

Framing Environmental Concerns: An Ecocritical Analysis of Select Films

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Abstract

The paper aims to present an ecocritical analysis of the films *Into the Wild* directed by Sean Penn, which was released in 2007, *The Hunter* directed by Daniel Nettheim released in 2011 and *Togo* directed by Ericson Core released in 2019. Environment plays a major role in the progression of action in these narratives. The paper will employ the theoretical framework of ecocriticism to evaluate and analyse the environmental sensibilities of these texts. The important concerns that this paper aims to tackle are the treatment of the landscape, living in and with Nature, anthropocentrism and the eco-cultural commitments of the selected texts.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Place, Witness, Wilderness, Nature, Culture, Landscape

Introduction

The biggest challenge that humanity faces presently is undoubtedly the environmental crisis. The awareness that the planet has reached the limits of its life support systems has spurred a need for an ideological shift towards ecocentrism away from anthropocentrism. Ecocriticism is concerned mainly with the reconfiguration of the ethical systems of the human beings - the only species capable of bringing about a worldwide change of attitude through processes such as education, awareness generation and self-reflection. Shifting the human focus back towards nature requires environmental action to be made a responsibility of every individual. This can be achieved by clubbing concrete activism with a more subtle and powerful technique of channelling the ideological reformation. Cheryll Glotfelty is of the opinion that literature and the power of story can be instrumental in achieving this ideological shift, as has been proven with the issues of class, gender and race in the previous century. In response to the ecological crises of the twenty first century literary theorists, philosophers, cultural historians, anthropologists, etc., have come forward with their ideas to tackle this issue. In so doing have given rise to an inter-disciplinary school of thought based on the "fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix).

Ecocriticism, as a theory, is directed at understanding how the reimagining of Nature through stories and image-making can change its real-life interaction with cultures across the globe. Laurence Buell, Ursula Heise and Karen Thornber in their article "Literature and Environment" state that,

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today (418).

The environmental problems are largely of our own making. As a species, humans have pushed the systems of the planet to their absolute end. This careless exploitation has emerged out of our refusal to treat nature as a live subject. Christopher Manes maintains,

As a consequence, we require a viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought, for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis that now requires the search for an environmental counterethics (17).

Therefore, the most important task that environmentally oriented discourse has on its hands is to bring about a change in how the human culture interacts with and understands the natural world. “Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them” (quoted in Glotfelty xxi).

Analysis

In order to contextualise the arguments, it will be useful to briefly present, the premise of the texts. Sean Penn’s *Into The Wild*, released in 2007, is based on the real-life events of one Christopher Johnson McCandless, which has been put into the form of a novel of the same name by Jon Krakauer. The movie depicts the two-year journey of McCandless from 1990 to his eventual death in 1992, in the Alaskan Wilderness where his body was found two weeks after death by moose hunters. Increasingly disturbed and disillusioned with the conventional life which he calls “a lie,” McCandless after graduating from college decides to live an authentic experience closer to nature and away from society. Prior to his journey he shuns the identity of Chris McCandless and begins to call himself Alexander Supertramp.

The Hunter, released in 2011 and directed by Daniel Nettheim, is also based on a novel of the same name written by Julia Leigh. The story revolves around a paid mercenary who pretends to be a researcher Martin David after being hired by a shadowy military biotechnology corporation called Red Leaf. He is assigned the task of finding and collecting DNA samples of a supposedly extinct Marsupial species Thylacine, commonly known as the Tasmanian Tiger or the Tasmanian Devil. His purpose is to find this animal whose bite is believed to have a specific toxin which has a paralysing effect on humans, collect its samples and kill it to ensure no competing agency gets their hands on the DNA.

Released in 2019 and directed by Ericson Core, *Togo* is another story based on real-life events well documented in history. It is based on the 1925, successful serum run of Nome where twenty dog sled teams participated in the relay over 828 miles to prevent an epidemic. Due to a Diphtheria breakout in the Alaskan town of Nome, Seppala takes his dog-sled team to race against harsh weather conditions to get the serum. The film is centred around the dog, Togo, who was the lead sled-dog in Leonhard Seppala’s sled team. Whereas the rest of the nineteen teams ran over thirty- one miles each, Togo and Seppala’s team ran over two hundred sixty miles. Togo, the eponymous protagonist is born with physical deformities and is regarded unfit to pull sleds. The story focuses on the indefatigable spirit of the underdog as

he overcomes the extreme weather conditions and physical landscapes to live up to sixteen years and completing the serum run when he was twelve years old already. These film texts have a common strand of being closely shaped by the natural phenomenal world.

The greatest challenges of ecocriticism has been to validate the idea of ‘Place’ as a separate critical category. This motive emerges out of the acceptance and understanding of the complex connections that exist between various species within a local ecosystem. This interconnectedness is brought to bear witness in literature. That a particular landscape affects an individual, is not only accepted but also well documented in literature especially in such movements as Romanticism and Nature Writing. Place, simply put, is the physical landscape of a geographical area, with its biotic and abiotic components. The sense of place exists not only at the level of the individual but also at the level of community with elements of ‘personal allegiance, social construction and physiographic matrix” (Buell et. al. 420). Although the concept of ‘place’ is of significant importance to the construction of the identity of an individual whose thoughts, philosophies and world view are influenced by his relation with the lived experience of his landscape, ecocritics attach an even greater signification to it by reconceptualising a particular landscape as a node in the global network. The value of the physical environment for the construction and elevation of the personal consciousness is evidenced in the writings of Wordsworth, Thoreau, Whitman, etc. They approach the landscape as a gateway for a transcendental and spiritual attainment. Accordingly, the first wave ecocriticism placed a great importance on the relation of the landscape and human. However, place has attained importance beyond its relevance for man and has become the microcosm for the global ecological phenomena.

Historically, landscapes have been relegated into the backgrounds of the texts. The physical world around the characters has acted only as a backdrop against which the apparently more complicated and crucial events of the human’s internal life play out. However, environmentally oriented criticism brings the ecological landscape out of its literary shadows. The interactions between the abiotic and biotic components of ecosystem take precedence to the psychological workings of humans in an environmentally directed narrative. In the selected texts, landscape plays an important role. Not only do the selected films feature the different landscapes and physical environments ranging from canyons, forests, snow-capped mountains, grasslands, lagoons of water, seas but also depict the seasonal variations therein. Although the physical world is the canvas on which human stories take place, but there exists a heightened sensibility to depict it as alive and complex. Within these texts, nature doesn’t exist as a mere referential context of the stories but an involved actor with a role to play in influencing the flow of the story. “Place entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort. But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Buell 63). People, it seems, carry their own preconceptions of what to expect in the landscape before they have even set foot in it. Some approach it with a naïve openness and trust, only to realise Nature can also be unforgiving and harsh in case of Alexander Supertramp and Togo, while others like the Hunter and Seppala, are cautious and on guard for anything that might injure them only to get hurt from the cultural permeations in the wilderness.

Penn’s *Into The Wild*, starts with a montage of the protagonist moving through the roads, railways, bridges, i.e., away from the human and the cultural towards the wilderness of the wintry Alaskan landscape. The camera zooms out as the protagonist steps alone into the wilderness. The road leads to a patch of field beyond which is a line of trees and the

mountains towards the end of the frame. All the vast landscape is covered in snow. A single man walking into this overwhelming expanse with bare minimum possessions he carries on his back symbolises the stripping away of the unnecessary cultural mementos. A sense of foreboding is presented when the man dropping Alexander Supertramp into the wilderness asks him to call in case “he makes it out alive”. This dialogue reflects the human attitude towards the natural wilderness. Within the text, the natural world is not seen as benign. There is an acceptance of the subliminal character of the landscape. Immediately afterwards successive frames show the moving clouds, the Sun and winds with snowflakes to portray the constant movement of the abiotic components of the physical environment. These frames set up the processes that direct such phenomena. The Sun is responsible for all life, the clouds carry rain and the snow on the mountains is responsible for the water flowing through the river. These are universal phenomena which are presented from the local point of reference, but the governing principles remain the same everywhere on the planet. Further along, the film through a series of flashbacks gives the history of the two-year travel that has prepared Alexander Supertramp for this Alaskan adventure. These reveal his stay in various other landscapes such as the forest cover in the Pacific Crest Trail. Within the forest, images of the protagonist climbing and walking over fallen trees are shown interspersed with images of other animals going about their lives. These shots reinforce the idea that humanity, represented by the protagonist going about their lives, is not any special than a worm wrangling up a branch or a deer drinking from a river. The order of the succession of these images is important for the director chooses to depict Alexander Supertramp’s actions parallel to the actions of other species. Not only does he accomplish showcasing the variety of life in that particular landscape but also critiques the preoccupation of humankind with their apparent purposeful actions. Interestingly, Alexander Supertramp approaches nature and the landscape with openness. He believes Nature will take care of him and in turn expects to learn from it, be remoulded and reunited with what he believes to be his true nature.

Similarly, Daniel Nettheim in *The Hunter* also chooses the trope of stepping into nature, but the intent is completely different. The eponymous hunter, steps into the forests with an intent to kill and collect DNA samples. The setting of this movie is the temperate Tasmanian wilderness. The forest cover, as the Martin David drives towards his lodging, is visibly dense. These frames provide an interesting impression of the forests being stagnant and devoid of life. However, a variety of trees and shrubbery are evident. Once he steps into the wilderness properly to set traps for the mysterious animal he hunts, the frames are resplendent with geographical variety and physical variations within the wilderness. Tall trees, a flowing river, tall rocky mountains covered by shrubs, clouds forming in the distance, the camera captures all this as it rotates to give the viewers a panoramic view of the wilderness. Again, Martin appears to be the only human in the wilderness. As he stops to fill his bottle with water at the river, upstream the camera pans towards a marsupial also quenching its thirst. Martin’s first interaction with an animal in the wild again critiques the self-absorbed human attitude by establishing the sameness of their physical needs. In presence of nature all living beings have the same needs and same means to fulfil them. The hunter’s attitude towards nature, however, is wary as he approaches the wilderness with the caution of the mercenary. Though with frequent visits into the wilderness, he starts to become increasingly comfortable with his wild surroundings and uncomfortable with society.

Contrary to this in Ericson Core’s *Togo*, the landscape in the beginning of the movie is akin to the Arctic tundra, with vast expanses of nothing but snow-capped mountains. The landscape depicted in the initial frames might lead one to believe that mountains are a meaningless space, with no values or connections related to it. Despite this rigorous

landscape having little value from the inter-human perspective, it is not a blank space. What gives the space a meaning and attaches to it a signification is the inter-play of different species. When the protagonist Togo is running away from the storm towards home, he finds a herd of Moose grazing on the mountain. Thus, this play of species in the most unlikely of places from the human perspective, lends a magnitude to the vast landscapes which evades the human mind. The film plays around with the idea of space and place. The town of Nome was founded on men trying their luck to find gold. It was found by greed and chance. Therefore, for the people, the connection and allegiance to the place is co-incidental. Their creed in living in the town is adaptability. However, the frozen tundra is the natural habitat of the non-human life forms that feature in the film. Their evolutionary progress has moulded them so that not only can they survive in such conditions but rather thrive. What appear from the human perspective to be blank spaces have in fact various lifeforms interacting and living. This prompts the question whether place is a construct of humans or can the category of place accommodate more than just humans? And in such scenario then, who has a bigger stake in the landscape?

The narratives in all three texts employ the journey trope where the protagonists travel through various landscapes to reach and settle in a certain place. Peter Barry differentiates the “outdoor environment,” into four categories viz., domestic picturesque which includes cultivated landscapes such as the parks and gardens; the countryside which includes mountains, hills and fields; the scenic sublime which consists the forests and lakes; and the wilderness like the deserts, oceans and uninhabited (by human) landscapes. In Penn’s *Into The Wild*, Alexander Supertramp begins his journey from the city, using his car to reach the countryside wheat fields where he works awhile in order to earn some money. His travels across America take him to such scenes of sublimity as camping on the banks of Lake Mead and living in the forests of Northern California with a single aim to reach the Alaskan Wilderness. However, in *The Hunter*, David travels from the city crossing the countryside to reach the tamed domestic landscape in the middle of the Tasmanian Wilderness in the form of his lodging at Lucy Armstrong’s cabin. His hunt takes him into the wilderness but by the end of the narrative he finds himself back in the concrete city to be the unlikely care giver of the single surviving member of the Armstrong family. Similarly, the narrative in *Togo*, begins with his birth in the domestic landscape of Seppala’s backyard. As he grows and is accepted by Seppala into his sled team, his practice takes him through the grassy hills and woods whereas The All Alaska Sweepstakes race takes him through frozen locales around the telegraphic lines. His eventual encounter with the wilderness takes place during the serum run in the form of frozen snow-capped mountain ranges. In all the texts there exists a movement, albeit temporary, away from culture towards a natural place untouched by the human.

Connected to the landscape, these texts also depict scenes of seasonal variations. This is important since the films employ a linear narrative and a cyclic temporality. In her essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Ursula Le Guin observes that “the (male) activity of hunting has produced a tradition of “death” stories having a linear plot, a larger-than-life hero, and inevitable conflict” (quoted in Glotfelty xxix). While this holds true in case of the living characters in the movies, the abiotic elements of the environment are treated within a (feminine) tradition conveying a cyclical model of Time and an ethic of community. The narratives end with the tragic deaths of the human characters. There is a solitary death in store for Alexander Supertramp who has made peace with his previous identity of Christopher McCandless. Similarly, as David makes his way back from his penultimate trip into the wilderness after having killed the Red Leaf operative sent to kill him, he finds the Armstrong’s cabin burnt down and learns about the deaths of Lucy and her daughter Katie.

However, the linear narrative in *Togo*, doesn't follow this pattern. Though it also ends with the death of the protagonist, it is not violent. Togo dies of old age after having sired his offspring ensuring the continuity of his breed which came to be known as the Seppala Siberians. Along the same vein, Joseph Meeker in "The Comic Mode" argues that the comedy and not tragedy is a better suited framework for environmentally oriented literature. "The tragic view of man, for all its flattering optimism, has led to cultural and biological disasters, and it is time to look for alternatives which might encourage the better survival of our own and other species" (158). The comic mode, he argues, is concerned only with the man's capacity to survive and a continuity of life. The seasonal changes that take place within the narratives follow this cyclic climatic pattern. *Into The Wild* and *Togo* depict the protagonists' evolution corresponding to the seasonal variations. Alexander Supertramp begins his journey in Summer, travels through to Mexico in the Spring, works on a harvest field in Autumn and eventually reaches the Alaskan wilderness in the beginning of the Winter. However, with the early onset of Spring after having survived the Winter he decides to leave the wilderness and becomes "trapped in the wild" by the overflowing river which has blocked his path. Similarly, the action in *Togo* spans across seasons. He is born in Summer. In the Spring, he survives his physical deformities and grows up; in Autumn he is given up for adoption, from where he eventually returns and is accepted by Seppala into his team. His maturity takes place during the serum run in harsh wintry conditions. The story of *The Hunter* doesn't span over much time. Consequently, there are no seasonal variations depicted per se. Nonetheless, due to a thick forest cover, the weather is quite unpredictable. In one frame it rains, and the very next frame is sunny and bright. Productive and stable ecosystems "minimize destructive aggression, encourage maximum diversity, and seek to establish equilibrium among their participants" (Meeker 160).

Environmental thought, within the films is also structured and built on the rhetoric of hubris and humility of man. In addition to being individual traits these extend to the level of institutions, corporations and socioeconomic structures. Often the narratives of progress are linked with hubris, and of decline with humility. Christine Gerhardt argues that environmental humility doesn't stem from a position of self-effacement. Environmental humility, for her

Does not mean replacing anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, but instead involves both skepticism about the human ability to achieve a balance between human and nonhuman interests and the responsibility to nevertheless continue striving to do so, in the recognition that "humble and human share the same root: the earth [humus] (quoted in Niemann 248).

This hubris is reflected in Penn's *Into The Wild*, when McCandless' parents react strongly to his refusal to buy a new car. Upon their dismissive opposition to his vehement insistence that he already owns a functional car, he reaches his threshold. He says, "I don't want anything. It's just things, things, things." His intent against this cultural hubris of seeming progress is to break free from the rules and regulations of the organised and measured existence within society. He wishes to feel freedom and live with a certain wildness. He finds exhilaration in being footloose and free from cultural entanglements. He learns to live in nature with the humility that is exhibited by other species. Michelle Niemann states "Humility comes to mean not only a humble attitude toward the unpredictable changes we face, but also the willingness to slow down and act, improvisationally, on the scales available to us" (255). This acceptance and action based thereof are an integral shift in the narrative in *Togo*. After his initial refusal to accept Togo as a dog worthy of driving the sled, Seppala twice gives him

up for adoption. His attitude towards Togo is utilitarian. He explains to his wife that the dogs they train are “Not our friends, not our pets, not our children. They are animals.” However, when Togo proves his utility by outrunning an entire team of trained sled-dogs, Seppala is forced to reconsider his opinion. He becomes more and more respectful to the animal being. However, *The Hunter*, presents a much more problematic scenario. Towards the climax, when Martin learns that Red Leaf had double crossed him, he visits the wilderness one last time to face the Tasmanian Tiger. When he comes face to face with the animal, he has an important decision to make, i.e., whether to kill it or collect its samples? The hubris is clearly espoused by a corporation like Red Leaf which plans to own the DNA of perhaps the last living member of a species for monetary reasons. They leave no stone unturned to ensure that they have a monopoly over this rare genome. But even more thought provoking are the actions of the hunter himself. In the climactic encounter with the tiger, he kills the animal being. He thinks it to be a necessary evil to burn the body to destroy all genetic material so that no one possesses it. But the intent behind stepping into the wilderness or chasing the animal, was never the preservation of the species. The purpose for the hunt was to capture in order to possess and kill. Quoting Dougald Hine, Niemann writes, “Hine advocates a “historical humility” which acknowledges “the unknowability of the future, its capacity to humble us and take us by surprise, our inability to control it” (255). It can be argued that the hunter could look for an alternative way out which would ensure the survival of the last living member of the species. Perhaps the DNA samples could lead to the cloning of the animal. Though it would not have led to repopulation of the species, but it could have resulted in its further perpetuation.

Another environmental concern that has been reflected particularly in *The Hunter* is the deforestation and clearing of forest land for the purposes of timber. Martin who is an outsider in town is viewed suspiciously by the two groups at odds with each other – the environmentalists called “the greenies” and the local loggers who are desperate for jobs. In one of the frames early in the movie, a sticker on the tissue disposal unit reads “Save Our Native Forests” which has been written over to read “Save Our Jobs.” This image speaks volumes about the complexity of preservation and conservation efforts. The loggers cannot find jobs without the forest, their survival depends upon it. Without a job, they cannot fend for themselves or their families. Whereas by the continuous unchecked logging of the trees, habitat depletion will take place locally which will have a domino effect on the global level. The cutting of trees will lead to lesser oxygen production and carbon dioxide absorption contributing to the rise of global temperatures leading to global warming. This will further cause the polar ice caps to melt and water levels to rise all over the planet culminating with a major environmental disaster. This of course will take place over decades, but it is a certain trajectory. This is the crossroads at which humanity finds itself at. The Tasmanian ecosystem, therefore, is a local representation of the global trend exemplified by developing countries such as Brazil where Amazonian rainforests are cleared to make way for industries to boost the country’s economy. Another implication of the deforestation is the loss of habitat. Forests hold the most ecological diversity. Many a plant and animal species exist in particular ecosystems within particular geographic conditions. Ronald Sandler argues that species are phenomena.

Human activities destroyed them or are in the process of doing so. If scientists create genetically similar organisms, engineer spaces where individuals of the species might persist, or store their genetic information in perpetuity, the phenomena are still lost. They are functionally and valuably extinct (77).

Nevertheless, the texts carry within themselves elements which can be read as counter narratives for the dispersal of the humanity's hubris with regards to the environment. Penn's *Into The Wild*, is preoccupied with the effects of nature and environment on the human self. It doesn't take on such issues as environmental depletion. It concerns itself more with the relation of nature and human. In *The Hunter* Nettheim, not only premises his story on the contemporary ecological concerns but goes so far as to honestly depict the complicated webs of ecological discourse. He seems to suggest that the fight for environment requires not only the support of the local populace but also legislation. The ecowarrior group called "The Greenies" not only watch the entry into the forest area and prevent any unwanted presence, they are also able to secure a moratorium against the logging practices in the area. Lucy Armstrong informs Martin on his return from the wilderness that "No tree will be touched for the next six months, until a complete ecological survey." This leads to a confrontation between the loggers and the greenies, which reflects the precarious situation between the people regarding the same resources. Another approach to tackle similar issues is suggested by Core in *Togo*. When Seppala questions his wife – Constance's insistence on caring for a new born Togo by asking "What does he bring to the breed if he survives?" it is a question based on pragmatism and rationality. He views life around him from the lens of utility and profitability. The wife responds that he brings "The heart of a survivor" presenting a counter view that there is value in life itself. Her motivation is not utilitarian but stems out of a respect for life itself. Critics that engage in an environmentally oriented discourse of literature, look into the similarities of the women and environment as being marginalised at the hands of Man – the Master. This subset of ecocriticism has been called Eco-feminism. The ubiquitous relation that exists between women and nature has been heralded by some critics as the harbinger of the counter patriarchal narrative which is based not on hierarchy but equality; not on domination but mutual respect. Citing Catriona Sandilands in their article Buell, Heise and Thornber view 'women—as bearers of children and guardians of "family sanctity"—as having a heightened awareness of ecological destruction. It is women, they believe, who will "green" society and improve the environment, primarily from the private sphere' (425). Seppala views Togo as being "mentally deficient, undersized, unintelligent and untrainable." Contrarily, Constance has a better understanding of the dog's wild nature. She responds that he is fast, refuses to be put in the kennel and digs his way out. She looks at these characteristics as being qualities which separate him from the rest. She not only understands his wild streak but also celebrates it. Her insight into the dog's untamed spirit is responsible for Seppala to find his most beloved and loyal companion. Her attitude is much more organic and entrenched in the continuous circular processes of the natural world.

Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren in their essay "Encountering a More-Than-Human World: Ethos and The Arts of Witness" call for cultivating the art of paying attention to the forms of life that constitute the natural world. They propose that "paying attention" is not simply an epistemic project but it teaches to live in tandem with other species. It brings out the uniqueness of different life forms and the unity in diversity. In living with and in nature, requires for human kind to become a witness to other life forms, to observe the similarities and dissimilarities between them and other living beings and to comprehend the design of the natural world in its magnitude. This notion of becoming a witness to other life forms is heavily drawn upon in the texts with implications which resonate on the level of the individual as well as a community. On one level, the films invite and implicate the audiences in becoming witnesses to the complex webs of relations that exist within the narrative and the frames. The moving imagery on screen establishes an immediacy with the viewer, who is given a genuine responsibility to bear witness to the environmental

connections. On the other level, there is an awareness - a meta-cognition developed within the texts, especially through the shifts in attitudes of the protagonists. It is often taken for granted that the protagonist moving into the wilderness is alone, without company. However, this is the anthropocentric fallacy. The place is not an empty space devoid of life and living beings. Within the wilderness, away from society, the protagonists become members of another kind of society. They are in the company of trees, birds, animals and other forms of life. *Into The Wild*, uses the concept of “bearing witness” in close connection with living in nature. Alexander Supertramp at one point happens to encounter a herd of moose in the wild. He becomes overwhelmed by strong emotions as his curiosity overtakes him. His eyes start to tear, and he runs alongside the herd. The freedom of the herd of moose inspires a sense of freedom in him. Similarly, in *The Hunter*, Martin initially is unconcerned with the humans and animals around him. The change in him is slow. With every visit to the wilderness, his emotional side becomes more accessible to him. The act of witnessing leads to the sprouting of compassion prompting a curiosity towards other beings. He starts to increasingly care about the Armstrong family. Slowly, other beings in the wilderness are enveloped within his concern reflected by his reaction upon his encounter with the being that he had come to kill – The Tasmanian Tiger. Although he kills the animal, his actions cause a deep emotional reaction. The mercenary drops his rifle and falls to his knees and mourns the death. In *Togo*, the act of being a witness is twofold. The care and concern that Constance and later on Seppala show for the dog fosters a sense of loyalty and understanding in him which remains unparalleled. Likewise, their concern makes the dog not only protective but also show a sense of responsibility towards them. This aspect is touched upon in the movie, when Constance entrusts her husband’s life to Togo. As they prepare to set out in the storm, she asks Togo to bring both her husband and her dog back to her. The process of bearing witness, therefore, is dialectical.

Living in nature also has other dimensions to it. The act of being in the wild affects the human psyche, greatly. It is not a romantic glorification of the natural world. There are wild and unforgiving sides to nature too. To only depict it as a genteel presence is redundant at best. Although it sustains all life, it is also a great leveller. All the films to some degree subscribe to this notion. A greatly impactful scene in *Into The Wild*, is one where Alexander Supertramp finds a lone moose. Immediately realising the opportunity he has; he shoots the animal out of pure instinct. He plans on preparing a barbeque of the meat and store the rest for future. However, the meat becomes “infested” with maggots rendering it unfit for his consumption. This undue killing of the animal greatly disturbs him. He writes in his journal that this is “one of the biggest tragedies of my life.” However, as he sits on a rock, visibly upset, in the background one can see the meat being consumed by a pack of wolves. Nature doesn’t believe in waste. Everything has a purpose. This is a subtle critique of how human culture not only wastes its resources but also encourages this behaviour. While Alexander Supertramp works in a fast food joint, the camera focuses on the dustbin where a sticker reads, “It’s OK to waste fries.” This is in complete contradiction to the principles of life in the natural world. Similarly, in *The Hunter*, in order to set traps for the Thylacine, Martin shoots an animal, takes its heart and throws away its body. In the evening, he hears a noise. As he goes to investigate, he finds that the other creatures are feeding on the corpse. The idea conveyed is that nature doesn’t waste resources and makes use of everything. In *Togo*, the capricious nature of the physical world is exemplified in the storm. It is a literal obstacle and villain in the story which is preventing the anti-toxic serum from reaching the town. The environmental conditions are such that children in the town might get killed. However, even more awe-inspiring is the fact that a storm is a phenomenon of the weather. It is not

conscious or aware. It doesn't have any realisation about the troubles it is causing. It is the humans who look, comprehend and realise their helplessness in the face of the natural world. Thus, living in nature is not easy. It challenges one physically, mentally and emotionally. It is a great leveller to humanity's hubris.

Identity and awareness of oneself are concepts which are interlinked with nature. Going into nature not only induces a state of heightened consciousness but brings an individual close to their true nature. By coming face to face with nature, one "becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown" (Slovic 352). The mysterious character of nature, argues Slovic, contributes to the independence and self-awareness of the observer. An unlikely conversation with an old man, Ron who can be seen as an advocate of human culture reveals Alexander Supertramp's higher state of consciousness. Upon being enquired about education, a job and making something out of his life, a matured Alex responds that he lives in the dirt by choice. His denial of the luxuries, which he views as falsities, is based upon a conscious unweaning from the ideals of the consumer society. To him the true purpose of life is "To measure yourself at least once. To find yourself at least once in the most ancient of conditions, facing blind, deaf stone alone, with nothing to help you but your own hands and your own head." Thus, nature becomes the mirror through which one recognises one's own self. A similar trajectory of self-realisation is evident in the other two texts as well. In *The Hunter*, Martin becomes a true round character who undergoes a shift in attitude towards the Armstrong kids. When he first arrives at their cabin, Katie asks about the song he is listening. He bluntly shuts the door on her face. Later on, not only does he repair the speakers on the tree in the backyard but also dances with the kids. His climatic redemption comes through Jamie, who after his mother's death has been taken by the authorities. He traces down the kid and it is implied, has taken him under his wing. His trips in the wilderness, therefore, seem to test his boundaries of who he presumes himself to be. In *Togo*, there are two animals whose destinies and lives are bound together. When Seppala restrains Togo from following his true nature and attempts to cage him, he becomes wilder and more untamed. He digs up holes in the kennel to free himself. Upon being locked in the barn, he destroys everything looking for an opening. When he is eventually given for adoption. He escapes by jumping out of a glass window to come back to Seppala's farm who is forced to express his annoyance to Constance thus,

Your dog disrupts my team. Your dog who jumps on me no matter how many knees I put to his chest, your dog violates the rules of the pack and upsets the hierarchy that I've worked years to establish. Your cur who rewards your kind nature with anarchy.

However, once accepted into the sled team, Togo soon calms down. His wild nature separates him from the rest. His stubbornness even saves Seppala's life later on. He becomes the saviour of culture and human life in the town of Nome. Similarly, when Seppala gives up his stubbornness and accepts Togo as a part of his team, he realises that he has been denying a born leader his purpose. He had been trying to breed and cultivate a dog of such calibre, but was denying the same, when the dog came to him. The connection between them is strengthened so much that Seppala not only talks to Togo as one would to a friend but trusts him to navigate and get the team through the last phase of the relay when the storm makes it impossible for Seppala to see anything. In this sense, they both help the other "realise who they are and what's what in the world" (Slovic 353).

The films also connect the notion of identity with the literal act of naming. In all three texts, the act of shedding the cultural identity becomes instrumental in the identification and

evolution of the one's understanding of oneself. Not only does the naming of a thing, assign to it an identity, but makes it recognisable. Recognition is important when connected with the issue of bearing witness. The naming and renaming of things is of great significance in Penn's *Into The Wild*. As has been mentioned, in order to escape from the falsities of culture, Christopher McCandless assumes the name of Alexander Supertramp, whose only wish is to live in nature. However, after the stint in the Alaskan wilderness, he decides to leave. Upon reaching the river, he finds to his dismay the water flowing too fast and too high, making it impossible for him to cross the river. He returns to his "magic bus" and writes in his diary "Disaster! River crossing impossible! Rained in – Lonely, Scared." After this he becomes increasingly disturbed and unsettled in Nature. The sense of constant peace is replaced by a growing unease to leave the wilderness. He becomes detached with the place. In this situation he reads Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and becomes fascinated by one of the passages which reads, "For a moment she rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name." After reading the line "to call each thing by its right name," he becomes almost delirious. Having picked a copy of Priscilla Russell Kari's book, *Tanaina Plantlore: An Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska*, he becomes obsessed with identifying and naming every plant that he can find. He, it is revealed has misidentified two plant species – inedible wild sweet pea and edible wild potato. This error turns fatal as the inedible sweet pea is poisonous and induces paralysis, inhibition of digestion and nausea. After the realisation hits him, that he will die in a few days from starvation and paralysis, Alexander makes peace with the life he has lived. The final message he leaves behind reads, "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!" He signs the message by his original name, after having reassumed the identity of Christopher Johnson McCandless. The shedding away of the original identity in *The Hunter*, is treated in a much lighter vein but the implications are weighty, nonetheless. The Armstrong kids Katie and Jamie, in the absence of their father and given their mother's incapacitated condition are left to their own devices. In this situation, the kids come up with their own names. Jamie becomes Bike and Katie becomes Sass. One can interpret this decision by the kids as being a product of their active imaginative powers, which are not curbed by rules and regulations imposed by human society. The kids are still evolving and growing. They are not set in a particular mould and are flexible and multi-faceted. Nettheim seems to suggest by giving the agency to the children, a hopeful future for the planet. A hope, that lightly on their shoulders, humans can carry the weight of their rationale and seek help from the elements of the fantastical and wonderful as well as the curiosity of their childhood. The act of naming in *Togo*, comes after Seppala accepts the dog into his team. Till then he refuses to name him and calls him "The Devil or whatever your name is". This refusal to name the animal is a measure to prevent himself from attaching any importance, value or respect towards the dog. The naming of the dog gives to him an identity. It is an act of acceptance of the being. It reflects the recognition of another consciousness, which has value of its own, is alive and not inanimate. The naming of Togo is not significant to the dog in itself, but the significance is attached to it by the value it has in the human social systems.

The theoretical framework of ecocriticism is critical towards the traditional genres of fiction writing for historically they have proved more viable to reflect the play of human lives. Buell, Heise and Thornber write, "Moving beyond the genre of fiction writing, environmentally oriented criticism has always favoured other expressive media such as visual, musical and cinematic forms to highlight and construct a vibrant and varied counter narrative (419)." Films, it can be argued, appeal not only to the human imagination but also

present a more realistic depiction of the environment by virtue of creating an illusion of movement on screen. It can make the representation of nature seem alive. The techniques that it uses to accomplish this are both visual and audible. The decisions to foreground certain aspects and to put others in the background play with the reception of the text by the audiences. There has to be a realisation that the moving image is not the thing in itself. It is only a representation of the referent reality which is present outside the text. Karl Van Wyk quotes Lefebvre's assessment of the techniques through which landscapes are made autonomous.

The first way in which the landscape can become, ..., autonomous, relies on the spectator's gaze, whereby, be it for a brief moment, the spectator recognises the landscape as separate from the narrative event. The second way in which a landscape can become autonomous is through the cinematographic medium, whereby landscapes are filmed in a manner which wilfully divorces them from the narrative (21).

The long drawn out shots which feature the panoramic views of the landscape figure in all three texts. The frames in *Into The Wild*, are often captured and set up to show the magnitude of nature and the insignificance of a lone man. It also features frames of airplanes flying over the wilderness leaving behind a smoke trail. This is done with the intent to critique the inescapable cultural permutations. Although *The Hunter*, doesn't make use of dialogues to set the scene or provide any exposition, it does use the audio-visual medium to present the multiplicity of life. Continuous shots of the wild life in the Tasmanian wilderness is accentuated by the use of a background score which consists of chirps of birds, sound of the waves on a lake, slurping voices of animals drinking water, the gushing voice of the flowing river, so on and so forth. With *Togo*, the frames capture the stunning icy vastness and the vegetations of spring with vivid colours. The hues of yellow accentuate the frames depicting summer and spring whereas the tones of blue and grey cast a gloomy shadow to the scenes of the winter. The use of colour in these frames directs the audience to gather impressions from these scenes. Thus, these techniques like setting and treatment of the frames and the use of background score help the director in translating not only the referent reality but also give his own interpretation to the story.

Conclusion

The eco-critical theory is still growing and maturing with the changing environmental concerns. The theory branches out to accommodate the inter-disciplinary character of scholarship. It questions not only the established *modus operandi* of Theory itself but in its own scholarship is constantly drawing upon, editing and building multiple fields of study. The paper has attempted to analyse the various concepts with which the texts engage. The concepts of place, identity, landscape are all linked strongly with one another. Although an environmentally oriented study requires the foregrounding of ecological and natural elements of the text, one finds the Nature/Culture binary cannot be easily side-lined. To speak of the natural world requires engaging with all its stake holders, which is only possible through the intervention of the humans. Given that the powers of reflection and the awareness of cognition rests with humanity, it becomes imperative for the species to reassess its relation with nature. The enlightenment hubris which dictates the self-assessment of the human species needs to be rethought, revaluated and reimagined to include, highlight and stress upon the responsibility which rests with the human kind. This is only possible through the ethical reconfiguration of the systems, to introduce an attitude of humbling down in the face of ecological challenges that threaten these systems.

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