

A Clarion Call for the 'Other': An Analysis of Eco-thrillers of Farley Mowat

R.James Ligorias
Dept. of English
Faculty of Education
SabhaUniversity,
Libya

Abstract: *Farley Mowat's skillful delineation of fact and fiction marks a very thin line between the two. It permits him to write amazingly, taking modernism to its extreme. He breathes life into old themes and endows with up-to-date taste and variety. In his writings, he retains the sensitivity of a man who is bewildered by what happens in his environs and who must tell about it. His fictional strategy is nothing but his close association of himself with nature and wildlife and of course, with his targeted audiences to launch his theory of ecology. From travel accounts and adventures to beast fables, his writings take the reader into a state vivid imagination, poetic descriptions and commitments to the ideals outlined by him. The writings are so magically blended with the autobiographical accounts, thrilling authorial narrativity and fictional parametres that they seize to have a unique genre.*

This paper aims at analyzing the fictional characteristics of the select ecothrillers of Farley Mowat. In fact, Mowat is accepted popularly as a travel and wildlife writer basically for young readers. In addition, some also consider him as one of the Canadian writers on contemporary ecological matters. But, his critical literary dimension is yet unexplored because of its hidden existence all through his major works. To prove this, the terms like "fictional analysis", and "eco-thrillers" are correlated to formulate the logic of the thrust of the paper. In addition, in some writings, the old themes and events are revived with up-to-date taste and variety; or the author reflects on the reality of cause and effect both through experiential and imaginary ways.

The specialty of focusing on this aspect is that Mowat is unique in his creative arts by giving imaginative colour to his organic experiences. When, the writers mostly opt for social realities of existentialism or surrealism or even absurdity, Mowat uses "chance over craft and employ metafiction to undermine the author's 'univocation' by combining multiple cultural elements"(Hutcheon 20). Mowat is a literary genius with a much warranted purpose of dragging attention of all through data based discoveries of ecological crisis. The writings make a clarion call for the protection and safety of the 'others' that found refuge in the world of Mowat.

As mentioned earlier, the next aspect is the "fictional analysis", which is a key to the criticism of fiction. In case of Farley Mowat, this aspect is very much associated with fast decaying of wildlife and environment and it is coloured with the nostalgic evidences. The narrative technique includes both reason and emotion with due proportion. In addition, he bears the elements of two streams viz. eco-literature in one hand and thriller in the other. The blend of both recommends a sub-genre phrase called "eco-thriller" appropriate for his writings. Thus the writings of Mowat,"explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with acute awareness of devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities" (Abrams 71). This gives the world both thrilling and degraded information with humane touch. Mowat successfully brings about the postmodern literary taste by converting anthropocentric aspects to eco-centric aspects.

Farley McGill Mowat was born on May 12, 1921, in Belleville, Ontario. He is a conservationist and one of Canada's most widely-read authors. He achieved fame with the publication of his books on the Canadian North, such as *People of the Deer* (1952) and *Never Cry Wolf* (1963). However his magnum opus is *People of the Deer*.

After a prolonged experience in the war, he came back to Canada and studied biology at the University of Toronto. During a field trip to Northern Canada, Mowat became outraged at the plight of the Ihalmiut, a caribou Inuit band, which he attributed to misapprehension by Whites. His outrage led him to publish his first novel, *People of the Deer* (1952). This book made Mowat a literary celebrity and contributed to the shift in the Canadian government's Inuit policy. This work was followed by an award winning children's book, *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), written about two teenagers, one White and one Cree who were lost in the Arctic.

The Dog Who Wouldn't Be (1957) and *Owls in the Family* (1961) are humorous memoirs about his childhood. During this period, Mowat also wrote two non-fiction accounts of the exploits of salvage tugs belonging to Foundation Maritime. The first, *The Grey Seas Under* (1958) chronicles the career of the tug Foundation Franklin, and the second, *The Serpent's Coil* (1961) chronicles the rescue of the British freighter Leicester in the face of two hurricanes by the tugs Foundation Josephine and Foundation Lillian. This is followed by *A Whale for the Killing* (1972) which presents the shooting of a trapped and doomed whale as an inhumane tragedy.

A brief discussion of his major writings is needed to focus the logic of the paper. Farley Mowat's *People of the Deer* is based upon a series of travels the author undertook in the Barrens region, west of Hudson Bay. During his stay in the Barrens, he studied the lives of the Ihalmiut, a small population of Inuit people, whose existence heavily relied on the large population of caribou that lived there. When Farley Mowat visited the Ihalmiuts in 1946-'47, their population had already dwindled to forty. Their destruction was due to changes in their hunting dynamics, introduction of flour and sugar into their diet and the failure of their primary food source, caribou. For two years, Mowat shared their hard life - the bleak winters, the shortages of food,

their passionate struggle to withstand the intrusion of White men. He found that they were in harmony with the land. Even when they were thrown to edge of extinction, they never tried to run away from their land. Besides fascinating descriptions of nature and life in the Arctic, Mowat's book tells a sad story of how this people, once prosperous and wide spread, slowly degraded to the brink of extinction due to unscrupulous economic interest and lack of understanding. J. A. Smith comments on this and his book beautifully:

Mr. Mowat impresses us, in the last instance, because he has a poet's as well as an ecologist's grasp of the connection between a landscape and the life in it. The Mountie whom he once asked about the Barrens was prompt in his reaction: That damn and bloody space—it just goes on and on until it makes you want to cry, or scream—or cut your own damn throat. Mr. Mowat makes us see it in different terms: the huddle of tents, the mounds of bleached bones and antlers, the brown river of deer, the line of the Inukok stretching into the distance—those stone men whom the Ihalmiut traveller built as he passed, not signposts, nor landmarks, but the guardians who stolidly resisted the impalpable menace of space uncircumscribed, which can unhinge the finite minds of men. (Smith :18) (Check documentation. Mention the year of publication)

Never Cry Wolf (1963) is credited with shifting the mythology and fear of wolves. It is an account of Mowat's official mission to study wolves for the Canadian wildlife Service. His study brought out many unusual facts about their pattern of living and disproved many of the commonly held myths about these magical creatures of the wild. Canadian authorities suspected that wolves were destroying caribou

herds. Mowat observed that the major food source for wolves in the Canadian wilderness was field mice, not caribou. By writing *Never Cry Wolf* Farley Mowat cautions that still there is time to prevent mankind from committing yet another in the long list of his crimes against nature – the elimination, from this planet, of a fellow creature which has an equal right to live. It is the common human failure that refuses the relationship with the wild life. Farley Mowat outbursts in this way:

Somewhere to the eastward a wolf howled; lightly, questioningly. I knew the voice, for I had heard it many times before. It was George, sounding the wasteland for an echo from the missing members of his family. But for me it was a voice which spoke the lost world which once was ours before we chose the alien role; a world which I had glimpsed and almost entered only to be excluded, at the end, by my own self. (Mowat 63:63)

Mowat himself admitted that he took poetic license with the writing of the book, blending fact and fiction somewhat for effect and to make his message stronger.

The Dog Who wouldn't Be (1957) is Mowat's book for juvenile audiences. It demonstrates his desire to retain the pleasant memories of his childhood. His subjects are the old time-tested children's story of pet animals and family life. But in his books *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* and *Owls in the Family* they take a new dimension. Mutt and his playmates, Wol and Weeps challenge their classification with animals and birds. "Within the genre of the animal story, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* belongs to the very popular class in which pets are the protagonists". (Alec 44) Essentially it is a modern beast fable that fits the genre of employing an animal to satirize man. It is Mutt who focuses the irony of the story. Mutt is not human but he has many of the characteristics of the human. Mutt is all dog and a little more. He is a creature

dedicated to escaping the limitations of a dog's life. His whole existence is an effort to be something more than nature verdicts. He cared for his character all through his life. "Subconsciously, he no longer believed that he was a dog at all, yet he did not feel that he was human" (Mowat 17) Wherever Mutt went he left deep-etched memories. No doubt, the aspects of humour and fiction add to the colour of such writings. But this biographical writing exceeds the level to philosophise friendship with the dog. *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* is an ingenious mixture of beast fable, tall tale, and satire. And, as Sheila Egoff notes in *The Republic of Childhood* (1967),

Mutt, the puckishly eccentric dog-hero, may be seen also as a portrait of the writer as a young man. Even so, the book's humor seems forced when compared to the more sophisticated brand found in *Never Cry Wolf*. This work is vintage Mowat, uniting his talents as amateur biologist, energetic advocate of a much slandered animal, and naturalist, with a born entertainer's sense of what makes a story interesting to readers. (Egoff 37)

Mowat's book stands apart from Marshall Saunders's *Beautiful Joe*, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Dog Crusoe*, E. R. Young's *Hector, My Dog*, and Morley Callaghan's *Luke Baldwin's Vow* and from Roberts's and Seton's stories with their attempts to examine animal psyche and character. It could be argued easily that Mowat satirizes all of these in his book, for

it treats lightheartedly and even irreverently everything that they took so seriously, that Mutt, the animal hero or anti-hero (the very name suggests anti-elitism), embodies Mowat's own sense of fun in a world of make-believe, or that Mutt and Wol reflect something of the revolt

against the status quo of the time as the dogs of the earlier books reflected the attitudes of their day and age. (Lucas 41)

Owl in the Family is the sequel to *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. Farley Mowat's funniest book tells the adventures of two owls from Saskatchewan: Wol and Weeps. They shake up a whole neighbourhood, turn a house topsy-turvy and outsmart Mutt, the dog hero of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. Wol is a wonderful bird, who brings dead skunks to the family dinner table and terrorizes the minister, the postman, and the French teacher. Weeps is a comical bird, afraid of everything except Mutt. The emotional attachment of Mowat to these wild beings has been well presented by Borland as he says,

Wol was rescued as a pathetic owlet from a storm-wrecked nest. Weeps came out of an old oil barrel in an alley. They grew up together in Mowat family and like Mutt, wanted to be people too. (Borland 62:30)

Wol and Weeps lived like human beings. They grew fast. Although they were grown-up, neither of them seemed to know what their wings were for. They tried to do what the kids around them did. *Owls in the Family* maintains the same realistic-fanciful perspective as *The Dog who wouldn't Be*. It is more than a sequel, for not only are the characters identical, but so also are many of the scenes, probably the result of the pleasures of memory rather than a flagging imagination. *Lost in the Barrens* (1956) is a story of high adventure or misadventure of two boys Awasin, a Cree Indian and Jamie, a Canadian orphan. In search of a viking tomb the boys lose touch with their hunting companions and have to winter on the barrens. The boys move from crisis to crisis, after the traditional fashion of boy's stories, and finally all ends happily, thanks to Peetyuk, a half-white Eskimo. The most distinguished section of the book by far,

however, revolves around the boys' lives in Hidden Valley. Mowat, like Daniel Defoe, could make the most of a situation in which man and nature meet, not as rivals but as partners. The combination of dramatic setting and narrative skill that makes for a compelling tale is best exemplified in the books of Roderick Haig-Brown and Farley Mowat. Both are bound within a balanced pattern between reason and passion, an ideal infused with knowledge and tempered with responsibility. These writers stand far above their Canadian contemporaries and rank high in the view of international literati. Both Haig-Brown and Mowat have come to the writing of outdoor books almost inevitably. Confirmed naturalists who have given years of their lives to exploring the Canadian wilderness, active and dogged campaigners for conservation, they have a feeling for the Canadian land and a knowledge of it that are genuine and deep.

More important, they are thoroughly professional writers who have learned how to shape their feelings rather than just express them; they know that even in children's stories a character remains vivid long after the most ingenious contrivances of plot have been forgotten.

(Egoff 164-65)

In his *A Whale for the Killing* (1972) Farley Mowat rejoiced of the chance to study at close ranges one of the most magnificent animals in creation. To his horror, town people amused themselves by shooting at the whale with rifles. The author undertakes a heroic battle to save the life of the Whale. Even though he observed the torture of the trapped whale as an outlet for the frustration of the town people who had been trapped by the 'progress' of industrialization, the incident deepened only Mowat's love of animals and embitterment with his fellow beings. In writing the book Mowat reserved his harshest words for the government and for scientists, who reacted too

slowly – or didn't react at all – to save the whale's life. This was an occasion to see the strange relation between humans and the other natural creatures. He lapsed into sheer distress thinking of all these. He writes beautifully:

The whale was not alone in being trapped. We were all trapped with her. If the natural patterns of her life had been disrupted, then so had been ours. An awesome mystery had intruded into the closely circumscribed order of our lives; one that we terrestrial bipeds could not fathom, and one, therefore, that we could react against with instinctive fear, violence, and hatred. This riddle from the deeps was the measure of humanity's unquenchable ignorance of life. This impenetrable secret, which had become the core of our existence in this place, was a mirror in which we saw our own distempered faces . . . and they were ugly. (Mowat 168)

Mowat through his writings not only highlights the ecological accounts but also automatically falls into narrative patterns and forms. For example, his *People of the Deer* and *Never Cry Wolf* are travel experiences with much of real accounts and reflect consciousness and reality in an exaggerated manner. There is a sort of fictional feeling expressed in all his narratives. Like any fiction, the writings of Farley Mowat have definite plot and setting. In addition, his characters, mostly animals, have never been portrayed simply as animals. Whether wild or pet, they are portrayed with their unique personified features. This kind of portrayal is an aspect of fiction too. Very often, the authorial point of view intrudes into his narratives with a whirling movement of subjective and objective expressions.

In each of his writings, the story is exposed and proceeds ahead normally till it reaches a discovery or even discoveries and simultaneously foreshadow about the

effect finally. Both his beast fable *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* and *A Whale for the Killing* are tragedies, where as *Never Cry Wolf* and *People of the Deer* explore myth and enlivened with nostalgia. In all his writings both the final message and the role of the antagonist are implied. The characters are naturally chosen and have ironic representations carrying meanings befitting to the environment. The novelist maximizes the chronological relative details of the main plot with a skillful dealing with the natural casualties at the nonlinear narrative levels. Each of his writings gives us a panoramic view of nature and human life as mutually dependent. Although the essence of his writings does not tend towards the organic aspects of fiction, still then, it is achieved unnoticed and very much evidential as in his *My Father's Son* and *No Birds Sang*. Fictional aspects are reinforced in his reply to an interview: "I am an entertainer . . . I do like to pleasure my audience. If that makes my writing more acceptable then it will be more effective. My writing is a communication between myself and the reader. I am very aware of the unseen reader"(Shepstone 92:3). Descriptions of Mowat not only refer to his "commitment to ideals," "poetic descriptions and vivid images," but also to his strong antipathies, which provoke "ridicule, lampoons and, at times, evangelical condemnation."

Thus Farley Mowat's fictional strategy is an outcome of his close association with nature, his own consciousness and the targeted audience. Like Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe or Rudyard Kipling, his aim is to go on giving the accounts of his association with and commitment to ecological concern but his sincerity in reflecting these have automatically patterned into the parameters of fiction.

References

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New Delhi: Cengage Learning, 2005
- Borland, Hal. "Owls in the Family", *New York Times Book Review*, March 11, 1962.
- Egoff, Sheila. "And All the Best Stories," *A Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature in English*, Toronto: OUP, Canadian Branch, 1975
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Online Edition, 2002
- Lucas, Alec. "Farley Mowat: Writer for Young People": *Canadian Children's Literature; A Journal of Criticism and Review*, No 5. 1976.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, London: Portledge, 1984.
- Mowat, Farley. *Never Cry Wolf*. London: Bantam Books, 19863.
- - - . *A Whale for the Killing*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1986.
- Shepstone, Joe. "Farley Mowat: On Writing Fiction, Non-fiction and Autobiography" *A Reviewing Journal of Canadian Materials for Young People*, Vol.20, No.6.Nov. 1962.
- Smith, J.A. "In the Barrens", *The New Statesman and Nation*, Vol. XIIIV, No.1129, Oct.25, 1959.