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**ECOLOGIES OF EMPIRE: AN ECOCRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF
ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, COLONIAL POWER, AND
CULTURAL SURVIVAL IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF LESLIE
MARMON SILKO**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the interrelationship between environmental degradation, colonial power, and cultural survival in the selected novels of Leslie Marmon Silko through the lens of ecocriticism. As one of the most influential Native American writers, Silko presents a literary vision in which land, culture, and identity are inseparably connected. Her novels expose the destructive impact of colonial expansion, capitalist exploitation, and environmental abuse on Indigenous communities and ecosystems. Through works such as *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko critiques dominant colonial ideologies that regard nature as a commodity and Indigenous lands as resources for economic extraction. The study explores how environmental degradation functions not only as an ecological issue but also as a cultural and political process that threatens Indigenous traditions, histories, and identities. At the same time, Silko's narratives highlight the resilience of Indigenous communities and their enduring relationship with the natural world. The novels portray cultural survival as deeply dependent on ecological preservation, traditional knowledge systems, and collective resistance against colonial domination. By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives

on land and environment, Silko challenges anthropocentric and imperialist worldviews while advocating sustainable and reciprocal relationships with nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Leslie Marmon Silko, Colonialism, Environmental Degradation, Cultural Survival, Indigenous Literature, Ecology, Environmental Justice, Native American Studies, Resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most influential approaches in contemporary literary studies, focusing on the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It examines how literary texts represent nature, environmental crises, and human interactions with ecosystems while exploring the cultural, political, and ethical implications of these representations. Ecocritical scholars argue that environmental problems cannot be understood solely through scientific or economic perspectives because they are deeply connected to social structures, historical processes, and cultural values. Literature plays an important role in shaping environmental consciousness by revealing the consequences of human actions on the natural world and by offering alternative visions of ecological coexistence. Within this context, the works of Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko provide a rich and significant contribution to ecocritical discourse.

Leslie Marmon Silko occupies a central position in Native American literature due to her profound engagement with Indigenous histories, cultural traditions, and ecological relationships. Drawing upon her Laguna Pueblo heritage, Silko presents a worldview in which humans, animals, plants, landscapes, and spiritual forces exist within an interconnected network of relationships. Her fiction challenges Western philosophical traditions that separate humanity from nature and justify the exploitation of land for economic and political gain. Instead, Silko emphasizes reciprocity, respect, and responsibility toward the environment. Through her novels, she demonstrates that the destruction of ecosystems is inseparable from the oppression of Indigenous peoples and the erosion of cultural identities.

The history of colonialism in North America provides a crucial framework for understanding Silko's literary concerns. European colonization transformed Indigenous landscapes through territorial expansion, resource extraction, forced displacement, and cultural assimilation. Colonial powers viewed land primarily as property and a source of wealth, often ignoring

Indigenous understandings of ecological stewardship and communal responsibility. These practices resulted in widespread environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil depletion, habitat destruction, and the disruption of traditional ecological systems. At the same time, Indigenous communities experienced the loss of ancestral territories, cultural autonomy, and social structures that had sustained them for generations.

Silko's novels reveal how colonialism operates simultaneously as an environmental and cultural process. The exploitation of land is linked directly to the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and the suppression of traditional ways of life. In her narratives, environmental destruction is never portrayed merely as a physical transformation of landscapes; it is also a disruption of memory, identity, spirituality, and community. By emphasizing these connections, Silko broadens the scope of environmental criticism and demonstrates that ecological issues are deeply intertwined with questions of power, history, and justice.

Another significant aspect of Silko's work is her emphasis on resistance. Indigenous communities in her novels are not passive victims of colonial oppression but active participants in struggles for justice, land rights, and cultural preservation. Resistance takes multiple forms, including storytelling, ceremonial practices, ecological stewardship, and collective action. These responses affirm Indigenous resilience and demonstrate the possibility of alternative relationships between humans and the environment.

This study aims to investigate how Silko's selected novels represent environmental degradation, colonial power, and cultural survival through an ecocritical framework. By examining the interconnected themes of ecology, history, and identity, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Silko's fiction offers a powerful critique of imperial domination while promoting ecological ethics rooted in Indigenous traditions. Her works challenge readers to reconsider dominant narratives of progress and development and to recognize the importance of cultural and environmental sustainability in contemporary society.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND THE COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF NATURE

A central concern in Leslie Marmon Silko's fiction is the environmental destruction caused by colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation. Through her novels, Silko illustrates how colonial powers transformed landscapes into commodities and reduced nature to an object of

economic extraction. This worldview contrasts sharply with Indigenous perspectives that regard land as a living entity possessing spiritual, cultural, and communal significance. By portraying the consequences of environmental degradation, Silko exposes the ecological costs of imperialism and critiques systems that prioritize profit over sustainability.

In *Ceremony*, environmental decline serves as both a literal and symbolic representation of colonial disruption. Drought, erosion, and ecological imbalance mirror the psychological and cultural fragmentation experienced by Indigenous communities. The novel suggests that environmental crises are not isolated events but consequences of disrupted relationships between humans and the natural world. Through the protagonist Tayo's journey, Silko demonstrates that healing requires restoring ecological harmony and reconnecting with traditional knowledge systems. The land becomes a source of renewal, emphasizing the importance of environmental stewardship in cultural recovery.

Almanac of the Dead expands this critique by examining the large-scale environmental consequences of colonial capitalism. The novel portrays a world shaped by exploitation, inequality, and ecological devastation. Mining operations, land seizures, urban expansion, and resource extraction illustrate the destructive impact of economic systems that view nature solely as a commodity. Silko highlights how these practices disproportionately affect Indigenous communities whose livelihoods, traditions, and identities depend upon the land. Environmental degradation becomes a form of colonial violence that extends beyond physical landscapes to encompass cultural and social dimensions.

Similarly, *Gardens in the Dunes* contrasts Indigenous ecological values with European colonial attitudes toward land ownership and scientific progress. Indigenous communities are depicted as living in reciprocal relationships with their environments, utilizing resources responsibly and maintaining ecological balance. In contrast, colonial societies often impose systems of ownership and exploitation that disrupt natural cycles and undermine biodiversity. Through detailed descriptions of gardens, plants, and landscapes, Silko emphasizes the sophistication of Indigenous ecological knowledge and challenges assumptions regarding the superiority of Western environmental practices.

A recurring theme in Silko's novels is the interconnectedness of environmental and cultural destruction. The exploitation of ecosystems frequently accompanies efforts to suppress Indigenous traditions and histories. Sacred sites are damaged, traditional practices are

restricted, and communal relationships with the land are disrupted. These developments reveal that environmental degradation functions not only as an ecological issue but also as a strategy of colonial domination. By severing Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, colonial powers weaken cultural continuity and collective identity.

Silko also critiques anthropocentric ideologies that place humans above nature. Her narratives emphasize that humans are part of broader ecological systems rather than masters of them. Animals, plants, rivers, and landscapes possess agency and significance within Indigenous worldviews. Environmental destruction therefore represents a violation of ethical relationships that sustain life and community. Through this perspective, Silko challenges readers to reconsider dominant assumptions regarding development, progress, and human exceptionalism.

Ultimately, Silko's depiction of environmental degradation serves as a powerful critique of colonial and capitalist systems. Her novels reveal that ecological crises are inseparable from historical patterns of exploitation and inequality. By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives, she advocates a more sustainable and ethical approach to human-environment relationships, one that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature and the importance of ecological responsibility.

III. CULTURAL SURVIVAL, INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE, AND ECOLOGICAL RENEWAL

While Leslie Marmon Silko's novels expose the destructive consequences of colonial power, they also emphasize the resilience of Indigenous cultures and the possibility of ecological renewal. Cultural survival emerges as a central theme in her fiction, reflecting the determination of Indigenous communities to preserve their identities, traditions, and relationships with the land despite centuries of oppression. Through acts of resistance, storytelling, and environmental stewardship, Silko demonstrates that cultural continuity remains a powerful force against colonial domination.

Storytelling occupies a foundational role in this process of survival. In Indigenous traditions, stories function as repositories of history, knowledge, ethics, and communal memory. Silko incorporates oral narratives into her novels to preserve cultural heritage and challenge dominant historical accounts. These stories maintain connections between generations and

reinforce relationships with specific landscapes and ecosystems. By preserving collective memory, storytelling becomes a form of resistance against cultural erasure and assimilation.

In *Ceremony*, healing is achieved through the recovery of traditional narratives and ceremonial practices. Tayo's personal transformation reflects a broader process of cultural restoration. The novel suggests that reconnecting with ancestral knowledge enables individuals and communities to overcome the fragmentation caused by colonialism. Environmental renewal accompanies this cultural healing, illustrating the inseparable relationship between ecological and social well-being.

Almanac of the Dead presents resistance on a larger political scale. Indigenous movements seek to reclaim land, challenge systems of exploitation, and restore historical justice. The novel portrays collective action as essential for confronting colonial structures that continue to shape contemporary society. Resistance is not limited to political activism but includes cultural preservation, spiritual practices, and ecological responsibility. Through these efforts, Indigenous communities affirm their sovereignty and maintain meaningful connections to their ancestral territories.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, ecological knowledge becomes a crucial instrument of cultural survival. Traditional gardening practices symbolize continuity, adaptation, and resilience. Plants serve as carriers of memory, linking individuals to ancestors, landscapes, and cultural traditions. The novel celebrates biodiversity and sustainable relationships with nature while criticizing colonial practices that prioritize control and exploitation. Through the preservation of ecological knowledge, Indigenous communities maintain both environmental and cultural integrity.

Silko's representation of resistance extends beyond human actions to include the land itself. Natural forces often appear as active participants in struggles against domination. Landscapes preserve memories of historical events, while ecological processes continue despite attempts at control and destruction. This perspective reflects Indigenous understandings of nature as a living presence with agency and significance. Ecological renewal therefore becomes a collaborative process involving both human communities and the natural world.

Another important aspect of cultural survival in Silko's fiction is the role of collective identity. Communities endure through shared histories, traditions, and responsibilities rather than

through individual achievement alone. Resistance is portrayed as a communal effort grounded in cooperation and mutual support. This emphasis challenges individualistic models of social organization and highlights the importance of collective action in addressing environmental and cultural challenges.

Silko ultimately presents ecological renewal as inseparable from decolonization. Sustainable futures require not only environmental protection but also the recognition of Indigenous rights, knowledge systems, and cultural autonomy. Her novels suggest that meaningful solutions to ecological crises must address historical injustices and support cultural diversity. By centering Indigenous perspectives, Silko offers alternative models of coexistence based on reciprocity, respect, and ecological balance.

Through her portrayal of cultural survival and resistance, Silko demonstrates that Indigenous communities possess valuable knowledge and practices capable of contributing to contemporary environmental debates. Her fiction encourages readers to recognize the enduring strength of Indigenous cultures and the importance of preserving both ecological and cultural diversity in an increasingly interconnected world.

IV. CONCLUSION

Leslie Marmon Silko's selected novels offer a compelling ecocritical examination of the relationships among environmental degradation, colonial power, and cultural survival. Through *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko demonstrates that ecological destruction cannot be separated from historical processes of colonial domination and cultural displacement. Her narratives reveal how imperial systems transformed landscapes into commodities, disrupted Indigenous relationships with the land, and undermined traditional knowledge systems that had sustained communities for generations. By exposing these interconnected forms of exploitation, Silko provides a powerful critique of colonial and capitalist ideologies that continue to influence contemporary environmental and social realities.

One of the most significant contributions of Silko's fiction is its portrayal of the land as a living and active presence rather than a passive resource. Rivers, mountains, plants, animals, and sacred places possess cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance within Indigenous worldviews. This perspective challenges anthropocentric assumptions that place human interests above environmental concerns. Silko consistently emphasizes the interconnectedness

of all forms of life and demonstrates that ecological well-being is essential for cultural continuity and social justice. Her novels encourage readers to recognize the intrinsic value of nature and to reconsider dominant models of development that prioritize economic gain over environmental sustainability.

The analysis further reveals that environmental degradation functions as a mechanism of colonial power. The seizure of Indigenous lands, exploitation of natural resources, and destruction of ecosystems are depicted as deliberate processes that facilitate political and economic control. These practices not only damage the environment but also weaken cultural identities, disrupt communal relationships, and threaten traditional ways of life. Silko's work therefore broadens the scope of ecocriticism by illustrating that environmental issues are deeply connected to questions of history, identity, and power.

At the same time, Silko's novels are not narratives of victimhood alone. They celebrate the resilience, adaptability, and resistance of Indigenous communities in the face of colonial oppression. Storytelling, ceremonial practices, ecological stewardship, and collective action emerge as powerful strategies for preserving cultural heritage and challenging systems of domination. Through these forms of resistance, Silko highlights the capacity of Indigenous peoples to maintain meaningful relationships with the land and to envision alternative futures based on justice and sustainability.

Another important aspect of Silko's literary vision is her affirmation of Indigenous ecological knowledge. Traditional understandings of environmental stewardship, biodiversity, and reciprocity provide valuable alternatives to exploitative approaches toward nature. Silko demonstrates that Indigenous cultures possess sophisticated ecological philosophies developed through long-term interactions with specific environments. These knowledge systems offer important insights for addressing contemporary environmental crises, including climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss.

Furthermore, Silko's fiction underscores the importance of cultural survival in ecological discussions. The preservation of languages, traditions, stories, and communal practices is closely linked to the protection of ecosystems and ancestral territories. Environmental conservation and cultural sustainability are presented as mutually reinforcing goals rather than separate concerns. This perspective contributes significantly to contemporary debates

regarding environmental justice and decolonization by emphasizing the need to respect Indigenous rights and knowledge systems.

In conclusion, Leslie Marmon Silko's selected novels provide a profound ecocritical critique of empire while offering a hopeful vision of ecological renewal and cultural resilience. Her works reveal the destructive consequences of colonial exploitation while affirming the enduring strength of Indigenous communities and their relationships with the natural world. By foregrounding interconnectedness, reciprocity, and environmental responsibility, Silko challenges readers to imagine more equitable and sustainable ways of living. Consequently, her fiction remains a vital contribution to ecocritical scholarship, Indigenous studies, and ongoing efforts to address global environmental and social challenges.

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