
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Inuit Searching for “Place” in *The Ice Whale*

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| ABSTRACT

Place theory is an emerging theory in the field of ecological criticism, emphasizing the psychological attachment, emotional connection, and self-identification of people to specific natural areas. The Inuit in Jean Craighead George's *The Ice Whale* are deeply connected to the Arctic Ocean, and the Inuit region becomes a “place” about where the “self” is. Technological violence that some humans have inflicted on nature and the excessive pursuit of the economy has destroyed the marine ecology and plunged the Inuit into a state of “non-place.” The author reconstructs the “place” by imagination, aiming to arouse children's love for the ecological environment through the beautiful conception and call for the construction of a community of shared future for mankind.

| KEYWORDS

Children's literature, Ecocriticism, Place theory, Jean Craighead George, *The Ice Whale*

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In modern society, economic development and technological innovation have become the core drivers of social progress. Scientific and technological advancements have fundamentally transformed our lives, shaping our values and cognitive structures. However, the blind worship of technology and the single-minded pursuit of economic growth have led to a rupture between humans and nature. Environmental crises loom large, and humanity has lost itself in the excessive pursuit of the conveniences brought by modern industrial technology.

The emergence of ecocriticism represents humanity's effort to re-examine its relationship with nature, abandoning the anthropocentric worldview and reclaiming the true self that has been lost in modern society. Place theory is an important approach within ecocriticism. “Place, in simple terms, refers to the specific natural region to which people are attached. It determines, influences, and marks the characteristics of human existence, ecological thoughts, and ecological identity. This natural region is also influenced and cared for by the people living within it.” Place theory researchers believe that a specific space that cannot reflect the connection between humans and nature, and cannot define and mark the ecological existence and ecological identity of people, is a “non-place” (Wang Nuo, 2013).

Jean Craighead George is one of the most important American writers. As a novelist passionate about nature themes, she has created over 100 internationally acclaimed works and has twice won the Newbery Medal. *The Ice Whale* is her last work of children's literature, condensing the essence of her ecological thought. The novel primarily recounts how the Toozak family's state from attachment to Inuit place to “non-place” in the development of the times. Eventually, as oil and other fuels replaced whale oil, commercial whalers disappeared from the Inuit region, and the local ecosystem recovered. Inuit people regain Inuit culture and find their self-identity, so that they can inhabit here with body and mind.

2. Place Attachment: The Inuit's Sense of Home

"Place" symbolizes homeland, with home at the center of "place." *The Ice Whale* tells the story of Toozak, an Inuit boy living along the shores of the Arctic Ocean. He is fortunate to witness the birth of a bowhead whale (Siku) - in Inuit culture, this is considered a blessing. However, when Toozak reveals the whales' habitat to whalers, many whales are killed. A shaman casts a curse on Toozak - he and his descendants must protect Siku forever. The curse is passed down through generations, with Toozak's family steadfastly guarding the whale until the whale saves a girl from the family, breaking the curse. This story is a reflection of the Inuit people's natural worship, in which they believe that all living things have spirits and are equal and that humans should not kill whales indiscriminately. After the baptism of the Industrial Revolution, the descendants of Toozak saw the courage, persistence, and strong will of their ancestors from this generational curse and were inspired by the wisdom of their ancestors. Emily, a seventh-generation member of the Toozaks, returns to the Inuit homeland, persisting in Inuit culture and rebuilding her sense of self, ultimately finding her rightful place. Jane Craighead George believes the Inuit homeland holds a special meaning for the Inuit people - it is the Inuit's "only home." In essence, the place, especially the homeland, represents the core of identity and belonging for the Inuit people in this story.

The Inuit people's attachment to their "place" is first and foremost reflected in their reverence for nature. In the journey of Toozak in protecting Siku by following its trail, Jane vividly describes Toozak's experiences in ice fields, especially the close connection between the Inuit people and the mystical whales, showing us the deep-rooted connection between the Inuit people and indeed all humanity with nature. Every spring, over sixteen thousand bowhead whales migrate to the Arctic to rest and breed in the Inuit region. The livelihood of the Inuit people is entirely dependent on the resources and climatic conditions of the Arctic environment. "The Inuit value whales the most, as whales provide them with food, shelter, utensils, and life." They make a living through hunting. Jane also describes scenes of the Inuit people hunting, building snow houses, and interacting with nature in the Arctic environment, depicting their close connection with the natural elements through descriptions such as "bearskin door" and "homes of skin."

The novel emphasizes the unique spiritual bond between the Inuit people and whales. In spring, bowhead whales migrate to the Arctic to rest and give birth, providing an opportunity for the Inuit people. Live within the Arctic Circle, they rely on hunting for their livelihood. While the Inuit people depend on whale hunting for sustenance, the large size and once abundant numbers of bowhead whales ensured that the hunting practices did not harm the whale's ability to thrive. Over the years, this relationship gave rise to a distinctive whale hunting culture, with whale hunting becoming an integral part of their cultural tradition. Jane depicts scenes of interaction between the Inuit people and whales, including hunting, celebrations, and gratitude rituals, showcasing their reverence and dependence on the whales, as well as their commitment to the whale hunting culture.

Through portraying the daily life and social organization of the Inuit community, the novel highlights their unique attachment to their homeland. The Inuit community is closely knit, living together, supporting one another and sharing common values with cultural traditions. The entire community gathers to celebrate, share food, and show respect to the great marine animals that provide them with life and nourishment. "...for thousands of years, they only killed what they needed. The whales are food and life's necessities." [3] In order to uphold and perpetuate the spirit of their homeland, The Inuit people frequently come together to celebrate bountiful harvests or other significant events, strengthening their bonds through storytelling, festivities, and collective activities. The nature worship in Jane Craighead George's ecological thought was deeply influenced by the "animism" of the Inuit people, advocating that all things in the world have life and power like people and bringing divine inspiration to the Inuit people living in the Arctic region, so that they can use this power to contend with the harsh environment. This reverence for nature, coupled with their deep connection to their homeland, fosters the inheritance and propagation of Inuit cultural traditions.

3. Place deprivation: Non-place Survival of the Inuit

While emphasizing the importance of the ecological environment for human survival and the Inuit people's attachment to nature, Jane reveals the environmental damage caused by commercial whaling and colonial development and the impact on the Inuit people. In modern society, the deprivation of the natural areas to which the urban human premises are attached leads to a state of "non-place." Wang Nuo observes that "The increasingly globalized modern civilization is one that is increasingly non-place, with rapid urbanization (excluding eco-cities) and consumer culture not only depriving most people of their place - or forcing them into non-ecological urban life, or polluting the places where people's childhood or ancestors lived in harmony with nature. But it also makes those rural residents who are less polluted by civilization more and more low self-esteem and yearning for non-ecological, non-place city life (Wang Nuo, 2013)." The situation of "place deprivation" or "non-place" described by Wang Nuo is a true reflection of the external and internal plunder that the Inuit people encounter in modern society. In Jane's ecological descriptions, there is abundant appreciation and praise for the Arctic Inuit region, but in a society where industrial development is rapidly advancing, their homeland is being plundered, and their original ecological harmony is under severe threat.

The plight of the Inuit people in the aftermath of "place deprivation" and loss of identity is fully reflected in *The Ice Whale*. Balaena mysticetus, also known as the bowhead whale, is prized by commercial whalers. Bowhead whales have more blubber than other whales. When the blubber is converted into whale oil, it can light thousands of oil lamps in the United States. Baleen, also known

as whalebone, is used to make umbrella bones, support for women's girdles, and support for hoop skirts. The United States once became rich and famous with the "help" of the *Balaena mysticetus*, which was nearly wiped out by a large number of whalers. After the discovery of the bowhead whale by the whaling ship *Superior* in the Arctic Ocean in 1848, the destruction of the Inuit homeland began (George, 2014).

"Ecological self-identification is related to ecology, mainly considering the natural place where I was born and grew up. To identify oneself is to identify roles, to determine who I am, where I come from, where I go, and how I live in a specific place and a specific landscape." (Wang Nuo, 2013) Once this place is destroyed, the ecological identity of the self will be questioned, and the loss of the home will inevitably lead to the loss of identity.

The ecological and cultural destruction of the Inuit region by colonization and industrialization has deprived the Inuit of their ideal home and affected their anxiety and confidence in their identity. When American whalers arrived in the Inuit homeland, they slaughtered whales. "When I came here, it was full of whales. Now, it's hard to see even one of them (George, 2014). "Their food source and living environment are under serious threat. At this point, the Inuit people had no choice but to let the colonists destroy their homes and places. The whalers and novelties of the modern industrial colonists in the Arctic are like a weapon in the heart of the Inuit people, robbing them of their land and food and even destroying their identity. For two generations, nearly 50 years, bowhead whales in the Arctic Ocean have been nearly extinct as the third and fourth generations of the Toozak family set sail in vain to search for Siku. The Inuit, represented by the Toozak family, began to question the powers of the shaman and the Inuit culture passed down by their ancestors.

In the process of modern industrial development, the "self" of the Inuit gradually drifts away from the land. "Modern civilization has greatly weakened or even removed the placeness of human existence, severing the attachment between human life and nature. Environmental pollution has destroyed the homes of the vast majority of people—where our childhood and the happiness of our ancestors depended on a mixture of landscapes, smells, sounds, history, neighbors, and friends. This mixture is subtle and intangible yet can touch the depths of the soul, forming a "place." Today, even if we consciously try to return, we have no home to return to. This is place deprivation." People whose places have been plundered are trapped in a "non-place" predicament, unable to find themselves in the vast world. This is the identity anxiety of the Inuit depicted by Jean, and it is also the survival confusion of many ethnic minorities in the world today.

4. Place Consciousness: the Inuit Regaining Their Ecological Self

Another important part of place theory concerns the relationship between "place" and people's self-identity. Wang Nuo mentioned that place is closely related to people's identity, which brings people together with all beings in a particular space and time and enables them to present their respective places in mutual connection (Wang Nuo, 2013). The shaman told Toozak, "Your curse is that you must protect the whale you saw born until it dies..... If the whale saves the life of a member of your family, the curse will be lifted (George, 2014)." The curse has never been realized, as overfishing has severely damaged the Arctic's biological chain, and the Inuit have not seen whales for a long time and question the curse's authenticity.

It was not until the birth of Charlie, the fifth-generation member of the Toozak family, that the American whaling industry abruptly stopped. Although the ecology is gradually recovering, many Inuit people, represented by Charlie, "no longer believe in shamans" and have converted from believing in Inuit culture to Christianity. Industrial civilization has invaded the Inuit spiritual realm and destroyed their self-identity. The unique spiritual connection with the whale is etched deep in Inuit hearts. Even after Charlie leaves the church, he continues to hear the ancestral voice saying, "Protect Siku until he dies." But, as if for the first time Charlie heard a response, the voice continued, "Or until it saves one of the Toozak." (George, 2014) The conflict between the two cultures caused a large number of Inuit people to lose themselves and fall into confusion under the impact of industrial civilization.

They may not believe in the shaman's curse, but the story has been passed down from generation to generation. Emily is the seventh-generation member of the Toozak family. It wasn't until Emily met with Siku that she began to believe in the ancestral stories, taking up the responsibility of protecting the whales and the environment again. When the rope on Emily's kayak accidentally fell into the water and entangled Siku, she fell out of the kayak while trying to rescue him, ending up on a sheet of floating ice. After Siku was freed, he didn't leave her but instead pushed her floating ice to safety on solid ground. This illustrates the mutual help between the Inuit and the bowhead whale. While helping Siku, Emily broke the curse of her ancestors, but she wasn't fully saved. Living alone on the desolate ice fields, she gradually put into practice the survival methods and life skills passed down from her Inuit ancestors, realizing the importance of her tribal culture. "My connection to this land comes not only from the intimate familiarity of childhood but also from the mysterious cognitive depths of memory, naming, language, and emotions passed down by my ancestors." She reaffirmed her own identity and became a crucial guardian of traditional knowledge. The process of reclaiming traditional culture is also a process of searching for Inuit roots, and only by establishing an emotional connection with the place where they were born and raised can they find their own sense of existence.

5. Place Imagination: the Comfort of Nature

If the near-extinction of whales is the disillusionment of the Inuit homeland, Emily's generation and the epilogue's future vision are Jean's reconstruction of the eco-utopia. Contemporary people are deprived of their place by modern civilization, and their sense of "place deprivation" and "non-place" is increasing with the development of industrial civilization. Writers with a conscience "have to fill the regret of 'non-place' existence through imagination, and the place imagination arises from this." This kind of imagination, even if it is imaginary, can also obtain a sense of place. Wang Nuo believes that "the imagination of the place is the main content of ecological literature, but also the important mission of ecological literature — to fill the blank of modern people's mind caused by 'non-place' through literary imagination, and encourage modern people to recover or restore the place. (Wang Nuo, 2013)" Jean Craighead George's ecological ideals are sublimated in such imagination.

"By 2048, it had been two hundred years since the first Yankee whale ship sailed into the Arctic. The western Arctic bowhead whale population had recovered its former numbers. The efforts of the Native communities to protect the whales and their habitat had been successful. The sea ice had retreated deep into the high Canadian Arctic in summer. Subarctic whale species like humpback, fin, and even blue whales now frequented the Chukchi and Beaufort seas.

The profitable years of oil development had diminished. Life in the Arctic communities still relied on a subsistence lifestyle . . . without whales, caribou, seals, fish, and the knowledge to hunt them, the village could not survive. Many dog teams were back in use. While still a thriving community, the pace of life had slowed down, and the village people walked the gravel roads of the village, visiting, talking, and sharing food." (George, 2014)

The life of the Inuit is being revived on the vast Arctic ice fields, where the ecological environment, whales, and other flora and fauna play a soothing and nurturing role in human growth. Heidegger specifically points out that the earth—the entire planet—is the dwelling place of human existence: "The earth has set their historical space for the people." [4] We can't just think of a place as an ecological region on Earth but extend it to the entire planet home. Jean, through the portrayal of the rise and fall of the Inuit tribe, aims to convey to readers that humans need to proactively improve their relationship with nature in order to rebuild harmony with nature.

6. Conclusion

The development of technology may distort the true nature of things, but the human soul continues to seek authenticity. In non-ecological cities, people living in box-like buildings are isolated from nature, and the most frightening aspect is the isolation of the soul, leading to a loss of sense of place and place consciousness, similar to the Inuit's distrust of traditional culture and abandonment of the Inuit region. Ecologists remind people to respect nature, believe that everything has a spirit and that we exist within the environment that nurtures us. Jean Craighead George continuously creates children's literature, representing the author's hope that more children can truly understand their diverse selves and not get lost in an incomplete, inauthentic world. With the deterioration of the environment, many children's literature writers focus on creating eco-friendly novels to cultivate children's ecological consciousness. Children gain the correct ecological awareness through reading these novels. As ecological crises intensify and globalization deepens, integrating ecological awareness into the study of children's literature becomes increasingly important and popular. Therefore, Jean Craighead George not only tells stories of place imagination to the Inuit people but also spreads the belief in the spirituality of all things in Inuit culture to children around the world, planting ecological consciousness in their hearts, which is beneficial for them to perceive the world and protect the world.

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