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Expressions of Ecocriticism in George Stewart's *Earth Abides*

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The seeds of the Science Fiction had been planted before thousands of years, when the human species began dreaming of the great unknown. Science Fiction is a kind of speculative fiction with its feet on the base of scientific truths. The law of probability helps the writers in narrating the future events. This 'what happens if …' approach is basic to most Science Fiction. H. Harrison says:

> Science fiction, like science will admit that the future exists. And, it will do an even more important thing; it will admit that there is change. And, a final thing it will do is to admit that you can change. And that is what research is about, that is what scientific thinking is about, and this is what science fiction is about. (78)

As Isaac Asimov states Science Fiction is nothing but "escape into reality." In the last few years' education, social structure, political power, religious faiths and moral attitudes have changed enormously. Science Fiction is called the literature of change. Arthur C. Clarke, in his, 'Kalinga Award Speech' gave a systematic exposition of the idea on Science Fiction as:

> The science fiction writer, by mapping out possible futures as well as a good many possible ones … encourages in his reader's flexibility of mind, readiness to accept and even welcome change in one word, adaptability. The dinosaurs

> disappeared because they could not adapt to the changing environment. We shall disappear if we cannot adept to an environment which now contains spaceships and thermonuclear weapons. (164)

The 1950s was a time in which disaster and population came to terms with their loss of property, and losing of loved ones. Science Fiction of this era in Britain reflected disaster and devastation caused by ecological imbalance which results in drought and famine. During this period no one wanted to read about heroic stories of super science world or space explorations. Instead of superheroes, there came heroes of middle class who attempt to find themselves way for survival in normal conditions.

As an ecocritical study of a Science Fiction novel, this article examines Stewart's *Earth Abides* as a novel that inculcates interest in energizing what Aldo Leopold has called in his work *A Sand County Almanac*, "the ecological conscience" (173). He says, "Obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of social conscience from people to land" (174).

Science Fiction deals with how scientific discovery and technological advancement affect the lives of humanity and the world which we live. The same 'What if' motif is seen in George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* which has been written in the year 1949, four years after the end of World War II and in the earliest stages of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the book of Genesis God made a covenant with Noah that God would never again destroy all life by a flood. *Earth Abides* is a post-apocalyptic tale set into motion when 'a kind of super-measles' wipes out a majority of the world's human population. Stewart's main character is Isherwood Williams whose tale takes place as he adapts to a world affected by the Catastrophe, which wipes out a significant portion of the

population. He is a survivor of the virus and former graduate student whose thesis, *The Ecology of the Black Creek Area*, explores "the relationships, past and present, of men and plants and animals" (4) in a region near San Francisco. His story begins when he is bitten by a rattlesnake after finding an old miner's hammer, but manages to survive the bite and accompanying infection. The belief that "everything is connected to everything else" (Walker 43) underlies Stewart's work of fiction. Man is no longer the master of the universe but part of the ecosystem. They are not excluded from the natural law.

Central to early environmentalist Aldo Leopold's thinking, the ecological conscience leads individuals, institutions, and societies to understand human existence as a part of ecosystemic integrity, rather than apart from it and to behave accordingly. The concept of the ecological conscience begs attention not to the moral principles of any organized religion but instead to the insights of spirituality, particularly of Earth-based spirituality and its ecological politics of interconnectedness.

Stewart's narrator writes,

> *As for man, there is little reason to think that he can in the long run escape the fate of other creatures, and if there is a biological law of flux and reflux, his situation is now a highly perilous one. During ten thousand years his numbers have been on the upgrade in spite of wars, pestilences, and famines. This increase in population has become more and more rapid. Biologically, man has for too long a time been rolling an uninterrupted run of sevens*. (8)

There is a biological control on the population as mentioned in the novel. On the title page, Stewart quotes, "Men go and come, but earth abides" (Ecclesiastes 1:4). Ish theorizes why ants have nearly disappeared in the desolate San Francisco area after a brief population

boom: "When any creature reached such climactic numbers and attained such high concentration, a nemesis was likely to fall upon it" (83). Humans have no privilege and are not immune to nature's means of population control. Stewart writes,

> When anything gets too numerous it's likely to get hit by some plague- I mean- "(Something had suddenly exploded in [Ish's] mind at the word.) He coughed to cover up his hesitation, and then went on, without making a point of it. 'Yes, some plague is likely to hit them.'" (106)

When man realizes that he is bound to the natural law, he pays least attention to the law and order system. One of the characters in the novel comments, "What law?" (237). Stewart's narrative of Ish's emerging Californian community is largely an exploration of the ease with which humans lived prior to the super-measles outbreak and the difficulty the survivors have in adjusting to life without the aid of technology. The community's disconnection from their essential animality, in fact, manifests itself when later one character asks, "Where did all this water come from anyway?" (159) about the San Francisco water supply, prompting the narrator to reflect,

> It was curious. Here they had been for twenty-one years merely using water that continued to flow, and yet they had never given any real consideration to where the water came from. It had been a gift from the past, as free as air, like the cans of beans and bottles of catsup that could be had just by walking into a store and taking them from the shelves. (159)

Stewart draws attention to the collapse of certain human symbolic constructs initiated by the re-emerging primacy of wilderness. Regarding domesticated dogs, in the post-apocalyptic world "*[n]ow no longer would Best-of-Breed go for stance, and shape of head,*

and markings. Now Champion Golden Lad of the Piedmont IV no longer outranked the worst mongrel of the alley" (25). Instead, "*The prize, which was life itself, would go to the one of keenest brain, staunchest limb, and strongest jaw, who could best shape himself to meet the new ways and who in the old competition of the wilderness could win the means of life*" (25). Further, those species off lora previously known as weeds for their undesirable presence in cultivated lawns and gardens "*pressed in to destroy the pampered nurslings of man*" (40) in both a very real and symbolic undermining of artificially constructed meanings. Finally, automobiles - "*the pride and symbol of civilization*" (100)—deteriorate as natural entropic processes break down their batteries and tires while they sit neglected.

To act on the ecological conscience is to behave in a way that maintains just relationships among people but also extends such moral status of the individual "from people to land" (Leopold 174). Leopold says, "A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (171). He criticizes the tendency of the modern man to view the land through the lens of economic gain.

Eco-criticism acknowledges the detachment from the natural world in its critique of an anthropocentric world view and pushes forth with its bio-centric approach to bridge this gap. Ish's community who call themselves the Tribe try to bridge the gap. And over the next few years, they grow in number as the women in the group have children. The comforts of civilization diminishes as the electricity fails. As the children grow, Ish tries to instill basic academics by teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography, but he is largely unsuccessful due to a lack of interest by the others. They have bows, arrows, and primary tools. This, then, is the point from which humanity will have to make its fresh start.

They perceive its dependence on the land and essential obedience to natural forces, thus its symbolic tendencies develop away from the type of human/nature binaries that Christianity encourages. Instead, one year becomes "Year of the Fires," (Stewart 120) another becomes "Year of the Bulls," (Stewart 123) another becomes "Year of the Lions," (Stewart 125) and still another becomes "Year of the Earthquake" (Stewart134). In these cases and in several others, Ish and Emma's emerging society names its social history for events in natural history, using its symbolic capacities to recognize the role of the natural world in human social existence. Stewart writes,

> In the times of civilization men had really felt themselves as the masters of creation. Everything had been good or bad in relation to man. So you killed rattle snakes. But now nature had become so overwhelming that any attempt at its control was merely outside anyone's circle of thought. You lived as part of it, not as its dominating power. (281)

Isherwood's attitude is that instead of pining for the civilization they once had; he focuses his effort and hope on finding new things they can learn that will improve their lives. For example, he teaches the younger Tribe members how to craft bows and arrows, and how to start a fire without relying on matches. After four generations, the Tribe members are skilled in both of these and rely less and less on what they can scavenge from stores. Ultimately, Isherwood stops dreaming of the civilization he had because he has the companionship he needs, and together, the Tribe adapts to not only survive, but to thrive. The younger generation adapts easily to the more traditional world. They become more superstitious Ish's hammer is treated as a symbol of his status.

In the last part the reader finds Ish spends most of his elderly life in a fog, unaware of the world. His grandson Jack shows him that the bow and arrow have become more reliable than the gun, whose cartridges may not always work. He hopes the new world may not make mistakes. Stewart writes, "Then though his sight was now very dim, he looked again at the young men. 'They will commit me to the earth', he thought. Yet I also commit them to the earth. There is nothing else by which men live. *Men go and come, but earth abides*" (312).

The songs of the Vedic rishis express a deep sense of communion with God. They say nature is to be understood as a friend, revered as a mother, obeyed as a father and nurtured as a beloved child. Together with Ish the readers realize the necessity to be one with an ecological conscience and lives not to subdue natural processes but to integrate itself into the nature.

Science Fiction is frequently set in future and has often been called "futuristic fiction." As Murphy notes, "extrapolation emphasizes that the present and the future are interconnected—what we do now will be reflected in the future" ("The Non-Alibi" 263). In this regard, the subjects of science fiction stories, their socio-political settings, their technologies, their utopian or dystopian visions, their ecologies, or in short, their spaces are more about the now than about the future or an alternative present.

Gunn says, "SF[1] exists in a world of change, and the focus is on external events: What is the change and how are humans (or aliens) going to respond to it?" (86). As a perfect Science Fiction novel Stewart's *Earth Abides* stretches the imagination of the readers and serves as a means of education. Ish and his community are the best examples to prove the urge of humanity to overcome the negative factors. By actively engaged in an ecological

work, that instill the readers with an ecological conscience, there is a call for a change from anthropocentric to bio centric view.

[1] Science Fiction is known as SF. In the given reference, Gunn calls it as SF.

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