

Ecological Concern in Kiran Desai's novels

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is very closely associated with human development and industrialization. However the concern for ecology and the threat that caused by the misuse of nature by human being has shaken the literary people and ultimately the branch of eco-criticism took place. Ecology and eco-criticism are the significant aspects for the literary study and research. People are becoming conscious about the environment. Environmental balance is very important in this globalized world. Many poets and novelists have become eco-conscious or environment conscious. They have used Nature as landscape, as beautiful atmosphere/lively atmosphere such as Arundhati Roy, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markanday, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, many more in whole over the world. The literature has become a mode of expression about environment and its importance in human life and universe. Due to the eco-imbalance and the environmental pollution, the whole world is under the curse of global warming. The healthy well balanced environment/atmosphere is the need of time. The present research paper highlights the ecological concern in Kiran Desai novels *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

Key words: Ecological Concern, ecocriticism, environmental balance, pollution.

Having emerged on the Indian English landscape in late 1990s, Kiran Desai, a young and vibrant author with innate artistic flairs, has created a discrete place for herself in the constellation of Indian women novelists in English. She is the daughter of the renowned fictionist Anita Desai, who explored in the Indian English novels, concerns like socio-political, moral, racial, emigrational, psycho-analytical as well as essential man-human-relationships in the post-independence era. In particular, innovative efforts of existing women novelists have been quite splendid during the last decades of the past century. In the series of Booker Prize winners after Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy; Kiran Desai has celebrated her name and extinguished the obscurity and despondency in the family surroundings which had anticipated her mother to be triumphant over the coveted

honour. My humble attempt here is to read her novels from the point of view of the inter-connection between the world of environment and the material world of humans.

"Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard," is a tale of a young man named Sampath Chawla who lives in the town of Shahkot, India. He is born on the night a severe drought ends when a ferocious monsoon sweeps over the region. The setting of the story is in a small town, Shahkot where the weather is intolerably hot. Many people suggest offering a variety of probable solutions:

Mr. Chawla himself submitted a proposal to the forestry department for the cutting and growing of vegetation in elaborate patterns; the army proposed the scattering and driving of clouds by jet planes flying in a special geometric formation; the police a frog wedding to be performed by temple priests. Vermaji of the university invented a giant fan which he hoped would attract the southern monsoon clouds by creating a wind tunnel moving north toward the Himalayas. (2)

The unbearable heat and dry condition depress the local people. During this terrible crisis, Sampath is born as an auspicious sign to the Shahkotians. The connection between 'terrible condition of draught' and Kulfi growing 'bigger as it got worst' (3) has the make-believe element in it. These paranormal and freakish activities can be read as premonitions of something quite menacing for the baby. And this, no doubt, is an instance of a mystic deed:

. . . all of a sudden a shadow fell across the sun and magically, as quickly as a winter's day tumbles into smoky evening and then night, the white-lit afternoon deepened into the colour of old parchment as the sky darkened. Curtains billowed white out of every window. Bits of news paper and old plastic bags turned cartwheels in the indigo streets. The air thinned and stirred in a breeze that brought goose bumps out upon her arms. 'Look!'

Kulfi shouted. 'Here comes the rain!' (9)

Kulfi is the first person to predict the coming of rain. She, in this way, can be compared to the Mother Nature; pure, slender, delicate and dishevelled. Sampath is basically an idler and this is evident when one notes his action of watching a fly 'vibrating like a machine circled lower and lower over the bowl of fruit that had been bought after much deliberation from the fruit stall'(22). When Sampath fails to get any government job, his father calls him 'a cross between potatoes and human being' (26).

His search for a new direction in life is described through a snake imagery: Sampath thought of snakes that leave the withered rags of their old skins behind and disappear into grass, their presence unbetrayed by even a buckle in the foliage; of insects that crack pods and clay shells, that struggle from the warm blindness of silk and membrane to be lost in enormous skies. He thought of how he was leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions toward nothing. (48) On leaving the buildings far behind, he feels the freshness of greenery bloom within his tired frame. Soon he leaps from the window of the bus and runs towards an old orchard visible far up the slope.

Finally he climbs up a guava tree and settles among the leaves. In the branches of the tree he experiences calm and contentment, as the writer comments, 'Yes, he was in the right place at last' (51). Trees can never be the abode of human beings, for it is open to all sorts of hardships unbearable to a human being. But to Sampath, such a life is a heap of immense joy, he feels himself much closer to Nature itself, and decides to spend all his life in plenty of its bountifulness:

Concealed in the branches of the tree he had climbed, Sampath felt his breathing slow and a wave of peace and contentment overtook him. All about him the orchard was spangled with the sunshine of a November afternoon, webbed by the reflections of the shifting foliage and filled with a liquid intricacy of sun and shadow. The warmth nuzzled against his cheek like the muzzle of an animal . . . Before his eyes, flitting and darting all about him, was a flock of parrots, a vivid jewel-green, chattering and shrieking in the highest of spirits. (51)

All of them suggest different plans to catch the monkeys engaged in ravaging and looting throughout the town. Some propose to convince Sampath to get down from the tree, because they believe that Sampath is the idol of the monkeys and if he leaves the orchard then the monkeys will not find any inspiration to continue the destructive work. But Sampath is resolute and his reply shows his deep attachment with nature:

"I am not going to live anywhere but in this tree," said Sampath. "And the monkeys are not drunk right now. They are only playing." When his father had gone he realized his heart was thumping. He could not get the horrible thought out of his mind. Leave his tree? Never. Never ever, he thought, his body trembling with indignation." (127)

The environment shift in her novel to 'fantastic realism' turns the theme into an uncanny mix of fantasy and magic. The matter of the novel is critiquing the 'normal' world besides the supernatural perception of some characters that show how the 'other' world has so much more to offer to the primary world. It reflects upon the realities of life, nature, animal world and finally man as the supreme power, who gains the perception of looking beyond the realities of everyday life. The writer is inviting the reader to react to the 'environment' of the story as text, from which the final message comes: the destruction of nature eventually leads to destruction of man.

Sampath considered himself, his mother and the monkeys were a band together and he was not ready to let the company break. The narrator describes: *And now they were getting rid of his favorite company in the orchard. Didn't they know how fond he was of the monkeys? And didn't they know how little he cared for all of them? Why didn't they take their advertising, their noise and dirt, their cars and buses and trucks, why didn't they take their little minds and leave him to his peace and quiet, to his beloved monkeys, to his beautiful landscape that was being so dirtily and shoddily defaced? (181,182)*

He who once felt happy for his environment in the orchard, later regretted for its absurd transformation. On the day set to trap the monkeys, Sampath was asked to climb down the tree. But he realized that if he climbs down once, it would not happen to climb up again. Now he was unprepared to get down the tree and was not sure that he could find a better place than the orchard when he first arrived which inspired and suited all his imagination. So Sampath was found dead in his mother's cooking pot.

"The Inheritance of Loss" travels beyond boundaries of continents, maps, and the intricate ethno-racial relationship between people having different cultural background. In this novel Kanchenjunga is presented to have paid for the brutality of human beings- that beauty, serenity, and quiet and calm atmosphere stands totally destroyed- war for power is the causal factor. Near similar things are also witnessed in Kalimpong, in North eastern part of our country. Nepali insurgency was the causative factor for an un-estimated loss of human life and their belongings. Animals too are mercilessly killed. What is the resultant effect of

this? Imbalance in the ecosystem gets created afresh. Value of both human and animal life stands exposed, naked before the self styled civilised world.

Kiran Desai approach is eco-centric. She has also focused the environment of east-west encounter, racial prejudice, political turbulence and its harmful effect on the balance of eco-system. Her novel starts with the delineation of the natural beauty of mount Kanchenjunga. She delineates the beautiful mountain, and the changing seasons charmingly. The mountain is also used to reveal the gloomy mood of the orphan girl, Sai. Desai describes the house of the retired Judge which is situated at blissful and beautiful atmosphere. The Judge lives with his pet dog Mutt, grand-daughter Sai and the Cook. The novelists start her description in the following manner: *“A crumbling isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered judge. He wants to live in peaceful atmosphere by isolating himself from the messy world”*. (1) Mist is moving like a water creature across great flanks of mountains Sai is observing Kanchenjunga, its wizard phosphorescence with a shiver. There is misty atmosphere and forest is old and thick. The bamboo thickets which have grown thirty feet are personified as gloomy. The trees are personified as moss slung giants, beunioned and misshapen; tentacle with the roots of orchids. Kalimpong ecologically rich, situated in northeastern Himalaya. Indian Nepalese were fighting for their own country. It was important juncture where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim. Beauty of Kalimpong and its ecological richness not only attracted but created great hunger in Chinese to possess this land.

Kiran Desai describes mist which was working like a dragon dissolving, undoing, and drawing borders. Beautiful mountains glowing like opal, thick forest of north eastern Himalaya is valuable wealth of India. It is a jewel in the crown of India. There was wetter climate, a rusty green landscape and paddy fields. There was Teesta river leaping and flowing between white banks of land. *„by the riverbank wild water racing by, the late evening sun in polka dots through the trees, they parted. To the east was Kalimpong, barely managing to stay on the saddle between Deolo and Ringkingpong hills. To the west was Darjeeling, skidding down the Singalila mountain. The nun tried to offer a final counsel, but her voice was drowned out by the river roar [Desai31]*.

The love affair of Sai and Gyan is also interesting from the point of view of nature-man relationship. Both of them joyously love to enjoy the luxuriance of nature and feel enlightened in its bosom. Gyan is a good student of Accountancy, is Nepali by birth, is a graduate indeed, but has not been able to find a good job. When he comes to Cho Oyo to teach Sai, the natural beauty pleases him, *“He enjoyed the walk to Cho Oyu and experienced a refreshing and simple happiness, although it took him two hours uphill, from Bong Busti where he lived, the light shining through thick bamboo in starry, jumping chinks, imparting the feeling of liquid shimmering”* (71). Similarly, Sai’s happiness knows no bounds in the monsoon months. She is able to understand the greatest philosophy of love, *‘the greatest love is love that’s never shown’* (87). Sai remains calm and cheerful during the period when Gyan used to come and teach her; the only time when her life in Kalimpong is perfectly peaceful. She used to sit on the veranda and enjoy the different shades and moods of the seasons. Neither Gyan nor Sai fail to grasp the charming spells of rain in Kalimpong:

A fine drizzle spelled an ellipsis on the tin roof. . . . Moments clocked by precisely, and finally she couldn’t bear it—she closed her eyes and felt the terrified measure of his lips on hers, trying to match one shape with the other. (125)

Our relationship with nature is a matter of faith. chaos in the life of modern man, it is necessary that man must make efforts to revive and re-establish the bonds of kinship with nature.

Desai throws light on how culture of human being interferes in the nature and creates serious impact on it. Biju remembers everything about his village. He used to sit with his father outside of home in evening. His father was quite happy with that life. „*how peaceful our life is. How good the roti tastes there it is because the atta is ground by hand, not by machine and because it is made on choolah, which is better than anything cooked on gas or a kerosene stove. Fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk, still warm from buffalo*” [Desai103] This underlines importance of natural life of village where everything is fresh and original. Biju understood importance and delight of village life when he got bad experience in America.

Ecological wealth of birds like bats, eagles, butterflies, pet animals like pet buffaloes, horses, elephants, donkeys, snakes, caterpillar gives this novel crucial importance from ecological perspective. People face natural disasters like landslides, storms, thick fog, extreme cold, and aqueous season. Desai has beautifully personified nature. She has stick human qualities to nature. The sky gaped lit by flame, blue fire ensnared the pine tree that sizzled to an instant death, leaving a charcoal, a singed smell, a crosshatch of branches over the lawn. Aqueous season was four to five months. It created big effect on each and every thing. „*Condensation fogged the glass of clocks and clothes hanging to dry in the attic remained wet for a weak*” [Desai 106].

People learnt to adjust with environmental problems. It was difficult to communicate with each other. Jhora overflowed its bank and carried the bridge downstream. Gorkhas were expressing their discontent through strikes and procession but it could not become successful. Due to excessive rain streets had flowed. Because of bad weather everybody was imprisoned in their house. They could not do outdoor movements.

Thus we see that Desai’s “The Inheritance of Loss” covers almost all the different concepts and definitions that have been put forth by various critics of ecocriticism. Her novel is rich with eco-critical references and among the recent fictions can be most aptly given an eco-critical reading. Thus, this novel begins with the overshadowing calm and serene nature, where human beings are responsible for their own. Miseries; it also ends with the shining Kanchenjunga gleaming brightly on the seeming possibility of the reconciliation between a father and a son.

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