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THE UPHOLDERS OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND BIOCENTRISM IN ANNIE PROULX'S *BARKSKINS*

Abstract

As the bedrocks of the French imperialism in North America, the fur trade and the logging industry led to a drastic depletion in the populations of fur-bearing animals, particularly that of the beaver, and massive deforestation on the continent. Examining Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* from an ecocritical point of view, this article seeks to investigate the novel's representations of the detrimental impact of anthropocentrism. We will show that the prevalence of anthropocentrism in New France resulted in the over-harvesting of beavers to procure precious pelts for European markets, where fur clothes were in vogue during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this scenario, French merchants went from rags to riches at the cost of losing myriads of beavers. On the other hand, our study will also address the indirect endorsement of biocentrism by the indigenous North Americans, who refrained from inflicting irreparable damage on nature in a vast territory in which the European settlers relentlessly cut ancient trees to make their fortunes. Hence, the focus of this article is the distinction between the perspectives on the natural world held by French settlers and Native Americans in *Barkskins*.

Keywords: Annie Proulx, *Barkskins*, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, beaver, deforestation

Introduction

As an award-winning novelist and short story writer who has significantly contributed to the portrayal of the environmental and ecological crises induced by Euro-Americans in North America, Annie Proulx reflects in her outstanding literary works the concern for environmental degradation through her focus on the chopping of ancient trees, the over-hunting of wild animals, and the consequent loss of biodiversity in North America. She is enthusiastic about the preservation of nature against human interventions in nature. The fact that Proulx lives in rural areas has had a significant impact on the themes she chooses for most of her works. Mark Asquith notes that “Proulx is a rural woman and happy to project herself as such, bringing the same degree of care and attention to her creation of her literary persona as to her fictional characters” (3).

The portrayal of the natural world is central to Proulx’s works, for she has closely observed the demolished American forests and their loss of biodiversity throughout her life. Antoni Monserrat Ferrer holds that Proulx has “called attention to a kind of nature-minded fiction that so intimately explores ethical drives and philosophical landscapes that it is inviting to examine just how closely this fiction is allied with the nature-writing genre” (3). Proulx implicitly reprimands the capitalist attitude of white colonizers towards the natural world of North America in *Barkskins* (2016), in which she observes the diminution of the beaver population in North America. 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 settlements on the continent they called the New World. Upon their arrival, European settlers started up business enterprises that had detrimental impacts on the flora and fauna of the vast territories they were about to conquer.

Looking enviously at the territorial expansions of the British Empire in North America, France dispatched thousands of troops to aid the French explorers, traders, and settlers who had set off for the New World by the turn of the seventeenth century. Consequently, massive influxes of French immigrants arrived to settle in a world they thought to be a land of opportunity. The ultimate outcome of this endeavor was the establishment of New France in North

America. As a novelist who is preoccupied with the environmental and ecological consequences of colonialism in North America, Annie Proulx sufficiently addresses these issues in *Barkskins*, her seminal novel that tracks the lives of several generations of European settlers across four centuries. To investigate *Barkskins* from an ecocritical standpoint, this article will focus on the adverse impacts of European settlement on the beaver population during the fur trade. More exactly, it will point out the prevalence of anthropocentrism among the French settlers and traders who consider North America to be a bountiful paradise with infinite natural resources that could be exploited to get rich. Furthermore, the anthropocentric assumption of man's superiority over non-human living beings is compared to the biocentric perspective of the Native American attitude towards the natural world.

Review of the Literature

As Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* is a novel published in 2016, not even a single scholarly article investigating this novel has appeared in an indexed journal. Nevertheless, a few short reviews of *Barkskins* have appeared, all of which, apart from admiring Annie Proulx for her preoccupation with the preservation of the natural world and its pristine resources, address the novel's depiction of the environmental crises induced by the intrusion of British and French traders and settlers, arguing that in her novel Proulx has adequately portrayed the massive deforestation carried out by the new settlers. Nonetheless, since these articles are indeed short reviews rather than scholarly writings, they fail to clearly examine the motives of the British and French settlers in the wilderness. Here is a short overview of them.

David Galef (2016) refers to Annie Proulx as "a writer of great scope and beauty" for her intricate description of the tormented individuals of the New World in the novel. He evaluates the novel as an ambitious attempt to trace the history of logging in the New World. Galef maintains that *Barkskins* is a critique of the ravaging of the forests that has been going on during the last three centuries. Highlighting the dense forests in which countless trees produce an impressive yet "brooding" image, Galef argues that the darkness of the forests in *Barkskins* reminds the reader of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which European colonizers saw the impenetrable forests of the Congo as a dark virgin realm awaiting their presence.

Patricia Schlagenhauf (2016) views Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* as "an epic novel" that spans three centuries – from the seventeenth century to the present time. Schlagenhauf asserts that *Barkskins* focuses on the colonization of the New World by European powers. According to Schlagenhauf, Proulx adequately depicts the avarice of colonizers who exploited the natural resources in virgin territories, imported various diseases, and ruined the lives of indigenous Indian subjects. The detrimental ecological consequences of colonization, including "forest rape," Schlagenhauf contends, are meticulously portrayed by Proulx.

Anthony Cummins's review in *the Guardian* (2016) describes *Barkskins* as an "ecological saga" in which European colonizers, who attempt to justify their atrocities with Christian rhetoric, are apathetic towards the adverse outcomes of tampering with the forests that "local pagans" hold in high esteem. The disaster of deforestation, Cummins remarks, is exacerbated by the problem of cultural erasure. Not only are the dense forests in the New World subject to devastation, but also the cultural heritage of Native Americans is exposed to erasure. That is to say, colonizers grow affluent by subduing indigenous people either by force or by cultural hegemony.

William T. Vollmann (2016) emphasizes, in *The New York Times*, Proulx's interest in writing about nature and man's relationship with it. He refers to Proulx's novel as the story of "shortsighted" greed, spanning over three hundred years, that leads to the destruction of American forests. The tragedy of chopping massive trees is planned and carried out by the vile newcomers for whom natural resources seem to be endless. Vollmann holds that, although Proulx has persuasively and compellingly portrayed many avaricious settlers, she seems to be inviting the reader to care more about the damaged environment than about the characters. The environment, he asserts, is as significant as the indigenous people whose lives are ruined.

In his short article in *USA Today*, Charles Finch (2016) focuses on environmental degradation induced by the ceaseless ravaging of the forests in *Barkskins*. He remarks that Proulx tends to highlight the negative role of human beings in the present ecological crisis and further argues that Proulx traces the irretrievable and appalling damage imposed on the environment in the New World by ten generations of two European families who arrived in America in the seventeenth century. They take, he asserts, something from the earth that is irreplaceable as they cut tall evergreens and oaks. Praising Proulx for her ethical

concerns, Finch maintains that many novelists have dealt with the economic, racial, and ecological consequences of the encounters between Native Americans and European colonizers in long historical novels. Nevertheless, Proulx is not merely concerned with the chronological history of colonization. In *Barkskins*, she is particularly motivated by environmental and ethical concerns.

Philip Hensher (2016) sees *Barkskins* as an epic account of deforestation of North America. He holds that Proulx is critical of the men who set fire to the beautiful forests of the New World. Deforestation is pursued, he contends, so quickly and extensively by European settlers that it is as if missiles attacked the area to destroy it. Like Charles Finch, Hensher argues that Proulx is primarily concerned with ecocentric issues rather than anthropocentric debates. Likewise, black people and their suffering in the traumatic and heart-rending history of slavery in America are absent in the novel and the dramatic decline in the number of Native Americans is not as noticeably dealt with as the devastation of the forests.

In a newspaper review in *The Hamilton Spectator*, Don Hopey (2017) asserts that, although Annie Proulx is a lover of nature, her concern is not limited to trees and deforestation. According to Hopey, Proulx laments not only the loss of tall trees but also the avaricious “mindset and morality” that convinced and encouraged European settlers to destroy the woods. The “rapacious society” that sends greedy men to America is to be blamed. The mentality of European colonizers, Hopey argues, allowed the devastation of the infinite forests that once shaded North America. He claims that Proulx seems to be denouncing those who considered the forest as an “inimical vegetable mass” that had to be devastated.

Ecocriticism: Critical Methodology

The deleterious manipulation of nature by human beings to reshape it for their own convenience has led to environmental degradation, particularly since the inauguration of the industrial revolution, which induced various forms of severe environmental contamination. The detrimental consequences of environmental crises have often been reflected in literary works. Nevertheless, even though a few outstanding American literary figures, including Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), whose poems could indeed be categorized as ecopoetry, adequately addressed and depicted untrammelled wilderness with untapped natural resources, the emergence of a

more comprehensive critical approach to examine the representations of environmental devastation was postponed till the 1990s, when ecocriticism gathered momentum in the United States. That is, the exacerbation of environmental degradation after World War II brought about environmental sophistication in literary studies, for many literary figures and literary theorists felt obliged to raise the awareness of their readers about the ecological catastrophes afflicting living beings throughout the world for the purpose of correcting man's adverse treatment of the natural world and its inhabitants.

Ecocriticism has thus emerged as a response to the immense damage imposed on nature by humans. This approach to literary criticism calls into question the anthropocentric assumption of man's supreme status among the entire species that justifies his harmful manipulations of nature. Glotfelty and Fromm define ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocriticism seeks to investigate a literary text to find distinct forms of environmental and ecological crises, including, though not limited to, the loss of biodiversity, deforestation, ozone depletion, air and water pollution, and the over-exploitation of animals. Likewise, an ecocritical reading of a text might highlight the representations of these crises that have turned the world into a terrain incapable of impressing nature lovers.

Ecocriticism is characterized by its vehement commitment to environmental preservation. Greg Garrard, a prominent critic whose books and scholarly articles have significantly contributed to the development of ecocriticism, maintains that 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" (*Ecocriticism* 5). An ecocritical reading of a text, then, examines the depiction of the harmful relationship between human beings and the natural world in literary works. Likewise, ecocritics keep an eye on the ways culture affects nature. That is, the elements of culture that prioritize the needs of human beings over the needs of non-human living beings are foregrounded by ecocritics as influential determinants of environmental and ecological crises. As one of the most recent literary approaches, ecocriticism has gone through two waves:

First-wave ecocriticism typically privileged rural and wild spaces over urban ones. Against this, second-wave ecocriticism contended that that

wall of separation is a historically produced artifact that throughout human history nature itself has been subject to human reshaping, and that especially since the industrial revolution, metropolitan landscape and the built environment generally must be considered as at least equally fruitful ground for ecocritical work. (Buell 93)

The first wave of ecocriticism sought to address literary works of eminent poets of British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism whose poems adequately mirrored exquisite wild beauty and focused on the “wilderness experience, founded in a romantic conception of the redeeming and educative possibilities of epiphany in nature” (Garrard, “Problems and Prospects” 234). In contrast to the first wave, which highlighted the representations of scenic beauty of the natural world in the poetry of prominent nature poets, the second wave of ecocriticism addresses environmental disasters afflicting nature and its inhabitants. The scope of ecocriticism was redefined in the second wave to include cities, too.

Rather than investigating representations of dense and beautiful forests and the infinite wilderness in literature, the second wave of ecocriticism focuses on the depiction of deforestation, massive animal hunting, air and water contamination, and urban pollution. As Greg Garrard contends, the second wave of ecocriticism represents “a dramatic broadening of the ecocritical canon to include urban literature, nonliterary cultural forms, ethnic American literatures and most recently postcolonial writing” (“Problems and Prospects” 237). Hence, instead of foregrounding the reverence for nature, the second wave of ecocriticism mourns the loss of green pastures and massive ancient trees, and depicts environmental contamination in urban settings. Likewise, this paper addresses the representations of environmental catastrophes induced by the detrimental measures taken by human beings in the natural world in *Barkskins*, a long saga in which the narrator regrets the loss of a bountiful paradise.

Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism in *Barkskins*

1. The Drastic Decline of the Beaver Population

The expansion of French imperialism in North America that commenced at the dawn of the seventeenth century led to the establishment of various permanent settlements in a vast area later known as New France. The devel-

opment of French colonialism in North America largely depended on the fur trade, which turned out to be the most lucrative enterprise for French traders and settlers. The fur trade accounted for one-fourth of the wealth acquired by French settlers in New France, and in this enterprise, the over-exploitation of the beaver had a pivotal role, for the bulk of fur pelts were procured from the beaver: "Of 1,548,588 livres worth of furs exported in 1754, beaver accounted for 505,319 livres or one-third the value. Among some of the other skins were 293,658 livres in buckskins, 182,324 livres in marten, 176, 477 livres in wildcat, and 130,145 livres in bearskins" (Nester 66). As the French empire depended on the implementation of the fur trade in New France, thousands of French merchants aggressively traded with Native Americans. As a result, the population of fur-bearing animals, particularly the beaver, significantly diminished during the fur trade. *Barkskins* is an exquisite portrayal of the fur trade and deforestation in North America, following the onset of French imperialism on the North American continent. The novel opens with the arrival of René Sel and Charles Duquet, two French settlers who came to New France as indentured laborers. They have to work three years for Monsieur Trépagny, a wealthy French settler involved in the logging industry. The fur trade in *Barkskins* revolves around Charles Duquet, who manages to run away from Trépagny in order to become a fur merchant.

Proulx clearly indicates that Duquet goes from rags to riches, anglicizing his last name to Duke in the process, through his exploitation of Native Americans and the excessive harvest of the beaver in New France. In contrast to the indigenous characters, whose biocentric perspective towards the natural world dissuades them from inflicting detrimental damage on nature and the dwellers of the biotic communities in which they live, Duquet never hesitates to over-exploit the untrammelled natural resources to amass wealth. More precisely, the anthropocentric assumption of the lordship of mankind in the universe to which Duquet adheres justifies his over-exploitation. Hence, although he comes to the New World as an indigent indentured laborer, Duquet manages to rise from rags to riches overnight by swindling Native Americans out of their fur pelts:

He began to barter privately for furs, offering a drink or two of cheap rum to the naïve 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, 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. (Proulx 57)

Barkskins could indeed be considered as a denunciation of the adverse outcomes of the dominance of 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. These detrimental, materialistic interventions indicate that French settlers oppose the “ecocentric ethic that says nature deserves moral consideration because nature has intrinsic value” (Kortenkamp and Moore 1). Refusing to endorse the species egalitarianism advocated by environmentalists, the majority of European immigrants did not attribute intrinsic value to non-human living beings, for they held the anthropocentric assumption of man’s superiority over non-human living beings.

The distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism is of pivotal concern for ecocritics. Anthropocentrism asserts the idea of man’s supreme status as the lord of creation. As the antithesis of biocentrism, anthropocentrism is a human-centered concept that distinguishes the man as the sole living being bearing intrinsic value, “the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things” (Steiner 1), a “system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 183). It stems from Semitic religions and the philosophy of rationalism. Semitic religions exalted man as a semidivine being, which has always been a justification for man’s deprivations in nature, as “standing in close proximity to the gods gives human beings license to exercise lordship over animals and other created beings” (Steiner 1). The ruthless engagement of Duquet and other French settlers in *Barkskins*, which eventually decimates the beaver population in New France, is thus an embodiment of the idea of man’s superiority over other creatures endorsed by the anthropocentric assumptions of Semitic religions.

As Christians who have invaded the territory of pagans, the French settlers resort to the Bible to justify their unfair treatment of nature and its inhabitants. They maintain that God has created the world for human beings to plunder its infinite resources. Joab Hitchbone, an old French trader, reminds his peers that, as the peak of creation, man has the right to exploit the bountiful resources of nature:

Better you remember your Bible: And God said replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and every living

thing that moveth, and every green tree and herb. Of course, here in New England there is such bounty of every wild resource that there is no limit to the assets, whether fish or furs or land or forests. (Proulx 163)

Hitchbone's assertion is rooted in the anthropocentric assumptions that Christian settlers brought to North America, which confirms the belief of a number of critics, including Lynn T. White Jr. (1967), who have argued that the current environmental degradation has not been induced solely by industrial revolution and the consequent technological advancements that enabled human beings to exploit nature. Rather, they assert that Semitic religions have also been an influential factor in the impacts our race has had on the natural world.

White further contends that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and adds that "by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (1205). To emphasize the relationship between religion and our attitudes towards non-human species, White maintains that the anthropocentric assumption that venerates man as the culmination of God's creation advocates and encourages man's aggressive treatment of nature. White remarks that "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" (1205). As the Bible maintains that all edible things have been created for humanity, the over-exploitation of non-human beings by our race is rooted in the teachings of Christianity.

The second viewpoint buttressing anthropocentrism has been the philosophy of rationalism. Emphasizing the idea of body-mind dualism, René Descartes argued that the mind would be the sole bearer of intrinsic values. He asserted that neither nature nor its non-human inhabitants could be intrinsically valuable. According to Descartes, "not only the brutes have less reason than man, but . . . they have none at all" (23). As a distinguished philosopher whose theories contributed significantly to the development of rationalism, Descartes holds that since man is the sole living being endowed with the faculty of reason and capable of having rational judgement, human beings deserve to be seen as the peak of creation. The ultimate consequence of the promulgation of rationalism was the intensification of the duality between man and nature. This perspective reinforced anthropocentrism and exacerbated its impacts on nature, which was considered as a lifeless machine at the disposal of man to serve his materialistic

interests. Neither nature nor its nonhuman living beings were worthy of moral consideration in the age of reason.

Val Plumwood, a prominent environmental philosopher, asserts that anthropocentrism is rooted in the reason-centered culture that has shaped the attitude of man towards the natural world. She further maintains that environmental crises necessitate the endorsement of a culture that does not rely on rationalism, for this perspective interiorizes and manipulates nature. Plumwood also notes that rationalism created the “ideals of culture and human identity that promote human distance from, control of, and ruthlessness towards the sphere of nature as the Other, while minimizing non-human claims to the earth and to elements of mind, reason, and ethical consideration” (4). The advocacy of rationalism, which is still a significant determinant of man’s hostile treatment of nature, could not be sustained anymore because the “culture of reason” severely endangers non-human species. Contending that environmental catastrophes are rooted in the rationalistic cult of reason, Plumwood asserts that “the ecological crisis we face then is both a crisis of the dominant culture and a crisis of reason, or rather, a crisis of the culture of reason or of what the dominant global culture has made of reason” (5) and ultimately denounces the exponents of the anthropocentric outlook who justify the over-exploitation of the natural world by human beings.

The over-harvest of beavers in *Barkskins* could indeed be a representation of the anthropocentric perspective upheld by proponents of rationalism that justifies and approves the deleterious measures taken by man in the natural world. This anthropocentric perspective denies the beavers’ right of survival in that the beaver could not have intrinsic values. Likewise, fur merchants, who find the beaver the instrument upon which their financial achievements rest, relentlessly and ruthlessly harvest this animal by hiring Native Americans to hunt beavers: “Auguste shot a swimming beaver, then dived into the water to retrieve it and his arrow. Before he was back onshore another beaver came up out of the depths and Kuntaw shot it” (Proulx 148). Thus, the myriads of beavers are trapped and killed during the fur trade every year to export their pelts to Europe.

Ecocritics further contend that there is no good reason to exalt man as a species to stand at the apex of creation, that anthropocentrism has been the most deleterious factor inducing environmental degradation, and that anthropocentrism “is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human ani-

mals” (Boddice 2). Moreover, “in assuming a natural prioritization of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale” (Huggan and Tiffin 6). According to Huggan and Tiffin, as anthropocentrism is a totally human-centered mindset, its endorsement implies that non-human beings are means to human ends and instruments of man’s will harnessed for meeting humans’ ends. In Proulx’s *Barkskins*, the beaver is thus the instrument to be utilized for the accomplishment of man’s materialistic enterprises. Prior to the onset of the fur trade, the beaver abundant in North America. Bruce Baker and Edward P. Hill remark that the beaver population of North America before European colonization was close to 400 million (288). Nonetheless, the development of the fur trade that solidified and expanded French settlements drastically diminished the beaver population, which is reflected in *Barkskins* as well: “the beavers were greatly reduced in number so severely had they been taken, for their skins could be turned into guns and metal pots. Yes, the beaver had become a kind of whiteman money” (Proulx 135). Remaining indifferent to the right of the beaver to survive, French settlers inhabiting the anthropocentric world of New France heedlessly pursue the fur trade, which all but eradicates the species.

2. The Massive Deforestation in *Barkskins*

Wilderness, understood as a vast area where the environment and its flora and fauna have remained untrammelled and intact, immune from the harmful interventions of human beings, has recently drawn the attention of ecocritical studies, particularly in the critical works on the representations of wilderness in American literature. In Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*, French and British settlers, whose perceptions of North American forests correspond to the idea of wilderness, find themselves in vast areas of land teeming with wild animals that have not been subjected to the will of domesticators. This occurs because the bulk of forests remained untouched in the pre-Columbian era, prior to the onset of European settlement in North America. When the stream of European settlers came to the New World with the hope of economic progress, they perceived it as a vast area of disordered land to be conquered and subdued. Rather than considering the wilderness as a pristine area far from the depredations of human beings, European colonists denigrated the wild nature and endeavored to alter the natural order of wild species. This points out the change in the settlers’

mindset as well: even though “wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good – it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself” (Cronon 9). The idea of the darkness and evil of the wilderness, however, is emphasized in the novel when René, observing meadows in the vicinity of the trees he is cutting, remarks that it would be easier for Trépagny to build his mansion in the meadow they have passed rather than constructing it in the forest that has to be cleared. Trépagny’s response confirms the aforementioned argument: “Easier? Yes, easier, but we are here to clear the forest, to subdue this evil wilderness” (Proulx 21).

The novel further addresses the belief in the boundless natural resources of the New World as one of the main reasons for European colonization. The idea of the infinitude of land and bountifulness of non-human species was widely propagated by European colonizers and those authors who endorsed colonial policies. The image of infinitude is raised by Monsieur Trépagny when he, referring to the forest he wants to clear, remarks that “it is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has ever seen its farthest dimension” (Proulx 13). René and Charles, Trépagny’s indentured servants, are also astonished by the density of the forest trees: “The young men had never imagined country so wild and wet, so thickly wooded” (Proulx 14) and, inspired by their master, consider the wilderness as evil: “Mud, rain, biting insects and the odor of willows made the first impression of New France. The second impression was of dark vast forest, inimical wilderness” (Proulx 12).

Trépagny orders his laborers to clear the forest without any regard for the environmental and ecological consequences of his rapacity. The forest fills with the sound of axes from dawn to dusk as lumberjacks, whom Proulx calls barkskins, relentlessly cut ancient trees. As René cuts the trees, “the wildness of the world receded, the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animals, trees to flesh and bones to grass shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped” (Proulx 18). Barkskins who came to New France never found themselves morally obliged to preserve the land that provided them with whatever they needed to sustain themselves; they “made no compromise with nature . . . [as] their livelihood depended on clearing the forests or breaking the prairie sod, not on preserving the wilderness” – they “came to subdue,

not to preserve” (Billington 41).¹ Proulx also frequently refers to the immensity and richness of the forest, which is eventually destroyed by the descendants of Charles Duquet and René Sel. The long line of characters, whose lives are briefly dealt with in the long family saga written by Proulx, overexploit the dark forests of New France and its indigenous subjects to make their fortunes. They establish various logging companies, including Duke and Sons, which is managed by Duquet’s children, to process the timber procured from the forest. Their lucrative enterprise results in large-scale deforestation in North America.

The unstoppable expansion of European colonialism is in Proulx’s novel depicted by “the sound of distant and near chopping [that] annoyed woodpeckers who imagined rivals, then, feeling outnumbered, fled to wilder parts. The trees groaned and fell, men planted maize between the stumps. The deer and moose retreated, the wolves followed them north” (51). Millions of acres of land were consequently cleared for the cultivation of crops, for every year, thousands of new settlers arrived in the New World. The prospect of a subdued wilderness raised by Trépagny at the beginning of *Barkskins* has thus been fulfilled at the end of the novel.

3. Biocentrism in *Barkskins*

Even though biocentrism is a critical concept raised by ecocritics, the denunciation of anthropocentric assumptions, which finally led to the prevalence of biocentrism, had already commenced after World War II. One of the pioneers of biocentrism is Robert Livingston Schuyler, who in his paper “Man’s Great Illusion” (1948), denounces the widespread endorsement of anthropocentrism and contends that the idea of man being the center of the universe is an illusion induced by vanity. By claiming that “we can, of course, no longer believe, as our forebears believed up to some ten generations ago, that we are, literally, at the center of the physical universe” (Schuyler 47), he argues that the advocacy of anthropocentrism has been an influential factor in the disruption of the balanced relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Advocates of biocentrism maintain that all living beings in the biosphere are equally valuable. Denouncing the utilitarian attitudes of anthropocentrists towards nature, biocentrists assert that all living beings are intrinsically valua-

¹ The worldview of the ruthless French settlers in *Barkskins* is compatible with the prevailing mode of literary texts in the eighteenth century in which wilderness represented chaos and disorder.

ble regardless of their utility for the well-being of human beings and that man is morally obliged to refrain from inflicting deleterious damage on nature and its inhabitants. They further argue that, rather than being instruments to be utilized for the accomplishment of man's well-being, non-human living beings are intrinsically valuable entities with the right to survive. The preservation of ecosystems and their inhabitants, they maintain, is indeed an end in itself, and the realization of the good and well-being of all living beings is intrinsically valuable.

In Proulx's *Barkskins*, the biocentric perspective is introduced through indigenous North Americans who live in harmony with nature. Apart from a few unknown natives who become engaged in the fur trade to acquire European goods, the majority of Native Americans refrain from damaging the environment in *Barkskins*. Since they do not find themselves separate from nature, Native Americans never over-exploit the pristine environment and its virginal resources. The attitude of indigenous peoples towards nature and its living beings is best described by Paul W. Taylor's argument that "according to the principle of moral consideration, wild living things are deserving of the concern and consideration of all moral agents simply in virtue of their being members of the Earth's community of life" (201). Rather than maintaining an anthropocentric perspective towards the natural world that considers natural resources as commodities to be sold, Native Americans procure merely their essential necessities from nature.

One of the instances of Native American biocentrism in the novel can be found in Trépagny's comment that Native Americans use plants as herbal medicines: "Of course, Monsieur Trépagny had sneered, as though describing a vicious fault, 'all the Indians are physicians and apothecaries. They alone know the secret virtues of many plants. Have you never heard how they cured de Champlain's crew, dying of *scorbut*, with a broth of hemlock needles?'" (Proulx 30). Even though Trépagny stresses that indigenous North Americans know the secrets of healing people with herbal medicines, his statement is hostile and derisive because Native Americans oppose the deforestation carried out by him and other French settlers. Since Trépagny's outlook towards the environment is determined by materialistic values, he does not tolerate any perspective that imposes limitations on the massive deforestation and the logging industry from which he makes his fortune. Native Americans, on the other hand, revere the environment that shelters them and provides them with food, clothes, and other

necessities as they believe they are part of nature. Thus, both their mindset and their subsistence activities are biocentric:

They stood opposed on 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, 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. But that, thought René, was woman’s talk. (Proulx 46)

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. In contrast to René and other settlers, Mari, whom they call a *sauvage*, laments the loss of ancient trees. Her lamentation is based on the Native American belief that “all life exists in an intricate system of interdependence, so that the universe exists in a dynamic state of harmony and balance” (Portman and Garrett 457–58). This balance could refer to a state wherein Native Americans maintain their harmony with a world in which they consider themselves only individual members of a particular species that is not superior to other forms of creation. Another example of Native American biocentrism is present in the scene in which Ahorangi Mahorioval, a Native American woman, urges Lavinia, a white American, to refrain from chopping ancient trees: “My husband says you are an important lady who owns a timber company and that you come here to look at the trees with a thought to cut them. I hope you will love our trees and not cut them. They are our lives. To live happily in this place we need the trees. I am afraid for them. You will not cut them, please?” (Proulx 414). Ahorangi’s reverence for all forms of life thus mirrors Taylor’s view that “the duties owed to wild organisms, species populations, and communities of life in the Earth’s natural ecosystems are grounded on their inherent worth” (5). Highlighting man’s moral obligation to revere all forms of life, Taylor argues that we are obliged to refrain from damaging non-human species because they are living entities. This biocentric assumption is further emphasized by Greg Garrard, who argues that “the metaphysical argument for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our attitudes and behavior towards nature” (*Ecocriticism* 176). More specifically, the rights and needs of human beings should not

be prioritized against the requirements of non-human species, for biocentrism advocates species egalitarianism.

This is exactly what is felt, believed, and lived by Native Americans. Their tendency to preserve the ecological balance in the natural world and to promote a reciprocal relationship with the natural world stemmed from their cultural heritage, which was fundamentally inconsistent with the anthropocentric culture of the whites. “Their reciprocal relationships with nature permeated every aspect of life from spirituality to making a living and led to a different way of seeing the world, what they might call a more environmental way of seeing the world” (Booth 329). *Barkskins*'s portrayal of Native Americans is grounded in this viewpoint as well:

One of the most curious of their attributes is their manner of regarding Trees, Plants, all manner of Fish, the Moose and the Bear and others as their Equals. Many of their tales tell of Women who marry Otters or Birds, or Men who change into Bears until it pleases them to become Men again. In the forest they speak to Toads and Beetles as acquaintances. Sometimes I feel it is they who are teaching me . . .

To them Trees are Persons. In vain I tell them that Trees are for the uses of Men to build Houses and Ships. (Proulx 121)

The aforementioned quote comes from a letter written by Père Crème to Marguerite, his imaginary sister. In his letters, Père Crème reflects on the Native American belief that a human is just a component of nature equal to other beings and not the owner of the land who is there to manipulate and reshape it to serve his interests. Their outlook on life is biocentric, as it asserts that all living beings are intrinsically valuable rather than being the instruments to be utilized in the economic enterprises of human beings. Armenius Breitsprecher is another European settler in *Barkskins* who confirms the biocentric perspective of indigenous Americans towards the environment and its non-human inhabitants. Breitsprecher describes Native Americans as “better managers of the forest than these settlers. They were very good observers of water, weather, all animals and growing things. And they forbore to cut lavishly. They used many parts of many trees for different tools and medicine” (Proulx 345). In contrast to European settlers, Native Americans refrain from inflicting severe damage on living beings as they make no attempt to disturb the ecological integrity of the natural world in *Barkskins*, for they do not rely on nature as a source of income.

Conclusion

Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* reflects on the detrimental consequences of European anthropocentrism on the North American beaver population and the natural world. In the novel, there is a striking distinction between the attitudes of Native Americans and European settlers toward nature as Proulx shows that the dominance of anthropocentric premises in New France, as a colonial settlement built on the fur trade, resulted in the massive diminution of the beaver population. Monsieur Trépany, Charles Duquet, and their descendants over-exploit the natural resources to amass a fortune, in that they do not hold that non-human living beings have intrinsic value. Native Americans, on the other hand, hold a sustained-base perspective towards the natural world, for they consider themselves part of it rather than its master. In contrast to the European settlers, who relentlessly hunt beaver and cut the forest, the indigenous North Americans do not rely on nature and its inhabitants as a treasure to be utilized for making their fortunes. Hence, the anthropocentric assumption of man's unique state is indirectly refused by the majority of Native Americans, whose treatment of the natural world could be considered as an endorsement of biocentrism.

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ZAGOVARATELJI ANTROPOCENTRIZMA I BIOCENTRIZMA U ROMANU *BARKSKINS* ANNIE PROULX

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Trgovina krznom i šumarska industrija, kao temelj francuskog imperijalizma u Sjevernoj Americi, doveli su do drastičnog iscrpljivanja populacije krznenih životinja, posebno dabrova, te masovnog krčenja šuma na kontinentu. Analizirajući roman *Barkskins* Annie Proulx s ekokritičkog stajališta, ovaj članak želi istražiti romaneskne prikaze štetnog utjecaja antropocentrizma. Pokazat ćemo da je prevladavanje antropocentrizma u Novoj Francuskoj rezultiralo prevelikim izlovom dabrova radi kvalitetnog krzna za europska tržišta, gdje je krznena odjeća bila u modi tijekom 17. i 18. stoljeća. U ovom su scenariju iz „uboštva“ do bogatstva, francuski trgovci ostvarili bogatstva po cijenu života mnogih dabrova. Naša će se studija također baviti neizravnom afirmacijom biocentrizma među sjevernoameričkim starosjediocima, koji su se suzdržali od nanošenja nepopravljive štete prirodi za razliku od europskih doseljenika koji su na golemom teritoriju nemilosrdno sjekli drevna stabla kako bi stekli bogatstvo. Prema tome, fokus je ovoga članka različito gledanje na prirodni svijet francuskih doseljenika i Indijanaca u romanu *Barkskins*.

Ključne riječi: Annie Proulx, *Barkskins*, ekokritika, antropocentrizam, biocentrizam, dabrovi, krčenje šuma