

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Applying Schauffler's Role of 'Ecological Conversion' in N. Scott Momaday's Writings to Shape Human Bondage with Nature

\*K Subapriya<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, P.G and Research Department of English, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai-30, India.

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### ABSTRACT

American literature and its canon for the past few decades have been frequently subjected to the study of eco criticism. The contemporary eco criticism pays more attention to the works of native American writers categorizing their works as 'nature or land based'. The four elements of nature – earth, air, water and fire form a major part of their literature. Marina Schauffler in her work *Turning to Earth* identifies and labels a group of writers as 'ecological writers' since, "these writers integrate a profound spiritual and philosophical sense about the earth into their practical lives". In this work she also exploits 'six phases of ecological conversion' namely remembrance, reflection, revelation, reciprocity, resistance and ritual. Among these group of 'ecological writers', she deals with one of the major native American writers and Pulitzer prize winner N. Scott Momaday. His works serve as a major source for the study of ecological elements. According to Schauffler, these six phases have eventually helped the writers to transform themselves and experience an ecological awareness and awakening. Momaday's works are enriched with resources of nature and through the exploration of his usage of 'ecological conversions', it is plausible to enlighten the mankind about the strong bond with the nature. The concept of theory leads to practices and therefore the literature at the basic level in a theory form may induce the humankind practically to conserve and ensure the preservation of nature. Native American literature serves as a major source which can pave way for the promotion of preserving nature in practice.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Eco criticism, Native American literature, N Scott Momaday, Schauffler.

### 1. APPLYING SCHAUFFLER'S ROLE OF 'ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION' IN N. SCOTT MOMADAY'S WRITINGS TO SHAPE HUMAN BONDAGE WITH NATURE

Only after the last tree

Has been cut down

Only after the last river has been poisoned

Only after the last fish has been caught

Only then will you find

That money cannot be eaten

-Cree Indian Prophecy

Native Americans, the people of land have envisioned the dangers of environmental problems centuries before and they have prophesized to caution the people about the devastating effects of nature's destruction. Environmental awareness, global warming and

the methods to prevent and protect the earth 'Our Blue Planet' has reached its peak. Mass media, government and academic spheres talks about the environmental issues to a larger extent. NGOs spring up like mushrooms and energetically educate and promote the awareness among the people regarding the adverse effects of exploiting nature.

Despite the persistent voice, the results we have achieved through conferences and activities are very average when compared to that of energy investment which it has involved. The questions of unequal ratio in this input and output should be examined with care. The population response to the storming canvass of NGOs, government, mass media and academic circle is due to the lack of self-involvement. Marina Schauffler in her

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +919585013527

Email address: [shakthikannan.priya@gmail.com](mailto:shakthikannan.priya@gmail.com) (K.Subapriya)

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introduction to the work *Turning to Earth: Stories of Ecological Conversion* explores this problem. She vividly describes the futility of canvass by cleanup organizers who try to prevent the dumping of trash into the ocean. She gives two major reasons for this activity of people: "They were dumping trash overboard because they saw the sea as a vast wilderness that would absorb it. And they believed the items were – as marketers claimed- "Disposable"" [1].

So, the basic step requires the change in these entrenched beliefs of people. But in an advanced level, it demands the spiritual involvement of an individual to become one with the nature. The magnitude of ecological problem has become so severe that mere scientific remedies and awareness alone cannot solve the problem. The best solution would be to achieve a transformation involving the elements of ecological conversion [2, 3].

Schauffler gives the list of six ecological conversion elements as follows:

1. Bedrock
2. Remembrance
3. Reflection
4. Revelation
5. Reciprocity
6. Resistance and Ritual

All these ecological conversion elements serve as an inevitable source to transform a person. As Schauffler states "We tend to view environmental crises as occurring outside us, rather than admitting that they stem from who we are and how we live". To overcome this wrong view of considering environmental crises as something which sprung from outside, one has to realize the fact that the term Ecology originally mean "household" or "home", drawn from the Greek word "Oikos". So, for Schauffler "Ecology involves learning how to be at home on earth".

According to Schauffler, Environmental reforms through a merely available science data devoid of spiritual beliefs and ethical values will not yield quite a good result. Science pays its utmost concentration to outer ecology but the inner ecology which stems from the cultural attachment to scientific materialism, is paid the least attention. In the current scenario, to prevent the environment destruction, the conscious of inner ecology becomes indispensable. The upcoming field Eco psychology also lays emphasis on the

"individual psyches who are intimately bound to the elemental earth". Therefore turning towards earth to promote inner ecology through the elements of ecological conversions is exemplified by Schauffler. She labels six set of writers namely Edward Abbey, Rachel Carson, N. Scott Momaday, Scott Russell Sanders, Alice Walker and Terry Tempest Williams as 'Nature Writers' who have already achieved this inner ecology by turning towards earth through the usage of ecological conversion elements.

Among these group of 'ecological writers', she deals with one of the major native American writers N. Scott Momaday. His works serve as a major source of study of ecological elements. Schauffler promotes the notion that all these six phases have created a profound change in the lives of writers and their bond with the nature. So, studying some of the major works of N. Scott Momaday to comprehend the phases will eventually help the mankind to imbibe these phases and undergo a self-experience. Further it is appropriate to study Momaday to trace all these ecological elements for whom the language and the earth are holy.

Schauffler metaphorically defines the first ecological element bedrock as something that "represents the ground that supports one's deepest conviction". Williams consider the "bedrock" as one which joins the inner and outer ecology. This concept of merging - outer and inner ecology, opposes the long standing philosophy which always divide the self and surroundings. However, the blending of inner ecology with outer ecology erodes one way or the other to fall in love with the nature. It creates such a transcend that as "geological bedrock is not reducible; one's bedrock identity is an indivisible part of a vast whole". Momaday too should have experienced this state, therefore the natural elements like sun, moon, air and the animals like horse and bear occupied a major space in his writings. Many passage and stanza from his novels and poems respectively echo the merging of his inner ecology with outer ecology.

In the novel *The Ancient Child* [4], major chapters put forth the notion of man's unity with nature. The protagonist Locke Setman after spending years of life in mainstream America comes back to his tribal land for his grandmother's death. His visit to his traditional land leaves a greater impact on

him. He ultimately finds peace in the desolate nature. His quest for life and restlessness finds a solution in communion with nature. All the characters in this novel are blended together with nature and hence serve as a best example for 'bedrock' experience.

The chapters titled as "Butterflies spring from the grass" and "Somewhere a Raven calls" exclusively describe the wonders of animal and landscape. One of the major characters in this novel Grey describes her appearance in the following way:

Dog, Dog, Dog, is it any wonder that I inspire the praises of Master Bonney? No indeed, for I am a bony lass. I have enjoyed eighteen wondrous summers, all of them in the wasteness of the wilderness, which is my incomparable element. I am tall and limber and well formed. My mind is clear. I am as trim and graceful as a doe, and I am free of the strictures of "civilization", so-called [4].

Describing herself with the features of nature is a most unique character which shows the love, awe and admiration for nature. If nature becomes a part of every individual, naturally the destruction caused to the environment will become much lesser. Grey's poems and letters reiterate her oneness with nature. The novel's final chapter reflects Locke Setman's bedrock experience with nature.

He could smell a thousand things at once and perceive them individually. He could smell the bark of trees and the rot of roots and the fragrances of grass and wildflowers. He could smell the scat of animals here and there, old and new, across the reach of the hills. He could smell the sweet saps and the stench of the deaths of innumerable creatures in the earth.

In short, the novel *The Ancient Child* stands for the bedrock nature which every human being need to experience.

The second ecological element "Remembrance" suggests the "contact with the natural world and with mentors (both familial and literary) that set the stage for a subsequent turn to earth". Citing this as seminal statement, one could clearly state that Momaday's upbringing in Arizona and New México, has created a good influence on his writings. The quality of Momaday to consider his physical and spiritual existence, profoundly influenced by the "remembered earth" originates particularly because of the desert in Southwest and the Great Plains where the Kiowa tribe

once flourished and he was brought up. The art of remembering and worshipping the nature is adopted by Momaday from his Kiowa ancestors. His grandmother's influence and his spending of time in Navajo reservation have considerably modelled him to be a person with spiritual attachment towards nature. The *Way to Rainy Mountains* [7] reflects this ecological element of remembrance. Both nature and his grandmother are mentors of Momaday. Along with nature, his grandmother also acted as a means through which he strongly related to his native landscape. In *The Way to Rainy Mountains*, he remembers his visit to his grandmother.

Once I was taken to see her at the old house on the other side of rainy mountain creek. The room was dark, and her old age filled it like a substance. She was white haired and blind, and, in that strange reversion that comes upon the very old, her skin was as soft as the skin of a baby. I remember the sound of her glad weeping and the water-like touch of her hand.

Schauffler herself gives an instance for Momaday's memories of the permeable identity through the experience of riding horses in the chapter "Remembrance".

After a time the horse became an extension of my senses, touching me to the earth, the air, the sun more perfectly than I could touch these things for myself. Separate creatures though we were, there were moments when there was practically no telling us apart. We were one whole and distinct images in the plane- indeed more than an image an entity of substance.

He constantly remembers his ecological duty and retains his awe for nature through his mentors. The act of remembrance becomes possible through the mentors. Schauffler in the third chapter of the book exclusively concentrates on the ecological element "Reflection". Reflection is the period of enforced introspection, which may be an emotionally taxing process but which would lead to an awakening of a sense of compassion for the good ecological practice. She states that, this kind of reflection especially the "Encounters with nature's destructive sides can test the commitment of Ecological converts, providing a potent reminder that a turn to earth is not a move toward stability, security or endless bounty".

Momaday's experience of visiting places, and dwelling on the margins of the society in a way has helped him to reflect about the nature. For ecological writers "Reflection" becomes possible through writing. In *The Names: A Memoir* [6], he reflects and recollects the disillusioned memory of his childhood age, "Memory begin to qualify the imagination, to give it another formation, one that is peculiar to the self. I remember isolated, yet fragmented and confused, images- and images...especially vivid to me". The reflection has helped him to collage the nature and personal elements. Through reflection, the landscape and identity becomes a part of his writing which once again proves him to be a "Nature Writer". In his autobiography, he completely describes the natural resource of Navajo reservation and the language which helped him to trace his identity in a biased world. This seclusion to reservation has helped him to reflect over the nation. Since autobiography is nothing but the reflection of the past, the complete work *The Names: A Memoir* stands for the ecological element reflection. The other four ecological elements - revelation, reciprocity, resistance and ritual have also played a major role in moulding Momaday as a "Nature Writer". Revelation is a moment of insight that reset, renews and reconstitutes the life of an individual towards an ecological awakening. This sense of revelation draws the truth of a sense of belonging to a sacred whole. Schauflier states that "Revelatory experiences can inspire fundamental changes in ecological belief and practice".

Perhaps his novel *House Made of Dawn* [5] can be considered as a spur of his production which came out of his revelation. Though the novel is often read for its theme of identity struggle and the necessity to retain culture, still through the words of Momaday who believed that "the whole world view of the Indian is predicated upon the principle of harmony in the universe" [5]. It becomes evident that the story is linked to the universe and the universe is nothing but the ecosphere.

Only a sense of revelation can lead to the description of the nature with such powerful words as follows,

The specter of rain in August is a distillation of light upon the land, a harder efflorescence upon the rocks and a sterile, uncommon shine upon the river and the leaves.

An element of darkness, however vague and tentative on the midsummer sky, implies a thin and colorless luster upon the sand and the cliffs and the dusty boughs of cedar and pine, and there is a quality like vain resistance in the air.

*House Made of Dawn*, the novel has evolved through the process of ritual i.e. the creative writing caused due to the revelation with a passion to reciprocate the love for nature. Momaday too had a great sense of resistance to protect our mother earth. His autobiography exposes "the tribal tales, his boyhood memories with a double focus on the possibility of reconciling Indian-white conflicts along with a rediscovery of the lost unity of natural world and self".

His spiritual attachment towards the nature becomes much more lucid in the following lines from [5]. He later commented that one of the things that concern him most deeply "is the way we treat our environment. We haven't done a very good job in protecting our planet. We have failed to recognize the spiritual life of the earth". For Momaday dreams have also lead to the process of revelation. After the revelation, it is through the process of reciprocity, writers often foster a stronger commitment to the ecological whole. In the duration of achieving reciprocity, one has to move from sympathy to empathy, i.e. the mode through which one can establish the kinship with all life. Momaday also insists on this reciprocity, where "people has to invest themselves in the land and simultaneously incorporate the land into their most fundamental experience". When the process of reciprocity happens, the earth becomes a sacred ground through rituals and ceremonies.

Schaufflier in order to explain the concept of reciprocity draws example from Momaday's concern for light pollution. He viewed the light pollution just not as an environmental problem but also approached the issue with ethical concern. He was anxious that his children would miss the opportunity of watching stars and stated, "The stars are very important to me mythically. To think of losing the stars represents to me a very deep wound".

Nature can be restored to some extent when it is viewed with aesthetic sense through art rather than completely approaching it with a sense of utilitarian attitude. The process of writing becomes ritual when the writing lays emphasis on moral and nature, rather than political. Though in current scenario political,

economic and social criteria could not be neglected, along with that it is the task of 'Nature Writers' to insist on the environmental awakening and the importance of ecological practice.

N Scott Momaday was one among those 'Nature Writers' who believed that through the process of writing as "ritual", a collective turn to earth is possible. Taking pen in hands to mobilize friends and to turn towards earth is an essential aim of "Nature Writers". The reaffirmation of the physical and spiritual bond with nature, involves an individual to cultivate all these ecological elements with patience, devotion and sincerity [8].

He has hailed from a tradition and culture for which the land is sacred that could not be bought or sold. Every element of the nature is whole and vital in itself. Hence, human beings have no authority to destroy it. Nature provides immense pleasure to enjoy and not to destroy. The myth which presents the animals, birds and tree as one which could talk is not merely a caricature. Cultivating love and respect for nature, through the elements of ecological conversion has produced a good change in bringing out the spiritual and physical bond with nature. Though all the people in this world are not writers who could find the bond with nature through the process of writing, still one can make the best use of ecological conversion elements to have a holistic thinking and a sense of oneness with nature.

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