

Effects of modern civilization on American Wilderness: A Study on Edward Abbey's *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Brave Cowboy*

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Abstract

Edward Abbey is best known for his advocacy of environmental issues, criticism of public land policies and anarchist political views. Abbey stresses the need of preservation of wilderness and he explains the effect of modern civilization on American wilderness. Abbey, as a lover of desert, mountains and forest, tries to preserve it from the damage. Preservation of wilderness being his predominant concern, he deals with the effects of machines and modern technology on wilderness and how the government neglects such important things without any consideration and he said as a patriot, people should defend for his country even against their government. This work aims at discussing the fictional representation of environmental issues in the select novels of Edward Abbey such as *The Brave Cowboy* and *Fire on the Mountain*. In both the novels, the protagonists try to preserve their land from the modern developments and they both like to live their life in the traditional life style and they defend for their land. This paper will explore how the protagonists protest against the modern civilization and their government, as a lover of their land.

Keywords: Environmental issues, Wilderness, Traditional life style.

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I am not an atheist but an earthiest. Be true to the earth.”

Edward Abbey

Edward Abbey is an American novelist and essayist and a strong influence in the development of the modern environmental movement in both its main stream and radical forms. His views and perceptions are shaped by his love towards nature and wilderness. Readers can understand his love towards the wilderness and nature through his detailed descriptions of the natural world and through his anger towards the effect of modern civilization on American Wild lands. He is against American government because the government supports industrialization and favour for the development of various machines thereby indirectly is against nature. Edward Abbey is of the view that patriotism is supporting the country not the government. If the government is doing something against a citizen, Abbey says that people should stand against it for the preservation of wilderness. Mr. Abbey is described as “a voice crying in the wilderness for the wilderness”, by Edwin way Teale in The Newyork Times Book review on January 28, 1968. Abbey believed that the west was in danger of being over developed and he believed that the only solution was to preserve the wilderness. His focus is on how to live in a land without spoiling it. Thus, Abbey is a lover of nature and it is evident through his writings.

As an environmentalist, Edward Abbey's love towards nature is expressed almost in all his writings including poetry, novels, essays, philosophies etc. His novels describe the environment in which the story is set in and the landscape is as important as the characters of the story. In the stories, landscape is portrayed as a real character and through Abbey's description the reader can feel the importance of landscape for a peaceful life and as a man everyone should preserve it from charge for better living. According to Abbey, Government and industries are collaborators in the destruction of wilderness. So he hates both and it is also visible in his novels and we can use such things as evidence to prove his love.

Fire on the Mountain, battles against conglomerates bureaucracy strongly and also highlights man's impotence against it, and through which we can understand Abbey's hatred towards despotism. *Fire on the Mountain* evidences his anger towards modernism, administrative procedure than military tries to send out the people from the ranch to develop their project and how an old man who is a true lover of his place tries hard to protect and preserve his place from the military force is the brief story of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. Abbey's novels stress the necessity of the wilderness for human spirit and the role of man in the earth is to preserve the wilderness and always should be ready to defend for the country against his government, if necessary.

The Brave Cowboy, a short novel by Abbey, is about an anarchist cowboy, who is not ready to take driving license, social security, draft card, other forms of identification, etc., as per

government order which states every citizen has to take these things compulsorily. Cowboy hates the fences, which disturb man in his horse back travel and fences are unnecessary to the world as it is common to all including organisms.

As a lover of mountains, protagonist wants to preserve the traditional life style of cowboy which depends on mountain and horses. He does not want to allow any government which tries to change the lifestyle of the cowboys in the name of modernization and civilization. Protagonist who gets himself arrested so that he can escape his buddy from the prison, but the plan fails and he escapes and travels in mountain on horseback to save himself from the police as well as from the modernization and civilization and would like to live the life as the Brave Cowboy, this is the brief story of the novel *The Brave Cowboy*.

This paper will explore how both the protagonists from the novels, *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Brave Cowboy* loves their natural land or environment and their dislikes towards modernization and their stubborn adherence to the values of the old west, which make them intolerable to the forces of law and order that control the new west. Both of the protagonists namely Jack Burns and Vogelin refuse to join the modern society and reject much of the modern technology and prefer to cut down any fence which does not allow them to lead the life in their traditional way of life.

In *Fire on the Mountain* the US government needs to expand its territory and the land is needed to expand a bombing range. It takes away all the farms in New Mexico and orders the people to give up their land and to leave the place by accepting the ransom. John Vogelin, an old man, also receives the same order which is received by his neighbours to vacate the place but unlike his neighbours the old man is not ready to give up his land and ready to fight against the military as a patriot. The old man is admired by the magnified beauty of the vast panoramic landscape. Since he spent his entire life in the ranch and practiced to live with mountain and cattle, John Vogelin is ready to protest against what he sees any unfair government practice. *Fire on the Mountain* is not just a tale of one man's love for hearth and home but for the mountains, river, and sky that hold it. Vogelin does not want any amount from the government; because according to Vogelin the offering amount seems legally sanctioned theft. Even his close friend, Lee forces Vogelin to sell the land to the government and he insisted him to withdraw his protest against the US government and he stressed the point that as an old man Vogelin can't win in his protest, but as a lover of mountains he remains steady and sacrifices his life in his protest.

In, *The Brave Cowboy*, government introduces driving license, draft card, social security card and some other modern identification and offers various jobs for cowboys such as driving job, transient workers etc, where as the protagonist John Burns is not ready to accept modern society and of course rejects much of modern technology. He refuses to register for the draft and he knows he may be punished by the government for the refusal. But still he refuses as a respect given to his old traditional values and life style. Since Burns, as a fighter against government, refused the draft, under violation of the selective service act 1948, he becomes criminal and he is not bothered by such laws and forces, and who hates fences which is built by the government and he breaks it wherever he crossed it and he believes that fences are unnecessary to the world and they are meaningless.

Jack Burns is brave enough to fight against his government and he feels no one can stop him or control him in his life; he would like to live his life with total freedom as a traditional old cowboy. Edward Abbey's powerful conviction conveys "a patriot must always be ready to defense his country against his government"; critics believed that Burns, a character what Abbey dreamed of being and the symbol of wilderness.

Both the protagonist in the novels could not adjust their life according to modern changes. In *Fire on the Mountain*, John Vogelin, seventy years old man feels hard to adjust to the changes which occur in the society. Modern developments are welcomed and appreciated by the government but the old man who spent his life with mountains and cattle, disagree the modernity as necessary one, he believes that the life under trees on the mountain with the cattle only can give satisfaction to him, rather the modern technology including rocket can't give satisfaction to life. Billy, 12 years old, who is grandson to Vogelin, uses to visit his grandfather and his ranch every summer. Bill's mother doesn't want to spend life in the mountain region where there is no development in technology as in Pittsburg but Billy likes his grandfather, loves the New Mexico and the mountain landscape and its magnificent beauty. Old man explained his life to his grandson and thereby grandson gets attracted towards the life style of his grandfather without the modern changes. Modern changes may be luxurious but the needed thing for the better life is wilderness so the old man is stubborn in his decision.

In, *The Brave Cowboy*, the protagonist, John Burns dislikes the new modern technology and civilization and considers that, they turn man's life from the path of freedom to a cage. He likes to live like his predecessors that is he wants to roam in horse back without any control or fences and he just wants to spend his life with mountains, rocks, sky, and sun. He thinks that there is no need for modernity in life because everything is perfect already and the change will bring problems to life as it damage the traditional way of life. Modern technologies may provide comfort and luxury whereas the causes and effects will give the problems and miseries in the life of man, so that Burns feels that modern technologies are not necessary and the beautiful nature is ready to give everything then what is the need for technology? So he advised all to enjoy the life along with natural environment.

In both the novels the beauty of mountain is portrayed by Edward Abbey through his protagonist's description about the landscape. Both the protagonist John Vogelin and John Burns loves mountain, sky, river, rock, and trees. In *The Brave Cowboy*, Burns loves to ride in horse back through trees and rocks and by such journey only he feels happy.

Jack Burns loves wilderness and he considers it as a heaven, where as the civilized policeman in the novel namely Johnson lives in middle period, which means not totally "wild" and not totally "civilized", and who hates wilderness and considers it as a miserable hell. Jack Burns has escaped from police and traveling freely in his horse back and enjoying the beauty of mountain and the pleasure which is given by the nature, where as Johnson while chasing Burns feels uncomforted in the path of wilderness. Johnson dislikes drinking water from river and feels bad to travel in uneven surface where as Burns feels completeness through the journey towards freedom with the mountain, sky, earth, river and his horse.

Thus through both the novels, Abbey focuses the effect of modern civilization on American wilderness and stresses the necessity of wilderness for human spirit. If the law disturbs the wilderness in any way, according to Abbey, people should preserve their wilderness by protest against their government. Man who loves his environment obviously will get anger if something disturbs the pleasant condition of their environment; both the protagonists Burns and Vogelin are angry when the government tries to misuse their lands and protest against the government whole heartily; and both the characters like to follow their traditional life style and reject the modern technologies and stress the bad effect of modernity and civilization. The protagonist emphasizes that in the name of civilization and modernity, government indirectly tries to damage the wilderness and as American citizens, people should preserve their wilderness.

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