

The Impact of Western Civilization on Forests in *Barkskins*

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Abstract

This research article very critically scrutinizes how forests in North America are devastated by the growing human civilization. It deals with ecological degradation in an American novelist Annie Proulx's novel Barkskins whose location is North America. In course of analysing the novel critically, the article describes how Barkskins revolves round the story of white colonists and indigenous Indians in North America or today's Canada. Firstly, it reveals how two families: Sel family (a poor biracial family of French and Mi'kmaq) that cuts trees and Duke family (rich French family) that does business of fur are linked to trees and deforestation. Secondly, the article focuses on the impact of western civilization on forests regarding forests as the antagonist to western civilization. Western colonialism is also a vehicle of civilization that causes deforestation. Due to civilization, humanism is developed. So, anthropocentric nature of people causes deforestation. Thirdly, European civilization has a negative impact on Indigenous people and their culture. Apparently, forests are shown as a symbol of darkness, evil forces, backwardness and an obstacle for human progress, but in the name of civilization, whites do deforestation due to their greed of colonization and anthropocentric nature. Hence, the first objective of the research is to explore why the whites regard forests as the antagonist to civilization. Likewise, the second objective of the article is to discover the real cause of them to do deforestation. Besides, as for the broad theoretical methodology, Greg Garrard's theory of Ecocriticism is applied for the textual analysis of Barkskins since the article deals with the ecological destruction of North America by whites and ecocriticism has emerged as a response to the heavy damage done to ecology by human beings.

Key Words: Human Civilization, Forests, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, deforestation, Colonialism

“Civilization in the true sense does not consist in the multiplication of needs, but in the free and well thought-out restriction of one's desires.

It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require”.

Mahatma Gandhi

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Introduction

This research project wants to explore how and why western civilization is the major cause of the devastation of forests. It mainly focuses on the ecological degradation in North America caused by European civilization. The human civilization indicates development of human beings in matters of culture, education, technology, modernized settlements, urbanization and so on. The nature of human civilization is human beings migrate from one place to another place in course of development. The history of civilization shows that it is directly related to ecology and environment. It causes ecological devastation due to colonialism, population growth, burning of fuels, deforestation and extinction of wild life. The city is the cradle of human civilization, but forests are the cradle of human life.

The article describes how in *Barkskins* Annie Proulx addresses the devastation of the world's forests over a three-hundred year period, recording the descendants of two French men who arrive in New France as indentured servants and happen to choose opposite career paths. The descendants of the family Charles and Mari (an Indian woman) choose the trade of timber, whereas the descendants of Duquet i.e. whites do the trade of fur of animals such as beaver. In 'Upholders of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*', Pegman Amonolahi Baharvand and Bakhtiar Sadjadi assert "The portrayal of the natural world is the central to Proulx's work, for she has closely observed the demolished American forests and the loss of biodiversity" (190). Firstly, the article reveals how and why the human civilization is the major cause of destruction of forests. Secondly, it shows the impact of civilization on the indigenous American Indian and their culture.

Methodology

The study has adopted qualitative research method to do textual analysis of *Barkskins*, for the novel is a fiction and the portrayed fictitious characters in the novel are white Europeans and indigenous Americans. Because of the delineation of fictitious characters, the data about them cannot be obtained. However, the researcher has analysed the feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and life experiences of these characters with the help of the qualitative methodology. Besides, the opinions and statements of critics and theorists are incorporated in this paper.

Firstly, the textual analysis is applied as a major theoretical tool which includes narrative analysis, naturalistic analysis and interpretative analysis. Secondly, the inductive method is used to make the research work quite realistic, factual and persuasive. Thirdly and mainly, for the broad theoretical framework, this research study adopts the theory of ecocriticism since the novel reflects the encroachments of European colonists upon forests and wild animals in North America and the dire consequences of it for almost four centuries. Therefore, to support the theoretical modality, Greg Garrard's theory of 'Ecocriticism' is applied. Besides, the theoretical ideas of Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm and William

Rueckert are also used for the effective textual analysis. Garrard's definition of ecocriticism "The widest definition of subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between the human and non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (9) indicates how ecocriticism as a theory is applied to do the analysis of human activities showing the relationship between human and nature in the novel.

Objectives

The research study answers the research questions which are based on the impact of western civilization on the forests. The first objective of the project is to scrutinize how the civilization has a powerful impact on the forests in the North America. The second objective of the research project is to discover the European colonization of North America for the sake of capitalism exploiting the forests and indigenous people. Likewise, the third objective of the article is to find out how western civilization affects the forests and culture of indigenous Americans.

Discussion

Along with the progress of human life in the history of civilization, the state of the forests and wild animals is deteriorating due to human activity of deforestation since the forests are regarded as the antagonist of human civilization. Every factor such as government, law, city, religion and so on that play a key role for human civilization is responsible for destruction of forests. In course of the researcher's ecocritical analysis of *Barkskins*, the novel reflects how the beauty of the wild forests in North America is devastated by white colonists in the name of human civilization. In this context, in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison expresses his views:

For reasons this book explores, the government institutions of the West—religion, law, family, city—originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which in this respect have been, from the beginning, the first and last victim of civic expansion. The following study, however, does not recount a merely empirically history how civilization has encroached upon the forests, exploited them, cultivated them, managed them or simply devastated them. It tells the more elusive story of the role forests have played in the cultural imagination of the West. (ix)

Though the forests have played a significant role in the western cultural imagination, they are devastated, for they are regarded as obstacles of human civilization. According to Harrison, forests are the places where no one dwells as wildlife is entirely devalued and those who live in the forests are not regarded as humans. His claim "The forests were in fact commonly referred to as the *locus nemini*, or 'place of no one'" (49) indicates how the forests were taken as the antagonist of civilization.

The research project based on *Barkskins* deals with the westerners as intruders to North America, who cause ecological devastation putting on the mask of civilization. The history of the West shows their migration to other nations is a damage to forests. The novel makes a clear portrayal of the descendants of two French men Rene Sel and Charles Duquet whose activities cause an irreversible damage to the forests in North America. 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 alternatively 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 wealthy white heirs to the Logging Company he founds. . . (260)

Spencer states western colonists' imperialistic activities in the name of civilization, but the real intention is to destroy wild forests for the materialistic profits. Ecocritics argue that anthropocentric nature of human beings is the major cause for exploiting the forests and wild animals. Greg Garrard's claim “anthropocentric dualism humanity/nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices” (23) obviously causes ecological devastation.

One who is the builder and preserver of human civilization is in favour of foundation of the city and every city is constructed clearing the forests and using logs of wood from the deforested forests. Harrison regards Gilgamesh to be the first great and civic hero depicted and commemorated in the great ancient epic *Gilgamesh* in Sumerian Civilization. His statements “Gilgamesh appears as the first great hero of civilization” (14) and “. . . the first antagonist of Gilgamesh is the forest” (14) indicate how the forest has been regarded as the antagonist of civilization since time immemorial, hence it is clear without feeling for the ecological setting. Although forests play an everlasting impact upon human life due to its ecological importance and natural beauty in literature, they are destroyed in the so called name of human civilization. Different English literary ages such as Elizabethan age, Pre-Romantic age, Romantic age and so on reflect the beauty of forests. As for an instance, the beauty of the forest of Arden in William Shakespeare's *As you Like it* gives human beings a message that forests are not only antithesis to human civilization.

Monsieur Trepagny in *Barkskins*, the representative of European capitalist immigrants in North America, creates myths about forests by saying that forests should be destroyed as they symbolize the evil forces, which had made early men like beasts. Trepagny asserts “we are here to clear the forest, to subdue this evil wilderness” (24). He further adds “Men must change this land in order to live in it. In olden times men lived like beasts. In those ancient days men had claws and long teeth nor could they speak

but only growled” (24). Trepagny’s views on the forests reflect Manichean opposition to civilization. In “Terror, Error or Refuge: Forests in Western Literature,” Catherine Addison relates such views of the forests as the antagonist to civilization “The forest in Western literature and culture has often been perceived as existing in Manichean opposition to civilization, enlightenment or even morality” (116). Proulx, Harrison and Catherine believe in Manichean opposition to civilization, which means the forests are regarded as darkness/evil forces whereas civilization is regarded as the light. Hence, keeping such a mindset, the western immigrants in North America causes deforestation, which *Barkskins* reveals.

Besides, along with the beginning of European Renaissance, European nations started colonizing Asian, African, American, and Australian nations. Through colonization, European nations started civilizing other nations as if they had civilizing machines, for which they had to clear the wild forests. The New France which is today’s Canada was firstly colonized by France and later it was colonized by Britain. The main objective of western colonization of the North America shown in the novel is to exploit the natural resources of the colonized lands. In *Barkskins*, Dieter views forests as untamed and wild ones, which should be tamed by westerners. Dieter’s views “Wild forests cannot be managed. That is why we cut them and benefit from their wood, then replace them with trees” (598). Proulx’s character Dieter’s views are similar to Spencer’s views as Spencer asserts “The forest is viewed as wild land to be tamed and made productive. The ideology of improvement is therefore a licence for colonial racism and disposition” (263). Apart from the forests, the western colonists tame the native Americans whom they regard uncivilized like the forests. What the researcher has understood from the colonists’ project of civilization is they, in the name of taming and civilizing both natural resources and indigenous people, exploit them for the sake of capitalism through the trade of timber and fur trade.

Likewise, western colonialism is entirely related to their capitalist motto, which means their greed for colonialism reflects their latent greed for capitalistic gain from the natural resources of the colonized nations. Lisa Crusie comments on *Barkskins* “*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” (54). The white Europeans who colonized North America terrorized indigenous Indians in course of destroying their wild forests for materialistic gains. Proulx speaks through her character Joshime displaying the fear of Indians for whites “You must never tell any white man about this pine forest, for they will come in numbers like passenger pigeons- and cut it down. Never speak it to any one” (306-307). In ‘Upholders of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism in Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*’, Peyman Amanolahi Baharvand and Bakhtiar Sadjadi reveal the capitalist attitudes of the white colonists in *Barkskins* “North America underwent adverse and drastic alterations following the onset of European exploration and the subsequent implementation of colonial policies, including the establishment of permanent settlement on the continent they call the New World” (190). Baharvand and Sadjadi blame the whites to be anthropocentric to cause deforestation.

In place of preserving ecology and environment, the whites damage the ecology, which is analysed through the application of ecocriticism since it can show the harmful relationship between humans and non-humans. Garrard's argument "system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms" (183) reflects anthropocentric nature of human beings to use trees and animals for their materialistic gains. Anthropocentrism regards human beings as the lord of creation, which enables human beings to exploit nature showing their monopoly. Proulx asserts uncovering Duquet's greed for capitalism:

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 caching the furs and returning later to pick them up. He bargained ruthlessly with the Indians, smilingly 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)

As the forest is regarded as the antagonist to civilization according to Harrison, the white immigrants' motive of clearing the jungle becomes easy. Baharvand and Sadjadi also discover the anthropocentric nature of whites in the novel claiming "*Barkskins* could indeed be considered as the 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 project" (197). Jay David Bolter's claim 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 centre of its literary and philosophical project" (1) reflects the anthropocentric nature of human beings, which is due to humanism. Besides, humanism, the anthropocentric nature of human beings is supported by Christianity, too. The rise of any human religion is the indicator of the rise of human civilization, but Christianity supports negative aspect of humanism. Lynn T. White, jr, who blames Christianity for the deforestation and extinction of wild life, asserts "Man names all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule" (9). White further argues "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's God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends" (10). Thus, anthropocentrism which is due to civilization is a cause of ecological damage.

To give counter to anthropocentrism does not mean to support misanthropy as Bryan L. Moore claims "To give counter anthropocentrism is not the same as expressing misanthropy" (x), but it indicates to support ecocentrism for the sake of preserving ecology and environment showing the positive and broader concept of humanism. Moore's claim for the ecocentrism "Contrary to anthropocentrism, ecocentrism places intrinsic value on all forms of life, independent of their value for humans" (6) focuses on the value of all the creatures on the earth, which humans should not exploit mercilessly. Proulx writes about

Mari's views towards forests "To Mari it was a living entity, as vital as the waterways, filled with the gifts of medicine, food, shelter, tool material, which everyone discovered and remembered. One lived with it in harmony and gratitude" (55), which reflects ecocentrism. Mari's views represents indigenous American Indians' views towards the significance of ecology. In *Ecology and Literatures in English*, Francoise Besson asserts how the indigenous people value trees "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). Like Besson, Moore strongly defends ecology and environment and states "Some Eastern religions, Daoism in particular, teach that humans are not the center of the world, that we must attune ourselves to the universe. The Daoist philosophers Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu taught that each natural being has its own good and precious reality that preclude a human-centered world" (9). What I have discovered through this research is though anthropocentrism is prevalent in the world, there are writers, ecocritics, ecologists and even religious minded people who stand in favour of preserving forests and wild life.

Finally, what Europeans call civilization does not become a threat only to the forests but also to the indigenous people, which *Barkskins* reveals. In other words, Europeans civilization has a devastating impact upon the forests and indigenous people as colonization has upon the colonized. Civilization implies light to the Europeans and the forest darkness, while civilization implies darkness to the American indigenous people and forests as light/life. Basically, the ideology of Eurocentrism works here to dominate and exploit the American Indians in North America as Lois Tyson asserts in *Critical Theory Today* "The colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonizers were at the margins. The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper 'self'; native peoples were 'other', different and therefore inferior" (366). Thus, throughout the novel indigenous Indians are othered by the white colonists.

Conclusions

Thus, this research project on the basis of the textual analysis of *Barkskins* tries to uncover the impact of western civilization on the forests in North America. On the one hand, the research tries to discover how European immigrants as colonists intrude into the wild forests of North America. The descendants of two French men- Descendants of Sel and Mi'kmaq and descendants of Duquet as whites cause deforestation due to the trade of timber and fur. In spite of biocentric nature of indigenous Indians, whites happen to damage due to their anthropocentric nature. Secondly, the research tries to investigate how the westerners create myths of civilization as light and forests as darkness/evil forces through their powerful discourse to subdue the indigenous American for the sake of capitalism deforestation subduing the indigenous Americans and exploiting natural resources. In this context, the westerners justify their colonization of the North America in the name of civilization as if they have the civilizing machine. Their avarice for colonization is for the

capital gains as they find the North America endowed with natural resources. Thirdly, not only the chastity of virgin forests/wild forests are damaged but also the culture, language and identity of the indigenous Americans are affected by the intrusion of European colonists. Thus, the bitter truth the research explores is that the more civilized people are, the more the forests are cut down.

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