

Loss of Natural Harmony in the Fiction of Kiran Desai in the Light of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

There are many Indian women writers in the history of English literature who have got worldwide acclaim and have won many prestigious National and International awards like: Anita Desai, Kamala Markandya, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Panwar Jhabvala, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. Kiran Desai is one of the greatest writers, who has won Man Booker Prize for her Second Novel "The Inheritance of Loss". She is a socially committed writer and is very sensitive towards the problems of society. In her works, she raises those problems, which are faced by society. With the society, she is very concerned towards the nature. In her debut novel "The Hullabaloo in Guava Orchard" and "The Inheritance of Loss", she deals with the problems of environmental crisis and portrays the nature like a character. In her portrayal, the nature is very lifelike and animate. She delineates both side of nature light as well as dark also. On the one hand she shows the bountifulness of nature, on the other hand she shows the wrath of nature also. Kiran Desai is a mouthpiece for the young generation of India. This paper focuses on this thing that except human beings no other one is responsible for the loss of this natural harmony.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, loss of natural harmony, ecological balance.*

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Introduction

Ecocriticism is a critical approach, which began in the USA in the late 1980s, and in the UK in the early 1990s, and since it is still an ‘emergent’ movement. Ecocriticism is also known as ‘literary ecology’ and green literary studies’. In simple word, it is a theory that shows the relationship between human being and natural environment. Man is surrounded by nature and this nature affects every action of human being directly or indirectly. This approach in itself is a very broad approach. We can say that this theory is like a baby or it is still in a diaper, since it has not developed, rather it is developing. There are a number of theories being floated and developed under the premise of “ecocriticism.” Ecocriticism is like a tree and the other theories which gained root from this tree are like the branches of this tree. Ecofeminism may be a branch of this tree, which sprouted from the same root. As it is a study of literature and physical environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, in the same way ecofeminism is the study which shows the relationship between the women and the earth. In ecocriticism the exploitation of the nature is shown and in ecofeminism the exploitation of women is shown. The decay of the earth as one and the same drama as the violation of women. The aim of the former one is to revive the consciousness of human beings toward nature and the aim of second one is to end the domination and oppression. As Cheryll Glotfelty noted in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Ecocriticism Reader*:

“Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” (Glotfelty xviii)

Human being and nature both are an aspect of a coin. Without the one, there is no identity of another. For their needs they both are dependent on each other. It is a kind of reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, human beings survive the nature and on the other hand nature provides valuable gifts to human beings. It is an intimate relationship that goes hand in hand.

In the history of Indian English literature, there are a number of authors who have taken nature as the background of his/her novels. Thomas Hardy has taken ‘Wessex region’ as the background of his novels and R.K Narayan’s novels are called ‘Malgudi novels.’ This paper focuses on Kiran Desai’s two novels *Hullaballo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. These two novels can be studied ecocritically. Kiran Desai has depicted Indian as well as foreign nature and landscape in her novels.

Hullaballo in Guava Orchard is a debut novel of Kiran Desai. It is very rich in its natural setting. It presents a small town called Shahkot in North India. It is a fictitious small town, in state of Punjab. The setting of the novel is in a guava orchard. Desai in this novel confronts the serious issues of environmental crisis. The novel begins with the problem of global warming. The people of the Shahkot are waiting for monsoon but monsoon has not reached until the September. When the novel begins, Mr. Chawla is reading the newspaper and, he is engaged in sorting out the problem cause for the draught:

“It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spur of activity in Tierra del Fuego..... And Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India. And even Hungarian musician offers to draw rain clouds from Europe to India via the music of his flute.” (HIGO,1)

In the Shahkot, summer is very hot. By the end of September, the situation is so bad that famine relief camps have to be set up. A variety of solutions is offered by many people:

“Mr. Chawla himself submitted a proposal to the forgery department for the cutting and growing of vegetation in elaborate pattern; the army proposal the scattering of driving of clouds by jet planes flying in a special geometric formation, the police a frog wedding to be performed by temple priests.”(HIGO, 1-2)

When the situation is unbearable and the people of Shahkot are on the edge of draught, at that time Sampath is born. Shahkotians take him as the symbol of good omen, for, as he takes birth the rain begins. He has a brown birthmark on his cheek. The ‘birth’ and ‘the birthmark’ on his face are taken as an indication of a spiritual identity of a godly person. In the Indian tradition, rain is taken as the symbol of regeneration, fertility and purification. The birth of Sampath is followed by a rain, so it means a salvation from famine cursed land. Sampath is taken as a miracle by Shahkotians because they think that he has a connection with some supernatural agency born to save the land and the life of the people. His birth provides salvation to the people of Shahkot from the misfortune of draught. They say to kulfi that his son is destined to be a great person and he has come from a large and mysterious world that is beyond the thinking of them. Before the birth of Sampath the plane of Swedish army cross over the Shahkot. They do not stay in Shahkot. But after the birth of Sampath a plane throws a packet of food on front the house of Mr. Chawla. Therefore, the people of Shahkot call him Sampath, ‘Good Fortune.’

As Sampath grows up, he is very idle and inactive. He thinks different and does different works. In his behavior, he is very strange. If he sees a fly, he will see it continuously for a long time. Due to his strange behavior, he is not able to find a government job. He feels very restrictive in the world of civilized people. He considers that civilized world does not permit him to do something different and this world has the lack of pleasure. So, he always thinks to escape from this world. He says that this world is very detrimental to his mental health and he can get the bliss of pleasure only by escaping this world. He gets a job in the post office from the source of his father. But very soon he loses it. In the wedding of the boss's daughter marriage, he creates scandal. He goes into the room and in the room where, he sees the jewellery and perfumes. He wears all the jewellery and sees himself into mirror. After wearing the jewellery he feels as if he has transported into another world. He feels so because he always has an attraction towards the beauty. He comes out from the room and dances among the audience. After this incident, he feels trapped in a life he hates. Next day he runs away from house and takes shelter in a guava orchard. He climbs up the tree and sits on the branch of tree. Sitting there he feels calm and contentment as the writer says, "yes, he was in the right place at last" (HIGO, 51). For a common man tree can never be the abode. Because it is not easy to sit the whole day or night on a branch of a tree. Tree is an open place and a person has to face a number of hardships. But for Sampath the life of the tree is the greatest life. After getting the tree as his abode he feels immense joy as he has got the heap of wealth. Now, he feels himself close to nature, and decides to spend all his life in the lap of nature.

He loses so much in the beauty of nature that he does not care for anyone even his family also. His family pleads before him and they chose a girl for him. But he refuses to get married. His father rebukes him and calls him monkey. But all these things do not matter him. Very soon he becomes famous as 'monkey baba' and 'tree baba.' He begins to make prophecy. He tells the people about their personal matters. But the reality of his prophecies is something different. When he was in post office, he used to steal the personal information of the people from their letters. Now he uses that information. People are very surprised and they begin to consider him hermit or a soothsayer. Very soon, he becomes famous as he is published by a local newspaper. His family also begins to live in a hut that is situated in guava orchard. At first, Sampath refuses but later he agrees. Before the arrival of his family, he was dependent on the tree for his food. But now his mother cooks food for her. She uses the different type herbs, spices and ingredients in cooking the food.

After sometime, some monkeys arrive in the guava orchard. Sampath plays with monkeys. He feels a kind of identity with them. When once he was travelling in the bus a lady tries to make conversation with him. He jumps from the window of the bus, for, he hates the civilized world. Monkeys are the creature of nature because they live amid the beauty of nature and they are not rational and civilized like the people of civilized world. This is the reason that they are liked by Sampath. Everything is going well but the situation becomes bad at that time when monkeys get the five bottles of rum in orchard. They drink it and after it that is done by them is very dangerous. They make noise and leap from one tree to another. One of the devotees says, "It is not the monkey's fault. Always men are the degenerated ones (HIGO,123)." After this incident the monkeys become so habitual of the liquor that in the search of it they go to market and attack on the people and the shops. Many plans are made in order to catch the monkeys. Some people say that on the place of monkeys, they should convince Sampath to get down from the tree, for, if Sampath will not live in orchard then the monkeys will stop to do such destructive works. But Sampath is determined 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 has 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." (HIGO,127)

Sampath is not able to sleep that night. He awakes and spends his whole night by watching the beauty of nature and orchard. He thinks that darkness is better than the company of human beings. When the officers arrive in order to catch the monkeys, Mr. Chawla shouts to Sampath that they are coming. Monkeys get ready to escape. Sampath disappears and on his place a large guava left with a mark like Sampath's birthmark on it. Nothing is said clearly about the disappearance of Sampath. This large guava is picked up by a cinema monkey. After it he leaps from the tree with other monkeys. Nothing is left in the orchard except a crack of the tree branch and the dead body of the spy in the cauldron.

The Inheritance of Loss, is the second novel of Kiran Desai. Unlike her debut novel, the setting of this novel is also in a natural surrounded region. The setting is in Kalimpong, which is situated at foothills of northeastern Himalayan. It is partly set in India and partly in America. That's why the landscapes of both places, India as well as foreign are portrayed by the writer. The eco-critical approach

becomes very dominant from the very beginning of the text. Because unlike her debut novel it also begins with the scenery of nature:

“All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.”(IOL 1,)

In the above lines, Desai is praising the beauty of Kanchenjunga. In the hilly areas, mist is very common and this mist is moving like the water all over the mountains. Due to this mist, it is seeming as if, the day has gone and night is seeming. The house of the retired judge, Jemubhai Patel is situated amid the bountiful of nature. It is situated far away from the hustle and bustle of materialistic world and the beauty of nature can be seen easily from this place. In this house Jemubhai Patel lives with his orphaned granddaughter Sai, his cook and his pet female dog Mutt. We see that Sai is sitting on her veranda and she is reading an article. With the reading of the article she is also glancing the beauty of Kanchenjunga; “Every now and then she looked up at Kanchenjunga, observed its wizard phosphorescence with a shiver” (IOL,1). Everything is calm and serene. There is a great harmony between men and nature. But this harmony is disturbed by the intrude of GNLF boys:

“They had come through the forest on foot, in leather jackets from the Kathmandu black market, khaki pants, bandanas- universal guerilla fashion. One of the boys carried a gun.” (IOL,4)

The GNLF boys, who intentionally try to disturb the harmonious atmosphere of Kalimpong They deliberately try to change the heaven into a hell. Mainly their job is to terrorize and rob people. They enter in the house of retired judge with the demand of ‘free’ land and to take away his licensed rifle. The activities of the GNLF boys in the novel is the reflective of the turbulent mid 1980s period when Indian Nepalese were fed up with being treated like the minority on such a place where they were in majority. That’s why they were demanding the separate land, a separate country, or at least a separate state in which they can manage their own affairs. The demand of the GNLF is also the same. They are chiefly concerned with the demand of separate state for Gorkha tribes in northern West Bengal. Kalimpong is located in northern Himalayas where India blends with Bhutan and Sikkim. It is very rich in its natural surroundings. Due to its beauty and ecological richness, it has always been a point of attraction. It attracted Indians as well as foreign also. Its ecological richness created the hunger of greed in Chinese people. It is like a jewel and it enhances the beauty of

the Indian crown. The mist is treated like a dragon by Desai because by taking the advantage of mist the GNLf boys intrude in the house of the retired judge.

Further we see that there is a great connection between nature and Sai. When she arrives at Cho Oyu, she feels a kind of change in nature. She sees the both aspects of nature, light as well as dark also. When she is travelling by car she sees that on one side there are mountains and at another side are deep valleys. She thinks that even a slightest mistake would end her life. Then an idea comes in her mind that nature is beautiful but at the same time it is ugly also. Because anything can happen at any time. After living in the lap of nature Sai begins to relish every moment of Kalimpong. Nature also plays a great role in the life of Gyan. Gyan is a Nepali and he is the teacher of Sai. He comes daily to Kalimpong from Bong Basti by covering the distance of many miles. But he does not tire, rather he takes relish in it. It is so because in the natural surroundings of Kalimpong, he feels very happy. In the lap of its ecological surroundings his happiness knows no bounds. It shows that he is a great lover of nature. Biju, who is living in America feels very nostalgic towards the landscapes of India. He remembers his village life. The village was covered with silver grasses, taller than manthar and making howling sound, shushuuuu, shushuuuu, as the wind turned them this way and that. He understands the importance of village's pure life as he gets bad treatment in America. The relationship between the retired judge and Mutt can be taken as a relationship between man and nature. Whenever he is with Mutt he feels very happy. He treats her like his daughter. When the GNLf boys threaten to kill the Mutt, he gets ready to give away his licensed rifle. When one day Mutt disappears, he becomes totally crazy and almost weeps. Once the SDO comes in the house of the retired judge and sees his garden. After seeing the beautiful flower of garden, he says, "Beautiful blossom, justice Sahib. If you see such a sight, you will know there is God"(IOL,248). Though a man of police, he has a great affinity with nature and his observation shows that in order to escape from the chaos of modern life it is very necessary that human beings should return back in the lap of nature.

The activities of the GNLf boys cross all the limits. They fire the bullets and set fire the house of Government officials. Even they break the bridges. The whole Kalimpong is burning and the situation becomes worse. In the city there is curfew. That's why the people cannot go to market. At that time, it is the nature who provides them help. In order to satisfy the hunger of their belly they depend on natural food. It is the first time when they are taking the real food and this food helps the people of Cho Oyu to move on in their life. People are themselves responsible to destroy the

calm and harmonious atmosphere of nature. It is said in the novel “India had swallowed the jewel colored kingdom where blue hills they could see in distance.”

Thus, at last, it can be said that these both novels of Kiran Desai follow every point of Ecocritical approach. In the first one the setting of guava orchard provides its ecological background. It begins in guava orchard and also ends there. In the second novel the setting of Himalayan mountains and its forest provides its natural background. It begins with the beauty of nature and ends with the beauty of nature where the shining Kanchenjunga gleaming brightly. In both the novels, human beings are responsible to destroy the calmness and beauty of nature. Disorder takes place in guava orchard only when human beings arrive there. The attack of monkeys on human beings can be taken as the revenge of nature. In both the novels the human beings try to possess the nature and want to know the secrets of nature. But in doing so they forget that nature does not give the right to conquer herself. We can get the blessings of nature only by relying on it. Mistakes are made by human beings but nature has to pay for the mistakes of human beings. Nature always forgives human beings but in spite of it she is treated very brutally by human beings. Men try to overpower nature. But at that time nature rebukes them and shows her wrath. Now a day's nature is being gobbled up very rapidly by human beings in order to fulfill their demands. That's why the ecological balance is the foremost need of today.

In her fiction Kiran Desai has shown great concern with this ecological balance. In her fiction we find a cry to maintain this balance and harmony. Her aim is to make the people sensible with ecological issues. She wants to draw the attention of the people in order to save the nature from destruction. She appeals to care it and create it.

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