

## Ecological Devastation in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*: A Byproduct of Capitalism

Ravi Shrestha

### Abstract

This research article deals with the ecological devastation of a part of North America or New France (today's Canada) colonized by France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The novel *Barkskins* on which the research is done is written by Annie Proulx, an American novelist. Firstly, the article reflects the portrayal of the environmental and ecological crisis of North America by European colonialists/capitalists. It shows Annie's close observation of the chopping down of ancient American trees, the killing of wild animals, and the business of timber and fur by Europeans. Such commercial activities that reflect European capitalism cause the heavy loss of biodiversity. Their activities reflect their anthropocentric nature. Secondly, the article deals with how Native Americans encounter European capitalists. Even though they want to defend their true wilderness from the white Europeans, they prove to be weaker than the capitalists. However, their biocentric nature appears to be different from the anthropocentric nature of the European colonialists. So, one objective of the article is to discover how European capitalists/colonialists cause ecological devastation in North America. The second objective of the article is to examine why they demolish the true wilderness of North America and the third objective of the article is to scrutinize how the Native Americans react. Since the novel reflects the ecological crisis and the article deals with the impact of European capitalists/Colonists on ecology and the environment in North America, ecocriticism is a suitable theory to apply for textual analysis in the article. Hence, for a broad theoretical framework, Greg Garrard's theory of Ecocriticism has been applied for textual analysis to explore how and why the biodiversity of North America has been affected since in Ecocriticism, Garrard's definition of ecocriticism "Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5) becomes very contextual for textual analysis in the research.

### Keywords

Anthropocentric, biocentric, colonialism, devastation, ecocriticism, ecological, New France, North America

### Introduction

This paper reveals how European capitalism causes deforestation, extinction of wildlife, and destruction of the lives of Native Americans/American Indians in New France, New England, and some other places such as New Zealand. It tries to discover how Annie Proulx's lengthy and latest novel deals with life in the forests in New France and other places she includes in the very novel. She ventures to write this novel which expands to three generations from 1693 to 2013. On the one hand, she seems to have written the history of deforestation, extinction of wildlife, and fragmentation and destruction of Indians in New France; on the other hand, she seems to show how European colonialism which is indicated in the novel 'Capitalism' is the major cause of ecological devastation. Proulx seems to intend to show the inextricable connection between the human world and the non-human world. Hence, her pathetic plight of seeing the non-human world getting affected by the human world is reflected in the novel.

This study focuses on the ecological devastation which is caused by French capitalists in the novel. The novel starts along with two French characters: Rene Sel and Charles Duquet who got exiled from France to New France to work for Monsieur Trepagny, the French feudal who was controlling forests in New France. In one way, both Rene Sel and Charles Duquet who were under the domineering influence of Trepagny were like his slaves. Both of them felled trees, hunted wild animals, cleared the forests, and served him. Along with time Rene followed Trepagny's order and offer. So, he married Trepagny's wife/concubine who was a Mi'kmaq Indian. Instead, Rene was made the owner of land and property by Trepagny. Why did he give up his Indian wife was he married to a rich French lady? But, Charles Duquet ran away from there to do his business of fur. After Trepagny's death, the entire novel revolves around the descendants of the two central characters Rene Sel and Charles Duquet. In "Conjectures on Forest Literature," Robert Spencer asserts:

*Barkskins* follows the descendants of two men exiled to New France, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, who are enjoined to work for their freedom by felling the forest to make a house and estate for the domineering Monsieur Trepagny. The novel alternately follows the descendants of Rene and his wife Mari, who is a Mi'kmaq, the First Nations people of Maine and Canada's once thickly forested Atlantic provinces, and Duquet's descendants, who are the healthy white heirs to the logging company he founds Duquet et Fils (later 'Americanized' as Duke and Sons, Duke and Lumber, the Duke Logging Corporation, the Duke and Breitsprecher, and finally Breitsprecher-Duke). (260)

Spencer critiques how the novel highlights the descendants of two exiled French men who continue the business activities on timber, which cause deforestation in New France. These descendants of the two characters show white people and native Americans. The whites represent the European capitalists and native Americans represent the indigenous Indians whose existence is affected by European settlers. Anyway, the research work uncovers why European Colonists caused deforestation in North America, why they caused extinction of the wildlife, and how the native Americans/Indians react.

This paper discovers how the European immigrants cast their evil eyes on the natural resources in New France, exploited them through deforestation, caused the extinction of wildlife, and did business exporting timber and fur of animals to different European countries. As a result, white European colonists or immigrants cause ecological devastation.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology has been applied to do textual analysis of the novel *Barkskins* because the novel is fiction and it delineates the fictitious characters who are white Europeans and native Indian Americans. Since the characters are fictitious, the data about them cannot be obtained as the data about human beings are obtained in sociology and anthropology. Instead, the feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and life experiences of these characters are described with the help of the qualitative methodology. Primarily, textual analysis is applied as a major theoretical tool which includes narrative analysis, naturalistic analysis, and interpretative analysis. Besides, the inductive method is applied to make the research work realistic, factual, and persuasive. As for the broad theoretical framework, the ecocritical theory has been applied, for the selected novel *Barkskins* reveals the destruction of the forests in New France, New Zealand, and New England over a three-hundred-year period reflecting the anthropocentric nature of human beings. Hence, to support the theoretical modality, the ecocritical theorists: Greg Garrard, Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, and William Rueckert are used for the effective textual analysis. In *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard's definition of ecocriticism is "Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human,

throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself’ (5) indicates the significance and contextuality of Garrard’s ecocritical theory. Likewise, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Criticism*, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm define ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (xviii), which also becomes contextual to do textual analysis of the novel. An ecocritic, Dr. Vathana Fenn claims “Ecocriticism regards nature as an autonomous, active entity of its own and so can be used as an important tool in interpreting literary texts that represent the relationship of human beings to their natural environment” (117) and focuses on the significance of the ecocritical theory as a tool for a methodology to analyze a literary text to show the relationship between human beings and nature. Thus, ecocritical theory/ecocriticism as a theoretical methodology has emerged to respond to the damage caused by human beings to nature.

### **Objectives**

This research article answers the research questions regarding ecological devastation. The article reveals the major cause of ecological destruction. Hence, one objective of the article is to explore the motive of European capitalists for do deforestation of New France for the sake of the timber business. The second objective of them to kill wild animals is to do the business of fur. Likewise, the third objective of the article is to scrutinize the biocentric nature of the native Indians' desire to preserve ecology and the environment.

### **Discussion**

This article revolves around the European white colonists who for the sake of capitalism keep on destroying the forests in New France reflecting their anthropocentric nature. The earth is the only known planet in the world that includes nature, so it is known as the natural planet incorporating both humans and non-humans. Though all living humans and non-humans are created with a divine purpose to maintain ecology and environment for natural survival, the anthropocentric nature of human beings happens to be the major cause of ecological destruction. In *Barkskins*, the reply of Monsieur Trepagny, the French lord, in New France to Rene Sel for the reason to cut trees “Easier? Yes, easier, but we are here to clear the forest, to subdue this evil wilderness” (24) reflects the false reasoning of the French capitalist to indentured employee like Rene hiding the real reason of doing timber business. Trepagny’s view of nature “To be a man is to cut the tree” (24) reflects his anthropocentric nature. Lisa Kruse in her thesis argues “In *Barkskins*, forest as a place of darkness and savagery is predominant for the major part of the novel. *Barkskins*, by focusing on early capitalism, and its nature/humanity distinction, reflects on how capitalism sees the forest as out of civilization, as a place of economic interest” (55). Kruse uncovers the hidden nature of European capitalists who cause deforestation for the sake of the timber trade.

*Barkskins* revolves around the descendants of two indentured Frenchmen Rene Sel and Charles Duquet who come to New France i.e. today’s Canada and work for the French capitalist Monsieur Trepagny. Over time, Rene starts the business of timber, whereas Charles Duquet does the business of fur of animals such as beaver. However, the novel focuses on the beauty of nature and its destruction by European capitalists/colonists. At the very beginning of the novel, when Charles Duquet asks Monsieur Trepagny about the size of the forest in New France, the latter answers “It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has ever seen its farthest dimension” (13). He narrates the forest as incredibly massive for European immigrants “Here grew hugeous trees of a size not seen in the world country for hundreds of years, evergreens taller than cathedrals, cloud-piercing spruce and hemlock” (12). Leonardo Nole's statement regarding the forest in *Barkskins* is as follows: "Monsieur Trepagny compares the forest to a mythical creature, highlighting

the newcomers' incapacity to comprehend rationally what lies ahead of them." (69), which indicates Trepagny's knowledge of the forest resources. At the same time, Nole's other claim about the newcomers/European colonials, "The newcomers see the land as private property, the forest as an incredible chance to make a profit and pass on to their descendants" (74) indicates how over time the European immigrants turn to cause deforestation for business. The root cause of the French capitalists migrating to New France is to accumulate capitalism through deforestation. It becomes obvious from Robert Spencer's line in "Conjectures on Forest Literature" that "Timber is a ubiquitous and indispensable commodity, much like coal or fire, in the capitalist world and is therefore destroyed for business purposes (253). Spencer forcefully raises their voices that *Barkskins* reveals the true nature of Europeans to come to the New World. Spencer claims "Proulx's *Barkskins* narrates the emergence and consolidation in North America since the seventeenth century as a process involving extreme violence against indigenous peoples and nature" (254). He further highlights the usefulness of trees "Trees are indispensable and versatile commodities, or rather they are primary commodities, the unprocessed material from which many other commodities are made" (256), which clearly shows the cause of deforestation.

Capitalism causes not only deforestation but also cultural erosion. The native culture along with deforestation is devastated by colonists for the sake of commerce, which Anthony Cummins in the review of *Barkskins* writes. Cummins regards the novel as a "Sprawling Ecological Saga" and argues in "Barkskins Review" that "The next 650 pages trace the bloodlines of these two men in an often grisly chronicle of deforestation, cultural erasure, and international commerce." Similarly, William T. Vollman points out the insatiable greed of human beings to clear the forests for the sake of capitalism in the Review of *The Barkskins* in *The New York Times*: "*Barkskins*- a tale of long-term shortsighted greed whose subject could not be more important: the destruction of the world forests."

Likewise, why European capitalists kill the wild animals in New France is they trade fur with European nations, China, and so on. The increasing demand for fur from animals such as beavers causes European capitalists to hunt animals in North America. Between the two major characters Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, Duquet's journey to North America starts from rags to riches due to his involvement in the fur trade. Duquet's fur business indicates how white Europeans started the fur business in New France/North America. In *Barkskins*, Proulx writes about Duquet:

He began to barter privately for furs offering a drink or two of cheap rum to the naive red men, hiding his activities from the others, sometimes catching the furs and returning later to pick them up. He bargained ruthlessly with Indians, smiling guilelessly into the savage faces as he accepted their heavy bundles of furs for a yard of cheap cloth and a cup of adulterated whiskey- a monstrous profit. (69)

In the course of the fur trade, Duquet exploited native Indians to exploit wild animals for fur which appears to be a great temptation for him. The man-centered belief of the world which has started since the European Renaissance leads human beings to use non-humans for their sake. Jay David Bolter's arguments in "Posthumanism," "Humanism was by definition anthropocentric; humanism as a historical phenomenon drew on a renewed and reinterpreted appreciation for the rhetoric and civilization of Greece and Rome, in placing man (rather than God) at the center of its literary and philosophical project" (1) reveal that anthropocentric nature of human beings is due to humanism. So, the destruction of wildlife in *Barkskins* is because of the anthropocentric nature of European immigrants such as Duquet. Baharvand and Sadjadi, who also points out the anthropocentric nature of human beings as the cause of ecological devastation, claim that "*Barkskins* could indeed be considered as a denunciation of the adverse outcomes

of the dominance of the anthropocentrism in a vast territory occupied by rapacious and ambitious settlers who never hesitate to abuse the natural world for the accomplishment of their materialistic projects” (197).

Firstly, France colonized this part of North America which is regarded as New France and secondly, England colonized it, which *Barkskins* shows with the help of the conflict between French colonists and English colonists in this territory to dominate the region. But, what is worth including and remembering is this vast territory is treated in *Barkskins* like the vast ocean of material prosperity in the form of natural sources for the European colonists. So, it becomes obvious that the European colonists/capitalists cast their evil eyes upon this territory for the sake of natural resources. Rene and Duquet represent all the colonists. Proulx through Duquet uncovers the undying passion of Europeans to exploit animals. Proulx writes “He now regarded tales of immense profits in the fur trade as fables. He wanted great and permanent wealth, wealth for a hundred years. He wanted a fortune to pass on to his sons” (72). This novel shows how the descendants of both Rene and Duquet do business in timber and fur causing the devastation of forests and animals. Why human beings like Duquet promote business at the cost of killing animals is due to their anthropocentric belief. Garrad’s argument “system of beliefs and practices that favors humans over other organisms” (183) is the main cause for their involvement in ecological destruction. In this context, the argument of Baharvand and Sadjadi “Anthropocentrism asserts the idea of man’s supreme status as the lord of creation” (197) supports Garrad’s theoretical concept of ecocriticism. In this context, the arguments of Lynn T. White, Jr. “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploits nature for his proper ends” (10) insist on the role of Christianity which causes whites to damage forests and animals in North America.

The third major issue that this research article deals with is how the native Americans/Indians react to the white Europeans’ anthropocentric nature. *Barkskins* shows how native Americans and forests represent minorities and nature and both of them are alike. The novel describes the destructive interactions of the European colonists with Native Americans/Indigenous Mi’kmaq Indians. On the one hand, the native Indians were deprived of their territorial rights; on the other hand, their traditions and ways of life started eroding on account of white colonists’ intrusion. Kruse argues in her thesis regarding nature and the native people that “Both are colonized, suppressed, denied their identity and complexity” (57). She points out that colonialism subdued both nature and indigenous people in North America.

One very important aspect of the novel is it shows a great contrast between the White colonists’ and native Americans’ attitudes toward nature. Mari is portrayed as one major native American character who is firstly shown as Trepagny’s wife/concubine and later she becomes Rene’s wife, which the capitalist Trepagny does with the great temptation of marrying a rich French lady. Rene and Trepagny represent whites, whereas Mari represents native Americans. Proulx’s statement “His relationship with Mari a marriage of intelligence as well as bodies” (55) reveals the marriage is just a contract for them. Proulx asserts, “They stood opposed to the nature of the forest. To Mari, it was a living entity, as vital as the waterways, filled with the gifts of medicine, food, shelter, and tool material, which everyone discovered and remembered. One lived with it in harmony and gratitude. She believed the interminable chopping of every tree for the foolish purpose of ‘clearing the land’ was bad” (55). Proulx tends to uncover that native Indians feel grateful to nature as nature is the source of food, medicine, and shelter. Hence, they desire to protect forests and animals. Her view is supported by Baharvand and Sadjadi, who claim “As a native American character, Mari thinks of the forest plants as potential medicinal herbs that could be utilized to cure various ailments. Moreover, she considers the natural world as the provider of

food and protection rather than a source of income and is critical of the materialistic perspective on deforestation upheld by the whites” (204).

The research article examines how the whites go on collecting materialism sidelining the American Indians and exploiting nature. Proulx’s statements “. . . Duke and Sons owned all the timberlands Breitsprecher had surveyed on their exploratory trip, a hundred thousand acres. He bought three city lots and hired carpenters” (442) indicate the growing influence and prosperity of whites, who extended their business of timber from New France to Detroit, Boston, Michigan and other cities of the USA. As a result, due to their growing capitalism, they happen to show their discrimination against the native people. Kruse claims “. . . how the capitalistic system represented by the Duke family is imposed on the Native Americans and how it is difficult to escape these inequalities. The Duke men rule the society and are powerful enough to take decisions and shape their lives” (49). Kruse’s claim appears as evidence to show how native Americans face inequalities.

This article explores how nature for the indigenous people appears as a means of living naturally believing in the mother God, whereas for the whites, nature appears as a means of capitalism. Proulx’s *Barkskins* beautifully and realistically portrays both types of characters whites and Indians to show their contrasting attitudes towards nature. Francoise Besson’s views in *Literatures in Ecology and English* “. . . unlike the white settlers' vision based on profit, the Indian vision is founded on listening to Nature and he thus links nature and supernature through the Great Spirit’s hands” (244) reveal their different ways of taking nature. Besson’s outlook towards nature “Nature speaks to those who can listen, which Native Americans like Australian Aborigines and African people always did, whereas Europeans are cut off from their natural origins and nature is silent to them” (245) reflects native people’s biocentric nature.

In one way, changes in the lives of native Americans due to whites cannot be denied, but in the name of civilization, the Indians along with their surrounding nature get highly exploited and marginalized. Proulx asserts “Yes. It is our land but we suffer advances from both French and English. The French see us as fighters to fight for them, our women good only for fucking. The priests see us as bounty for their God as we might see beaver skins. They do not see us as a worthy people. The French use us for their protection” (168). Robert Pogue Harrison’s argument in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* “. . . how civilization has encroached upon the forests, exploited them, cultivated them, managed them, or simply devastated them” (ix) reflects the encroachment of European capitalists/colonists upon North America in the name of civilization.

No doubt, *Barkskins* reveals the conflict between Europeans and the indigenous Indians, capitalism and poverty, technology and virgin resources, and colonizers and the colonized. Spencer claims “*Barkskins* dramatizes a conflict between white settlers and the Mi’kmaq, but this is also a conflict between rival world views, forms of knowledge, system of production, and finally ways of being human. On the one hand, there is power and property, and on the other is the rejection of property as part of the Invaders’ ways” (264). Spencer’s views reflect how the colonists focus on capitalism with the help of their business knowledge and show their anthropocentrism, whereas the native Indians/the Mi’kmaq focus on their dependence on the virgin forests knowing their knowledge of trees and wildlife.

Besides the above issues that research discusses, forests for the sake of forests rather than for human beings are also an important issue. The novel delineates many characters- whites and native Americans through which the ecological devastation becomes obvious. Charley and Dieter are portrayed as two of the characters. Charley stands for preserving forests for the sake of forests, whereas Dieter thinks the forests should be used and controlled by human beings. Charley’s view “A forest living for itself rather than for mankind” (598) indicates that people should not interfere in nature. But, Dieter’s

views “Wild forests cannot be managed. That is why we cut them and benefit from their wood and then replace them with trees” (598) reflect the human tendency of anthropocentrism. However, Proulx gives a powerful message through the novel in the concluding part writing Spatisia Sel’s view “The forests, the trees they can change everything” (663), which hints the preservation of the forests to avoid further natural calamities such as rapid ice melting.

### Conclusion

Thus, this research article presents ecological devastation in North America for three centuries. On the one hand, *Barkskins* shows the history of deforestation which is caused by European colonists/capitalists. On the other hand, the article explores the conflict between the whites and indigenous Indians in North America. The whites were French and English colonists who colonized the territories of the native Indians in North America, made them slaves, and exploited both them and their natural resources for capitalism. Thus, the white European colonists’ unsatiable thirst for hoarding capitalism becomes the cause of colonialism and ecological devastation. However, the native Indians regard forests as healers of human wounds or ailments, causes of good climate, environment for living, and so on. In this way, the whites show their anthropocentric nature, whereas the native Indians show a biocentric nature. In this context, ecocriticism becomes an effective theory to analyze showing the importance of an inextricable bond between human beings and nature.

### Works Cited

- Baharvand, Peyman Amanolahi, and Bakhtiar Sadjati. “The Upholders of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism in Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*.” *Anaphora*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 189-208.
- Besson, Françoise. *Ecology and Literature in English: Writing to Save the Planet*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.
- Bolter, Jay David. “Posthumanism.” *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, John Wiley and Sons, 2016, pp. 1-8. WILEY, [https://doi: 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiec220](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiec220).
- Cummins, Anthony. “*Barkskins* Review- A Grisly Tale of Chopping down People and Trees.” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2016.
- Fenn, Dr. Vathana. “Roots of Ecocriticism: An Exploration of the History of Ecocriticism, A Literary Theory of the Post-Modern World.” *Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol.2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 114-19.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Harrison, Robert Pogue. *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. The U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Kruise, Lisa. *It’s a world of Trees, Where Humans Have Just Arrived: A Comparative Study on Contemporary Narratives About Trees*. Universite Catholique de Louvain, 2020.
- Nole, Leonardo. “Understanding the Fabric of the Natural World: The Role of the Collective Protagonists in Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*.” *Journal of American Studies in Italy*, no. 3, 2022, pp. 69-86. ISSN: 2612-5641.
- Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins*. Scribner, 2016.
- Spencer, Robert. “Conjectures on Literature.” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 58, no. 2, 9 June 2022, pp. 253-71.
- Vollmann, William T. “*Barkskins*,” by Annie Proulx. *New York Times*, 17 June 2016.

White, Lynn T, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, the U of Georgia P, 1996, pp. 3-14.