

Ecocritical Concerns in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*

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Abstract:

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the whole planet has been severely facing the environmental crisis. Almost all the countries have been experiencing the conflict between the human and non-human world. The Environmental Studies did not remain to confine to natural science subjects only but the writers also took a keen interest in it and began to portray it in their respective works. Numerous writers in the 20th century highlight the inherent relationship between man and nature and their influence on and inter-connectivity with each other. The ecocritical studies began in 1970s in America, then spread to the other countries of the world. It reached its peak in the mid-90s when Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm wrote a book, *The Ecocriticism Reader*. In recent years, the ecocritical studies caught worldwide attention among literary scholars and critics. One of the noted eco-fiction writers of America is Edward Abbey, who not only wrote the fiction and non-fiction but also took part in the ecological activism and remained the great advocate of ecological justices throughout his life. Abbey's oeuvre mirrors the picture of environmental degradation by the hands of human beings. He is a radical environmental writer whose uncompromising spirit throughout his life exposed the ills and evils of America's social, political and economic systems which, according to Abbey, are responsible for the dilapidation of the environment. The writer like Abbey tries to find out the cause of

Environmental imbalance between man and nature. He in his novels indirectly expresses his views that how man has been the part of the planet and now he is digging his own grave by tampering the green planet. Abbey as a radical environmentalist has no any political ax to grind to satirize the corrupted social and political system of America which he believes have failed to control the Eco-crisis in his country in particular and in the world in general. The present paper will highlight the Ecocritical concerns and environmental consciousness in Edward Abbey's groundbreaking novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. The paper will show how man and nature are inter-related with each other and what is the cause of the imbalance between the human and nonhuman world.

Key Words: **Environment, America, Dilapidation, Imbalance, Human, Non-human, Highlight.**

Introduction

Ecocriticism is the recent critical approach in literature which seeks to analyze the relationship between man and the environment. After going through the history of literature we come to know that man and nature has been sharing an unbreakable bond from its very beginning. In the mid 18th century, when the industrial revolution came in Europe, it had altered the whole scenario of the world, particularly of Britain which became one of the leading manufacturers of the world. But at the same time, it had brought the biggest calamity and cataclysm to the natural world. The writers and artists split into two groups: one who welcomed the new technology and progress and another who vehemently reacted against it. In the former, there include Lord Macaulay, Samuel Smiles and in the later, there were Mathew Arnold, Ruskin, Carlyle, Dickens,

and Trollop. Hence we have understood that the destruction of the green planet started during the industrial revolution, but it has risen in the 20th century at a very breakneck speed. In the present century, Ecocriticism attracted the worldwide attention of literary scholars and artists, and they began to write about the relationship between human and the non-human world and protest against the eco-crisis. Among the contemporary artists there include Barbara Kingsolver, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Carl Hiasson, Earnest Hemingway, Rachel Carson, etc.

Edward Abbey, who is known as one of the leading and the well-known co-writer of America, portrays the inhuman attitude of the human world and the corrupted behavior of socio-political organizations in his whole oeuvre. His groundbreaking novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) widely called the attention of eco-critics and artists and became the prominent piece of work in American eco-fiction canon. The novel portrays the author's uncompromising spirit towards industrialization and governmental strategies and his utmost love and enthusiasm for nature. The plot shows that the author can go to any extreme for protecting the environment and flourishing the green culture in America. He sometimes labeled as a "radical environmentalist" and "eco-terrorist" by his contemporary writers and political activists. He inspired some groups in US such as Earth First and The Earth Liberation Front. His foundations considered him to be "the father of Green Thinking." The foundation was formed in his honor toward professors Edward Abbey Foundation endowments based upon their enviroidynamic thinking.

The novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* published in 1975 made Abbey overnight famous not only in America but also throughout Europe. The novel depicts the radical attitude of the gang of four members who do not compromise with environmental dilapidation. In the novel, the author creates the four main characters namely Smith, Doc Servis, Bonnie Abzug, and George

Hay duke. They are "ecologically minded misfits" who formed a group and made it mandatory to work for environmental issues. Their team has an uncompromising behavior that shows much extremism for protecting the ecology. Although they behave like criminals, the reader sees them as philanthropists and call them "good criminals" who works for the benefit of mankind and society. They break the law and can go against anything or any organization that is negative towards the environment. The environmental issues for them become the primary issue which according to them needs to be protected and saved, if not legally or lawfully then illegally and lawlessly. Dr. Servis is the backbone of the gang who has been called the "brains" (126) of the team. He is the member of one of the organizations called "the Democratic Country Committee" (10) and he funds the group. At first we see that he has the habit of blowing up billboards but eventually, he decides to blow up his economy and starts to spend it on the gang. He begins to buy explosives and other weapons for the gang, "Explosives, of course, were tax write-offs." (43) He is the creator of the Hayduke like Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein. He "walks like a prefabricated man, Dr. Sarvis's hand-made monster." (203) Doc is a criminal type of a character who shows hypocrite and disorder conduct. He condemns mining but on the other hand, he owns mining. He says "I don't believe in majority rule... I am against all government, including good government." (98) He is misanthropist who seems out of senses. It shows his unethical attitude which resembles the author's anarchical ideology. He wants a government like an autocratic rule. As an anarchist, he shows much sexual interest too. He opines "I want to bugger a Baskin-Robbins girl." (81)

Bonnie Abzug, the girl with the feministic attitude gives the reference of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique (1963)* and repeatedly mentions it in her conversations. She is portrayed

as a girl with the feministic bent of mind but at the same time, she goes through the encounter with Hyaduke. She is indifferent towards the attitude of the author's interest in environmental concerns. She opines "What utterly ghastly country". (34) Abbey does not like feministic attitude and states "Help Fem-Lib; Liberate A Woman Tonight". (162) The author calls Bonnie a "teenybopper intellectual..." (26)

Abbey not only shows the environmental concerns but highlights his anarchist views and intermingles it with sexual violence. He calls Hayduke an "anarchist voyeur" (228) and evokes an orgy when Bonnie states that they want to watch. Abbey provokes the younger generation for the environment movement. The leader of the gang is Hayduke, expertise in a shoot out and a former Green Berret POW during the war with Vietnam calls himself Rudolph the Red. No doubt Hayduke is violent but the author calls him patriotic because the environmental zeal is alive in his mind and spirit. Abbey calls him "Philosopher and liar" (94) who is "more destructive than bright." (61) He is a type of a hypocrite who slams and condemns others for the desecration of Nature but in reality, he pisses where he pleases. He loves nature for his selfish tasks like "liberty, sex, and free beer." (241)

Abbey tries to highlight the different characters having different perceptions of nature. Abbey shows that some are very much enthusiastic and some who rare wet blankets and pretentious, while others are violent and acts like criminals like Hayduke. But the novelist at the same time appreciates their deeds especially their environmental concerns which they show at every step of their life. The environmental gang is the projection of Abbey's perception and philosophy towards nature and environmental concerns. Abbey expresses his sense of vision

through these characters. Doc Servis feels ecstatic after hearing the sound of the murmuring waters of the river. He apostrophically addresses the river:

Come flow with me, Doctor, through the deserts of New Mexico, down through the Canyons of Big Bend and on to the sea the Gulf The Caribbean, down where those young sirens weave their seaweed garlands for your hairless head, O Doc. Are you there? Doc?
(09)

The author uses the violence in the novel which can be termed as the “eco-violence”. After the destruction of billboards, Doc tells his teammates that their country is under threat because of the capitalists and the wrong policies of the government. They turn violent because they could not see anything detrimental to physical nature. Abbey through the gang stresses that human beings are nothing but the creatures which have been formed from the big natural planet. The factory system, industrialization, and the government have completely turned a blind eye to the environmental policies. These gang members became the mouthpiece of the author. He wants to interpret the physical nature through the different perspectives, and this becomes the reason that he has constructed four different characters whose motive is same “obey little and resist much” though perceptions vary. Abbey creates eco-consciousness among readers through their rhetoric and different strategies. Mr. Doc tells his teammates about the hazards and harmful effect of smog:

Did you know, my dear, that we have the biggest strip mine in the United States, up near Shiprock? Right here in New Mexico the Land of Enchantment? Have you thought about where all that smog is coming from that blankets the whole bloody River Grande valley?

Paul Horgan's 'great river,' channelized, subsidized, salinized trickling into cotton fields under the sulfur skies of New Mexico? Did you know the consortium of power companies and the government agencies are conspiring to open more strip mines and build even more coal-burning power plants in the same four-corners were all that filth is coming from now? (32)

Seldom Seen opines, "Before farming was invented we were all hunters or stockmen. We lived in the open, and every man had at least ten square miles all his own. Then they went and invented agriculture and the human race took a big step backward. From hunters and ranches down to farmers, that was one hell of a fall." (241. Abbey takes the profession of farming at the very highest stage and makes it one of the noblest and holiest professions. It is because the farmer is being always preoccupied with land and nature and through this, he can develop an environmental sense and love for it. The author through his narrative displaces the modern technocracy and yearns for agrarian idealism. Abbey is a postmodernist nature writer who in this novel attracts the attention of the readers towards himself. He acts like a poor naturalist who shows determined attitude towards everything which is a threat to the physical environment. He does not believe in moderate politics but shows the extremism towards the present system of America and by the portrayal of the gang members, he proves his anarchic and extremist philosophy. It is because of his radical views and the eco-protest he was charged as an "eco-terrorist", and a kind radical environmentalist who like puritans does not compromise with anything which is against his principles and ideology.

The novel is one of the leading environmental novel which centers around the eco-centrism and displaces and undermines the anthropocentrism. The novel is packed with violence

and radicalism to emphasize that how the modern man has changed into mere a thing and lacks his sense of co-operation and integrity which he has been sharing with nature since the beginning of his life. According to *The National Observer*, “It’ll make you want to go out and blow up a dam” We, therefore, can understand that the politically correct system is a fallacy which is corrupt and Abbey shows aggression towards this corruption with the uncompromising spirit and uncorrupted soul.

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