



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 7.589 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-5, Issue-4; Oct-Dec (2024)

Poetry: a tool of advocacy: A Study of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's climate crisis poems

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Abstract

Poetry conveys complex emotions and finer feelings. Nature finds a predominant place among various themes in poetry. Poets usually address Nature using different metaphors, smiles, and images. Poetry, which once praised Nature during the Romantic Age, glorifying its beauty and transformational capacity, has recently tasked itself to the new realm where poetry addresses various issues surrounding the natural world.

As the specter of climate change looms ever more prominent in recent years, poets have turned their attention to capturing more catastrophic changes. The worsening crisis is a daunting matter of great significance, requiring understanding and arriving at various innovative solutions.

Humanity has to be open to acknowledging its limitations in understanding Nature. Nature is a contiguous phenomenon; restricting and reacting, considering Nature in a minimal manner in a restricted location is tantamount to ignorance.

However, to comprehend the gravity of climate change, it is essential to concentrate on the local impacts of the climate catastrophe on diverse peoples. Poetry plays a significant role in reframing global challenges to local needs by sensitizing familiar people to complex scientific concepts and environmental issues and inspiring them to act.

This article explores the relationship between literature, climate change, and climate activism through the lens of poetry, focusing on the influential works of Marshalllese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. Based on her renowned poetry such as "Dear Matafele Peinem," "Tell Them," "2



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Degrees," and "History Project." This study explores poetry as a powerful tool for raising awareness, inspiring, and creating empathy in the face of the climate crisis. By analyzing the themes, the article conveys how the poetic expressions of the selected poems can effectively communicate climate change, particularly to vulnerable communities like the Marshall Islands.

The most pressing and challenging issue of our time is climate change. Climate change debates have emerged as a prominent literary theme in recent years, reflecting growing attention within literary studies. The importance of climate change in literature has led to the emergence of "Cli-Fi," short for climate change fiction, suggesting the existence of a distinct literary genre (Johns-Putra, 2016). The increasing analyses of climate change in literature, mainly poems, are helping to frame the standard of climate change narrative. The paper focuses on the influential work of Marshallese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner by drawing upon her prominent poems such as "Dear Matafele Peinem," "Tell Them," "2 Degrees," and "History Project."

Keywords: climate change, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, Marshall Islands, climate poetry, climate advocacy.

Introduction

The most pressing and challenging issue of our time is climate change. Climate change debates have emerged as a prominent literary theme in recent years, reflecting growing attention within literary studies. The importance of climate change in literature has led to the emergence of "Cli-Fi," short for climate change fiction, suggesting the existence of a distinct literary genre (Johns-Putra, 2016). The increasing analyses of climate change in literature, mainly poems, are helping to frame the standard of climate change narrative. The paper focuses on the influential work of Marshallese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner by drawing upon her



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prominent poems such as “Dear Matafele Peinem,” Tell Them,” “2 Degrees,” and “History Project.”

Kathy Jetnil- Kijiner—Marshall Poet

Kathy Jetnil: Kijiner is a celebrated poet, performance artist, educator, and advocate for climate change action originating from the Marshall Islands. Kathy holds a Master’s degree in Pacific Island studies from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and currently serves as a climate envoy for the Marshall Island government. In a poignant collaboration in 2018, Kathy partnered with Inuk poet Aka Niviana from Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) to create the video poem “ Rise: From One Island to Another.” This powerful piece raises critical questions about the disparities in climate mitigation and adaptation discourse across oceans and islands, intensifying the voices of those directly impacted by environmental challenges.

Her impactful poetry and dedicated activism have left a profound mark on literature and environmental advocacy. In a significant milestone, the University of Arizona Press published her debut poetry collection in 2017, titled *Lep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, making her the first Marshallese author to achieve this feat. Through her poetry, Kathy explores various crises the Marshall Islands face, from historical injustices to contemporary socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Kathy’s advocacy through poetry has a universal impact as it emphasizes climate change threatening her islanders and the entire world. She calls for a radical shift in approach, advocating for the cessation of carbon pollution within her lifetime, support for those most affected by climate impacts, and accountability for irreversible loss and damage caused by greenhouse gas emissions by including these themes through her poetry, Kathy was internationally recognized for her efforts. Besides her literary writings, Kathy co-founded the ecological non-profit organization *Jo-Jikum*, meaning “your home” in Marshallese.

Jo-Jikum is essential in nurturing a sense of responsibility and love for the islands among its inhabitants. The organization empowers islanders with the necessary tools to address climate change through initiatives such as island-wide clean-ups, workshops, community movie nights, and more. *Jo-Jikum* operates a Climate Disaster Relief Fund, which assists families in rebuilding their homes following climate-related damages. She gained widespread acclaim for her poetry recital at the 2014 UN Climate Summit opening in New York. She was one of Vogue’s 13 climate warriors in 2015, and in 2016, Earth Company honored her as Impact Hero of the Year.



Kathy Poetry and Marshall Island

Marshall Islands—The Marshall Islands, located in the northern Pacific Ocean, comprise over 1000 islands inhabited by nearly 70,000 people. With an average height of just two meters above sea level, these low-lying islands face a significant threat from climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that two-thirds of the island could be submerged by 2100. Most of her works focus on threats affecting her people in the Marshall Islands. She says her poetry should speak not just for the Marshall Island, not just the Pacific, but for the whole of civil society. "That's the entire world," is the Marshallese voice for seven billion people.

Most of her work is particularly significant as it describes one of the most vulnerable regions in the world—the low-lying land in the Pacific Ocean—impacted by global warming. Her work also explores the themes of empowerment and the revival of cultural identity. Through her poetry, she seeks to etch the sense of pride among her people, through which she reaffirms their connection to history, culture, and land. Her artistic quality uniquely combines traditional Marshallese storytelling with contemporary forms, making her voice a testament to her heritage and heading to environmental advocacy.

Dear Matefele Peinem

“Dear Matafele Peinem” is an expressive poem written as a letter by Kathy to her infant daughter, Matafele Peinem. Presented in English, the poem achieved widespread attention when Kathy recited it at the 2014 UN Climate Summit opening ceremony in New York.

The poem addresses the severe global climate crisis, especially the threat of rising sea levels affecting the Marshall Islands, where Jetnil-Kijiner’s family resides. Even though the future is bleak due to the environmental crisis, Kathy pledges to safeguard her daughter and ensure she and future generations have a safe living in their homeland.

She addresses her daughter’s future amidst the looming threat of rising seas. She acknowledges the warnings of impending danger yet reassures her daughter not to worry about it. By using various metaphors, like sharks, whales, and backwater danger, she subtly refers symbolically to the corporations and governments profiting at the expense of the climate. The promise to shield her daughter from these fears mirrors a broader commitment to collective action.



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Despite efforts to conceal the truth from her daughter, she emphasizes the power of unity in combating the crisis. Kathy speaks of a determined community ready to defend the world from harm, demonstrating hope amidst adversity. Her words resonate with unwavering dedication and resolve, representing her steadfast commitment to securing a brighter future for her daughter. However, amidst the looming specter of impending catastrophes, the feasibility of evading such dire outcomes remains uncertain. However, one cannot dismiss the sincerity of her convictions. Kathy speaks the truth; she and other islanders having similar convictions will tirelessly strive to compel the world to halt the advance of climate change. To those who continue to degrade our planet, her message resounds with clarity: she will confront, challenge, and stop them.

While Matafele Peinem will one day confront the realities of climate change, she can find solace in knowing that millions worldwide are more actively crafting sustainable solutions. However, the poems also acknowledge the harsh truth of past failures, such as the forced relocation of the Carteret Islanders due to the climate crisis. Kathy emphasizes a commitment to take action and draws a line, indicating a resolve to address the crisis and prevent further displacement and loss.

She skilfully intertwines the concept of motherhood with that of a secure sanctuary, drawing parallels between the bond shared by mothers and children and the relationship between inhabitants and their landscape. The poem concludes on a hopeful note, dedicating its final section to celebrating optimism, resilience, and the power of global collaboration. In the last line of her poems, she tenderly reassures her daughter:

“ so just close those eyes, baby
And sleep in peace.
Because we won’t let you down,
You’ll see.” (Jetnil Kijiner)

While Matafele Peinem will one day confront the realities of climate change, she can find solace in knowing that millions worldwide are actively crafting sustainable solutions. “Dear Matafele Peinem” serves not as a message for the future but as a heartfelt call for action for each individual in the present moment.



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She says, “This is how one mother’s concern for her seven-month-old sunrise of gummy smiles” moved the world’s leading dignitaries to tears. It was a show of empathy that no news report or statistics on the fate of the Marshall Islands, Bangladesh Gambia, or the Arctic has managed to evoke.

Kathy remains resolute in her ongoing battle against the detrimental business practices that imperil our planet’s well-being. “Dear Matafele Peinem” is truly captivating, especially with its opening phrase repeated throughout the poem, almost as if Jetnil-Kijiner speaks directly to her daughter. The special bond between mother and daughter brings warmth and happiness, but the dark cloud of climate change also overshadows it.

2 Degrees

In the poem "2 Degrees," Kathy delves into how climate change's personal and environmental impacts on the Marshall Islands. The poem narrated the realities of rising sea levels and their threat to the island nation's existence. It captures the necessity of the situation, underlining the disparity between the contributions of small islands like the Marshall Islands to global warming and the lopsided effects they face. Kathy emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life on Earth, pointing out that the impacts of climate change affect not only the Marshall Islands but the entire world.

The poem triggers a sense of urgency in calling for action on the climate crisis, using the analogy of a parent caring for their sick child to highlight the impending threat to low-lying islands like the Marshall Islands. The poem delves into the consequence of a two-degree Celsius increase in global temperatures.

Kathy employs a range of literary devices that emphasize the urgency of the climate crisis. Metaphors and imagery, such as the sick child symbolizing the Earth's vulnerability, vividly convey the dire consequences of inaction. The recurring use of phrases like "wandering wondering" echoes the uncertainty and aimlessness about the future course of action. She also utilizes emotive words like "fever" and catastrophe " to paint a stark depiction of the potential outcomes of climate change.

The poem's structure, with its varying stanza lengths and free verse form, creates a conversational tone reflective of the speaker's contemplation. The line breaks, and punctuation is employed to create pauses and emphasize vital phrases, while the lack of a consistent rhyme scheme mirrors the severe nature of the subject matter. Kathy adds Marshallese words, which add cultural authenticity and further ground the poem's context. It



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serves as a call to action, urging listeners to recognize the severity of the climate crisis and take meaningful steps toward mitigating its effects.

Tell Them

The main idea of the poem revolves around cultural pride and heritage. The poem focuses on the significance of the Marshall Islands, its people, and their navigation history. She uses vivid and descriptive language to narrate Marshall Island and its people. Words like “black pearls glinting,” “carved ribs of a tree stump,” and “intricate mandalas” evoke imagery and create a sense of richness and tradition. Specific details, such as cowry shells and calloused fingers, add depth to the description. The earrings and baskets symbolize cultural artifacts that carry a story and history within them.

Wearing the earrings and displaying the basket becomes a form of cultural preservation and sharing. The repetition of the word “woven” and the use of alliteration in phrases like “tight spirals” and “brown cowry shells shiny” add to the musicality of the poem. Kathy structured this poem in free verse with varying line lengths. The broken line creates a sense of movement and fluidity, mirroring the theme of navigation and travel.

The poem is a note from the poet to her friends in the States, sharing a piece of their culture and heritage through the gift of earrings and baskets from the Marshall Islands. The poet encourages the receivers to wear the earrings proudly and share the story of their island origin. Through these, the poem conveys the pride and resilience of the Marshallese people. It serves as a reminder of the importance of cultural identity and the power of storytelling in preserving traditions.

History Project

"History Project" follows the journey of a 15-year-old Marshallese girl as she explores her heritage by participating in the district-wide History Day competition. Focused on the nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean, she realizes the importance of understanding her history. Determined, she immerses herself in books, articles, websites, and archives, piecing together fragments of a seemingly overlooked past.

"History Project" by Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner is indeed a powerful poem that delves into the historical trauma and ongoing struggles faced by the Marshallese people due to US nuclear testing in their homeland. The poetry serves as a reminder of the devastating impact of colonialism and nuclear imperialism on the Marshall Islands and its inhabitants. Jetnil-Kijiner's use of poetry to raise awareness about these issues is significant, as it allows for a



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deeper exploration of the emotional and cultural aspects of the Marshallese experience. Through her words, she captures her people's pain, resilience, and determination in the face of environmental degradation and social injustice.

The collection "Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter" provides a broader context for understanding Jetnil-Kijiner's work and the themes she explores. In addition to addressing the legacy of nuclear testing, the collection also engages with the urgency in acknowledging climate change's consequences and its disproportionate impact on Pacific Island nations like the Marshall Islands. "History Project" reflects the intertwining of literature and activism, shedding light on often overlooked issues and amplifying the voices of those most affected.

Indeed, the title "History Project" carries a dual significance that reflects the complex nature of the poem and its subject matter. On one level, it can be interpreted literally as a reference to the narrator's task of writing a history project, suggesting a personal or academic attempt to document and understand the past. However, on a deeper level, the title also refers to the larger historical context of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and the broader Pacific region. Nuclear tests conducted by the United States and other nations in the mid-20th century were indeed part of a vast project aimed at developing and testing the effectiveness of atomic weapons. These experiments had tragic consequences for the indigenous peoples of the Marshall Islands, who were exposed to high levels of radiation and forced to endure the long-term effects of nuclear contamination.

The phrase "History Project" can thus be a metaphor for the broader historical narrative of colonialism, imperialism, and environmental exploitation that underpins the poem. It serves as a reminder of the human-made catastrophe unleashed by nuclear weapons and the ongoing struggle of affected communities to consider its lasting impacts.

In drawing parallels between the Marshall Islands' experience and other nuclear events, such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the poem highlights the interconnectedness of global atomic history and the universal human cost of warfare and militarism. Through its exploration of these themes, "History Project" invites readers to reflect not only on the specific injustices faced by the Marshallese people but also on the broader ethical and moral implications of nuclear expansion. The poem "History Project" was taken from her poetic collection Iep Jaltok; the poet reflects on her high school history project about atomic testing in the Marshall Islands. The poem emphasizes a central message: the United



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States has failed to acknowledge the harm it caused the Marshallese people despite the apparent suffering endured by many residents. However, underlying this theme, the poem contains more profound messages that Jetnil-Kijiner brings to light.

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's poem "History Project" uses powerful imagery, figurative language, and poignant diction to convey the ongoing struggles of the Marshallese people in the aftermath of nuclear testing on their land. The simile in stanza six vividly describes the congenital disabilities caused by radiation exposure, likening the affected infants to "jelly babies / tiny beings with no bones/skin—red as tomatoes." This graphic imagery evokes a visceral response from readers, highlighting the brutality of the suffering endured by the Marshallese community due to nuclear testing and the resultant waste imposed on the community.

Throughout the poem, Jetnil-Kijiner employs irony by repeating phrases like "for the good of mankind" and "God will thank you," echoing the justifications used by Americans to convince the Marshallese that their sacrifices were worthwhile. However, these phrases serve to underscore the disconnect between the purported benefits of nuclear testing for the United States and its people and the devastating consequences suffered by the Marshallese in their territories. The irony lies in that harming fellow humans cannot truly benefit anyone. This attitude reveals the callous disregard for Marshallese lives, considering them dispensable in pursuing geopolitical interests.

In Stanzas 26-29, she recounts her experience at a History Day competition, where she reveals that the judges failed to grasp the significance of her project. The poem concludes with the line, "And I lost," which carries multiple layers of meaning. Though superficially, the words signify her loss in the competition, more profoundly, they symbolize the broader failure to draw the world's attention to the plight of the Marshallese people and the historical injustices they have endured. This failure suggests a larger pattern of marginalization and powerlessness felt by the Marshallese in the face of a dominant and indifferent global community and the pressing narrative of the colonizers.

The poem prompts reflection on the inability of the Marshallese to prevent their land from being used as a nuclear test site. It raises questions about their awareness of how the world perceives them, their powerlessness in the face of larger geopolitical forces, and their attempts to navigate their identity and place in the global community. Through her powerful



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poetry, Jetnil-Kijiner sheds light on these complex issues and urges readers to confront the ongoing struggles the Marshallese people face.

Conclusion

Exploring the complex relationship between literature, activism, and the pressing issue of climate change, utilizing the evocative poetry of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner as its focal point, with an in-depth analysis of her renowned works such as "Dear Matafele Peinem," "Tell Them," "2 Degrees," and "History Project," the study establishes the various roles of poetry as a catalyzing force for raising awareness, instigating action, and nurturing empathy in the context of the climate crisis.

Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry, deeply rooted in the experiences of her native Marshall Islands, serves as a poignant testament to the profound impact of climate change on vulnerable communities. Through her lyrical craftsmanship and poignant imagery, she intricately weaves together narratives of loss, resilience, and hope, offering readers a visceral insight into the human dimensions of environmental degradation.

By shedding light on the existential threats faced by her people, Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry transcends mere words on a page, serving as a rallying cry for urgent action to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Central to the thematic exploration of Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry is the profound interconnectedness between nature, culture, and identity. Through her verses, she eloquently articulates the symbiotic relationship between the Marshallese people and their environment, underscoring the devastating consequences of rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and extreme weather events on their way of life. By poignantly depicting the erosion of cultural heritage and the uprooting of communities brought about by environmental degradation, Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry compels readers to confront the tangible human toll of climate change, transcending abstract scientific discourse to evoke a profound sense of empathy and solidarity.

Moreover, the poems foreground the transformative potential of poetry as a vehicle for enhancing marginalized voices and challenging existing power structures. Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry serves as an effective medium through which the voices of those on the frontlines of the climate crisis are elevated, offering a counter-narrative to dominant discourses that often marginalize or ignore the experiences of vulnerable communities. By centering the perspectives of the marginalized, poetry becomes a powerful tool for social and political



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mobilization, galvanizing collective action and encouraging a feeling of global unity in the struggle against climate injustice.

There is an inherent power of poetry as a form of activism in the face of the climate crisis. Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner's poetry provides an artistic expression transcending linguistic barriers to convey an urgent imperative addressing climate change, particularly to vulnerable communities like the Marshall Islands. By harnessing the expressive power of language and imagery, poetry emerges as a catalyst for social transformation, inspiring empathy, fostering dialogue, and mobilizing togetherness to achieve sustainable environmental justice.

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