

Ecocriticism and American Indian Biographies

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Abstract *Ecocriticism deals with the subject of human and non human nature and focuses on the relationship of man and nature. The theory traces the ecological issues in literary expression of human experience. The paper traces the formulation history of ecocriticism by going through the views of the leading critics related to it. Afterward the theory is applied to the three prominent biographies of American Indians named Black Elk Speaks, Rolling Thunder, and Mad Bear to dig out their relation with the nature, to find out the problems of human interference with nature and their possible solutions. The American Indian biographies explain at length the subject of relation between man and his environment. Black Elk, Rolling Thunder, and Mad Bear represent the interests of both the human and non human nature equally and vocally. They declare that the cure of all spiritual and environmental problems lies in developing understanding, harmony, respect and a sense of cooperation and sharing with the whole human and non human nature.*

Keywords: *American Indians, Biographies, Ecocriticism, environment, man,*

I. Introduction

Ecocriticism traces links between humans and their environment. It studies human and non human nature, their problems and possible solutions. Eco means “house” and ecology indicate “the study of house”/ environment. Ecocriticism is the environment as represented in literature according to Loretta Johnson. [1] It celebrates the “joys of abundance”, laments the “sorrows of deprivation”, kindles a hope “for harmonious existence” and feels fear and horror of “loss and disaster”, borrowing the terms from Michael P. Cohen, hence broadens the horizon and “vision of life” and guides us to “our place in nature”. [2]

The paper traces the formulation history of ecocriticism by going through the views of the leading critics related to it. Afterward the theory is applied to the three prominent biographies of American Indians to dig out their relation with the nature, to find out the problems of human interference with nature and their possible solutions.

The paper contributes positively by paying heed to the most critical matter of the present age i.e. man and his environment. The gradual but alarming degradation of the non human nature is the biggest problem of the modern man. The paper looks for the issue in the literary texts to see how far they carry the issue and what they offer to resolve it.

Black Elk Speaks by John G. Neihardt is the life story of Black Elk, the holy man of the Oglala Sioux. It starts from his boyhood experiences leading to his old age knowledge and feelings. [3]

Rolling Thunder by Doug Boyd is the biography of an American Indian medicine man named Rolling Thunder, a Cherokee adopted into the Shoshone tribe. Doug Boyd narrates the story of his life and his “secret healing power.” Apart from being a medicine man, he is a great supporter and defender of non humans and environment. [4]

Mad Bear is a tale told by Doug Boyd of another American Indian medicine man from Tuscarora Indian reservation. Mad Bear, being a healer, has great interest both for humans and their surroundings. His focus encompasses environment and non human world like all traditional Indians and ecocritics. [5]

II. Review Literature

2.1. Christopher Hitt [6]

Hill quotes Cheryl Glotfelty to define ecocriticism which studies the “relationship between literature and the physical environment.” He himself relates ecocriticism with making “value judgment about literature” and “about the exploitation and overconsumption of nature by certain human cultures.” It helps to “build a bridge between the past and present” which ultimately brings life to the literature.

2.2. Jonathan Levin [7]

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach which aims at studying “nature, environment and culture”. It deals with environmental politics. For Jonathan Levin ecocriticism is an extension of “pastoralist impulse”. It seeks to “escape from the challenges of urban life” and “modernity”. He goes on to accuse ecocriticism for “challenging the conventional boundaries between nature and culture, country and city, wilderness and

domesticated environment". Ecocritics' focus rests on "nature writing" and a consideration for "the value of wilderness or wildness". They also tend to incorporate the "trend toward globalism". (pp 171-172)

Ecocriticism emerged in 1960s and 1970s for American literary scholars. The first wave of literary ecocriticism was concerned with the loss of natural world and the negligence to the environmental aspects of literature had "made the matter worse." These critics were greatly influenced by the environmental studies movement of the seventies. Early to mid nineties was the time when ecocriticism was organized properly. The establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 and the publication of an anthology "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harlod Fromm in 1996 had deep impact on Ecocriticism.

The works of Ecocritics can be divided in two "critical camps". One camp consists of "realists" who support "return to nature" as sole remedy for "healing our modern/ postmodern alienation". The other camp is of "social constructionists" who look upon nature as "a discursive strategy" and are suspicious of "its alleged healing properties." The social constructionists think that our social and physical environment is shaped and formed by "language and discourse". Both groups are further divided into a number of "varieties". Some realists are "naïve epistemologists" who believe in the language that is "direct, natural and rich in metaphors and similes" which are embedded in "the natural world". Others are "complex epistemological" who give importance to "the dialectical relationship between subject and object, language and world". They look for a "natural world" but also develop a deep understanding of how human beings and their culture "interface with that world". In social constructionists, some stress on "constructedness of all nature" and that "nature is discursive". Others go for "dialectical models" to comprehend "the relationship between social ideologies" and "natural systems and processes." (P-175)

Ecocritics are concerned with the environmental issues and environmental degradation and also what it means "to dwell with the earth." (P-178)

2.3. Glen A. Love [8]

Ecocriticism being interdisciplinary is the "only rational method for bridging the gulf ... between the two cultures science and humanities". Love quotes Joseph Meeker who is considered one of the founders of Ecocriticism is of opine that this "interdisciplinary movement" is not an academic fashion rather it is "a response to the growing need" of all people "to find a sense of integrity" and "understanding" for their lives and "the world around them." The study of environment and literature is a response to these concerns. (P-561)

Being interdisciplinary, ecocriticism can use scientific methods of investigation and inquiry to understand the world and sort out the possible solutions for the problems like "pollution, population, and despoliation" which are important issues of concern in ecocriticism.

Literature also includes "interrelationship". Both literature and ecological awareness increases this sense of interrelationship to the extent of inclusion both "non human and human contexts". Ecocriticism needs to take the nonhuman world "seriously", the way human society and culture have gained serious attention and treatment from other modes of criticism. What Love means by taking non human world "seriously" is to learn "something scientific about it." Love refers to Gasten Bachelard who says that thinking science takes him into "undeniable hierarchy of thought". He also cites Snow who argues that humanists may find in natural sciences like Biology means of "taking nature seriously." He goes on to take an extract from *Literature and Science* by Aldous Huxley to make his point regarding Biology being more "relevant to human experience" valid and compelling. For Pope proper study of mankind is Man whereas for Huxley "the next most proper study is Nature." Both studies are interconnected and this connection is significant for ecology. Problems like overpopulation, pollution of air, water and land, senseless and heedless forestry, destructive farming and barrenness of once fertile lands connect science and humanities, man and his environment resulting in ecology. (P 561-563) Thus ecocriticism is an approach of dealing with human individuals, human societies, other living creature and plants also. It is a bridge between scientific and literary communities.

Love talks about the emergence of ecocriticism in his writing. It appeared in 1960s and 1970s. Love has written an ecocritical essay, "Ecology in Arcadia" which examines the portrayal of "ecological blight in contemporary literature and film." Leo Marx's work *The Machine in the Garden* in 1964 has played a vital role in inspiring Love who has already been "working with environmental ideas" in American literature.

In 1974, Joseph A. Meeker's publication *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* takes this "biological-environmental-literary connection" to the critical expression. "Meeker for the first time in this essay reads literature from an "ecological-evolutionary perspective." He argues that literature is inseparable from nature and ecology. Literature offers insight "into human relationships with other species and with the world around us." (P-564) Love believes in the relation of Biology with ecocriticism and human life.

Environmental matters which are of greater concern for humanists involve values and values are part and parcel of arts. Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko, written in 1977, discusses "environmental concerns". It is a story of a "spiritually poisoned individual" who lives in the "technologically threatened landscape." He

finds the cure for the ailment of “both land and people” in his “Native American Heritage.” (P-571) Same is the case with Set, the protagonist of *The Ancient Child* by N. Scott Momaday. He also finds remedy of his spiritual sickness back at home in his native heritage and in proximity to nature.

2.4. Dana Phillips [9]

Phillips considers nature as “complex” and thoroughly concerned and caught up with “culture” which in turn is related to “nature.” Phillips quotes Jay Parini who thinks ecocriticism demands “a return to activism and social responsibility.” It asks for “a reengagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lies behind the wilderness of signs.” (P 577-579)

Next Phillips cites Donald Worster who defines nature “as a landscape of patches of all sizes, textures and colours” which keeps on “changing through time and space” and responds “to an unceasing barrage of perturbation.” (P-580) Phillips also refers to Buell who views ecocriticism “as study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to environmental praxis.” (P-583)

2.5. Laurence Coupe [10]

Coupe claims that Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) a North American critic is one who has analyzed “culture and literature from an ecological perspective” primarily and “systematically”. His whole life is “a profound experiment in green thinking.” Coupe mentions *Attitude towards History* (1937) where Kenneth Burke talks of “one little fellow named Ecology” who discusses “rationale of exploitation” and predicts that “exploiting part must .. suffer if it too greatly disturbs the balance” of the whole planet. (P-413) Coupe laments the fact that Burke has gone unnoticed by American ecocriticism.

Burke emphasizes upon being responsible and “critical” for the motives which are in “conflict with the planet’s.” He asks to learn “how to behave towards or within” nature. (P-417) Burke opines that when “Men victimize nature” in fact “they victimize themselves” in doing so. He deems that literature has power to “resist the insane logic of ‘hyper-technologism’”. His suggestion to expose the “agenda of our ‘culture of waste’” through “ecological satire” has great appeal and practicality. He thinks culture offers to “create a technological heaven on earth” but it ends up producing “a hell.” He renames this cultural-production as “Helhaven” which comprises of burning cities, dying forests, hunger and homelessness, dead fish and polluted skies, garbage dumps and extinguishing species. In such a scenario, ecocritics have to take up the cudgels of “comic corrective” of Kenneth Burke to defy the “victimization” of both people and planet.’ (P 430-431)

2.6. John Foster [11]

Environmental problems are focal point of concern for ecocritics “the real, material ecological crisis” in term of Richard Kerridge taken from his *Writing the Environment*. The disciplines of arts concentrate on the process of “creation, interpretation and critique.” The task of ecocritics is “to track environmental ideas and representations” as they appear in the texts “to see more clearly a debate” which takes place “in a great many cultural spaces.” Having paid their keen attention to the content, the critics have “to evaluate texts and ideas” to judge their “coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.” (P-541)

III. Data Analysis

3.1. Black Elk Speaks

Concern and connection with human and non human nature emerge as the top most priorities for the American Indians. Black Elk starts the story of his life by drawing upon the harmonious environment at length which “two legged” and “the four legged and the wings of the air” share the earth, air and water without any competition or threat on equal footing. All creation is considered as “the children of one mother” i.e. the earth mother and “their father is one spirit” i.e. the sky. (P-1)

Black Elk has known the long human history of his forefathers in the company of non human world without any case of discrimination and exploitation. He attributes the same origin to both of them. Nature is not used as a framing device in the narrative of Black Elk rather he talks about the good relationship which human and non human enjoyed before the arrival of white man and his culture of environmental destruction. “The two legged and the four legged lived together like relatives.” Both have had enough food enjoying “happy” time in their country. (P 7-8) The point of prominence is that Black Elk does not display signs of ownership of county/land by his people/ humans alone. He acknowledges non humans as partners using same terms of address and speech for both humans and non humans.

The disturbance and perturbation in their peaceful environment starts with the advent of “Wasichus,” the white man who tries to confine both of them by making “little islands” for them in an effort to adjust their white selves and those islands become “smaller” with every passing day.

The natives have had a number of fights with the whites to resist the confiscation and conquest of their land and to save their environment. But they have been an easy target since they do not have adequate arms and

ammunition to guard themselves and their environment from the atrocities of the white culture. "Dead men and horses and wounded Indians were scattered" everywhere and every time they come across their invaders in the battlefields. (P-10) Both humans and non humans suffer equally from the ravages of Eurocentric culture of war and usurpation in contrast with Indians' traditions of harmony and sharing.

Non human nature has significant and sacred place for Black Elk and his people. They play a key role in their religious stories, rituals and healing process. They sing songs for them to get power and share power with them. Its one example is they have cured "snowblinds" by putting "snow upon their eyes" and singing a "sacred song" about "the dragon fly" for that fly has been the source of the "power" for that medicine man. (P-11)

Native Indians world is incomplete without non human nature. Black Elk's holy vision is crowded with horses and he gets power from them. Bison are regarded as "gifts" and source of "strength" by Black Elk and his people. Native Americans enjoy close proximity with non human nature. They inhabit their lives, dreams and visions as an important part and parcel of their beings. The "four legged" and "wings of the air" have "all danced together" with the two legged in the vision of the Black Elk. (P-32)

Whenever Black Elk wants to aim at the birds, he is restrained by the thought that he is "like a relative with the birds." Once he shoots "a green frog" and afterwards the very thought "I have killed him" makes him "cry". (P-39) He feels pain and "hurt" when other boys throw stones at swallows which are "holy" for him. (P-59) This sensitivity towards natural world is appreciated and aspired by the ecocriticism.

Black Elk speaks of nature as his companion. He feels "happy" at the signs and arrival of a "thunder storm". It appears to him "as though somebody were coming to visit me." (P-47)

Non human nature is a source of pride and pleasure for the native people. They name themselves after non humans e.g. Crazy Horse, Black Elk, Red Cloud, Standing Bear etc. This practice is evident in *Rolling Thunder* and *Mad Bear* also. Their rituals and recreational activities revolve around natural elements. They have the Sun Dance and the Horse Dance. Their months are named after natural beings and doings e.g. "the Moon of Falling Leaves" for November, "The Moon of Black Calf" for September. (P-102) They follow nature making their tepees "round" like the nests of the birds.

Demonstrating love and respect, which are hallmarks of ecocriticism, are also important traits of Native American tradition and culture. Black Elk asks his father to make offering after hunting the "animals" for food to show their gratitude "to the wild things." While fishing with his age fellows, they "kiss" the "first fish" they catch as a sign of respect while the whites kill not "to eat" but "because they like to do that". (P-164)

The Native people have never tried to spoil their surrounding for their leisure and pleasure. They take from nature as much as is needed whereas whites plunder the land and hills to search "yellow metal" which "makes the wasichu crazy." This ecological interruption is read as a marker of "the bad trouble" for natives. Natives have the knowledge of it but they do not bother land and hills for digging it out. (P-60)

With the disorder of ecological balance, "the rivers and creeks seemed to be drying" up. Every being from humans to non humans start starving "to death" (p-177) due to "big" drought. A land with "big water" a 'green land' where "bison and the other animals" live "together" with Indians becomes a dream for the natives. (P-181)

3.2. *Rolling Thunder*

Being a medicine man, Rolling Thunder has close relation with herbs and green life. For him all plants are useful and "have a purpose which should be respected." He denies the existence of "weeds" because nothing is uneconomical and wasteful in nature. The plants have families and tribes like human beings and it is imperative to pay "respects to the chief" before gathering them "by making an offering." Further he lays stress on plucking only what "is needed" and for a "good purpose." He also advocates making "apologies" when "it is necessary to kill an animal for food or clothing." Nothing is wasted by the natives. All the parts of that animal are "put to good use". He proudly proclaims that there is no concept of "wanton slaughter" among Indians. (P-9) Indians' culture makes them eco-friendly. They treat nature as equal partner to humans which needs to be treated reverently and properly.

Rolling Thunder discusses ecological issues and laments the fact that the modern man aims at conquering nature "making nature a servant of man" instead of living in harmony with it. Environmental degradation is the result of the modern man's manipulation of nature who now fears "air pollution, radioactivity and poisoned water." The land is "contaminated" and resources are disappearing rapidly. Rolling Thunder opposes the idea and efforts of controlling nature because "Nature is sovereign" like "man's inner nature". Both "cannot be controlled." He sounds one among ecocritics when he suggests "all life" needs "to be respected" to solve the problems. (P-40)

Rolling Thunder raises his voice against the unjust "destruction of pinyon juniper forests on Shoshone land." He feels worse for "knocking down thousands of acres of trees" for the sake of some wealthy ranchers who are indifferent to environmental problems due to these felling trees. The idea "to convert the forests into

grazing land” is nothing else but a step towards the “destruction of his [man’s] own environment.” Soon everything will be wiped out due to these ecological imbalances and the earth would turn into “a dust bowl” when “no grass or sagebrush or trees or anything” would be able to survive. Rolling Thunder considers it an unwise bargain of deserting a country for good just “for the sake of a few blades of grass” for a limited time period. (P-43)

Rolling Thunder seems to be upholding the cause of ecology very consistently. He talks to Doug Boyd about the “polluted” streams and hazards which they carry for the bathing children in those streams who may become victim of contaminated water if they happen to “swallow any amount of it.” He recalls the time when the country has been peaceful and safe ecologically. It “was pure, the air, the water, everything.” Now the case is contrary after the white man’s arrival. Environmental impurities are the legacy of white culture. “it hasn’t taken him[the white] long” to displace the healthy features of environment with the unhealthy ones. (P-49)

The modern man is unjust in his brutal treatment of nature. Rolling Thunder echoes the policy of ecocriticism when he equates earth with “an organism”. He connects running “streams to the veins of flowing blood” and the body consists of “the sand, soil, plants, rivers, streams and air.” Hence the earth is “conscious, struggling living being” with an “identity and purpose.” He can communicate with insects, plants and animals understanding their gestures and responses. Rolling Thunder, like ecocritics, does not believe nature as a framework or a scenic device. It has its rights and ways of responses. The modern man should avoid misusing and abusing it which is a basic slogan of ecological creed.

Rolling Thunder, like all ecocritics and scientists, reflects that the poison of pollution cannot be contained in “one place” rather “it spreads all over” like an “arthritis or cancer” which “spreads in the body.” The earth feels “sick” now for “being mistreated.” Like all traditional Indians, Rolling Thunder has faith in earth being “living” individual who “has a will and wants to be well.” The solution is “love and respect” for “all creatures and the plants and the rocks and the minerals.” People need to regard “all things” including their “will”, their “way” and their “purpose.” Respect, for Rolling Thunder, means fulfilling “our obligation to ourselves and our environment.” (P 51-52) It is not a mere lip service rather it is doing good and avoiding bad for the well being of the non human nature.

Rolling Thunder informs his white friends on a trip to the Ruby Valley about the “greedy, inconsiderate, destructive” ways of the white hunters who behave like “trophy hunters after a prize.” They kill deer without caring or counting, leaving the carcasses “along the path.” Indians do not exercise such exploitation of animals. “We take what we need” with “respect” and “in the proper way.” (P-62) The farther the man is from the world of nature, the more reckless and fearless he grows in his activities against nature to the point of exhausting it.

Rolling Thunder shares the love and concern of ecocritics for the natural world. He is anxious about its future the way they are. He speaks against “the destruction of forest” and also against “the testing of chemical and biological weaponry in Nevada.” He does not forget to mention at his healing ceremonies the “wars, oppression, jealousy, hatred and greed” of the modern materialistic man which results in physical and spiritual barrenness of both the man and his environment. (P-86) While victimizing nature, the man himself becomes a victim of his inconsiderate self.

Native Indians have cherished a very “intimate relationship with nature” before the advent of whites who now try to “cut you off”. Nature is not a commodity for Indians rather a power to provide “food and shelter and medicine and cleansing.” (P-96)

Rolling Thunder does not chain his dogs for he is against the philosophy of “keeping animals confined” and has been fined for it several times. American Indians are the people who “flow with nature” in harmony and understanding contrary to the modern man who is bent upon playing havoc with both human and non human worlds.

3.3. Mad Bear

Mad Bear calls earth as “Earth Mother” that has a spirit and a self which should be taken care of properly by the human world. (P-24) He accuses “the progress” of civilization’ for the damage and destruction of land. Though Indians have spent a good time in the company of nature as “friends with the birds and animals and even the wind and the moon” but they have least bothered it with their presence. (P-29)

Mad Bear highlights the ecologically friendly ways of Indians repeatedly in the biography. They have lived for thousands of years with non human world without “spoiling”, “destroying or depleting or degrading land.” Instead they have developed an understanding and cooperated “with all the living forces of nature.” Today man has brought it to “the brink of death” by his “so-called civilization.” (P-34)

Mad Bear embraces the concept of “transition” but emphasizes to participate in transition, creatively”. There should be no fighting “against the Mother-Earth and Nature”. It is useless effort to try “winning” from mother and nature and those who try have to pay a “great” cost. Mad Bear, like Rolling Thunder and ecocritics, brings up the issue of “the destruction of the forests.” (P-50)

Mad Bear goes against the idea of competition for survival. People are wiping out the forests thinking either they can survive or the “wilderness” but the solution which Mad Bear offers is to “cooperate, cultivate and live” otherwise “compete, combat and die.” Those can survive who “cooperate best with nature”. Mad Bear declares trees as “living relatives” like ecocritics who treat nature as a being not as a background beauty. Mad Bear, like Rolling Thunder, echoes the idea of self destruction of modern man in cutting down trees which are “symbol of life.” People should “feel for them” to make their own world healthy and worth living. (P-50)

Mad Bear insists, like ecocritics, on treating plants as “living beings”. Plucking flowers and plants for decoration purposes is the cruelest thing and the height of insensitivity on the part of human beings. He stresses to restrict the activity only for “sacred” and good purposes. He himself gathers herbs but to heal and makes it mandatory to take permission from the plant and make an offering before going for any part of it. (P-97) He maintains that taking anything without permission is equivalent to the “rape of the Earth” which is highly disagreeable because Earth is mother. (P-153) Mad Bear pinpoints the need of developing a relationship with nature. Native Americans have suffered at the hands of whites like their environment. Indians have experienced “genocide” and “culturecide” by their invaders. (P-132) Plundering and looting without any sense of respect or remorse is against native culture and ecology.

Mad Bear is a “bridge-maker”. He highlights the necessity of building relationships among different cultures along with nature. (P-234) He demands, at Cross Cultural Conference, “the cessation of the mining of coal, uranium, oil and gas” on the territory of Indians. He wants to make a public knowledge of “ecological dangers” which “will result from mining” in that particular area. (P-314) Apart from endangering the environment, the traditions and culture and sacred sites of the natives also become vulnerable in the face of these mining and intruding activities.

IV. Conclusion

The American Indian biographies explain at length the subject of relation between human and non human nature which is basic principle of ecocriticism. Nature and environmental problems are the key issues which Black Elk, Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear take up and fight for like the ecocritics. They represent the interests of both the human and non human nature equally and vocally. They voice that the cure of all spiritual and environmental problems lies in developing understanding, harmony, respect and a sense of cooperation and sharing with the whole human and non human nature.

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