

ECOMASCULINITY IN EDWARD ABBEY'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN**Shyamala, C.G.**Department of English and Research Centre for Comparative Studies, Mercy College, Palakkad, Kerala.
E.mail: cgsm2007@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This paper makes an attempt to analyse ecomasculinity in Edward's Abbey's *Fire on the Mountain*. The natural environment and ecology are altered by man either positively or negatively depending on what man thinks about himself in relation to nature around him. The relationship between nature and culture is intimately woven and any attempt to sever the bond could be disastrous. Man's peaceful co-existence with nature makes him realize the importance of maintaining the ecological balance. However, indiscriminate poaching, deforestation and other exploitative activities have ruined man's chances of preserving the environment. The novel exposes the significance of living in perfect harmony with nature, thereby defining the ecomasculine self that proves that it could care for the environment. Exploitative forces are too strong for the protagonist who has to give up his life fighting against the onslaught of modernity. The paper critiques man's callous attitude to nature and simultaneously warns mankind of impending danger of total annihilation of mankind due to ecological imbalance.

Keyword: Ecomasculinity, ecology, nature, culture, power.

"Neither ecocriticism, nor men's studies, nor queer ecologies, nor (to date) ecofeminism has offered a theoretical sophisticated foray into the potentials for eco-masculinities" (Gaard 12).

As proposed by Garrd, ecological masculinity is of immense significance because it establishes a crucial point of divergence from traditional masculinity that maintains a dominant and the dominated relationship with nature. Knowledge, material success, power and rationality are the probable parameters that are considered when discourses on masculinity are taken into consideration because masculinity rests on the assumptions based on these factors in relation to politics, society and economy. Ecological masculinity would be part of remaking the economy and facilitating the transition towards a more environmentally benign way of living with the ecosystems in the biosphere. This way, ecomasculinity would ensure the sustenance of the environment in the face of technological advancements and the indiscriminate use resources to serve man's needs.

This paper analyses how the shades of masculinity with regard to nature are enacted by the characters in Edward Abbey's *Fire on the Mountain* that would subvert the traditional masculine positions that rest on maintain a rigid contact with the word, based on control and power. The novel

delineates the conflict between the old rancher and nature- conservationist John Vogelin and the United States government that tries to take the possession of the ranch in order to extend the missile range for the United States Airforce. Vogelin's resistance to give up his farm for nuclear purposes and his final defeat in the course of the events evinces the need to understand the values and practices of men that could formulate and decide about the environment without subjugating nature for personal gains. The protagonist disapproves of man's callous attitude to nature and simultaneously warns mankind of the impending danger of total annihilation of mankind due to ecological imbalance.

Traditionally, in the West, the relationship between man and nature is based on power, control and conquest. The fictionalized lives of cowboys and pioneers proved their masculinity by subduing nature to their will and by exploring, penetrating and conquering the 'virgin land'.

The ecologist Martin Hultman defines this attitude to nature similar to Industrial masculinity, which is "a figuration that evaluates nature as dead, man as the chosen dominator, and engineering as the method of creating wealth for all humans" ("Green Men?" 4). Industrial masculinists believe that the world is dead from the beginning and primarily exists for humans to conquer and extract resources from. Ideas from engineering and classical or neo-classical economics, favouring large-scale and

centralised energy technologies and the practice of patriarchy are contained in the practice of industrial masculinity. Projects that range from large-scale hydropower or nuclear power plants to fossil fuel technologies are projections of this masculinity (Ohman 56). In relation to nature, the most important idea is to separate it from humans and value it as a resource for human extraction.

Historically, industrial masculinity was challenged in the 1970s by “ecological masculinity ...which gained presence at this period in history as well as previous research on masculinity which has used this term” (Gaard 32). This form of masculinity has a history that spans many years and has taken shapes as the Earth God Kokopelli in New Mexico (33) or later in the history the Green Man (Basford 54). The Green Man, found in variations in many cultures throughout the world, is a figure that could be seen in Europe in cathedral carved heads from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. The figures manifest a heterogeneous variety of features, but the Green Man is often a face or head sprouting, surrounded by, or even entirely made from, leaves and foliage. He is found carved in wood or stone usually interpreted as a symbol showing the cycle of birth and death (55). This is a legendary figure that features in the annals of time.

In the 1960s, ecological masculinity emerged in retaliation to industrial masculinity. Localization of economies, use of technologies on a small scale basis, creation of renewable energy sources, decentralization of power structures as well as living harmoniously with nature, the flora and the fauna are regarded as the everyday practices that enact ecological masculinity (Hultman 75). Such an approach could not be regarded as effeminate because it calls for an approach that would care for the environment by maintaining a symbiotic relationship that would cater to the preservation of the entire species on earth without being too passionate or emotional, but centered on finding a solution that would resolve the environmental crisis forever.

The green wave in the 1980s not only suggested the recycling of old technologies and old values, but also created a vision of eco-socialist-based intentional communities of alternative modernity. These groups created alternative projects amidst the dominant model. Their models and experiments were part of “a mighty international peak in environmental consciousness” in the 1980s (Hultman 76). Primarily antagonistic to industrial masculinity, during this period, a form of masculinity

exemplified being caring, humble and sharing sort was presented as being more appropriate in an ecologically sound society and challenged the hegemony of what has been called cowboy, industrial, or hegemonic masculinity (*Masculinities* 125).

Ecomodern masculinity recognises environmental issues as an intrinsic part of politics from the 1990s onwards. It can be defined as “an assymetric combination of the determination and hardness of industrial modernity with appropriate moments of compassion and even sense of care for a vulnerable environment from environmental movement” (Hultman “Transition” 78). Ecomodern masculinity is the dominant configuration of masculinity in recent years when handling several environmental issues. Ecocriticism gives human beings a better understanding of and a broader view of nature. It analyses the role played by the natural environment of the imagination of a cultural community. Cultural moorings form an inevitable part of any eco-critical discussion and depending on what man thinks about himself in relation to things around him, he acts and alters the ecology around him either positively or negatively. Representations on masculinity in fiction are wrought by social, economic and political reasons that seem to influence the divergent attitudes to human response to nature around them.

Fire on the Mountain presents the rigid modern world, set over two hundred miles South of Duke City, New Mexico. It appraises the western code of behavior to explore the individual's role in the larger scheme of the voracious society and takes on the entire United States government in conflict with the individual. John Vogelin is an old rancher whose property adjoins the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. When the United Air Force tries to take the possession of the ranch in order to extend the missile range, the old man refuses to give up his property. Aided only by his twelve-year-old grandson, Vogelin shows what one determined individual can do in the face of overwhelming legal and military power.

The novel begins with the description of Mexico as: “Brightest new Mexico. In that vivid light each rock and tree and cloud and mountain existed with a kind of force and clarity that seemed not natural but super natural” (*Fire* 1). Then, Vogelin's grandson Billy takes up the theme “yet it also felt as familiar as home, the country of dreams, the land I had known from the beginning” (1). The reader is transported to that twilight zone of an imagined new

Mexico on highway of heat waves, "giving the road far ahead a transparent, liquid look, an illusion which receded before us as fast as we approach" (1). The landscape feels like "Paradise" (1) to Billy who is fascinated by the natural beauty of the countryside. The land is both the philosophical and the emotional crux of the story is but a reflection of the author's depiction of the landscape.

John Vogelin has not changed or evolved with modernity. John's life is inextricably and harmoniously blended with nature. Billy, in the first person narrative, records many nostalgic moments of his boyhood days spent with John. Being close to nature for a long time, he expounds the crucial and inevitable bond between various objects in nature and the individual. John is deeply related to nature and he even derives his philosophy from nature. He is neither a romantic nor an idyllic that writes or recites verses, but a practical environmentalist who recognizes the role played by each species of the ecosystem. He knows that each organism has its role in the ecosystem. For instance, John dwells upon the role played by rabbits and vultures that help "preserve the balance of nature" (*Fire* 3). This illustration proves that each species "performs unique and specialized functions which play a part on the overall stability of the community" (Meeker 162). The ecomasculine individual understands the interconnectedness of each system in the environment and seeks to preserve the delicate balance in nature.

John's descriptions of the behavior of animals and birds are accurate. He notices the complicated and sophisticated patterns of behaviour of the creatures in his ranch and explains the roles of each animal in maintaining the balance in the ecosystem. John describes the road-runner, who is stubborn and runs in absolute speed. He explains how the road runner is different from the jack rabbit that ends its life running along with vehicles and dying during the chase. Billy loves the land as much as his grandfather and would stay to death with him if he could. He says: "Sir, if you'll let me, I won't go back. I'll never go back. I'll stay here and work for you for the rest of my life" (*Fire*12). Billy's desire to take care of the land is grounded in the ecological principle of maintaining intimate contact with all things of the biosphere disregarding the monetary or material gains out of the connection.

John hates the persecution of animals in the name of progress. He shows a selfless concern for the world and the flora and fauna around him. Talking about the tallow balls used to kill the wild

animals by the fellows of the National Fish and Wildlife Services, he says that the poison used to kill animals in the name of progress is detrimental to the survival of the species on earth. He questions the rationale behind killing animals and destroying their habitats in the name of progress: "Progress. I say, Let's turn back the clock. Why does progress have to progress over me and the coyotes?" (*Fire* 32). In such a view of the ecosystem, there is no trace of the anthropocentric arrogance or a dominating attitude towards nature. John is an ecomasculinist who believes in the oneness of creation and suggests a mode of progress that does not take advantage of nature. Man becomes here a part of nature, not its exploiter.

Billy's ride with his grandfather exposes man's cruel side that reduces the role of nature to a provider, to be used and discarded. Man is predatory by nature and through his quality has made the entire planet his prey. The persistent question is the cruelty of man towards the other forms of life on earth. While searching for the horse, Rascal Lee gives graphic details of this cruelty in claiming the coyote he has killed to be his property. Man believes that no other species is more important than him. John says: All beliefs are provisional, subject to change when they fail to produce harmonious consequences" (*Fire*167). It is man's responsibility to realize the importance of preserving the various groups of plants and animals that exist on earth. When Billy asks John whether they would hunt a lion, John says that is futile to kill an animal for no reason. He adds: "Besides, it's the only lion left on the place. I can't afford to lose him" (59). Billy likens his grandfather to the lion that is "aged, battered but still mighty lion" (61).

John exhibits a wonderful sense of ecological wisdom as he and Billy walk towards the trail. Billy admires John's close association with nature when John predicts the arrival of rain in the area and the amount of water they would require. Living in close proximity with nature, John could not only make accurate judgements but also prove that nature has a cycle of its own that depends on man's treatment of the various species of the biosphere. Charmed by the beautiful sights and sounds of birds like night hawks, ravens, magpies and especially a trickling water song of a canyon wren, Billy asks: "Is heaven better than this place? John responds: "The climate's a little better here" (62).

The changing perceptions of masculinity over a considerable period of time propose masculinity to be a dynamic concept that undergoes

nuanced meanings. There is a pointed focus on place and time in the novel which lends itself to ecocritical analysis. Such a reading accentuates a homogeneous world where man shares an equivalent relationship with the vegetation and other life forms. To John, his life covers the entire ecosphere where all the things he sees around him are connected to the other as a chain. It also represents a culture that lives in tune with nature and it is in this culture that man's roots lie.

At this point of time, "civilization" encroaches upon John's property when the government wants his isolated ranch for a guided-missile test site. John refuses to sell the ranch and vows to resist the demands at any cost. He never agrees to vacate the premises. In the opinion of the government, the ranch is a plot of mud and land meant to be explored for nuclear purposes. The government represents the attitude of the industrial masculinist that uses natural resources to the advantage of a few. It disregards the need to preserve nature since nature is a source of economic progress. In its view, the separation of man from nature would be ideal because nature is seen as an inexhaustible resource for human extraction and progress. Nature is sacrificed in the name of progress and material comfort.

While John's neighbors gradually succumb to pressure and leave the area, he grows more uncompromising and aggressive. If necessary, he would fight single-handedly to protect his property from the government so that he can protect the area from being destroyed by nuclear power. Lee, John's friend asks him to vacate the place because the government is too powerful for them: "Nobody is safe when the government can take away his home" (142). John is unwilling to leave his ranch. He replies:

This is my home. I was born here. My father worked and fought all his life for this place. He died here. My mother died here. My wife almost died here. Now I want to die here, when I am ready to die. I will not leave here part time as some sort of charity ward of the government while they think up new ways to wedge me of completely. No, by God, I can't do that. I'll fight it out with bullets before I'll do that. (142)

John's courage to defy the orders of the government signifies the arrival of the green movement that promoted the protection of the environment. John is one among the many others who would not tolerate annihilation of the

ecosystem. They are against androcentrism and they are ready to spread the message of an ecocentric approach to maintain global harmony.

After the Air Force rounds up John's cattle, sells them and drives away his hired man and family, it aims for John too, but the seventy-year-old rancher restricts the entry of the troops at gunpoint. When his best friend Lee Mackie betrays him, John is defeated. Forced to leave his land, he retreats to Alamogordo and lives in isolation, grieving the inevitable death of the inmates of the ranch. After a few unhappy nights, John sneaks back to the mountains above his ranch and dies; a victim of an apparent heart failure. Giving a Viking burial, Billy and Lee watch John as he "disappeared within the fire, wrapped from head to foot in flame, and cell by cell, atom by atom, he rejoined the elements of earth and sky" (180). His grandson and Lee have given him a burial, which is a symbolic fire in the mountain while the United States marshal looks on. Lee mentions that the old man has now become one with nature, a gesture that proclaims John's irreconcilable temperament in resisting destruction of the environment because he sees life in every object living or non-living, on the ranch.

According to Manes: "In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, the earthworms, wolves and waterfalls -a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for gatherer-peoples) one ignores at one's peril" (15). The concluding line of "Fire on the Mountain" declares a similar proposition: "Far above the on the mountain side, posed on his lookout point, troubled by the fire, the lion screamed" (181). The death of John is a warning against the birth of destructive forces that would soon devastate the ranch resulting in the death of divergent species in the area. John's demise foregrounds the power of destructive forces that are resolved to inflict damage to the existing fragile balance of the ecosystem.

John's attempts to protect the ranch from the government are an individual's effort to restore peace and harmony in one's habitat. The novel proves that a single man's need to conserve the biotic and abiotic elements is in vain and the ecomasculine projection of the individual is at the losing end. However, the issue could be resolved if forces could join hands to prevent the onslaught. This would mean that joint endeavours could subvert hegemonic masculinity and create potentially new, mutually enriching and non-oppressive conversations between man and nature. In the desire to conserve the environment, man

should be wary of the resurfacing of hegemonic control of the surroundings. Rather than provide a discourse of oppressiveness, one could locate interconnections between oppressions and thereby argue for interdependent oppositional politics. It would be wise to restrain from feminising or romanticising nature, which historically have been indicative of dominating or repressed relations to nature and women. The transition towards a more environmentally conscious way of asserting oneself is to be practiced.

Abbey creates a counter- discourse to the traditional rhetoric of masculine practices and self-affirmation through the exploitation of nature by depicting John to be a man who believes in peaceful co-existence with nature. John loses because of the United States government's superior strength but the book succeeds in a crucial way. It projects the culture of New Mexico that witnesses the continuous struggle between the ecomasculine phase and the industrial masculine phase. The seeds of economic strength and power sown at the expense of nature are witness to the uncompromising struggle in the modern era, the conflict between industrialization and preservation of nature in the face of progress and scientific advancements. The novel presents an experience of nature which is emotional as well as capable of tempering the mind with simple human love for all living things, thereby associating one with nature.

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