
**Examining the Ecological Consciousness of Haenyeo: An Analysis of Lisa See's
The Island of Sea Women**

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Abstract: The environment significantly influences the characteristics of human beings. They rely on the environment to satisfy their fundamental needs. Indigenous women depend on robust ecosystems to nourish their families. The environment serves as their guiding principle in life. Their culture and customs are infused with it. The evolving global order imposes strain on the environment and adversely affects indigenous populations. They are impacted by environmental deterioration and calamities such as flooding, biodiversity loss, and climate change. The indigenous rural women's community bears distinct duties to guarantee the welfare of their families. The haenyeo, female sea divers, constitute a community reliant on the sea for their living. The haenyeo's expertise in marine environments, their sustainable collection techniques, and their reverent relationship with nature exemplify this. The novel depicts the sea not merely as a source of livelihood, but also as a living testament to trauma, resilience, and female solidarity. Lisa illustrates the preservation, disruption, and transmission of ecological memory amid war, colonialism, and modernisation through the experiences of the protagonists, Mi-ja and Young-sook. This paper analyses the issue of ecological memory in Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women*.

Keywords: Haenyeo culture, Matrilocal Culture, Jeju Island, Ecological memory, Cultural Identity.

Introduction: Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* (2019) is a historical novel centred on the Korean island of Jeju, spanning the period from the 1930s to the 2000s. The narrative revolves around two women, Young-sook and Mi-ja, who initially maintain a friendship but thereafter experience estrangement. They are part of the island's matrifocal society and function as haenyeo, referring to female deep-sea divers who collect seafood to support their families. Young-sook originates from a distinguished haenyeo family, but Mi-ja's father was

a Japanese collaborator, resulting in her social disgrace. Notwithstanding their diverse backgrounds, the girls cultivate a profound connection and undergo training together under the guidance of Young-sook's mother. They face the dangers and difficulties of diving in frigid seas while also fostering strength and resilience through their participation in a community of women.

Korea was a Japanese colony during the girls' adolescence, and they must battle destitution, starvation, and persecution. The book analyses the consequences of imperialism and the fight for existence during warfare, encompassing the forced labour and military oppression endured by the Korean population. The April 3rd Massacre or Jeju Uprising of 1948 constitutes the most atrocious occurrence in the tale. In this instance, government soldiers brutally repressed purported communists. Young-sook's family endures considerable losses in this atrocity, prompting her to suspect Mi-ja's complicity, thus terminating their friendship. This misapprehension and betrayal will burden them for decades. The narrative advances into the 21st century, depicting the influence of grief, recollection, and silence on future generations. Young-sook ultimately uncovers the motivation behind Mi-ja's acts and acknowledges that her old friend has experienced considerable anguish. The novel's climax instills a sense of tranquility, contemplating forgiveness, healing, and the persistent strength of women.

The Haenyeo's Bond with the Sea: How Ecological Memory Shapes their Cultural Identity: Ecological memory denotes a community's aggregate knowledge and experiences regarding its environment, encompassing both natural and cultural components. Ecological memory fundamentally pertains to the mechanisms by which ecosystems preserve the traces of historical occurrences. This is not a deliberate recollection akin to human memory; rather, it is an imprint inscribed in the terrain, the genetics of species, and the fundamental composition of ecological groups. It is the enduring impact of historical disturbances, such as war, environmental calamities, or human-made activities, on the contemporary functioning and composition of an ecosystem.

The memory is ecologically orientated. It adheres to a relational framework ("between living organisms and their environment," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary in its entry on "ecology") rather than being confined to individual human cognition. This premise is fundamental to the interdisciplinary domain of memory research. The notion of "ecological memory" in psychology was introduced in the 1980s, primarily championed by Ulric Neisser. Considering memory from an ecological perspective is essential for psychology's involvement in debates regarding memory studies by Fivush and Merrill. Moreover, in some areas of the field's disciplinary spectrum, "ecology" is the preferred term for articulating the logic of memory. Andrew Hoskins, drawing from sociology and media studies, introduces the term "memory ecology" to elucidate the interrelation between minds, media, and society. Finally, the recognition of species extinction and the Anthropocene has prompted memory academics to engage with

ecocriticism, resulting in the emergence of innovative perspectives on remembrance and oblivion by Craps.

The components of ecological memory in the story are predominantly portrayed through the haenyeo's traditional diving techniques. Their comprehension of the ocean—its cycles, organisms, and perils derives not only from written documents but also from experiential knowledge and the oral tradition. Girls are educated from an early age by their mothers or experienced divers, assimilating environmental knowledge in a profoundly communal and physical manner. The haenyeo adhere to harvesting limitations, avoiding the overexploitation of marine resources. This is not solely for practical survival but arises from a cultural principle of reciprocity with the natural environment. Their yearly diving routine corresponds with spawning periods and environmental patterns, demonstrating advanced, memory-driven ecological knowledge. It becomes essential to explore the ways in which the haenyeo people as a community connect themselves with nature, preserve their culture from external disturbances, and adapt to it.

On Jeju Island, a group of elderly women in their 80s engages in the practice of diving ten meters underwater to collect shellfish, including abalone and sea urchins, for their livelihood, all without the assistance of oxygen masks. The Jeju haenyeo, or female divers, possess extensive knowledge of the sea and marine life. They engage in harvesting activities for up to seven hours daily, across ninety days each year, holding their breath for approximately one minute per dive and producing a distinctive verbal sound upon resurfacing. The women divide themselves into groups, and each group has a head who will guide others. They dive in groups, and every few minutes they need to look after their partners. They stand still a boat to safeguard the divers during emergencies. The sea becomes their home, and the divers are aware of every moment in the sea. They make rituals based on the season. To quote:

Swallowing water breath is the process all haenyeo use to gather enough air in their lungs to sustain them as they submerge. The sumbisori is the special sound—like a whistle or a dolphin's call—a haenyeo makes as she breaches the surface of the sea and releases the air she's held in her lungs, followed by a deep intake of breath. (See, 14)

In addition to practical skills, ecological memory is embedded in the spiritual and ritual practices of the haenyeo. Shamanistic ceremonies, such as those performed for the Dragon Sea God, reflect a spiritual ecology that acknowledges the ocean as a sentient force deserving of respect. Many people in the town practise shamanism, which is also known as muism. People often take part in mudang, which are female-led shamanic ceremonies, in Haenyeo villages. People hold these meetings to please the sea gods, ask for protection, ensure their safety, and bring good luck. When divers die, their loss is not simply mourned but woven into the sacred memory of the sea, reinforcing a worldview where human and environmental destinies are intertwined. These rituals also mark seasonal transitions and

environmental events, connecting ecological cycles with communal memory. Through such practices, Lisa highlights how ecological memory is not only scientific but also emotional, symbolic, and spiritual.

The shaman held ritual knives in her hands from which white ribbons streamed. As she sliced through negativity, the ribbons swirled around us like swallows through the air. Her hanbok ballooned in clouds of riotous colour. We chanted. We wept. Our emotions flowed from us accompanied by the cacophony of cymbals, bells, and drums played by Shaman Kim's assistants. (32)

These rituals are done before and after the women arrive from the sea. They believe that the spiritual gods help them to control their emotions and stay protected from harmful spirits. Individuals frequently invoke Yowang, the Sea Goddess. Individuals believe she safeguards divers and governs the oceans. During rituals, individuals engage in dance, play drums, deliver offerings, and embody the roles of spirits. These activities cultivate a spiritual and social dialogue with nature.

The Unwavering Spirit of Haenyeo Community: Cultural Identity and the Power of Resilience: In the backdrop of war, Mi-ja and her family are pushed to migrate, taking factory work in Russia. The Jeju Island becomes alien to them, as it is filled with Japanese troops. They have altered and destroyed the geography and culture of the people on the island. This shows how modernisation, political unrest, and war can damage natural memory. The Jeju Uprising, also known as the April 3 Incident, took place between 1948 and 1954 as a protest against the separation of Korea and the impending elections in the south, which they believed would result in a permanent split. With American assistance, the government forces violently put an end to the uprising, accusing thousands of villagers of being communists. Whole towns and cities were devastated or burned to the ground, and thousands of people lost their lives. During this time, Young-sook's family experiences a great deal of suffering, which leads to a significant split between her and Mi-ja, whose husband is a police officer.

The government labels the haenyeo a cultural heritage treasure—something dying out that must be preserved, if only in memory. How does it feel to be the last of the last?" If they're academics, they'll want to talk about Jeju's matrifocal culture, explaining, "It's not a matriarchy. Rather, it's a society focused on women. (4)

The haenyeo's sustainable practices and ecological knowledge are being lost as industrial fishing, tourists, and changes in the economy based on gender make it harder for them to make a living the way they used to. It turns into a place of sadness and violence, mixing ecological memory with past trauma. The loss of community customs and environmental harmony is like Young-sook's own loss. The presence of military forces of Japan has pushed the people to migrate and has also caused them to lose their habitat. The fishing patterns and rituals they followed have been shattered. The matrilineal culture has

been transformed into an institutionalised ruled space. As it was the time, people were protesting against the ratification of the Korean Islands by the Western powers. The people were against the elections to be held. The Indo-Pacific war has changed Jeju Island into a battleground. It led to the colonisation of the island, and the people were marginalised as tourist guides. They were pushed to demonstrate their culture to others. But the haenyeo, especially women in their late eighties, practise their culture without losing their way to modernity.

The impact of the war has influenced the cultural life of the people on Jeju Island. The families, educational institutions, and fishing cooperatives were established to register the local people and provide fishing rights. The haenyeo associations, The Haenyeo School, and The Haenyeo Museum collectively facilitate the transmission of knowledge to subsequent generations. From oral traditions, the practices are institutionalised. The provincial government has selected the culture of Jeju haenyeo to symbolise the island and its inhabitants. This culture has elevated the status of women within the community and contributed to environmental sustainability by promoting eco-friendly methods and engaging all members in the management of the fisheries.

At present, Jeju Island has become a tourist spot and attracts people from various parts of the globe. From an indigenous community to a marginalised alienated people, Jeju people still hold their spirit to save their island from natural calamities. The news article published by the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), titled “UNESCO Honors Records on Jeju Uprising, Post-war Reforestation,” gives data about the environmental degradation that took place during the Korean War and how people are still concerned about it. To quote:

The UNESCO Memory of the World Register has records about the uprising on Jeju Island in 1948–1949 and the planting of trees in the country after the Korean War. The records on the uprising include comments from victims and papers about the process of finding the truth and making peace after the civilian killings. (Aiyng)

Conclusion: Lisa See’s *The Island of Sea Women* is a powerful literary reflection on ecological memory and environmental concern. Through the haenyeo’s practices, rituals, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the novel portrays a sustainable relationship with the natural world grounded in memory, respect, and resilience. The novel portrays how these women maintain a reciprocal relationship with nature and how this ecological memory is threatened by historical trauma, war, and modernization. See’s work stands as a poignant tribute to vanishing lifeways that reflect a deep environmental ethic, offering insight into traditional ecological knowledge and the emotional terrain of memory, place, and survival. See’s writing gives us two points of view: she praises the strength of traditional ecological knowledge while also expressing sadness over how easily it can be changed by outside forces. The book makes you think deeply about what is lost when modernity moves into cultures that are based on keeping the world in balance.

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