vitario's comments. The term "Pache Mama" refers to Mother Earth and conveys the idea that the well-being of humans is inextricably related to that of the planet. This thinking emphasizes how much native people value a harmonious coexistence with the environment.

The portrayal in the book highlights the indigenous community's dedication to imparting its values and knowledge to the next generation. It highlights the importance of fostering a strong bond with the Earth, not just as a physical habitat but also as a spiritual and cultural being. This cultural transfer, highlighted by occasions like the Friendship Circle, links ancestors' customs and modern living, preserving the ingrained harmony between native

peoples and the natural world. For many indigenous people, maintaining cultural traditions and protecting the environment are linked goals. While indigenous people work to preserve their cultural traditions, they also have a wider goal: protecting the planet from the materialistic and capitalistic impulses that the West frequently embodies.

Nature is not only a backdrop for indigenous cultures; it is a living thing that requires respect and responsibility. This viewpoint contrasts sharply with the exploitative method frequently used in capitalist systems. Indigenous people consider themselves stewards of the environment despite being brutally uprooted from their homes due to settlement activity. Maintaining the natural world is as much a duty as a resource for them. The text emphasizes the difference between settlers' and indigenous peoples' attitudes towards the natural world. Penny's conversation with Jim, an activist she meets at a camp on Vancouver Island's Five Valley Coast, is an example. If given full control, Jim wonders why native people wouldn't think of making money off the land to help them out of poverty. In response, Penny highlights the basic problem: Through thousands of years of habitation, the indigenous people have a history of not destroying their lands. She points out that their strategy is founded on a fundamental comprehension of true sustainability, sometimes lacking in the predominately capitalist paradigm.

This difference highlights the indigenous mindset of preserving the environment while avoiding exploitation, a hallmark of capitalist-driven systems. The text emphasizes the wisdom inherent in indigenous viewpoints on Nature and their sincere dedication to its conservation for the greater good, especially in the face of significant past injustices, through Penny's response. Undoubtedly, the book emphasizes that, from the perspective of indigenous groups, the land is much more than just a resource to be used and profited from. Instead, it represents a deep, mutually beneficial relationship and a spiritual bond. By emphasizing a holistic viewpoint that considers the land's intrinsic importance to human well-being as well as the well-being of the planet as a whole, this concept redefines how Nature is regarded.

The essay emphasizes the significance of the sustainability concept. It strongly emphasizes living in harmony with the environment to balance meeting human needs and preserving the environment. Anyone who cares about ecology and our world's future should note this emphasis on sustainability. In essence, the book repeatedly contrasts a society with a strong connection to Nature with one where exploitation and the pursuit of wealth are prevalent. The story offers a fascinating picture of a different future in which ecological harmony is attained through a sustainable strategy. The book presents an alternate viewpoint



when the environment faces serious difficulties by giving this picture of a more harmonious relationship with the environment. Indigenous narratives, like those in this book, are crucial in igniting change and promoting environmental activism. They offer perceptions of a way of living that coexists with Nature and potentially solves our environmental problems. These narratives encourage a change in consciousness and the desire for a more environmentally friendly and sustainable future through their storytelling.

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