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Challenging Anthropocentrism
in Tony Hillerman's Detective Novel *Listening Woman*

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Abstract

This article explores Tony Hillerman's detective novel *Listening Woman* (1978) through the critical lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. It aims to challenge both anthropocentrism and scholarly dismissals of popular genre fiction. Drawing on some key concepts such as ecocentrism, symbiosis, and deep ecology, this article demonstrates that *Listening Woman* subverts the dominant anthropocentric view of nature as a resource to be exploited. Instead, Hillerman's novel presents an ecocentric environmental ethic that underscores the sentient aspect of the natural environment of the American Southwest, its dynamism, and its intimate connection with human life. Therefore, it can be said that Hillerman's *Listening Woman* disrupts the mythic image of the American West as a frontier of conquest and resource extraction, and illuminates the Navajo worldview based on interdependence and the importance of venerating the natural environment. By foregrounding these themes within the framework of detective writing, Hillerman not only widens the genre's thematic scope but also urges readers to rethink their relationship with the environment. Thus, this article testifies to the fact that popular genre fiction is far from being a means of entertainment only, since it can serve as a powerful cultural medium to raise ecological awareness.

Keywords: Detective writing, the American Southwest, postcolonial ecocriticism, environment, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, symbiosis, Navajo worldview, interdependence.

Popular genre fiction is a major form of popular culture. In general terms, genre fiction can be defined as a standardized type of fiction which follows a pattern of repetitive formulas or conventions that are familiar to readers (Baldick 140). Science fiction, detective fiction, the western, and the historical romance are among the most popular types of genre fiction (Baldick 140). Traditionally, popular genre fiction has always been regarded as the antithesis of literary fiction, and it has been dismissed by many critics as a 'low' form of culture: it is a commercial and formulaic form of writing that is intended to be passively consumed by readers. It lacks any artistic merit. By contrast, literary fiction is seen as a 'high' form of culture: it is appreciated by many critics as being serious, original, and of high literary value (Thorne and Tulip 5). Starting with the second half of the twentieth century, derogatory attitudes towards popular genre fiction shifted, and genre fiction emerged as a legitimate area of academic study. However, it is noteworthy that "a literary snobbery still persists that renders popular fiction, especially genre fiction, a minor accomplishment, something well beneath the respectability of literature" (Rodriguez 2). Hence, this article seeks to challenge arrogant academic attitudes towards popular genre fiction by examining Tony Hillerman's detective novel *Listening Woman* through the postcolonial ecocritical lens. More particularly, the aim of the present article is to demonstrate the ways in which Hillerman challenges western anthropocentrism in his novel, ultimately calling into question pejorative views of popular genre fiction that deny its cultural and artistic value.

This article is organized into four main parts. The first part is a brief overview of Hillerman's life and writing. It also provides a brief synopsis of *Listening Woman*, as well as an idea of the critical reception of the novel under study. The second part outlines

the contextual framework of the article. The main theoretical concept, i.e. postcolonial ecocriticism, is described in the third part. Finally, the last section tackles the ways in which Hillerman contests anthropocentrism in his novel.

Hillerman (1924 – 2008) is one of the most highly-acclaimed detective writers of his age. A decorated combat veteran of WWII, he worked as a journalist. Later, he taught journalism at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque and started writing novels. By the time he passed away in 2008, Hillerman had achieved recognition for his more than thirty books (Krueger 258). Despite the fact that some of his works are nonfiction, “what Hillerman is best known for are the eighteen novels in the Navajo Tribal Police mystery series, set in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest and featuring two Navajo cops, Joe Leaphorn and later, Jim Chee” (Krueger 258). Hillerman is renowned for bringing the landscape of the American Southwest and the Navajo culture in mainstream America (Dunaway and Spurgeon 62). Because he had lived nearly all his life in the Southwest and had spent his childhood with Native Americans, he developed a growing fascination for indigenous cultures (Dunaway and Spurgeon 65). His detective fiction delves into chaotic crosscurrents that take place when indigenous cultures, Hispanic worlds, and the dominant Anglophone society intersect. The fact that he is not a Native American comes as a surprise to many readers (Dunaway and Spurgeon 63). Hillerman managed to reach commercial as well as critical success: he was a best-seller writer and one of the most widely read detective writers in the United States and abroad. Indeed, his detective novels were translated into many languages including German, Dutch, Swedish and Japanese and received critical awards from the American Library Association, Mystery Writers of America, and the American Anthropological Association (Dunaway and Spurgeon 63).

Listening Woman is a police procedural novel that brings to a close the series of three novels devoted to introducing Joe Leaphorn as a solo detective. The novel takes place in the vast landscape of the Navajo reservation in the American Southwest.

Listening Woman opens with Margaret Cigaret, a blind medicine woman visiting an old man named Hosteen Tso in his Hogan in order to diagnose and treat his illness. She holds the belief that some “messed-up” religious sand paintings may be the outcome of witchcraft and thus, be the reason behind his illness. She asks her niece Anna Atcitty to take her to a place outside the Hogan to listen for nature and diagnose Tso’s disease. When Cigaret is ready to go back to the Hogan, the reader finds out that both Anna and the old man have been murdered. Leaphorn delves into the investigation of the case, determined to uncover the truth. As the plot unfolds, Leaphorn’s focus expands to include a robbery linked to a militant group of Native Americans named the Buffalo Society and a kidnapping of a group of Scout boys. His investigation leads him to a sacred cave in which he finds himself entrapped, trying to survive and save his life. He achieves his final victory after a brutal and violent confrontation with the major criminal named Goldrims and eventually solves the case.

Listening Woman has been the target of some critical explorations. Works such as Harry Greenberg’s *The Tony Hillerman’s Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to His Life and Work*, John Reilly’s *Tony Hillerman: A Critical Companion* (1996) and Fred Erisman’s *Tony Hillerman* (1989) are guidebooks that help familiarize readers with some details of Hillerman’s life, his writing career, and the narrative strategies deployed in his detective novels, including *Listening Woman*. Issues of ethnicity and culture, such as the centrality of spiritual and cultural values in Hillerman’s *Listening Woman*, have been the topic of many articles, notably Šárka Bubíková’s “Ethnicity and Social Critique in Tony Hillerman’s Crime Fiction” and Maurice J. O’Sullivan’s “Tony Hillerman and the Navajo Way” (2001). Furthermore, the character of the fictional Navajo detective has been explored by many critics like Jane S. Bakerman whose article entitled “Tony Hillerman’s Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee” underscores some crucial personal and professional traits of Hillerman’s Navajo sleuths by making reference to *Listening Woman* and other novels. The use of the region of the American Southwest in Hillerman’s detective novels,

including *Listening Woman*, is the focal point explored in Karl W. Doerry's article entitled "Literary Conquista: The Southwest as a Literary Emblem" (1990). In this article, Doerry calls attention to some common points shared by the detective and the Western genres. Hillerman's deployment of landscape and place in *Listening Woman* and *Dance Hall of the Dead* is the major thematic point of Leonard Engel's "Landscape and Place in Tony Hillerman's Mysteries" (1993). Engel argues that Hillerman refashions the relationship between the hero and the land, which exists in traditional Western fiction, by depicting the land as a complex and a harmonious essence which gives the Navajo tribal cop a balanced state of mental health. Moreover, *Listening Woman* is mentioned alongside other novels by Hillerman in Jack W. Schneider's article entitled "Crime and Navajo Punishment: Tony Hillerman's Novels of Detection" (1982). It sets out to demonstrate the unique features of Hillerman's detective writing, since it expands the conventional boundaries of the detective genre.

In light of what has been said so far, it can be assumed that there is no substantial research work focusing exclusively on *Listening Woman*. On the contrary, the novel is usually referred to in a sketchy way as there are some issues which have been left underexplored in the scholarly discourse. For instance, the critical potential of Hillerman's *Listening Woman* to redress power inequalities by countering and resisting hegemonic Western environmental ethics is a topic which has not been dealt with substantially and which requires further research. Consequently, this article seeks to fill the identified research lacuna in the existing literature about Hillerman's *Listening Woman* by attempting to examine the novel from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective. To achieve this goal, it is of paramount importance to provide some contextual clues and give a glimpse into the Navajo heritage and the significant place of the American West in the American popular culture.

The Navajo tribe is the largest Indian tribe in the United States. Like other Native Americans all over the Americas, the Navajos have been ensnared within a state of subjugation and have

endured the calamities of European and Euro-American invasion. Since their homeland became part of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the reality of Navajo life has often been shaped by degradation, impoverishment, unemployment, and neglect (Minahan 262). It can be assumed, therefore, that the Navajo, and Native Americans in general, are enmeshed within a state of "internal colonialism." According to the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*, 'internal colonialism' was first deployed to depict the situation of minorities in contemporary America. It refers to the situation in which "the colonized groups are minorities under white bureaucratic control; they have been conquered and forcibly taken to the United States, in the process having their culture depreciated or even destroyed" (Cashmore 177). In an article entitled "The Colonization of the Cherokee Native Americans" (1979), Gary Anders argues that "the federal government's policies towards Native Americans conform to a clearly colonial pattern and that these policies are strongly related to Indian underdevelopment today" (qtd. in Arneil 7). In brief, the Navajos, and Native Americans in general, have been enduring an on-going state of colonialism and dispossession.

What is of paramount importance is that the struggle of the Navajo and other Native American groups is inextricably related to the popularity of the mythic image of the American West in American popular culture. In fact, the American West has often been a subject for Americans' enthrallment. For approximately three hundred years, the chief undertaking of Americans was to open the West and conquer it. As long as the West remained a raw and an embryonic resource, replete with economic options, any American had the chance to secure a better future for himself (Harvey 63). Hence, the American West served as a source for unique American myths and legends (Rollins 587). "[A] lonesome cowboy tending cattle on the open range, thundering herds of buffalo and wild horses, and antagonistic Indian tribes" are major romantic and mythic images evoked by the American West (Penaloza 82). It was during the nineteenth century that the romantic or mythological West was packaged for sale (Jaupaj 9). James Fenimore Cooper

was the first American novelist who benefited from the frontier with dramatic success. In 1823, he published *The Pioneers*, the first of *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Cooper's accomplishment motivated other writers to exploit the frontier in their writings. Subsequently, many books were published, both fiction and non-fiction, that utilized frontier material (Carstensen 6). The rise and the commodification of the literary West during the latter third of the nineteenth century were also strengthened by the booming popularity of the dime Western novels, popular melodrama, and Wild West shows. Notably, the crucial significance of the mythic West is usually associated with the work of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner. For him, the chief element moulding the American character was not shaped by America's British heritage, but by the unique environment of North America. In his book *The Frontier in American History*, Turner argues that "[t]he existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (4). He further maintains that the West "offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature, into the midst of resources that demanded manly exertion . . . Never again can such an opportunity come to the sons of men" (183). A major function that Turner's frontier thesis assumes is that it "served as a legitimization and celebration of the purposes of American colonization and the dispossession of the lands of indigenous peoples" (Furniss 26). The image of "free land with abundant resources" and the image of indigenous savagery aimed essentially to erase indigenous peoples and their rightful ownership of traditional territories (Furniss 26). "Beginning in the 1960s in the United States, the prominence of antiracist, feminist, and environmental movements precipitated a critical interrogation of the relationship between academic discourses and oppressive social practices" (Finnegan 7). Therefore, the nationalistic, ethnocentric, and sexist associations of the frontier mythology were spurned by New Western historians (Scharnhorst 293). Historical as well as literary representations of the American West came under particular scrutiny as the perspectives of people of color and

women were misplaced by popular myths of western freedom, economic opportunities, free land, and masculinity. Moreover, Revisionist critics were deeply alarmed by the ecological destruction that accompanied the transformation of the “empty land” of the open frontier (Finnegan 7).

Having said this, I will endeavour to answer the following questions: In *Listening Woman*, does Hillerman represent the American Southwestern environment in a manner that aligns with mainstream representations of the American West? Or is his representation of the natural world of the American Southwest meant to do justice to the colonized group of the Navajo? To answer these questions, I will now proceed in two directions. First, I will provide a brief overview of ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism. Second, I will attempt to grapple with Hillerman’s *Listening Woman* from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective.

Ecocriticism emerged as a recognized literary critical discipline in the USA in the late 1980s and as ‘green studies’ in the UK in the early 1990s (Erkan 28). In the United States, the advancement of ecocriticism as a widely deployed critical theory by the early 1990s was ensured by some factors among which the foundation of ASLE, the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment in 1992, the introduction of the recognized journal *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)* in 1993, and finally the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996 (Erkan 28). Coming up with a concise definition of the term ecocriticism is not an easy task. ‘Ecocriticism,’ which originates from the words ‘eco’ and ‘critic,’ derives from Greek, more precisely from the two Greek words *oikos* meaning ‘nature,’ and *kritics* referring to an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order. Hence, ‘ecocriticism’ is commonly used as a broad concept addressing ecological or environmental concerns in literary works (Erkan 28). Since its official emergence in the early 1990s and its recognition as a prominent academic field of study, ecocriticism has expanded beyond the area of literary analysis to embrace the investigation of other cultural forms such as music, photography, and film. Because

of its wide scope of inquiry, ecocriticism stays methodically and theoretically diverse (Willoquet-Maricondi 1), and does not have a notable set of assumptions and procedures within the academy as a whole (Willoquet-Maricondi 1). However, as noted by Serpil Opperman, ecocriticism does not have a determined theoretical model beyond its purpose to promote ecological awareness, to bring ecological consciousness to the scrutiny of literary texts and other cultural forms, to fathom the place and function of humans vis à vis the non-human world (Willoquet- Maricondi 104). In light of what has been said so far, one can invoke the critic Pramod K. Nayar who defines ecocriticism as

. . . a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (242)

As these lines suggest, ecocriticism has a strong political agenda. One of its main objectives is to combat the binary way of thinking that has separated human beings from the natural world in Western discourse and practice (Dreese 4).

Postcolonial theory is a major field of study that intersects with ecocriticism. The phrase ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’ is generally used to define the field of literary and cultural study which explores the convergence between environmental issues and the historical legacies of colonialism. Postcolonial and ecocritical studies are both “concerned with anti-colonial resistance as the natural world and indigenous peoples are equally exploited by European colonizers in the past and by the post-imperial capitalists and newly post-independent elites for their self-serving socio-political and economic interests” (Ahamed and Toppo 73). In other words, postcolonial ecocriticism can be defined as an interdisciplinary approach that uncovers and contests the manners

in which the exploitation of land, natural resources and indigenous people during colonial times still influence contemporary ecological and cultural landscapes (Giri xxiii).

A postcolonial ecocritical reading of *Listening Woman* requires the elucidation of some key concepts, such as anthropocentrism, deep ecology, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism is a focal point that has been criticized by ecocritics. Despite the absence of a single historical foundation for it, anthropocentrism is an essential concept held by many Western philosophies and religions (Erkan 55). According to Timothy Clark in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, anthropocentrism “names any stance, perception, or conception that takes the human as centre or norm” (3). In environmental discourse, an anthropocentric perception of the natural world views it in relation to the human. Humans are considered as distinct from and superior to nature. Anthropocentrism postulates that only human existence matters and that all other beings are merely resources that can be rightfully utilized for the good of humanity: human beings and their interests are the sole valuable priority, and come above all other beings on the planet. Therefore, an anthropocentric worldview is grounded upon a hierarchical order in which humankind is positioned as superior to all other beings. To quote Savannah Kuper, it essentially “manifests itself through the exploitation of natural resources and general prioritisation of human self-interest over the environment” (qtd. in Erkan 54). Therefore, by ignoring the intrinsic value of nature, anthropocentrism promotes and enhances its degradation and commodification.

A major critical term that serves to call the idea of anthropocentrism into question is the idea of deep ecology. According to *Green Politics: An A to Z Guide*, the concept of ‘deep ecology’ was coined by the Norwegian professor of philosophy Arne Naess. It can be defined as a radical environmental philosophy and political movement grounded upon the holistic understanding that all living things have an equal right to life, or have subjective or objective inherent worth (97). The philosophy of

deep ecology suggests the appreciation of the inherent value of nature with all its different entities, regardless of their beneficial and utilitarian uses for human beings (Giri 245). As explained by Dustin Mulvaney, Naess articulates an 'ecosophy' with two major pillars. The first is a sense of self that transcends the individual to include the entire living world (98). In other words, the idea of the self is conceptually broadened to encompass the other, which would allow humans to valorize the non-human as part of themselves. Thus, humans are encouraged to realize that harming other species implies necessarily harming themselves. As for the second pillar of 'ecosophy,' it is the belief that all organisms and entities are part of an interconnected whole and that they are all equally endowed with an intrinsic worth (Mulvaney 98). Deep ecology dismisses Enlightenment notions which separate humans from nature, maintaining an objectification of the natural environment. The commodification of the natural world serves to legitimize and validate the continued exploitation and degradation that resides at the heart of the global environmental crisis. This way, deep ecology seeks to contest the hierarchy that has polarized humans and nature by advocating a biocentric or an ecocentric perspective.

Despite the fact that both biocentrism and ecocentrism are two life-centred approaches which accentuate the idea of interdependence, and that the two terms are used interchangeably by many critics, it is important to note that the concepts of ecocentrism and biocentrism do not have the same meaning. Western biocentrism advocates the idea that the foundation of a universal sense of morality lies basically in the fact of "being alive" (Johnson 61). To state it differently, biocentrism puts the emphasis only on animate beings. By contrast, ecocentrism underscores the paramount importance of both the animate and inanimate constituents of the ecosystem (Erkan 65). Indeed, an ecocentric ethic "places whole ecosystems at the center of consideration, which includes biotic as well as abiotic elements of the natural world: rocks, snails, streams, soil, microorganisms, storms" (Johnson 61). Briefly, ecocentrism challenges anthropocentrism as

it unsettles the dividing lines between the living and the non-living, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the non-human.

A postcolonial ecocritical reading of Hillerman's *Listening Woman* reveals the fact that the novel disrupts Western anthropocentric ethics and promotes ecocentrism as an alternative environmental ethic. A major strategy that Hillerman utilizes to call anthropocentrism into question is the showcasing of the impact of colonial attitudes to land management on indigenous landscapes. In one scene of the novel, there is a reference to "a sparse stony grass land ruined by overgrazing and now gray with drought" (Hillerman 123). Drought, overgrazing, and aridity are more than mere environmental conditions, for they stand as a reflection of more profound historical and cultural disruptions brought about by settler colonialism. The arrival of European settlers in North America represented a watershed in the history of the continent: the rapid expansion of agriculture has radically transformed the American landscape. In fact, "[a]s settlers moved westward, they cleared forests, plowed prairies, and established farms and ranches. This agricultural expansion had a profound impact on the environment, leading to the conversion of vast tracts of wilderness into productive farmland" (De Marco 21). Moreover, the introduction of new crops and livestock resulted in the displacement of Native plants and animals by non-Native species, which led to a drastic alteration of the ecological balance of many regions (De Marco 22). More specifically, "[d]omesticated livestock have contributed to the decline of old growth forests and the destruction of native plant and species through overgrazing, which result in a decrease in native perennial grasses and a loss in the density of vegetation" (Macauley 274). The rise of the cattle industry, for instance, assumed a pivotal role in the modification of the American landscape, given the fact that cattle drives, which involved moving huge herds of cattle over long distances to rail heads, often triggered substantial environmental damage, as overgrazing resulted in soil erosion and the degradation of grasslands (De Marco 22). The legacy of this era can still be seen today as human

and colonial intervention has left its indelible scars on the landscapes of the American West (De Marco 23).

Environmental degradation is rooted in Western anthropocentric land ethics which view land as a commodity to be used. From an ecocritical perspective, one can evoke the expression of “slow violence” to refer to such environmental scars. The expression “slow violence” has been coined by Rob Nixon to depict this specific type of slow-moving environmental damage, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is too dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all (qtd. in Comos and Rosenthal 55). By calling attention to the environmental hardships faced by the Navajo, Hillerman aims to draw attention to the effects of colonialism on Indigenous ecology and to direct a scathing criticism of Western anthropocentric land ethic which views the land as a commodity to be exploited.

In addition to calling attention to the destructive effects of colonialism on the Native American environment, *Listening Woman* contests anthropocentrism by promoting ecocentrism. An ecocritical postcolonial reading of the novel discloses that Hillerman conveys an ecocentric environmental vision which aligns itself with the Native American worldview. It is noteworthy here that the belief system of Southwest Native Americans in general is distinguished by animism and shamanism. According to animists, the world is filled with living entities, spirit beings that animate the sun, moon, rain, thunder, animals, plants, topographic features, along with other natural phenomena (Kuiper 109). Shamanism can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices intended to make communication with the spirit world easier. It is believed that many objects, ceremonies, songs and dances hold sacred characteristics, and it is the shaman’s role to communicate this information to the group members. A shaman, therefore, can be viewed as a type of priest or practitioner through whom different spirits allow themselves to be known to humans (Kuiper 14). Briefly stated, Native Americans deconstruct dichotomies such as animate vs inanimate and physical vs spiritual.

A major way in which the Native American worldview is underscored in Hillerman's *Listening Woman* can be detected in the representation of the natural world in a way that resonates with the idea of deep ecology. A close ecocritical reading of the novel demonstrates that the environment in the novel is not described as a backdrop for the story. Rather, it is represented as a living character which is imbued with a sacred force and an intrinsic worth. This idea becomes evident in the opening scene of the novel which reads:

The Southwest wind picked up turbulence around the San Francisco Peaks, howled across the emptiness of the Moenkopi plateau, and made a thousand strange sounds in windows of the Old Hopi villages at Shongopovi and Second Mesa. Two hundred vacant miles to the North and east, it sandblasted the stone sculptures of Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park and whistled eastward across the maze of canyons on the Utah-Arizona border.
(1)

Nature is vividly described in these lines, and powerfully established as an active presence. The wind is far from being a passive background, for it is represented as agentive and dynamic. The focus on the different actions of the wind which "howled," "picked up turbulence," and "made a thousand strange sounds" showcases the wind as a living and active force: it speaks and exerts influence. To further grasp the relevance of the wind symbolism in this passage and in the novel as a whole, it is essential to understand its importance in the Navajo belief system. In her book, *Wind: Nature and Culture*, Louise M. Pryke argues that the wind plays an instrumental role in the Navajo creation myth since it functions as a creative force that connects everything in the cosmos together (82). Furthermore, "[a]mong the Navaho, the wind gives life, thought, and speech, it is behind all good or bad human thoughts and serves as a means of communication between all elements of the living world. . . . In order to provide life and guidance, the Holy Ones send winds to a person throughout one's life" (Olson 98). The wind, in Hillerman's *Listening Woman* thus, mediates between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

To further demonstrate Hillerman's depiction of nature as a living entity that is charged with spiritual power, one can refer to the following passage:

Fierce internal updrafts pushed its cap above thirty thousand feet. There the mist droplets turned to ice, and fell, and melted, and were caught again in updrafts and soared into the frigid stratosphere, only to fall again – increasing in size with this churning and producing immense charges of static electricity which caused the cloud to mutter and grumble with thunder and produce occasional explosive bolts of lightning. (Hillerman 184)

As suggested in the passage above, the formation and the development of a storm witnessed by Leaphorn while doing his investigation are vividly described. The agency and the power of the natural world are accentuated by attributing verbs such as “mutters” and “grumbles” to the cloud. This way, this passage testifies to the fact that nature does not act as a mere backdrop in the novel under study but it is a dynamic and living force. Moreover, it is relevant to consider Leaphorn's reaction to the storm: he “sat, engulfed in sound. He glanced at his watch, and waited, enjoying the storm as he enjoyed all things right and natural – not thinking for a moment about any of the unnatural affairs that involved him” (Hillerman 185). It goes without saying that Leaphorn's enjoyment of the storm serves to illuminate two principles that lie at the core of the deep ecology philosophy, which are the necessity of respecting nature and the emphasis on the intrinsic worth of the natural world.

In addition to the focal idea of representing nature as a living force in *Listening Woman*, another key idea that pertains to the philosophy of deep ecology and to Hillerman's representation of the natural world, is the idea of interconnectedness. At the beginning of the novel, for example, through the conversation between Hosteen Tso and the Listening Woman, the reader comes to know that Tso's disease is actually related to an incident which has to do with “messing up” with some sacred sand paintings. Originally, Navajo sand paintings were a part of a religious healing

ceremony to cure the sick or mentally disturbed (Fidler and Velde 101). Traditionally, the Navajo hold the belief that breaking taboos or in “some way being out of tune with the natural world” leads necessarily to sickness. Hence, the creation of a sand painting was utilized by the medicine man to bring the ill person back in harmony with the universe (Fidler and Velde 101). Drawing on materials gathered from the environment such as crushed flowers, charcoal, and sand stone, the medicine man spreads clean sand on the floor and designs different figures. Each picture is designated for a specific illness (Fidler and Velde 101). The figures in every picture stand for various Holy People from the Navajo sacred stories, such as the Hero Twins who combatted against dangerous monsters. During the ceremony, while the person to be cured sits on top of the painting, chants are sung and dances are performed. Many people gather to express their solidarity and support. When the ceremony is over, the paintings are collected and scattered in the desert (Bruchac 73-74). The destruction is explained by the Navajo principle which states that sacred paintings must never be desecrated (Fidler and Velde 101). Hence, it can be said that the incident of “messing up” with sand paintings in *Listening Woman* is an act that ruptures the state of harmony within the different parts of the universe that leads to Hosteen’s sickness.

In addition to informing Cigaret about the violation of some sand paintings, Hosteen reveals that he has committed another misdeed: he incidentally killed a frog “on the same day the sand paintings got ruined” (5). Such a revelation has a startling impact on the listening woman given the fact that “[i]n the complex Navajo metaphysics, the concept that would evolve into frogs was one of the Holy People. To kill the animals or insects which represented such holy thoughts violated a very basic taboo and was known to bring on crippling diseases” (Hillerman 5). Therefore, it may be argued that Hillerman’s reference to the violation of Navajo beliefs is meant to demonstrate how disrespecting nature leads inevitably to spiritual and ecological disharmony. The violation of the sand paintings and the killing of a frog are acts that dishonour the natural world and that cause adverse physical and spiritual

consequences such as illness and death. In Hillerman's *Listening Woman*, the diverse components of the natural world such as land and animals are represented as active and responsive actors in a relational network.

The ecocritical idea of interconnectedness can be equally detected in Hillerman's depiction of the symbiotic relationship developed between Cigaret, Leaphorn, and their natural surroundings. Throughout the novel, symbiosis is foregrounded. In the opening scenes of the novel, for instance, the listening woman's profound sensitivity to the land is brought into the limelight. To diagnose Tso's sickness, the elderly woman is required to "hear the voice-in-the earth" (7). What is worth noting is that the elderly woman's job is not represented as merely settling on the sand and leaning her forehead against the stone. Indeed, while listening to the land, the woman is described as being immersed in a trance:

It was as if she had gone into the rock, and through it into the Black World at the very beginning, when there were only Holy People on the things that would become the Navajos were only mist. Finally, she had heard the voice, and found herself in the Fourth World. She had looked down through the emergence hole, peering at Hosteen Tso in what must have been Tso's painted cave. (10)

The fact that, by the end of her trance, the medicine woman comes to know the reason behind Tso's disease, as well as the required dances that he should perform, serves to accentuate the informative and the communicative functions of nature. To put it differently, Cigaret has shown a deep respect towards the natural world, which in return has acted as a source of wisdom and provided her with the right diagnosis. Nature is described as being active, dynamic, responsive and interactive. The interconnectedness between the human and the natural worlds is highlighted. Rigid lines between the physical and the metaphysical, the secular and the profane are blurred. The symbiotic relationship between humans and their natural surroundings in *Listening Woman* also become apparent in Leaphorn's attitudes. Leaphorn's sensitivity to the natural world is

underscored throughout the novel. For instance, while doing his job and searching for the suspect named Goldrims, he “squatted on the sand and considered what it had to tell him” (Hillerman 42). His ability to read and make the distinction between the tracks of “a small flock of sheep and goats, the paw prints of dogs . . . and the prints of some boots” (Hillerman 42) demonstrates his intimate connection with the land. Leaphorn’s symbiotic relationship with nature can be further illustrated in relation to his acts of testing the moisture of a rim of sand and considering the state of weather (Hillerman 42). The process of investigation in the novel, then, is affected by Leaphorn’s capability to skilfully read, analyze, and decipher the subtle signs and messages conveyed by the natural world. The symbiotic relationship between humans and nature plays a vital role in *Listening Woman* for it directly influences the plotline of the novel.

Focusing on interconnectedness, the environmental vision conveyed in *Listening Woman* pivots upon the Navajo philosophy of Hozho. Hozho is a state that combines harmony, peace, and prosperity. To achieve this state of balance, human beings should never dominate nature. Rather, they should strive to be in a close relationship with the universe in which all things are interrelated (Rickard and Bial 68). As reflected in the novel, “[e]verything intermeshed, from the mood of a man, to the flight of the corn beetle, to the music of the wind. It was the Navajo philosophy, this concept of interwoven harmony, and it was bred into Joe Leaphorn’s bones” (189). As one can infer from these lines, the anthropocentric belief in the centrality of human beings is shattered. According to the Navajo, human beings and all other things are all active agents in the web of life. Rather than having the upper hand over nature, human beings are required to respect and worship their natural surroundings.

In conclusion, one may argue that exploring Hillerman’s *Listening Woman* through the postcolonial ecocritical lens demonstrates its political scope, for it brings to the fore its potential to critique the prevailing anthropocentric worldview. *Listening Woman* promotes an ecocentric worldview, in which the natural

environment is not represented as an inert backdrop for the story. Rather, it is represented as a dynamic and living entity. Similarly, human beings are not depicted as supreme beings who are separate from nature. Instead, they are portrayed as being a part of the universe. It can be assumed, therefore, that *Listening Woman* serves to contest the widely-popular image of the mythic American West that is grounded upon the anthropocentric view of nature as being a resource to be utilized and exploited. By promoting ecocentric environmental ethics, Hillerman's novel paints a new image of the American West in which boundaries between the human and the non-human worlds and between the physical and the spiritual are blurred. Hence, it may be argued that a postcolonial ecocritical reading of Hillerman's *Listening Woman* serves to broaden readers' perceptions beyond an anthropocentric gaze and urges them to consider alternative ways of engaging with the environment. Detective fiction, therefore, and popular genre fiction in general, prove to be a useful platform to assume a political function, since it can be deployed by ecocritics to contest hegemonic environmental ethics and raise awareness about multifarious ecological issues.

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