Chapter Three

Joy Harjo

This chapter centers on the poetic contribution of Joy Harjo and argues despite being a mixed-blood like Allen her poetry shows her resentments against nativism as her worldview on the one hand and Bhabhalian hybridity on the other. As compared to Allen, Harjo deploys more the traditional and mythical notions of her tribe and at the same time hybridizes the traditional worldview with contemporary issues. In the hybrid conditions of her context, her poetry shows a tilt to the tribal concerns and this politicizes her poetry. As another ecofeminist Indian poet, Harjo resembles Allen; yet in her ecofeminism she is seeking a kind of balance between gender polarities. Her poetry received international recognition since the publication of What Moon Drove Me to This? in 1979. While Harjo’s poetry evolves from her personal experience, it consistently moves toward something much larger. As Wilson puts it, “at her best the energy generated by this journeying creates a powerful sense of identity that incorporates everything into the poetic self, so that finally she can speak for all the earth” (Wiget 417). To Paula Allen, Harjo is “a poet whose work is concerned with metaphysical as well as social connections” (qtd. in Wiget 417).

This Chapter selects poems from her collection titled She Had Some Horses (1983) and some poems have been selected from her anthology titled In Mad Love And War. In Coltelli’s words, the collection She Had Some Horses “marks a significant milestone in Harjo’s poetic career” (Porter and Roemer 286). The analysis and discussion of the
poems are held in the light of the general arguments of the thesis. It is shown how a hybrid poet denounces hybridity in the way Bhabha defines it. Bhabhalian hybridity does away with differences in the Third Space, sets in mobility all codes and thus homogenizes the cultures involved. Against this, Harjo votes for the hybridity that arises out of tensions between cultural moments giving each side its due concern. Heterogenizing the colonial encounter is Harjo’s attempt to preserve her marginalized and degraded tribal tradition. This objective is quite clear in the themes of returning and remembering which underlie some of her poems. In some others, the speaker is shown caught up in a dilemma, between going back to the tribe and staying in the status quo. The hesitation that her speakers suffer embody the many tensions that they are exposed to in the intercultural moments; and the desire to return reflects the resentments the speaker nourishes against the homogenizing forces of the cultural hybridity which she is experiencing. And this forms her worldview too. She offers an insight into the history, culture, beliefs and sufferings of the natives and her poems present new perspectives and perceptions into these issues. Harjo creates awareness of the native struggle from the past into the future, while also projecting the tribal worldview that gives least importance to the ranking system in society, western beliefs and binary thinking.

**Biography and Literature Review**

Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in an urban environment; like Allen she is a mixed-blood; she is Cherokee on her mother’s side, and Creek on her father’s. She owes much of her Indian identity to her great aunt, Lois Harjo Ball. In 1976, she got her B. A. from the
University of New Mexico and an M. F. A. from the University of Iowa in 1978. She has taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Arizona State University, the University of Colorado, and the University of Arizona. She has been a writer and consultant for the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, the National Indian Youth Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Writing poetry in the mid-1970s, Harjo was influenced by figures like Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko, Flannery O’Conner, James Wright, Pablo Neruda, Country-western songs, Stomp dance songs, jazz, and blues. She holds an optimistic belief in the power of language which is consistent with the traditional Native American respect for language. She told Bruchac: “I realize writing can help change the world. I’m aware of the power of language which isn’t meaningless words. . . . Sound is an extension of all, and sound is spirit, motion” (Bruchac 100; qtd. in Wiget 418). Unlike Allen’s poems, Harjo’s are a mixture of prose and poetry; mostly her poems are prose-poems. In Nixon’s view on her collection, A Map to the Next World, “Harjo’s distinctive style continues to complicate the notion of poetry and prose poems” (2006, 2). The same stands true to this collection of her also.

The fact that Harjo mixes poetry with traditional oral storytelling renders her poetry hybrid; this hybridity gains political importance as it embodies her stylistic attempt to gain balance. As Gunn Allen observes context for Native Americans is both tribal and historical, contemporary and ancient; thus the Indian artist deploys elements of both oral and Western traditions; this mixing of literary conventions levels politico-literary hierarchies in texts and thus makes the Native American text a site of power struggle. Bill Ashcroft et al. call this hybridity a resisting
strategy in which the artist “writes back” to the empire. Moreover, in such stylistic hybridity she closely anchors her poetry to orality, with the result that “written text is, for me, fixed orality” (as cited in interviews, p. x). On this point, Coltelli explicates, “it thus goes back to a performance she remembers and it transmits an oral act, in which the moment of speaking and listening unites the poet and her audience in a single inseparable unit” (interviews, p. x). What Coltelli says about Harjo’s poetic expression rightly reveals the postcolonial urges underlying her works; quoting Harjo, Coltelli contends, her poetic expression “allows her ‘to speak directly in a language that was intended to destroy us’, or to quote another famous text of hers on Native American women writers, edited with Gloria Bird, ‘reinventing the enemy’s language’” (Interviews, p. xi). For Harjo, the English language is “a male language, not tribal, not spiritual enough” (Spiral 69; in Gannon 297). Harjo appreciates deploying rhetorical strategies in the oppressor’s language as political resistance to the atrocities suffered by Native Americans. She explains:

> In our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to create is understood. These colonizers’ languages, which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs: beadwork, quills if you will. We’ve transformed these enemy languages. (qtd. in Dennis 31)

Thus she refers to the unavoidable solid presence of Indian American despite their being deculturated: “We are still here, still telling stories, still singing whether it be in our native languages or in the enemy tongue” (qtd. in Dennis 80).
Harjo’s politically charged use of the enemy’s language aims at naming the enemy as an attempt to identify the many sources of colonial atrocities; she believes as soon as the source of pain is identified, the victims are freed from its power over them (1997, 22; qtd. in Archuleta). Archuleta rightly posits “Speaking out and naming the enemy reveals the central role language can play in our empowerment and continued existence” (92). Similarly, Janice Acoose admits her attempts to name the enemy eventually led to her “liberation and empowerment” (qtd. in Archuleta 93; Acoose 19). Natives have a different concept of language and it is a part of their worldview. This renders words and their power to reveal and identify the enemy as war zones and texts become sites of political struggle against the colonial atrocities. Harjo identifies the enemy as “hatred [. . .], self-doubt, poverty, alcoholism, depression, and violence against women” (Archuleta 94).

The common point that links Harjo’s poetry to Paula Allen is both are feminists and ecofeminists; the same political urges and significance which applies to Allen’s poetry stands true to Harjo. Thomas C. Gannon writes in book length on the significance of animals, especially horses and birds, in Harjo’s poetry and argues that her poetry attempts to give voice to not only the Natives’ silenced voice but also to the animals. Unlike the Western outlook that takes animals as mere dumb beings, Harjo draws upon her traditional worldview that holds an abiding belief that other species can actually communicate with humans. Gannon interprets this perspective in Harjo’s poetry and politicizes her perspective when she is shown to have criticized human follies through the eyes of birds, bears, horses, etc. Harjo, as analyzed by Gannon, seeks
the “healing” of the destructions done to the earth and the ecosystem in “an attentiveness to other voices . . . [which] not only are often nonhuman but their very nonlinguistic nature is a redemptive quality fit for praise” (291-292). This view draws a line of distinction between Allen’s and Harjo’s ecological concerns as for Allen there seems to be less concern with the other nonhuman voices in the cosmos. Harjo’s care for animals goes so far as the point where Gannon compares her to Ortiz and the notion that a poem is sometimes learned by “watching the animals” (296). This justifies her poem from another collection given the title, “Humans Aren’t the Only Makers of Poetry” (*Map* 112).

While Allen focuses on restoring the lost female voice, Harjo’s main concern is bringing into balance the male and female, hence androgyny. She views the world and its complex social and political issues not only from the perspective of women but also from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed people. Moreover, she targets the weak points in the modern Native Americans. She deals mostly with the sordid impacts of colonialism and urbanization on Indians. Therefore, as compared to Allen, her poetry is more cynical. Nixon aptly describes her poetry as “Honest, unmerciful, and direct” (Nixon 1). Like Allen, Harjo is aware of the inevitable hybridity in the colonial encounter and like Allen she votes for the negative dimensions of this homogenizing hybridity. In Hussain’s apt words, Harjo “historicizes identity and difference” (37). As compared to Allen, Harjo’s poetry deals more with human bonds and their disintegration among the Indians than Allen whose poetry revives the lost Indian concerns. While Allen concentrates on the lost traditions, Harjo detects the reasons for this
great loss in the colonial encounter and its legacies. Hence, alcoholism and drunk people especially youth abound in her poetry. As Coltelli rightly observes, “the reading of her poems is often an illuminating exegetic commentary” (Intviews, p. ix).

Unlike Allen, Harjo deals more with the issue of language and human communication. In her poetry she casts negative lights on Western technology like phone which gives only a virtual sense of presence to the person who is actually absent from the sight. The issue of talking and language dominates most of her poetry and she attempts to detect the reasons for crisis, and sometimes lack of communication which has gaped the Indian society. She integrates numerous proportions of the Native backdrop by looking into into societal, political and historical issues, as she empowers women, crosses cultural boundaries, celebrates nature and defies western ideologies. The Bhabhalian hybridity notion facilitates cross-cultural communications; the mimic men are those situated on the liminal Third Space, capable of interacting with both sides, the colonial and the colonized. Among Harjo critics, Sheila H. Hughes concerns herself with the religio-spiritual dimensions of Harjo’s poetry on a comparative scale with that of Louise Erdrich. In her study Hughes contends, “Through poetic and linguistic play, Erdrich and Harjo create a ‘third space’ for religious experience. . . . And in doing so, they unsettle radical oppositions both within Christianity and between it and tribal religions, turning their differences into what Native theologian George Tinker calls ‘reciprocal dualisms’” (Bloom 42). The present study views this comment in the light of Native American Worldview. However, as Harjo’s poetry reveals in the liminal space where she finds herself
inevitably located, her poetic imagination arises out of the many tensions that exist between her hybrid identity and the politico-historical demands of her context as a Native American poet. Albeit she attempts to bring about rapprochements between the two poles of her hybrid identity, her poetry is marked with a tilt toward the Native side as she regards the non-Indian side cynically. Therefore, the interstitial Space is the most fertile area for creative communication and innovative interaction with the socially, sexually, and racially Other and asserting one’s alterity. While Allen casts cynical lights on this hybrid interaction under the theme of betrayal, Harjo takes issue with the linguistic inarticulacy which emanates from the Third Space where Western modernity clashes with Indian traditions. Viewed in this light, alcoholism can be taken as an instance of inarticulacy, an experience in which the Indian loses his sobriety and thus his power to interact with others. Getting drunk is a state of imbalance both in speech and action; and it is this state with which Harjo is mainly at grapple. Harjo gives life to characters, stories, beliefs of Indian identity without heavy statements of purpose and without hypercritical connotations she gives voice to the passions. In her poetry the urban scene comes closest to the natural scenery. At many places she views the world without overemphasis on her roots or way of life choices.

Analysis and Discussion

On *She Had Some Horses*, Wilson aptly states that it is an “exorcism of the kind of fear that can paralyze an individual or a whole culture” (Wiget 421). This collection starts with “Call It Fear” in which the poet expresses her “fear of the dark” (3). Coltellini contends in this poem “the sense of dread is linked to a tribal past of defeats and losses
and which, together with the hostility of silence, thwarts any possibility of revival” (Porter and Roemer 287). Contra responsive to this reading, it can be argued this fear is the dread inflicted by the trauma of colonization. Lee Maracle (Salish/Cree) believes that “Being colonized is the internalization of the need to remain invisible” (qtd. in Archuleta 92; Maracle 8). Rhonda Pettit’s words on the general framework of this collection deserve to be quoted at length:

Harjo develops an individual voice not only by dealing with Native American subjects and experience but by echoing the sound of Native American chants and rituals through her use of repetition. She also more successfully transforms her story-telling technique to produce a poetry of witness that moves beyond mere victimization. If her characters and speakers are at times still driven by an outside force or condition, they are now more likely to seek the spiritual guide or vision that will grant them a sense of agency. Two poems about fear – one that faces it, and one that denies its power over the speaker – provide a frame for the book. (qtd. in Hussain 44; Pettit 18-19)

It is on the edge of this fear that “shadows/ and bones of some of us walk/backwards./Talk backwards (p. 3). Talking backwards is highly significant here as it is connected to the darkness which arouses fear in the speaker. The speaker loses her linguistic power in talking backwards and thus cannot be articulated as Harjo’s tradition demands. Inability to be articulate equals physical impotence best manifested in “walking backwards”. This fear has penetrated into the conscious and unconscious
of the speaker, influencing both speech and action. When she intends to talk, she encounters this edge hindering her: “a string of shadow horses kicking/ and pulling me out of my belly, / . . . into the music/barely coming through/Sunday church singing/from the radio” (3). The interference of Sunday church song coming from the radio, filling the imposed silence signifies the colonial legacy of technology which has debilitated Indians in urban society. The poem expresses native worldview which detest western way of modern lifestyle in a way. The title itself is significant in the sense that “Call it Fear” implies even the speaker is not articulate enough to name the strange feeling she has; hence it is not “Fear”, but “Call It Fear” in which the pronoun “It” remains inarticulate, vague, and inexpressible in words.

In “Motion”, Harjo talks about lack of communication in words, “I write it to you/. . ./not being able to get/ the essence/ the true breath/ in words, because we exist /not in words, but in the motion/ set off by them” (51). The idea that one exists in the motion that words set off comes from Harjo’s traditional belief in the power of words. Moreover, words, for Native Americans, are spirits, hence a channel to reach the spiritual realm. This view on words countersigns the American notion that language and words are man made, context-bound, and hence of ideological power. For the Westerner, there is no “true breath/in words”; instead cultural and political power is implied by words. While the Indians take language as an autonomous entity, the Westerners give it roots in its context, making it reliant and interdependent. Such a linguistic relativism accounts for the disintegration and fragmentation that American society has been witnessing from the early twentieth century.
By contrast, the Indian perspective unifies people by its traditional notion of language. The ambivalence that a mixed-blood senses is quite clear when the speaker in “Motion” says, “I am next to you/ in skin and blood/ and then I am not” (51). While skin and blood imply physical presence, the sense of absence can be spiritual (in words), mental or emotional. This ambivalence best manifests the problematic situation of Indians transplanted in the colonial culture. Lack of full presence stands for fragmentation, a feature of hybridity, which is a colonial legacy and with which Harjo takes issue.

“Your Phone Call at 8 A. M.” is on the way technology has done away with the essential features of human voice, hence “a deadly rope” (54). The voice without the presence of its owner lacks the human emotions; it is this lack that makes the speaker suffer: “And what you said you wanted/ was easy enough, a few books, /some pages, anything, to cancel /what your heart ever saw in me that you didn’t” (54). Wilson sees the voice of the woman’s former lover reduced to a “skeleton”, wanting and argues while the man tries to effect the emotional distance, the woman regains her emotional independence (Wiget 418). As the sign of this independence, the speaker states that she dedicates the poem not to the speaker but to herself (54). The poet’s inability to articulate herself in words is best reflected in “The Poem I Just Wrote”. The speaker talks ironically of the unreal being of her poem and compares it to “the black horse” and “ghosts of old lovers” (55). The unreal being of the poem is due to the inability of the speaker to communicate herself and her true feelings in words. Natives are more closer to nature and real world in their perspective.
In the other section of the book, “What I Should have Said”, Harjo gives a much darker view of the state of Indians in the Western cities. It starts with “Untitled” which shows practically nothing has remained of her past identity: “Either a snail’s moist web/ of moonlight, or someone’s/ hot breath at 4 a.m./ when the night has been too much, has eaten/ you whole” (46). What has remained is all that she has. Thematically, the sheer darkness that has engulfed the speaker’s whole being is what she has been trying to entitle fear in “Call It Fear”. Linguistically, “Untitled” signifies language’s impotence to name or describe the plights of the displaced Indians. Counterdistiction to Bhabha’s notion of hybridity which mobilizes all fixed codes, the Indian poet finds herself in a mess about her own identity for which she cannot even think of a name or title to refer to.

“What I should Have Said” is the poet’s complaint about the present status quo of the Indians and the lack of communication which has gaped between the Indians in cities. The speaker is a teacher who feels having betrayed her people when she finds herself not telling them what she should have, “I feel like a traitor/ telling someone else things that I can’t tell/to you” (46). The fact that she can tell someone else what she cannot tell her own people refers to the linguistic estrangement which has distanced her from her tribe, hence sense of betrayal. The only connection that she sees between herself and the addressee are just fingertips which are ironically enough specific to every single person and hence their point of distinction. What she suffers from is their states of suspension, the in-betweenness which denies them sense of belonging to anywhere. She bemoans, “We drift and drift, with/few storms of heat
inbetween the motions” (46). Words, expressive of her love, “become a cushion/ keeping us in azure sky and in flight/ not there, not here” (46). She finds herself and her people as horses “knocked out by tranquilizers/sucked into a deep deep sleeping for the comfort/ and anesthesia death” (46). Her dark visions catches them “caught between / clouds and wet earth/ and there is no motion/ either way/ no life/ to speak of” (46). This poem quite cynically describes the sense of suspension and hesitation, a sense of dangling between two states of being, which is an essential feature of hybridity. In the Bhabhalian zone of Third Space where all codes are mobilized, there can be found no fixed code to stick to, hence in-betweenness. Harjo is quite aware of the pains of this state of dangling and she focuses on this dimension of hybridity while for Bhabha the state of suspension in cross-cultural realms is the most appealing and fertile one for the artist. Moreover, traditionally speaking, suspension deprives one of any sense of belonging anywhere and this inflicts so much pain on the Indian whose identity is constructed out of tribal belonging. Displaced in the urban areas, the Indian finds all his/her codes of identity in danger; the new codes of identity offered or imposed by the Western modernity enhance the sense of suspension. Therefore, the other cognate feeling which makes the Indian suffer is estrangement or what Bhabha appreciates as deculturation which is condemned by Harjo and Allen.

Harjo’s pessimistic approach to the state of hesitation is best reflected in “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window”. In this poem, she aptly portrays the suicidal end of a displaced Indian woman who has lost the beauties of her traditional life which she once
used to cherish in her father’s village. Now transplanted in the city, she can no longer tolerate being misused and humiliated in the lifestyle offered to her by the whites. The speaker typifies her by generalizing her identity to all other women in the apartment: “She sees other/ women hanging from many-floored windows/counting their lives in the palms of their hands/ and in the palms of their children’s hands” (13). She has reached the point that she thinks suicide would set her free (13). Her hanging position in fact signifies her dangling situation; she is an Indian who does not belong to the city life and cannot be claimed by her traditional tribe; hence her dangling and state of in-betweenness: “and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her /own skin. Her own thread of indecision” (14). While hanging, she thinks of her relatives, her dear and near ones and also she flashbacks to her past days: “She thinks of the color of her skin, and/ of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines./ She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms/. . ./She thinks of the 4 a. m. lonelines that have folded/her up like death, discordant, and without logical and/ beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges” (14). While Indian worldview gives a woman her due respect and honour never letting her feel alone, the Western legacy has made her suffer many states of loneliness impelling her to desire he death. Thus she cries for the lost beauties of her life: “She sees the /sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago” (15). For her the West stands for the loss of the sun and indulging in “grey” and deadly life of city.

“White Bear” starts with the Indian woman on board of the plane late at night but stops in the corrugated tunnel, “a space between leaving and staying” (19), hence a state of hesitation. During the flight she
dreams of “the white bear/ moving down from the north, motioning her paws/ like a long arctic night, that kind/ of circle and the whole world balanced in/between carved of ebony and ice” (19). The polar bear is identified with the white bear moon (20).

“Ice Horses” deals with colonial displacement of the Indians having chased them out of their lands and cornered them. Yet the physical displacement is less dangerous than the mental. The poet is concerned about the mental displacement which has brought about cultural estrangement among the Natives: “These are the ones who escaped /after the last hurt is turned inward;/ they are the most dangerous ones” (66). Harjo is of the view that whatever violence is directed at these people: “These are the ones who cut your thighs/, whose blood you must have seen on the gloves/of the doctor’s rubber hands” (66). She calls them “the ice horses, horses /who entered through your head, / and then your heart,/ your beaten heart” (66). Despite their iciness, these are the horses “who loved you./They are the horses who have held you/so close that you have become/ a part of them,/ an ice horse/galloping /into the fire” (66). Bringing a balance between ice and fire, Harjo reflects the unavoidable contradictions that reign over man’s life and the call for balance.

Unable to cope with the deculturated state, Harjo’s speakers long for escape. In “Leaving” the speaker is a woman whose husband, early in the morning, receives a call regarding the escape of her sister from her boyfriend and is in need of money in some other city. This event reflects the loosening of human bonds to which Indian women find themselves exposed to in the White man’s realm. Moreover, the notion of escape strikes the woman’s mind; she longs for escaping from her modernized
city life into their wilderness. The woman loses herself in her dreams of their traditional long by-gone life: “I dreamed on a Canadian plain, and warm arms around me,/ the soft skin of the body’s landscape. And I dreamed / of bear, and a thousand mile escape homeward” (21).

The same theme runs through another poem in the collection. “Late Summer Leaving” revolves around the Natives’ yearning for home of which they always have dreams. The speaker sees her companion in deep sleep, “Your eyes are closed to the brightness/ but you breath in sun/ like sunflowers do” (49). She is well aware that her companion is dreaming of returning home, “like birds/ talking about some return home” (49). The passage of time does not change the desire to go back home, “It is another year,/ another morning./ I watch it return in you/ and say one last song to return home on” (50). The theme of homecoming is an underlying theme for most Indigenous women writers. Returning home and reviving the traditions is one resisting strategy against colonial acculturation.

The theme of leaving receives another interpretation by Harjo in “Kansas City”, a poem on West’s legacy of urbanization and the displacement of the Natives. The speaker focuses on an Indian woman in Kansas city; her house is near rail station and always watches trains coming and going. The station gives her the opportunity to leave the city, but she decides to stay there and breed her many children she had by men of different colors. The dominance of the Indian woman is well portrayed in the many colored children she has given birth to as if in each child she repeats herself and her tradition mixed up with others races. For such hybridity she has her traditional justification, “Because she knew/ that each star rang with separate/ colored hue, as bands of horses/ and wild/
like the spirit in her/that flew, at each train whistle” (26). The children she mothers are maimed ones, blind or dumb; and she had chosen to stay and grow these children up to make them capable of breeding their own children: “all of them/. . ./giving birth to children/ and to other stories” (27). She is called by children Noni Daylight. She stands near the tracks and waves to the last train leaving Kansas City. Daylight is a persona that reappears in some of Harjo’s poems; she is typical of contemporary Native American women suffering and seeking an outlet. Laura Coltelli views Daylight as “Harjo’s alter ego or imaginary projection of herself” (Porter and Roemer 287).

In some of her poems, Harjo lays hands on the reasons for escape like violence, loss of their traditions, corruptions inflicted upon the Indians, and loss of human bonds. In “Resurrection” from In Mad Love And War, Harjo describes the predicaments of Indians under the force of the colonizers waiting for redemption. The Natives are in a war-stricken condition from which there is no outlet. Hence the poem is replete with war discourse like soldiers, bloody, watch over, war, pace, violence, gunfire, the wounded and the dead, et cetera (17). If there is any love affair in the war scene, it is only the male perpetration on the female. The whole atmosphere of the poem is one of dread, violence, apprehension for the bad events, and politico-sexual violence. In such a context, the speaker apprehensively awaits the dead to return and rescue them: “We all watch for the fire/ for all the fallen dead to return/ and teach us a language so terrible/ it could resurrect us all” (18). The fact that the speaker is looking for a redeeming language instead of a salvaging force hints at the discoursal nature of racial wars. Such a view puts under
question the “normality” of language as assumed and imposed by the colonizer over the racially oppressed. Besides, the poet’s focus on the power of words hints at her belief in the functional role language plays in resisting strategies against colonization. In this light, Harjo resembles Bhbabha whose textual and discoursal concerns in the colonial encounter lay at the core of his seminal postcolonialism.

In “Backwards” the speaker focuses on the modernized Indian man in a moon lit night. The moon “was thrown/ off the bridge” (10). In contrast to Allen’s poem on the moon which glorifies the autonomy of Indian woman, this one has a belittling outlook on the moon. The speaker feels “Something tries to turn the earth/around”; something that she cannot understand; but the concourse of events shows that that force is acting against the on-goings of the universe and wants to change the events in another way, “This has been going on/ since I don’t know when, baby” (10). The word “baby” is the stereotypifying term that has entered Indian lexicon from the Western culture. Unlike most of Harjo’s poems, here the speaker is an Indian man bearing the codes of the colonial capital figure. The stereotypifying word “baby” on the tongue of such a figure as this hints at his acculturated personality, hence a mimic man. Westernization of Indians is quite obvious in the lines, “... when the dance is over, sweetheart/ I will take you home in my one-eyed Ford” (10). The moon that he perceives is not a complete moon but “torn/at the edges”. The Indian’s interpretation is quite revealing of the history of civilization which has been based on the interference in and exploitation of nature by white man: “I dreamed when I was/four that I was standing on it./A whiteman with a knife cut pieces/ away/ and threw the meat /to
the dogs” (10). Although the male speaker is an acculturated figure, he has with him his Native worldview. His dream as a child drives at his Indian identity which is manifest in his adult view of the moon with torn edges. As a mimic man, he is the hybrid figure in whom the codes of his Indian and American identities have merged together; yet in the lens through which he views the world he is an Indian; he targets this lens at the colonial force, hence politicized. Thus he cannot be a depolarized hybrid the way Bhabha expects. He is the hybrid who is Indian in his worldview especially with respect to nature.

In “The Returning” Harjo talks of “trickery of the heart” (56); the poem emerges out of the tensions she has as a hybrid figure with her Indian identity which has long been marginalized under the colonial force. The speaker complains while reading and studying poems she is disturbed by the returning of “you [who] . . . scratch your fingers at the /door and that voice that you always /had, arching into me” (56). She cannot avoid the addressee, her Indian self, who follows her across seas right into her modern life: “Raw red cliffs that you/ stumbled down into your own shadow/haven’t kept you away, or soft /red lights and strange electrical/ music that I play” (56). Despite her attempts to keep the addressee back, she always comes back, “your half-grin/ is the only image that comes clear” (56); she sees it is “your voice,/not mine” that is set into motion by the rain (56-7). Then submitted, the speaker gives the addressee full authority, “you can / call yourself anything you want/. . . /Or maybe you are my own life/scheming desperately to climb/ back in” (57). Describing the addressee as her own “life” puts under question her present status as a hybrid figure. Implicitly, she is bemoaning that with
the Whites, she has not been living a life of her own, as she once used to
before being colonized. It also hints at her not being alive in the colonial
setting. The identification that she draws between her own life and the
addressee can motivate us to take the addressee as her long ignored past,
her traditional self that she has always ignored under the force of
modernity. Although she tries to get rid of that past, it keeps returning to
her claiming her. Not only does the poet see this return as inevitable, but
she also calls it “trickery of the heart”. In this context, it should be noted
that this returning is not trickery; rather her attempts to hide away from
her ignored Indian identity is the trickery she has been playing upon
herself and her heart. The heart’s insistence on the Indian identity casts
the trickery back upon the speaker herself, revealing that she has not been
“living” so far in the modernized world of the Whites. Like the male
speaker in the previous poem, the speaker is a hybrid figure who responds
back to the demands of her context; hence far from being a depoliticized
figure, she is highly political in giving way to her Indian codes of
identity.

“Bleed Through” from In Mad Love And War is Harjo’s pessimistic
view of the world in which her speaker finds herself bereft of her
traditional significance as a woman. The poem starts with her lack of
belief in promises; this reminds one of the history of white colonization
that has exploited the Indians through land treaties, documented promises
to the Natives which were never fulfilled. The speaker is a woman
pregnant with an offspring the existence of which inside her stands for a
promise. The poem has roots in Harjo’s belief in the redeeming power of
woman in a male corrupted world: “Inside your horn lives a secret
woman/ who says she knows the power of the womb,/ can transform massacres into gold” (36). The offspring has the sun as her heart; the sun sinks in her belly and then reappears in her genitals to make it attractive. The identification of the white sun inside the black skin is Harjo’s strategy to make Indian female a source of attraction rather than repulsion, of life rather than death: “A black hole inside is a white-hot star,/ unravels this night/ into a song that is the same wailing cry as blue” (36). The wailing cry that is blue is the new born that cries on the point of stepping into life. The speaker takes the new born’s sounds, lacking words, as the redeeming force “into the darkest nights” (36). The fact that the new baby knows no language, but makes sounds, and brings changes by her sound represents the poet’snullification of man-made language which compartmentalizes instead of unifying people on the earth. The infant’s wailing sound is shown to have more unifying force than words; in this way Harjo puts under question the claims of man’s language to unity, understanding, and change since language is not, unlike the infant’s sounds, innocent. Degrading language as the means of communication to the means of compartmentalization is Harjo’s comments on the issues of articulacy and speech which have been imposed on Indians through linguistic colonization.

The other factor which urges the Indian woman escape her predicament is loss of the beauties of her traditional life. “The Black Room” is a poem on the darkened vision of the state of an Indian woman displaced in a city. It is about a woman who “thought she woke up” (17). The repetition of the same sentence all through the poem indicates the poet’s emphasis on the dark state of a woman in modern life. In her
thoughts she goes back to her childhood in her grandmother’s house where she was in close relation with all natural elements like the stars, the trees, the rain, the storms, etc. The tone is sort of nostalgic and the woman remembers these with grief as these beauties are lost to her present life. In her thoughts she remembers being raped by Joey, “she has no voice no name and she could only wait/ until it was over – like violent summer storms/ that she had been terrified of” (17). The violence of sex makes her aware of “some rhythms that weren’t/ music; some signified and horrible deaths/ within her – she rode them like horses . . . /into the west” (17). Her ride into the west signifies her being manipulated and subordinated by the Western codes. The poem ends with her being awakened by the ring of the alarm and she finds herself in a black room while her past is lost to her: “Black horses are slow/ to let go. She calls them by name but she fears /they won’t recognize hers” (18). The sense of estrangement she feels between herself and her past is the colonial legacy to which she has been exposed.

“Nandia” centers on the lost traditions that have now become a pain for the survivors. The speaker is a growing-old mother of about sixty six years old who recalls her childhood memories with her own mother living over McCartys, with its “red rock mesas, Indian tea/. . ./and the hardened/ black ashes /of the Malpais” (33). She remembers her mother having taken her to “an older part of earth /. . ./where monsters were born/and killed” (33). But now what remains of those sweet memories are just ghostly footprints, and “wings /slapping wind/that force sound through me” (34). The thought of the loss accompanies her like a permanent pain: “this trembling ache/haunts me endlessly/like you” (34).
The addressee of this line is the Indian woman who is likewise entrapped in the White man’s snares of modernity and out of which they find no escape. This typifies the old woman’s plight, encompassing the whole race.

Loss of human bonds and the sordid aftermaths of the loss are best portrayed in “What Music”. Here, Harjo expresses her love toward an old Indian lady who has been abandoned by her two sons having gone to Los Angeles. The speaker recalls the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the Natives by the whites, “Maybe it was the Christians’ language / that captured you” (6), hence deculturation, “you missed the aboriginal music that you were” (6). Stating that the Christians’ language has taken them away from their original roots, Harjo’s speaker targets the compartmentalizing and politicized nature of the colonial language. Besides, referring to the colonial language as “Christians’ language” brings to the page the discourse of Christianity. Christianity is widely propagated as the unifying religion which embraces men of different colors by the thread of love. This love-based religion, however, is presented in the poem as a disintegrating force which not only estranges men from their tribal culture but also breaks away the strongest human love-bonds of mother-child. This critical view puts in contrast tribal religions with colonial religion and thereby hints at the limitations of Christianity as an imposed religion for the Indians.

Although Harjo’s speaker had escaped from the south to the north, she tells her female addressee that she had been followed all the time by stars, “Their voices echo out from your blood and you drink/ the Christians’ brandy and fall back into/ doorways in an odd moonlight” (6).
The words “Christians’’ brandy” is a repetition of “Christians’ language” through which Harjo censures the colonial legacies which have been imposed on the Indians through their Christian discourse. Alcoholism is the sordid aftermath of colonization. The state of the old Indian lady having given way to the colonizers’ gift, brandy, at the expense of forgetting her true identity is Harjo’s harsh criticism of the history of colonization under the pretext of civilization.

Corruption of Indians is the other running theme in Harjo’s poetry which receives its due attention as one of the urges of rising against the West. In “Night Out” life is described as “this deadly thing” (11), as it portrays Indian life being wasted away by the allurements of white man’s life. The Indian man spends his nights drinking, smoking, and having sex in bars in white man’s cities. Caught off from their natural habitats the Indians are displaced in urban areas wasting away themselves: “your teeth are broken and scattered in my hands” (11). The speaker sees no end for this humiliating plight: “It doesn’t end/ For you are multiplied by drinkers, by tables, by jukeboxes/by bars” (11). In her own self the speaker sees the lost Native: “I have heard you in my own self./ And have seen you in my own past vision” (11). For such Indians she sees no way out, hence “You are the circle of lost ones/ our relatives./You have paid the cover charge thousands of times over/with your lives/and now you are afraid/ you can never get out” (12).

The other important issue that Harjo turns her hands to is drinking. Alcoholism is one of the main causes for family disintegration. Although in her other collection, What Moon Drove Me to This?, Harjo attends to the romantic aspects of drinking, in this selected collection, she
approaches it quite cynically. “Nautilus” focuses on alcoholism as the Western legacy for the Natives who can no more have dreams without whiskey which has “driven the night/ dark and in me/like a labyrinth of knives” (40), hence violence. “Alive” is on the Indian speaker trying in vain to feel alive through Western commodities like beer and wine. The speaker longs for music, the music of her past life, but is hummed into sleep by the sound of the car. She misses the deep-throated song to stir her spirit. Frustrated in her spiritual quest, she finds the concrete presence of her body as the only escape from feeling dead. She finds her body as the only way through which she can feel herself as a living being: “‘... I saw myself /naked. And alive’ ” (53). The only left thing for her is her body which can help her feel free and “cross any line” (53). Norma C. Wilson also detects in “Alive” sort of awareness needed by the Natives, as the speaker “learns to accept herself as part of the creation” (Wiget 419). Wilson does not clarify what kind of awareness comes to the speaker and how it comes, whereas the poem itself tracks down the many tensions the speaker goes through getting her to the only concrete reality of her bodily presence. Wilson aptly refers to the “vicious cycle of alcoholism” (Wiget 419) and detects its sordid aftermaths in “Night Out” which addressing the drunk ends with the quagmire in which Indians have been trapped and out of which there is no way out.

“Jemez” talks of loss of dreams and dreamers, an essential part in Indian spiritual life. Instead of the dreamer the speaker sees Jemez Mountains, symbol of violence and hatred, “opened red/ like the sun going down/ against /soft breath” (48). The fact that violence enters into the dream life of the Indians stands as the proof of the atrocities to which they have been subject in the colonial encounter.
In “The Friday before the Long Weekend”, the speaker is a teacher frustrated at her mission of teaching. She finds out the Indians having given way to westernization enticed by its lures like alcohol and cigarette. Disappointed she says, “what can I teach/ what can I do?” (28). Finding her words not influential to the humans, she talks to nature and its elements like the wind and the moon. However, the kind of her speech is just curse, “goddamn, goddamn” (29), which itself shows the changes Indian perspective in the modern world. While previously Indians used to worship nature and its forces, now they project their embittered temperament onto nature.

For the Indians such corrupted and estranged from their own culture, Harjo sees no end other than a suicidal one. “Drowning Horses” is on the suicidal end of Indians who have been uprooted by the West. They are like drowning horses who have been washed away from their natural habitat and in the new ground they are withering away. Having been estranged to their traditional life, they are on the edge of two cultures belonging neither to this one nor to that. The speaker identifies with the girl who finds suicide as the only escape from this dangling position: “Her escape is my own. / I tell her, yes. Yes. We ride/ out for breath over the distance. Night air approaches, the galloping/ other-life” (65).

The darkened vision given to the poet and Indians influences her view of nature. In “Moonlight” Harjo pinpoints the politico-erotic infidelity with which she finds her people inflicted under the reign of the West. She deals with the opposite natural elements like the moon and the sun and drawing upon their contradictory presence in the sky she hints at
the betrayal of the moon, a she figure, “‘The last time I saw her [the moon] was in the arms/ of another sky” (47).

Harjo condemns the West for all such plights with which the Indians are at struggle. “Connection” contrasts natural wilderness in the presence of a hawk with human wilderness in the hums of city life. Talking about Indians living in wilderness has been one of the stereotypes that the white men utilized to subordinate the Natives. This poem gives another version of wilderness and throws the same back on the Western like; a hawk which has touched down while crossing the wires addresses the Indian as “You old Shawnee” in “slick-floored bars and whisky /sour nights”; it says: “The Spokane you roam isn’t City of Angels/ but another kind of wilderness./ You speed in a Ford truck and it’s five/ in the morning, the sun and dogs/ only ones up” (25).

Counterforce the losses the Indians have been exposed to, Harjo seeks a drastic revival of traditions, a return to the by-gone past, and a reunification of human bonds. Hatred is one of the names she has used in order to identify her enemy and thus she raises love against it. “Transformations” from the collection In Mad Love And War is a prose-poem which deconstructs the notion of hatred and transforms it into love. This poem relies on Harjo’s definition of transformation; for her transformation is “really about understanding the shape and condition of another with compassion, not about overtaking” (qtd. in Hughes 43). Hughes goes on to explain this definition in the light of Harjo’s Native worldview: “Because all matter is dynamic and sacred – and ‘God [. . .] is a relative [. . .] [who] lives at the roots of molecular structure in all life’. . . changes in mind trigger changes in body. This is the tribal balance, or
answer, perhaps, to the Catholic mystical belief that discipline of the body can reshape the soul” (43-44). In the prose part, the speaker directly addresses the white man who has taken her and her race as his enemy nurturing hatred towards them. Drawing on her memories of winter she gives the harshness of winter an attractive vision, “a blackbird laughing in the frozen air” (59). Being an Indian who believes in interrelatedness of the whole world, she parenthetically tells of the effect of the bird’s laughter on its surroundings: “(I saw the whole world caught in that sound, the sun stopped for a moment because of tough belief)” (59). She then tells of turning a poem into “a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling the air for sweet alive meat” (59). It is her Indian tradition that has taught her how hatred can be turned into love. When she says to the white man in his heart “the most precious animals live”, she is actually revealing her indiscriminating lens which regards the white man as her own self despite his cruelties (59). It is this egalitarian perspective which is missing in the Western worldview. The prose part ends with the brief narrative of an old dying man, taken by an ambulance, who is not dying in fact, but transforms into “the backyard tree he has tended for years, before he moves on. He is not sad, but compassionate for the fears moving around him” (59). The single-stanza poem with which “Transformations” ends makes the white man aware of the presence of “a dark woman” who has been trying to talk to him, the man who has given her names “in the middle of a nightmare”. The weapon the dark woman takes against his hatred is her beauty and beautiful love extended towards the hating man: “This is your hatred back. She loves you” (59). While the history of colonization has been based on hatred and marginalization, the
traditional history of Native Americans is a treasure of love not only toward nature but also toward all human races.

Love as a unifying factor is treated in another poem of the collection. In “Two Horses”, Harjo plays on self-other relation taking the two as horses. Thus the poem starts with an emphasis on I which is repeated through especially the beginning of the poem. Self’s territories are transgressed by the unpredictable step of other, “you must have grown out of / a thousand years dreaming/ just like I could never imagine you. / You must have broke open from another sky/to here” (64). What happens between self and other is attraction, hence “And I know you as myself/ . . . / My heart is taken by you” (64). The result of this love is sharing nature together: “There are two moons on the horizon/ and for you/ I have broken loose” (64).

Harjo calls for regaining unity among all people through natural elements. “Vision” gives the reader an Indian vision of the rainbow. The colorful rainbow can signify the many races that are scattered on the earth, each one having its own beauty. As a unifying gathering of all colors, the rainbow appears to the speaker as “the barest/ of all life that is possible” (36).this poem again reiterates the theme of the previous one, “All the colors of horses/ formed the rainbow,/and formed us/watching them” (36).

“September Moon” represents the moon as the unifying force which does away with all discriminations. When the speaker says “the moon was east” she deliberately wants to put the position of the moon in contrast to the West which has always tried to make them busy with
everyday life and hence away from the natural elements. The fact that she is called by her friend who tells her to look at the moon shows the way the Indians have got estranged to nature from the time they got displaced in urban areas. Yet she tries to keep a balance between modernity and nature: “I was fearful of traffic, / trying to keep my steps and the moon was east,/ ballooning out of the mountain ridge, out of smoky clouds” (58). When the speaker describes the moon ballooning “out of any skin that was covering her. Naked. Such beauty” (58), she is actually stripping the moon of any color-based discrimination. Only when they are away from such demarcating criteria, they can feel being alive: “We are alive. The woman of the moon looking/ at us, and we looking at her, acknowledging each other” (58).

The last section of the book is titled “She Had Some Horses” which starts with a poem bearing the same title. For Indians horse is of great significance; it is a code which presents the Indian stature and procures for him honor in the tribe. In this poem, Harjo implicitly describes Mother Earth as the woman who owns some horses; the horses are different, sometimes contradictory; yet the last line of the poem, “These were the same horses” (63) unifies all of the horses together, doing away with their differences.

“For Alva Benson, and for Those Who Have Learned to Speak” embodies Harjo’s traditional belief in the all-embracing soul of Mother Earth which never dies but repeats itself in every female new born (8). As Coltelli aptly writes, this poem “weaves a close-knit relation between language, earth, and woman. Contact with the earth is an essential element of regeneration” (287). The new born is a mixed-blood, speaking
in Navajo and English, and witnessing the changes in the earth, towns and cities. The same also happens to her daughter; what Harjo wants to show is the cyclic structure of life which turns round and round with the Mother Earth at its center, “And we go on, keep giving birth and watch/ourselves die, over and over. / And the ground spinning beneath us /goes on talking” (9). Giving birth and speaking are viewed as two interlinked activities which have close relationship with the Mother Earth. Giving birth stands for procreativity while speaking signifies expressiveness; and these two are shown to be interlinked to the earth. As Hussain rightly observes, “In this poem Harjo begins by enunciating and enacting a dialectic of the land and language, suggesting that language emanates from the land and that to reclaim the land is to reclaim the language itself” (45). Through this link, Harjo politicizes and historicizes the issues of land and language. While in Indian tradition man’s life is always unified and interlinked to the whole human race across time and space, the Western outlook brings interruptions in the concourse of human life, the most blatant of which is the generation gap which justifies the disengagement of children from their parents and grandparents. This gap is the legacy of colonial modernity which rapidly and radically changes the lifestyle of generations.

In “Anchorage” Harjo utilizes the urban discourse in order to introduce her Native traditional worldview in which all natural elements are in complete unity and harmony with one another. The setting is apparently a city, Los Angeles, but the way it is described is quite Indian. Unlike its Western modernized counterpart, Harjo’s city is one made of natural elements like fish, stone, and blood right flanked by Chugatch
Mountains, and left flanked by whale and seal. The sky is “another ocean, where spirits we can’t see / are dancing joking getting full” (4). When the speaker says, “Nora and I go walking down 4th Avenue”, she is actually using the Western number-based style of city life at the service of her country lifestyle which escapes any numbering. This could be regarded as a hybrid perspective, in which the oral Indian tradition is mixed with Western worldview; and the objective of the speaker is to revive her own traditions in the face of dominant Western hegemony. This poem resembles Allen’s “Ruins” which relates how Western highly secured apartment has become a protective means, a shelter, for her grandmother and mother sticking to their Indianness. What Harjo is trying to show in this poem is the flexibility of her Native culture and its urges to survive despite the dominance of the colonizing culture.

When the speaker states, “our dreams/ don’t end here, two blocks away from the ocean/ where our hearts still batter away the muddy shore”, she is actually referring to the survival of her tradition through power of dreams. The ending part of the poem centers on the “6th Avenue jail, of mostly Native/ and Black men, where Henry told about being shot at/eight times outside a liquor store in L.A., but when/ the car sped away he was surprised he was alive,/ no bullet holes, man, and eight cartridges strewn/ on the sidewalk/ all around him” (5). The transformation of a dead into an alive man which is impossible but true emanates from the Indian worldview which does not take death as one’s fatal end, unlike its Western counterpart. This incident proves the survival of the Natives “which were never meant / to survive” (5) hence anchorage of traditions and their culture despite modernity imposed on them.
“Rain” is Harjo’s narrative of death of Bobby having fallen down Nine Mile Hill. The speaker implicitly informs it has been the enchantment of gold “shimmering like the Milky Way” at the bedrock of the river that led him to his death. Rain washes down everything, “Now Phoenix struggles under water” (7). Yet the rain brings with itself some hope as the speaker sees, “Something has been let loose in rain; / it is teaching us to love” (7).

In “One Cedar Tree” Harjo draws a sharp contrast between a cedar tree and her own life. In the tradition of Native Americans the cedar tree contains many voices in its branches, like the voice of the sun, the moon, the wind, on the whole the nature; so it is regarded as a sacred tree to which Indians say their prayers. In contrast, the speaker finds herself sending prayers to the cedar smoke. And the same is repeated through her linear generation: “the children who are bone-deep echoes /of a similar life” (16). To her, nature is the same and at the same time has changed: “the sun gallops . . . on the /eastern horizon./ The moon floats familiar/ but changing” (16). Thus she finds herself praying to “some strange god/ who could be a cedar tree/ outside the window” (16).

Noni Daylight reappears in “Heartbeat” to express her fear. In this poem, Noni is the offspring with “elastic body” (31) in her mother’s womb waiting to be delivered; yet the delivery which frees her is “a fierce anger” (32). Within the womb, “The pervasive rhythm /of her mother’s heartbeat is a ghostly track /that follows her” (31). While in the previous poem, Noni has the role of a mother for her many-colored children, here she is an offspring attached to the mother and has to accompany her wherever she goes, “to her apartment, to her sons’/ room,
to the bars, everywhere; there is no escape” (p. 31). Seeking her independence from the mother, Noni wants to have her own heartbeat as she finds herself lulled by the mother’s heartbeat. The crave she has “for the hand that will open the door” stands for the generation gap that the Natives are encountering in the Westernized world. This gap has been a legacy of the colonizer for the colonized which runs in counter to the strong familial bonds that have once been unifying the Indian tribes.

In “Remember”, Harjo best expresses the Native American worldview regarding the unity of all races on the earth. The poem appears like a reminder to the addressee, hence the recurrence of “Remember”. Calling the listener to remember nature and its forces and elements, the speaker tries to bring the addressee back to a lost unity with nature, mending the lost harmony between man and nature: “Remember the sky that you were born under;/ know each of the star’s stories./ Remember the moon, know who she is” (35). Such references to nature and demanding the viewer to reflect on his/her origins are the missing points in the modernized life. When the speaker states, “Remember the earth whose skin you are:/ red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth/brown earth, we are earth” (35), she is in fact countersigning white man’s claims to superiority based on skin color. This way she is leveling all the hierarchizing and thereby demarcating racial discourse which has inflicted suffering son the non-whites all through history, “Remember you are all people and all people/are you” /Remember you are this universe and this universe/ is you” (35). The audience is invited by the speaker to regain the lost affinity with nature, hence “Remember the plants, trees, animal life . . ./ . . ./Talk to them, / listen to them. They are alive poems” (35).
A deconstructed notion of remembering is at the core of another poem, titled “She Remembers the future” in which Noni Daylight speaks (41). She speaks to herself, “The otherself knows/ and whispers/ to herself” (41). What she talks about is the urge for salvation, as she finds her tribe in danger of oblivion. This is the way she anticipates/remembers the future and in a flash forward to the future she calls for a revival of the lost traditions, “But she needs/ the feel of danger, for life” (41). She asks, “‘Should I dream you afraid / so that you are forced to save/ yourself?’” (41).

“New Orleans” quite rightly touches on the changes that the Native Americans have been exposed to and have thus differed from their ancestors. In the Western modern city, the speaker is looking for the remnants of her tradition and tribal people: “I look for evidence/ of other Creeks, for remnants of voices” (37). Instead of an alive horse, she sees the statue of a horse brought by the Spanish. Here the speaker implicitly contrasts the legacy of colonization which brings artificial and unreal things to life and the Indian life style which used to deal only with the natural and the real. Nearby she sees a shop of ivory and knives and red rocks; “The man behind the /counter has no idea that he is inside/magic stones. He should find out before/ they destroy him. These things / have memory, you know” (37). Then she shifts to her own memory which “swims deep in blood” (37). By this, she means her traditions or ancestral memories which satisfies her spiritual thirst: “My spirit comes here to drink. /My spirit comes here to drink” (37). Then she goes on to her memories and stories of DeSoto, the adventurer, who had been in quest of golden treasure, “came looking for golden cities, for shining streets / of
beaten gold to dance on with silk ladies” (38). Unlike the dream that DeSoto nourished, the speaker finds the Indians living in “earth towns,/ not gold,/ spun children, not gold” (38). He was drowned by the Creeks in the Mississippi River. The golden world that DeSoto was dreaming for his people changed into widespread exploitation of Indians by the Americans who rushed to their lands in search of gold. Looking for DeSoto as an evidence for the truth of her own life, she finds him drinking “on Bourbon Street,/ mad and crazy/ dancing with a woman as gold/as the river bottom” (39). Such a degraded view of the Indian adventurer marks the humiliation of the Natives and the sordid effects of modernity on their dreams.

The desired result of regaining one’s unity with man, nature, and the lost traditions is best reflected in “I Give You Back” which represents the poet getting rid of her fear; the dread that she and her people used to suffer leading them to a long history of exploitation is now set free. She laments, “Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash./ You have gutted me but I gave you the knife./ You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire” (72). Now after a long history of submissiveness, the speaker lets go of her fear, her “beautiful and terrible/ fear” (71). She reprojects her fear on all those who have inflicted sufferings on her: “I give you back to the soldiers/ who burned down my house, beheaded my children, /raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters” (71). She releases her fear “because you hold/ these scenes in front of me and I was born /with eyes that never close” (71). Having released the dread, she claims herself back: “I take myself back, fear./ You are not my shadow any longer./ I won’t hold you in my hands” (72). The volume which starts
with fear “Call It Fear” ends in releasing “Fear”. This accords the volume a cyclic form. In Native American worldview, cycle is a symbol of perfection as it includes the four basic dimensions of man’s being, the spiritual, the emotional, the mental and the physical. Therefore, the cycle is sacred and completing the cycle stands as gaining balance. Harjo completes her cycle in this collection in an attempt to regain the balance which she and her people have long ago lost in the colonial encounter. Moreover, the cyclic form that Harjo’s collection deploys has roots in Native American philosophies. Such philosophies, in Nixon’s words, “are characterized by worldviews that are nonhierarchical and nonlinear and that reveal the interconnectedness of all living things (humans, plants, animals, the earth, land, air, oceans, plants, rocks, etc)” (3).

Conclusion

The detailed analysis and discussion of Harjo’s selected poems show the resemblances and differences that they have in comparison to Allen’s poetry. Allen’s political stance in the poems hints at her attempts to restore the long unheard female voice; while this is one of Harjo’s concerns as well, what lies at the core of her poetic creativity is resisting the colonial force through articulacy and language. She refers to naming the enemy and reinventing the enemy’s language as the more forceful strategy against its corrupting legacies. As compared to Allen, Harjo shows more concern with the social realities of the Natives, especially the women. Alcoholism is one of these realities. However, Harjo does not detach herself totally from her traditions, hence her deployment of traditional myths and culture. Hybridizing her tribal myths with
contemporary issues is one of her strategies to create a balance between the two polarities of the modern and the ancient. This contemporizing endeavor accords her poetry a unique feature which is missing to Allen’s. Enriching her poetry and social concerns with myths and traditional legends gives her stance a historical background and thereby historicizes her poetry. This historicization implicitly claims the land and all the land-oriented cognates for the Indians as against the paper-ownership of the white settlers. Moreover, as best analyzed by Hussain, Harjo’s repeated return to history “marks a decisive return to the concrete material sites of the body, land, labor, and language, the intersections of which over determine identity and difference themselves” (37).

The cyclic structure that Harjo’s collection cherishes not only signifies her mythical perspective but it also countersigns the Western linear worldview. In the colonial outlook, progress is highly emphasized; progress has a linear movement with a beginning that is the least developed and an ending that is the most developed. This structure is hierarchical and therefore most suitable for the colonial project. Related to this linearity is the notion of time which is likewise on progress. Contra responsive to these views, Harjo draws on myth instead of linear history to reclaim her land and her Native perspective: “Alive with names, alive with events, non-linear” (qtd. in Hussain). Hence her mythic time stands in contrast to the colonial historic time. Besides, the mythic structure is cyclic which not only promises completion but it also depoliticizes and de-hierarchizes the colonial linearity, hence the coveted balance. In Allen’s poetry these aspects of the Native worldview are missing, while Harjo dedicates her poetic creativity to these notions.
This dimension emanates from the differences that lie between the Western view of poetic creativity and that of the Native Americans. The Hopi feminist poet, Wendy Rose, aptly maintains that poetics and poetry in the West are always the privilege of a “special elite” who are “non-utilitarian, self-expressive, solitary, ego-identified, self-validating”, whereas for the Indian Americans poetry or art must be “community-oriented . . . useful, beautiful, and functional at the same time” (Rose 411; qtd. in Hussain 32).