

A Study on the Alienation of Annie Proulx's Barkskins from the Perspective of Eco-Marxism

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Abstract

Barkskins, Written by Annie Proulx, deeply reveals the ecological crisis in the course of capitalist industrialization. Based on Eco-Marxism Criticism, this paper discusses the alienation caused by the capitalist social mechanism in the novel. It argues that capitalists utilize the capitalist of technology using and ecological imperialism to alienate nature into a tool of capital appreciation. The consumption and human nature alienation of capitalist social values make individuals lose their subjectivity and moral value. This paper analyzes the internal relationship between ecological crisis and social crisis under the capitalist system. It holds that sustainable development could be realized only by going beyond the logic of capital and reconstructing the relationship between man, nature and society.

Keywords

Barkskins; Eco-Marxism; Alienation

1. Introduction

As a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and the National Book Award, Annie Proulx is known for her complex characterization and natural environment depiction. Throughout her literary career, Proulx has explored themes such as the natural environment, family history, and criticism of capitalism. By advancing the development of ecological literature and highlighting marginalized social figures, she has opened up new horizons for contemporary American literature. Barkskins is her latest novel, published after a fourteen-year hiatus from the literary scene. Set against the backdrop of North American and New Zealand rainforest from the late 17th century to the early 21st century, the novel recounts the rise and fall of the French Sel and Duke families over three centuries. Two young Frenchmen, René Sel and Charles Duke (formerly known as Charles Dique), leave their hometown to seek their fortunes in the Canadian forests. René marries a Mi'kmaq Indian woman named Mahi and gradually integrates into the indigenous culture. Charles builds a

vast timber empire through logging and commercial expansion. The descendants of these two families subsequently experience a series of migration, conflict, integration, and decline amid historical waves such as forest development, colonial expansion, and the Industrial Revolution, ultimately reflecting on the relationship between humanity and nature in the face of an ecological crisis.

Since its publication in 2016 and introduction to China in 2020, *Barkskins* has been studied by academics from multiple perspectives, including ecological criticism, identity recognition, and animal writing. Foreign scholars have closely followed the publication of Proulx's novels and conducted dynamic research, demonstrating a trend toward diversification in research perspectives and producing relatively abundant research results. Amanolahi Baharvand and Bakhtiar Sadjadi (2020) played particular emphasis on the differences in worldviews between French settlers and Indigenous people regarding nature. Nolé Leonardo (2020) focused on analyzing the interaction between humans and forests in *Barkskins*, revealing the impact of individuals and social institutions on the global environmental crisis. Ida Olsen (2021) used comparative analysis to contrast *Barkskins* with *Ender's Game* of Orson Scott Card, arguing that both authors aim to raise readers' awareness of environmental conservation. Timothy Fosbury, drawing on postcolonial theory, conducts a critical analysis and examination of colonial rule and ecological destruction under the capitalist system. In contrast, domestic academic research on *Barkskins* has begun relatively late. Li Chao (2021) analyzes the novel based on narrative techniques and themes, concluding that so-called correction is the insight humanity gains from confronting nature. Wang Yuxin (2022) employs literary ethics criticism to conduct textual research, summarizing the animal issues and ecological ethics expressed in the novel. Yang Tianshou (2023) adopts an environmental justice ecological criticism perspective and explores the ecological value and practical significance contained in Anne Proulx's work. Based on the research findings of the above scholars, ecological criticism is a hot topic among domestic and international scholars studying. However, there are still scholars who study the novel from the perspective of ecological Marxist criticism. It is a fact that *Barkskins* profoundly reveals the destruction of the natural environment by the capitalist mode of production and the alienation of humanity under the capitalist system, which is consistent with the core view of ecological Marxist criticism. Ecological Marxism inherits and develops Marxist alienation theory and the Frankfurt School's perspectives. Alienation refers to the process by which things negate themselves in their self-development. Given the facts above, this paper aims to explore the alienation of nature and non-nature under the capitalist mode of production and system from an ecological Marxism critical perspective.

2. Capitalist Mode of Production and Natural Alienation

The Marxist view of ecology holds that nature is the material foundation for human

survival and development, and that humans depend on nature for resources to sustain life and social production. The Marxist view of ecology emphasizes the wholeness and systematicness of nature, viewing the natural world as an interconnected organic whole. Human activities not only affect nature locally, but also have a chain reaction effect on the entire ecosystem.

2.1. Capitalistic Technology Using and Predatory Forest Exploitation

Herbert Marcuse (1991) criticized the bourgeoisie's technological rationality in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* for intensifying the dual exploitation and oppression of workers and nature, destroying the ecological environment, alienating the relationship between humans and nature, and leading to the capitalist ecological crisis. The capitalist of technology using has caused severe damage to the natural environment. In *Barkskins*, "Before he saw it, he had already felt the clanging of metal from the sawmill through his feet, the screeching sounds of the drive shaft gears and steering arms, transmitting a rhythmic hammering into the ground. Now it was spring, and soon the entire forest would echo with the noise of sawmills, as the rivers flowed smoothly once more. His eyes were troubled by sparks from branches and needles." "Building a 74-gun warship required fifty acres of oak, so along the broad-leaf forest belt of the New France rivers, trees began to fall due to Dique's ambitions." Proulx's description of the noise of the sawmill, the changing seasons, visual disturbances, and the protagonist's ambition all point to a common theme of destruction. This description vividly and intuitively reflects the destructive impact of the capitalist of technology using on the forest, as if the desolation of forest were right before reader's eyes.

From the perspective of the capitalist mode of production, ecological Marxist theorists argue that scientific and technological innovation and iteration further exacerbate the ecological crisis. First of all, scientific research itself is inherently purposeful which leads to science itself having its own inherent direction. Marcuse pointed out that society not only reproduces itself within a technicist complex of things but also relationships that include the technical exploitation of humans. Even if there is no predefined practical purpose, there still are a general direction inherent in the application of science within pure science. In other words, scientific and technological innovations and their applications are inevitably applied to social life and production practices, which must bear the side effects of their practical application. Secondly, the root of the ecological crisis does not lie in technology itself or its applications, but is rooted in the inherent logic of capitalism's endless pursuit of wealth under the capitalist mode of production. To maximize wealth accumulation and capital expansion, capitalist production does not confine its activities to the production of goods to meet basic human needs or the necessary infrastructure for social development. Instead, the infinite proliferation of profits has become its fundamental purpose, while the form and actual utility of products have receded to a

secondary position. Therefore, technological progress and innovation cannot resolve the ecological crisis but instead further exacerbate the exploitation of the natural environment. As Annie Proulx describes in the text, the logging activities and commodified production serve as evidence of the practicality and authority of Marcuse's theory, which posits that the capitalist of technology using under the capitalist mode of production has led to the commodification and predatory development of virgin forests, thereby intensifying the alienation of the natural environment.

2.2. Ecological Imperialism and Ecological Crisis

The concept of ecological imperialism was first proposed by Crosby(1986) , referring to the biological expansion of European colonizers, who introduced plants, animals, and diseases to their colonies, causing severe damage to local ecosystems. The text describes the spread of disease and species invasion as follows. "Mash and other Mi'kmaq were forced onto a French ship and taken to Paris, where most of them died on passage. Mashie contracted smallpox but survived, enduring the long journey across the ocean back to her homeland. However, she brought the disease back with her, and most of her tribe perished." As described by Sossup, outsiders forcibly trafficked Indigenous people while also introducing infectious diseases, leading to a sharp decline in tribal populations. McNeill listed smallpox as one of the diseases of civilization, arguing that the spread of disease from industrialized nations to agricultural societies was the "third weapon in Europe's arsenal, alongside warfare and iron. It not only cause death among Indigenous peoples who had never developed immunity but also destroys the cultural spirit and independence of these primitive tribes.

The influx of European immigrants has also brought new species that threaten the land and ancient cultural traditions upon which Indigenous people depend for survival. "These French Acadian drained many salt marshes to grow salt-tolerant hay for their livestock. Larger game, such as moose, caribou, and bears, have already fled far away. Beaver populations have drastically declined due to severe over-hunting, as their pelts could be traded for guns and metal cans." As capitalist production methods evolved, Foster (2000) argued that ecological imperialism exhibits the following characteristics, "Capitalists transfer large numbers of people and labor through resource extraction and transfer, and exploit the ecological fragility of underdeveloped societies to strengthen imperialist control." New immigrants not only cause biological invasions that disrupt local ecological chains and reduce soil fertility, exacerbating biodiversity loss in economically underdeveloped regions, but the economic model of agricultural commodification also brings ecological destruction to pristine forests, forcing indigenous peoples who rely on traditional communal living to seek alternative livelihoods. The consequences of ecological destruction are that Indigenous peoples cannot survive without European immigrants' commodities and food. In this circumstance, they no longer hunt or make the items they need but

instead become loggers to earn wages for survival. Therefore, the profit-driven nature of the capitalist mode of production, which incorporates natural capital into the capitalist commodity production system, has the primary consequence of further subjecting nature to the logic of commodity exchange. Thus, viewing environmental issues as economic costs not only reinforces the legitimacy of the capitalist production system's unlimited expansion but also inevitably exceeds the Earth of ecological system's limited carrying capacity that ultimately triggers severe ecological crises and environmental alienation.

3. The Capitalist Social System and Non-natural Alienation

Ecological Marxism argues that the capitalist system transforms human social relations and self-worth into tools for capital appreciation through the alienation of consumption and humanity. Non-natural alienation manifests itself in the distortion of humanity by consumerism and the reification of social relations. The capitalist social system binds individual desires and social values through the logic of capital, causing humans to lose their subjectivity in the pursuit of material wealth and fall into a double predicament of spiritual and social alienation. Ecological Marxist scholars' critique of capitalism delves into the realms of social relations and human nature, revealing how capitalism transforms human social relations and self-worth into tools for capital accumulation through the alienation of consumption and human nature. This unnatural alienation manifests itself in the distortion of human nature by consumerism and the reification of social relations. Capitalism binds individual desires to social values through the logic of capital, causing people to gradually lose their agency in the pursuit of material satisfaction and fall into the dual predicament of spiritual emptiness and social alienation. Take modern social media as an example. People seek attention and recognition by showcasing wealth accumulation and consumption capacity. Virtual social interaction partly replaces genuine interpersonal relationships. In the pursuit of likes and attention, individuals unconsciously link their self-worth to their material consumption levels, falling into a cycle of constant comparison and competition. In such circumstances, human agency is weakened, the spiritual world becomes hollow, and social relationships become superficial and utilitarian, reflecting the profound impact of unnatural alienation under the capitalist system. In *Barkskins*, Capitalists represented by the Duke family forced the Indians to submit to this way of life by establishing rules and methods for commodity trading. However, although complying with the capitalists' rules allowed them to survive, their subjectivity was weakened and their spiritual world became hollow.

3.1. Alienation of Consumption

Marx (1975) pointed out in *Capital* that a commodity is an external object, a thing that satisfies human needs through its own attributes. A commodity possesses dual

attributes of use value and value. Commodity production itself originates from humanity's need to satisfy basic survival requirements. However, overproduction in capitalist society leads to extreme consumption. Western Marxist argues that so-called consumption alienation refers, on the one hand, to people using desire rather than basic survival needs as the starting point for consumption, which leads to the loss of their subjectivity and rational spirit in consumption activities. On the other hand, the process of capital accumulation and reinvestment in capitalism requires constant stimulation of consumption, leading to consumption behavior deviating from people's true needs and becoming a forced, alienated form of consumption. Barkskins describes Charles Duke's commercial ambitions as follows. "He will make as much money as possible from fur trading over the next few years, prepare in every aspect, and then switch to timber. He will not abandon the profitable fur trade for now. For the Indians who set traps for hunting. It is a dirty and incomprehensible business, but for white traders who have penetrated the market, it offers high profits." The author use the terms "dirty" and "profitable" in describing the business plan sufficiently illustrates Duke's money-driven nature and disregard for the plight of the Indians. Through generations of the Duke family, capital accumulation and a shift in industrial focus were achieved by exporting animal furs to Europe, showcasing the capitalists' insatiable greed. At its core, it was the distorted demand from Europe's alienated consumer groups for rare animal furs that provided Duke with the opportunity to accumulate wealth.

Marcuse (1991) pointed out that contemporary western developed capitalist societies exhibit significant material abundance, yet they also exhibit profound pathological tendencies in terms of social structure and individual psychology. Firstly, while individuals enjoy material abundance, they endure the pain of alienation on the spiritual level under the capitalist social system. This state of alienation manifests specifically as follows. Individuals' genuine needs are systematically distorted, their agency gradually eroded, and they ultimately become passive entities dominated by the logic of commodities. Secondly, capitalist societies continue to systematically construct and reinforce a consumerist cultural paradigm through their massive ideological propaganda machinery and ubiquitous commercial advertisements. This cultural paradigm not only tightly binds commodity consumption with concepts such as personal happiness and social status but also maintains the continuity of capital accumulation by creating false demand. While the Duke family's employment of the Indians to log timber met their material survival needs, it also subjected them to spiritual alienation and distortion. They were dominated by commodities in their survival, caught between mainstream society and their own half-understood and soon-to-disappear culture. Additionally, illusory consumer demands enslaved the Indians to debt, forcing them to live like slaves in the logging camps. Those who attempted to escape faced horrific punishment, being captured alive and burned to death with rubber ropes. Thus, consumer alienation brought white people luxurious

material enjoyment and abundant wealth accumulation under the capitalist social system, while imposing heavy debt and cultural extinction on the Indians tribes.

3.2. Alienation of Humanity

Marx (1975) pointed out that the human world is fragmented into atomized, mutually antagonistic individual worlds in capitalist society. Individuals are separated from traditional communities and become isolated, mutually antagonistic atoms, with social relations reduced to competition and the exchange of interests. This alienation is not only an inevitable result of the capitalist system but also a significant manifestation of the crisis of modernity. Capitalism, while ushering in industrial society with advanced productive forces, has also exacerbated the alienation of humanity. In terms of the alienation between races, *Barkskins* centers on the forest as a core imagery. The Sel family represents the indigenous culture that coexists with nature, as Mahi believes that the forest is a living entity and it should be treated with reverence. The Duke family symbolizes capitalism's exploitation of nature and the slaughter of fellow humans, accumulating wealth through the logging industry, ultimately leading to an ecological disaster. Essentially, it is a clash of two value systems and the ideological differences between two races under the difference of social and historical conditions. In the novel, he describes the scene when Decker confronts a child stealing wood. "The boy tightly closed his eyes, either from pain or resistance. Decker twisted the boy's arm, pressing his left hand flat against one of the protruding tree roots. With a swift swing of the axe, he severed a small finger and part of the adjacent one. Speak, or I will cut off more. I will leave you without a whole body." Decker's physical harm to the child is an assertion of his own rights and status, a bullying and disregard for the lives of the weak. He had always lived in the free commercialized market economy, where his understanding of human relationships was primarily shaped by commodities and markets. In this context, relationships between people had become alienated into relationships of money and power. This alienation left Decker feeling isolated and indifferent in society. In Decker's efficiency-driven worldview, even a weak child who had made a mistake could be dealt with through violent means as the most effective method to achieve his goals.

When it comes to colonial conquest under the alienation of humanity, *Barkskins* uses plain description to depict colonial plunder. "They found themselves among about two hundred British immigrants, who were cutting down trees and building log cabins where Ahil's hut had once stood. They did not speak French. Thirty fully armed British soldiers stood there in battle formation. The soldiers aimed their guns at him. Six of them rushed forward to seize the moose meat, beating him with fists and feet. One of them fired a shot, leaving a mark on the skull above Achille's ear. Besides the pain, he felt the warmth of his blood flowing down his neck." Colonial conquest under the alienation of humanity is essentially racial oppression. Lukács

(1923) argued that in capitalist society, human relationships are reified into commodity relationships. Social relationships are concealed beneath the form of things. Colonizers viewed the indigenous peoples' land, resources, and even culture as objects to be possessed and exploited, while the indigenous peoples themselves were regarded as inferior races, becoming reified "other". This objectification strips indigenous peoples of their humanity, reducing them to tools or obstacles in the eyes of colonizers, thereby exacerbating the colonizers' own alienation. On one hand, colonizers appropriate indigenous lands and resources, engaging in exploitative development that deprives indigenous peoples of their means of survival which leads to intensify racial oppression. On the other hand, colonizers used intellectual means to expel indigenous peoples, destroying their homes and cultural symbols, depriving them of their living space and cultural foundations, thereby revealing the cruelty of racial oppression.

In the historical process of capitalist global expansion, colonial conquest was not merely a form of violent material plunder but also a profound structural alienation. Through the dual logic of racialization and objectification, it completely dismantled the indigenous subjects' sense of self, thereby serving the fundamental purpose of capital accumulation. The violent actions of British soldiers toward Achille in Barkskins are not merely acts of physical cruelty against an individual but a systematic negation of the indigenous people's collective dignity and cultural identity. Lukács' viewpoint of reification demonstrates powerful explanatory power. All social relations are transformed into calculable, exchangeable commodity relations in capitalist society. Colonial expansion is an extension of this logic in spatial and racial dimensions. Indigenous peoples' land, resources, and culture are stripped of their social and historical significance, reduced to pure economic resources. They themselves are deprived of their agency, becoming "obstacles to be removed" or "tools to be exploited" in the eyes of colonizers. This objectification not only intensifies racial oppression but also traps colonizers in moral and emotional alienation. They lose basic respect and empathy for the lives of "the other" which becomes both executors and victims of capitalism's alienating logic. From an ecological Marxist perspective, the alienation logic of colonial conquest is also reflected in the destruction of the relationship between humans and nature. Capitalism's predatory exploitation of land not only deprives indigenous peoples of their means of survival but also leads to global ecological crises. This dual alienation of humanity and nature reveals the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. It achieves capital accumulation by objectifying the relationship between humanity and nature, yet ultimately results in a spiritual crisis and ecological collapse for human society. Colonial conquest under the alienation of humanity is a collusion between the objectification logic of capitalism and racial oppression. It not only deprives indigenous people of their living space and cultural dignity but also causes colonizers to lose the moral and emotional dimensions of humanity in their pursuit of capital accumulation.

4. Conclusion

Barkskins written by Anne Proulx, offers a comprehensive and profound exploration of the ecological crisis that emerged during the industrialization of Western capitalist nations from the 17th to the 19th centuries. This paper analyzes the economic base and superstructure of western capitalist society from an ecological Marxist critical perspective, arguing that capitalists represented by the Duke family have caused the alienation of nature through the implementation of technological capitalism and ecological imperialism. The alienation of consumption and humanity under the value system of capitalism has led to the alienation of the non-natural. *Barkskins* is not only a cautionary tale about ecological crises but also a mirror reflecting the inherent contradictions of the capitalist development model. It reminds us that the root cause of ecological crises lies in the capitalist system itself. If has the chance of transcending capitalist logic and rebuilding harmonious relationships between humans and nature.

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