

The Poetics of Displacement and Disintegration of Identity in Linda Hogan' s Selected poems

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Abstract

Linda Hogan is one of the well-known contemporary Native American poets whose ancestral family was displaced from their homeland into another place by the end of the 19th century. Hogan was affected by this ancestral displacement for the entirety of her life. As a result, the majority of her poetry is haunted by the painful memories of this experience of persecution, and suffering. Linda Hogan shows how native Americans struggle to reconcile and confront the problems that occurred as a result of their displacement from their original lands of abundance to other areas of severe poverty and barrenness. She also chronicled her people's attempt to overcome this sense of homelessness and heal their collective wounds by recalling the sweet memories of the past. This latter process of Memory sometimes becomes painful when they compare their golden past with their miserable current state and their inability to restore their ancient way of life, tradition and ceremonies. Consequently, Native Americans faced not only physical but also cultural dislocation. This paper is an attempt to investigate how Linda Hogan embodied in her poetry this severe process of displacement and cultural

dislocation which she experienced at first hand and the role of memory in healing fractured identity and rebuilding a new sense of home and tradition.

Keywords: Displacement, Trail of Tears, cultural dislocation, identity, memory

تعد ليندا هوغان احد اهم الشعراء الأصليين الامريكان. نزلت عائلة أجدادها من وطنهم إلى مكان آخر بحلول نهاية القرن التاسع عشر. تأثرت هوجان بنزوح اجدادها طيلة حياتها. ونتيجة لذلك ، فإن غالبية شعرها تطارده الذكريات المؤلمة لتجربة الاضطهاد والمعاناة هذه. توضح هوجان كيف استطاع الأمريكيون الأصليون التغلب على المشاكل التي حدثت نتيجة نزوحهم من أراضيهم الغنية إلى مناطق الفقر المدقع ، والتغلب على إحساسهم بالتشرد الدائم وشفاء جراحتهم من خلال تذكر ذكريات ماضيهم الجميلة ، تصبح عملية التذكر هذه مؤلمة أحياناً عندما يقارنون ماضيهم الذهبي بحالتهم الحالية البائسة وعجزهم عن استعادة أسلوب حياتهم القديم وتقاليدهم. ونتيجة لذلك ، لم يواجه الأمريكيون الأصليون النزوح الجغرافي فحسب ، بل واجهوا أيضاً الاضطراب الثقافي. هذه البحث هو محاولة للتحقيق في كيفية تجسيد ليندا هوجان في شعرها هذه العملية الشديدة من النزوح والاضطراب الثقافي التي عاشتها بصورة مباشرة ودور الذاكرة في شفاء الهوية الممزقة وإعادة بناء شعور جديد بالوطن والتقاليد.

Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet, novelist, essayist, activist, and playwright, is widely regarded as one of the most influential Native American figures in contemporary American literature. Through her works, she has distinguished herself as a political ideologist, and an environmental theorist whose depiction of the human experience "centers on the concept that all life is interconnected" (McNally, 1990:1).

Although Linda Hogan lived in different places throughout her childhood because her father was in the military and was transferred from one post to another, Hogan has always considered her home to be Oklahoma, where her father's family lived (Ibid.:1-2), as she states: "my

identity with family is there, with Chickasaw people and land, and maybe my idea of what a home is, is there, in south-central Oklahoma. I think also, this is where I was loved” (Smith, 1990:145, cited in Martanovschi,2008:54).

Hogan’s ancestral family was forced to move from their homeland because, in 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed The Native American Removal Act, a law that establishes the forced removal of Native Americans from their homeland east to west of the Mississippi River Indian Territory. These native Americans, including Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, were called “Five Civilized Tribes” because they “adapted to certain European ways by taking that which most suited their quality of life while at the same time retaining their sovereign integrity and folkways.” Following the passage of the Indian Removal Act, these tribes were forced to move away from their place. Almost a quarter of these displaced peoples died due to exposure, sickness and starvation on the way to their newly designated reserve. The term “Trail of Tears” has come to depict the displacement and the tragic experience of these tribes (Totten and Bartrop, 2008:208).

Hogan was deeply transformed by this traumatic experience for the entirety of her life (Cullum,2004:139). She states that :

I was only one of the fallen in a lineage of fallen worlds and people. Those of us who walked out of genocide by some cast of fortune still struggle with the brokenness of our bodies and hearts. Terror, even now, for many of us, is remembered inside us, history present in our cells that came from our ancestor’s cells, from bodies hated, removed, starved, and killed (cited in Ziarkowska,2021: 169).

So, she inherited this sense of pain, disintegration and cultural dislocation which become a kind burden or postcolonial legacy she has to put up with. Her ancestors had lived in Indian Territory since displacement, and Hogan grew up amidst a “storytelling tradition of including family stories of prosperous allotment homesteads lost to the oil boom land swindles of the 1920s and bank foreclosures of the Depression.” Hogan remembers how her Oklahoma relatives, during her childhood, “lived in poverty, without electricity or running water, and traveled by horse and buggy” (Arnold, 2002:130).

The traumatic memory of the Tear of Trail haunts most of Hogan’s poems. In her poem “Trail of Tears: Our Removal,” which was published in her collection *History*, Hogan clearly exposes the manipulative schemes used by colonists to seize the homeland of Cherokee. They cunningly exploited the laws of primitive life and the righteousness of legitimate owners. A land “with lines unseen” (338) was a fact that was used by the “surveyors” as a justification to maliciously usurp the homeland of Native Americans. Since then, a conflict has erupted between the realm of sharing and the realm of possessiveness (Jamil,2020:245).

This conflict is one of existential confrontation, as she explains, between two forces: one loves and worships nature, and the other exploits and kills nature and creatures. On the one hand, stands the jungle, the motherland, the bonds and the “swamplands with birds and more lowly creatures” (338). On the other, there is an artificial entity consists of the power of theft, cunning, greed and brutality. To emphasize the variation, Hogan requires the new remorseless possessors “to have compassion for” (338) the homeland (Ibid.).

So, you who live there now,
don't forget to love it, thank it
the place that was once our forest (Hogan,
2014:338).

The oppressors exploited the goodness and gullibility of Native Americans. "Believing justice lived in the world,"(338) the indigenous people quickly fall victims of the enemy's deception. But over time, the malicious plans were revealed when thieving begins; their horses, "so many, one by one stolen by the many thieves" (338). The greedy settlers not only took the horses, but they also stripped Native Americans of their homes and basic possessions, leaving them "longing for trees, for shade, homing, rooting, / even more for food along the hunger way" (338) (Jamil,2020:245).

Nevertheless, the valiant Native Americans remained united. All aggressive actions have failed to destroy their nation's pride or end the conflict "between the two worlds in this place." The oppressions that afflicted Hogan's nation gave rise to dreams and a will to resist the aggression and to continue the fight for the "things we were forced to leave behind, living country, stolen home" (338). Moreover, the oppressors were boldly opposed by Hogan and the continuing of injustices could only lead to "another red century," (338) another bloody war (Ibid.).

In general, "Trail of Tears," among other traumatic incidents, still lurks in Native American artists' minds and consciences, and it inhabits almost all of the art forms they make. From the turn of the twentieth

century to the present, poems still appear to memorialize the horrific events of the displacement of Native Americans. Almost every poem written by indigenous people includes references to the Trail of Tears in order to remind the global body of the need for solidarity and justice, for what seems to have been forgotten or deliberately ignored by all parties involved, and also to keep the memory of the holocaust alive and to uncover the hidden “truthful history” (Ibid.: 241).

In the poem "Tear," which appears in her collection *The Book of Medicines*, Hogan uses the title word to characterize both the dresses worn by her tribe's women and the historical displacement that destroyed her forefathers on the western route:

Tear dresses they were called
because settler cotton was torn
in straight lines
like the roads we had to follow
to Oklahoma.
But when the cloth was torn,
it was like tears,
impossible to hold back,
and so they were called
by this other name,
for our weeping (Hogan, 1993:59).

the cotton is torn in straight lines similar to the straight roads to Oklahoma and the streaming tears running down the faces of those compelled to walk this harrowing route (Dreese,1999:17).

Hogan uses a complex use of perspective to tell the story of her people's displacement. The speaker of the poem opens by telling the reader that the events of the poem occur in "the time before /I was born." The speaker, however, shifts to telling the story of the trail in the first person in the second stanza. She stresses her placement alongside the travelers: "Above us, lightning split open the sky./ Below us, wagon wheels cut land in two. /Around us were the soldiers."(59) "This placement insists on the coherence of the people and their integration with the land. The poem strongly asserts that the trail was not traveled in vain and that the people were stronger than the destructive forces allied against them" (Borthwick,2016:15).

Through the image of blood, Hogan utilizes the body as a meeting place for both ancestors and grandchildren, as well as a place where ancestors can reclaim the stolen lands. In addition, "the road between us" links the past that "did not close " and the future that "is still open" (Elgezeery,2013 :22):

They walk inside me. This blood
is a map of the road between us.
I am why they survived.
The world behind them did not close.
The world before them is still open.
All around me are my ancestors,
my unborn children.
I am the tear between them
and both sides live. (60).

The poem's speaker indicates that as "the tear between them," her function is to link the two sides, the past and present, together. She knows, as her grandmothers did, that the only way for their people's story to survive is for it to be told again and again. Through her, the ancient stories can be passed on to future generations, so she must survive in order to narrate to her unborn children the ancient stories as her grandmothers did during the Chickasaw Trail of Tears (Montgomery, 2009:183-184).

Since it is a tear that lies between the speaker and her forefathers, and what lies between two divided entities unites them, the title, whether it reflects torn clothes, the displacement of Red Indians, or the tears they shed on the Trail of Tears, comes to be seen as a tool of rebellion and healing through rupture and blood imagery (Elgezeery, 2013 : 22).

Jace Weaver reflects on the necessity of cultural healing in the displaced community, noting that :

in communities that have too often been fractured and rendered dysfunctional by the effects of more than five hundred years of colonialism, to promote communalist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them.... Linda Hogan testifies to this healing when she titles a volume of her poetry *The Book of Medicines* (2001:49).

As Dress points out, the healing that Hogan introduced in her collection *The Book of Medicines* occurs by loving, remembering the past

and sharing stories (1999:18). She emphasizes this idea even further in her collection *Calling Myself Home*, by using the image of the turtle which becomes “symbolic of Hogan herself and of the Chickasaw people who have carried their homes with them, each body a shelter, a shell, a home” (Wiget, 1994: 430).

In “turtles,” the first poem in the collection *Calling Myself Home*, Hogan explains that she is “dreaming the old turtle back” (Hogan, 2014:15). There is a feeling of bereavement, of attempting to reclaim an animal that has vanished. The turtle's spirit awakens within both skins: “small yellow bones of animals inside/are waking” (15). In the middle of the poem, the poem's speaker moves from seeing inside the turtle to becoming the turtle, carrying its defensive shield as well as its burdens in the dress of the Turtle Dance (Oubre, 2000:131). “We should open his soft parts/ pull his shells apart/ and wear them on our backs” (15). This link, as Wiget states, associates the turtles with Chickasaw women who traditionally perform healing ceremonies by dancing with the shells of turtles on their legs (1994:430). Before performing a Chickasaw Picofa healing ceremony, the medicine people fast for three days. The patient's clan family gathers on the third day to dance and sing. The turtle-shell rattles are worn by the women during the ceremony (Gibson, 1971:106). Hogan links between Chickasaw women and turtle:

Wake up, we are women.

The shells are on our backs

We are amber,

the small animals

are gold inside us (15-16).

Cheyfitz (2006:216) comments on Hogan's use of the turtle image:

she uses the image of the turtle, that mythic "home" of Indian people who reside "on turtle's back," which recalls the Chickasaw use of turtle-shell rattles in ceremonial healing. In Hogan's hands, the metaphor opens to revelations how "we" who are all searching for the place of belonging can learn to carry home with us, can learn how to live at home with the planet.

This pattern of images continues to work in the title poem of the collection *Calling Myself home*. Women in this poem design the dress for the Turtle Dance by lacing the shells of turtles together to make leggings (Oubre,2000:132).

Their dark hands
laced the shells of turtles
together, pebbles inside
and they danced
with rattles strong on their legs (Hogan,
2014:19).

Hogan, in a later stanza, transforms the image, so that women, like turtles, carry the earth with their framework. "This land is the house/we have always lived in./The women,/ their bones are holding up the earth"

(19). In the poem, the burdens of the world are borne by women and turtles (Oubre,2000:132).

Hogan returns to her ancestral "land," the "dry river," and "the road" she "walked to return" and she describes her return in terms of "memory and history as much as of actual place" (Cheyfitz,2006:215). However, Hogan uses the turtle as a metaphor for adjusting to homelessness. She ends the poem by saying that she "returns home only to leave it" once more, to "say good-bye/ to the turtle /to those bones/to the shells locked together /on his back" (20) because she, like a turtle, will carry her home with her always (Oubre,2000:132). Hogan evokes memories of their tradition and ceremonies to keep their sense of home and belonging.

The title "Calling Myself Home," according to Oubre, reflects two different senses of home. "Like the turtle, she is always carrying home with her, in her memory and in her history. However, she is also traveling, always leaving behind a sense of home." In some ways, Hogan tries to "reconcile these two ways of being at home" in all her work (Ibid.).

Hogan employs cultural memory in "Turtle" and "Calling Myself Home" in order to maintain the identity of her people. As Nancy Helene Lang states:

While it is clear from this poem that Hogan accepts that 'you can't go home again,' she also realizes that the power of memory—more specifically knowledge of one's family history and cultural heritage— helps to define a person as a Native American in contemporary Anglo dominant life. Memory also gives to the person spiritual strength, self knowledge, and courage. Even if

the dominant culture ignores or steals the outward signs of heritage, memory and the spirituality behind it always remains (Lang, 1991:176 cited in Oubre,2000:132-133).

Hogan's poem "Heritage" adopts the voice of historical witness as she recalls the displacement of the Chickasaw Nation from the southeast by Andrew Jackson's administration in the nineteenth century (Montgomery, 2009:95). The poem's last lines recall the injustice of the removal: "From my family I have learned the secrets / of never having a home" (19). At this point in Hogan's work, she views her heritage as "one of loss." Her early view of home was what one carries on his back as "a burden" because her people have been displaced from their place. However, by learning to carry the stories inside herself, she turns that "feeling of displacement into a positive image of home" (Oubre,2000:133-134).

Hogan, in her poem "A Song of Turtles in the Gulf" published in *History* collection, depicts how this valuable sea creature loses its importance and dies in a tragic way after the coming of colonization. She begins the poem by describing the collapsing white man, plastic and "British petroleum" as the elements of death. She mourns the turtle's initial liveliness: "We had been together so very long/ you willing to swim with me" (330). The turtle was alive in the middle of the sea, its eternal home, but the "distortions" happen at the hands of "man from the British Petroleum"(330) (Alakhdar,2019: 34).

In the poem, the Juxtaposition of the sea's "splendor" before the British and "dead/plastic" arrived shows Hogan's sense of "pain and deep loss." The adjectives "dead" and "plastic" come in a single line to detect

the close relationship between colonial money-oriented practices and the negative effect it has on nature (Ibid.):

and now when I see the man from British
Petroleum

lift you up dead from the plastic
bin of death

he with a smile, you burned
and covered with red-black oil, torched
and pained, (Hogan,2014: 330).

In an ancient eulogy, Hogan sets out to compare the white man 's effect of “burned,” “pained” and “red-black oil” to the gorgeous and rich presence of the turtle before its death from pain. Though the turtle began as “a male warrior,” upon its death it is referred to as a female, an “old great mother” to “shift significance and bond with the resources of wisdom and life in native American legacy” (Alakhdar,2019:34).

all I can think is that I loved your life,
the very air you exhaled when you rose,
old great mother, the beautiful swimmer,
the mosaic growth of shell so detailed,
no part of you simple, meaningless
or able to be created by any human,
only destroyed (348).

The only moment she interests in joining points of view across her presence and the white man's is when she apologizes to the dead turtle. Nevertheless, she insists on clarifying the disparity in perspective: out of ignorance, the white man casts the dead turtle into the sea, but she hails the turtle and shows the honor of restoring it to its heavenly home "accompanied by prayers for forgiveness" (Ibid.:34-35).

Forgive us for being thrown off true,
forgive our trespasses,
in the eddies of water
where we first walked. (330)

Conclusion

Hogan illustrates her ancestors' misery and oppression as a result of their displacement from their homeland and cultural dislocation. She depicts the memory as a tool that Native Americans use to escape from their miserable current situation by hanging on the sweet memories of their past, but this tool turns into a curse when they see the difference between their past and present. Thus, Hogan shows how Native Americans are displaced from their imagination and reality, as well as from their past and present. Still, she emphasizes the function of indigenous tradition in helping them to rebuild their cultural fabric by restoring their lost identity and rebuilding a new sense of home.

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Note

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