

Envisioning Divine Stewardship: An Ecocritical Reading of Jack London's White Fang

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Abstract

Human and nature share the same planet for their existence. It is a dream of humans to have a peaceful ambience which seems unattainable because of their corrupted behaviours and selfish nature. Unemployment, unpredictable weather, scarcity of resources created a haunting terror in the minds of humans about their existence and survival. Many corrective measures are undertaken to restore the happy living and healthy relations among human and nature. Ecotheology a branch of Ecocriticism focuses on the role of humans towards nature. It acts as the panacea to solve many ecological problems humans encounter in this present world. Jack London, a visionary American Writer has incorporated humans and their relationships with nature in his classic *The White Fang*. The researcher's article tries to analyse the concept of stewardship and its application in the characters of the novel to show that stewardship is the panacea for the present ecological crisis.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Eco theology, Anthropocentrism, Stewardship

Human and nature share the same ambience for their survival. They share an intrinsic bond with each other. It is an undeniable fact that both share a congenial relationship between themselves from the early phases of human history. The bond between them is considered to be a sacred one which is explicitly seen in various myths and religious practices in the life of human. After the invasion of scientific ideologies, humans tend to rationalize themselves as a superior race in the cosmos which made them to belittle nature. This anthropocentric nature of human washed off the divine connectivity relished by human and nature. They become hostile to each other which is evident in the cosmic disorders and chaotic incidents that human face in this present world. The survival of the human in the present cosmos is threatened by the bitter fruits of their selfish attitude towards nature. Several corrective measures have been undertaken to restore the amicable relationship with nature.

Jack London, one of the prolific writers of the American Literature, is known for his vivid portrayal of human and nature relationship in all his writings. His magnum opus *White Fang* is the tale of a wolf and its relationship with humans. The myriad dimensions of human behaviour and their reflection on nature is artistically woven in this novel. The novel highlights three men named Gray Beaver, Beauty Smith and Weedon Scott and their relationship with *White Fang*. Being the ardent follower of Darwinist ideologies, London shows his readers how human behaviour is reflected in the natural world. Gray Beaver, a good-

natured man, slipped into the whims and fancies of wealth, sells White Fang to a cruel human master named Beauty Smith who exploits White Fang to quench his thirst to accumulate riches.

Beauty Smith is the iconic representation of anthropocentric nature of humans. London vividly portrays the negentropic effect of humans' selfishness and their reflection on nature. He says,

If Beauty Smith had in him a devil, White Fang had another; the two of them raged against each other unceasingly and the mere sight of Beauty Smith was sufficient to send him into transport of fury. And when they came to close quarters, he had been beaten by the club. (WF 230)

The hostility between White Fang and Smith is clearly seen in the passages where his sound or a glance creates a great negative impact on White Fang. Smith treats White Fang merely as a commodity and not even considering it as a living being. This creates a major fuss in the novel. One can witness the same thing that happens in the present world where nature and human are entirely hostile to each other. Climate changes, sudden natural disasters, unpredictable weather conditions, depletion of natural resources are some of the evidences of the hostile nature of human and nature. Human on his egoistic nature fails to accept or reconcile with nature which worsens the situation is clear in both the novel and the present world. Religion takes its giant leap to patch up the hostility between nature and human that results in a field of study named Ecotheology a sub branch of Ecocriticism the study of the relationship of human and nature. Eco theologians strongly affirm and propagate that humans are not a superior being over nature because the core principle of the universe is that everything is intrinsically connected to each other to form a 'whole being.' "Christian ecotheology is arguably characterized by a dual critique, namely both a Christian critique of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christian complicity in such destruction". (Conradie, 22) Eco theologians believe that God is the owner or the creator of the cosmos in which human and nature share their existing parts in a dependable way. Eco theologians suggest the role of human as a 'steward' or a care taker' of the universe for the welfare of each other. They deny the fact that human is the superior entity because they are merely a creation and not the creator. Christian Eco theologians believe that stewardship is the divine position entrusted to humans by God. "And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). It is a fallacy that humans project themselves as a superior being is the outcome of their pride says the lovers of nature.

Jack London is a secular writer and the ardent follower of science and realistic ideologies. It is a surprising fact that his character named Weedon Scott is the true epitome of divine stewardship. The relationship between Scott and White Fang is aesthetically woven in the novel. The queer nature of Weedon Scott and his relationship with Fang brings the paradigm shift in the novel. Scott turns the ferocious Wolf to a Dog with full of love and happiness by imparting his divine nature to it.

The basic fact of a divine stewardship is understanding and loving things beyond one's self. In Judeo-Christian theology it is a belief that humans are entrusted by God to care for and protect the natural world. Jesus in his Sermon explains and highlights the nature of the real steward. "The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, so when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons them and runs away. The man runs away because he is hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:11-13).

The first encounter between Scott and White Fang is a significant one. Weedon Scott's humaneness and his love beyond self is reflected in his opinion to save White Fang. When Scott sees White Fang in a pity state surviving for its life, he decides to rescue it not because of any benefit he rescued it out of love. Scott knows White Fang is no more a beneficial being to human in all aspects because it requires huge time for

it to recover to life. His divine nature is expressed in his behaviour which surpasses humans' selfish attitude and nature.

The word divine stewardship can be interpreted in literary context in a different way. A divine steward is the one who exhibits divine qualities like empathy, respect, and understanding towards nature. Weedon Scott exhibits these virtues in his relationship with White Fang. London contrasts the way Scott relates to White Fang. Gray Beaver, Beauty Smith uses Whip as a medium of communication. But Scott uses love as a medium of communication. London refers Scott as 'love – master'. "We will let him run loose and see what kindness can do for him. And here's a try at it. He walked over to White Fang and began talking to him gently and soothingly" (WF 308). The sudden change in the behaviour of human startled White Fang. Weedon Scott's loving nature towards White Fang created a positive impact on its life. White Fang's rudeness, cunning and ferocious nature starts to diminish and dissolve in the love of Weedon Scott. London through Weedon Scott emphasises that the relationship of human and animal is interdependent to each other. He clearly emphasis the need of human's kind gesture towards nature because like human, nature too responds to the way one deals with it. This is clearly evident in White Fang's life. White Fangs character and nature changes based on its encounter with humans.

Stewardship helps human build an amicable relationship with nature. London affirms that the loving nature of human will reflect in nature. It is an act of redemption. Stewardship becomes dine because of its act of redeeming nature. Scott is no longer considered a wolf tamer because his relationship towards White Fang is not of any personal gain but purely based on love. A steward can be equated to Christ who redeemed the world and humans by his graceful nature. London records this idea in the novel as,

Weedon Scott set himself the task of redeeming White Fang- or rather, of redeeming mankind from the wrong it had done to White Fang. It was the matter of principle and conscience. He felt that the ill done to White Fang was a debt incurred by man and that it must be paid. So, he went out his way to be especially kind to the fighting Wolf. Each day he made it a point to caress and pet White Fang, and to do it at length. (WF 313)

The above lines from the text are the clear evidence of the divine character of a real stewardship. The act of love and kindness by Weedon Scott created a huge impact on the character of White Fang. White Fang starts to realise the warmth of human and its character starts to tune towards goodness of Weedon Scott. Another aspect of a divine stewardship is, it never demands order and hierarchy. Though Weedon Scott is the owner of White Fang, he never treats White Fang an inferior being. He never forces and expects any kind of submissive act from it, rather he waits patiently for the transformation he expects from the wild dog. London skilfully etched this idea as "It required weeks to accomplish. But Weedon Scott never give up" (WF 229). Throughout his relationship with White Scott, he never demands any submission from it. This made White Fang to restore the bond with nature.

Human and nature share the unique bond which need a lot of care and acceptance on the part of humans. To restore the lost amicable relationship with nature, humans should realise their role as a steward and not an owner of nature. They should realise the way they treat nature is a reflection of themselves. London through his characters Gray Beaver and Beauty Smith informs the world that nature suffers because of the selfish attitude of humans. Their rude behaviour reflected in the character of White Fang and their ferocious attitude is reflected in its character.

Scott realises his role of stewardship and the plight humans entrust on nature. Through his divine human qualities of love, compassion, and trust he transforms the ferocious nature of White Fang which is a

positive sign that London gives to the humans that through divine stewardship the nature and humans can live an amicable and happy life on Earth.

What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man- nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink the older one (Hierbert152).

Through Weedon Scott and his divine stewardship, London envisioned that happy living with nature is possible. It is a call to the present humans to be a steward for an amicable life with nature.

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