



## An Introspection of Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave*: An Eco-critical Analysis

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### Abstract

Pankaj Sekhsaria is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (C-TARA) IIT Bombay. His literary contributions are environment-oriented. His debut novel, *The Last Wave: An Island Novel*, has the themes of eco-criticism, deforestation, displacement of the Jarawa community, and the impact of climate change on the environment and ecological consciousness. Further, the novel *The Last Wave: An Island Novel* supports bioregionalism. *The Last Wave* unfolds the damage done to Andaman and Nicobar, an archipelago of the Bay of Bengal, due to the influx of a huge population. Modernization has taken a toll on the non-human counterparts. This paper aims to raise an ecological consciousness among the audience to witness the extent of depletion done by the humans to natural resources. This paper explores an eco-sensibility that voices out to curb the ecological disasters. *The Last Wave* voices out for bioregionalism, which aims to have a sustainable environment for humans to live. *The Last Wave* unfolds the terrible impact of the tsunami on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the way human and non-human counterparts have dealt with its aftermath. *The Last Wave* is an alarm for the world to take a serious note of ecological disasters and the need to address the way urbanization is ruining the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. *The Last Wave* is the saga of adventurous facts of history and an analysis of a vulnerable ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Bioregionalism, Ecological consciousness, Ecological disaster, sustainable environment.

Pankaj Shekhsaria is an emerging name in the literary world. Pankaj Shekhsaria is a member of the environmental action group Kalpvriksha, where he works on the issues of

the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He is a freelancer, journalist, photographer, and author. His latest work is *Island in Flux: The Andaman and Nicobar Story* (published by HarperCollins

India, 2017), and his novel, which talks about the sensitive issue of the island, is *The Last Wave – an Island* Novel published in 2014. He has completed his graduation from Pune University in Mechanical Engineering and followed this with a post-graduate degree in Mass Communication from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, in 1998. He has done a doctorate in philosophy in Science and Technology Studies (STS) from Maastricht University, Netherlands. The title of his thesis is Enculturing Innovation – Indian Engagements with Nanotechnology. He has worked as a senior project scientist at the DST-Centre for Policy Research, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi. Currently Pankaj Shekhsaria is working as an associate professor at the Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (C-TARA), IIT Bombay.

This paper studies Pankaj Shekhsaria's novel *The Last Wave*, incorporating the ideas of bioregionalism. Bioregionalism is the philosophy that opines that political, economic, cultural, and social systems are highly sustainable and justified when they are organized around the naturally defined areas of bioregions (similar to eco-regions). Bioregionalism is an ecological movement that aims to elude the political borders to make the world as one bioregion. Bioregionalism voices out for pacing down the ongoing high-speed industrialization. According to bioregionalism, modern lifestyles have secluded human beings from nature; as a result, the Earth is becoming vulnerable to the environmental crisis. The modern lifestyle has been disturbing the eco-balance of the Earth. Bioregionalism demands a sustainable environment. Bioregionalism is a progressive movement for establishing harmony between human beings and nature. There is an existing global voice for a sustainable environment. According to the Brundtland Report, sustainable development is defined as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of

future generations to meet their own needs." (Alexander: 1987)

The term bioregionalism was given currency by Peter Berg in the 1970s an American author who deals with environmental concerns. Bioregion is literary and etymologically a life – unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities in the other words, referred to as a life place. (Thayer: 2003)

Pankaj Shekhsaria's *The Last Wave* explores the Andaman and Nicobar as a bioregion. The Andaman and Nicobar is named as the Indian Archipelago in the Bay of Bengal. Andaman and Nicobar is known for its vast variety of biodiversity, which makes it a different natural landscape. Sekhsaria has crafted the stories concerning Andaman and Nicobar in a comprehensive manner. *The Last Wave* also explores the interrelationship between its people and environment. Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave*, which can be considered a novel of bioregionalism "A bioregion refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place." (Berg: 1978) Pankaj Sekhsaria *The Last Wave* also explores the subjugated Jarawa community, who are confined in their own territory. *The Last Wave* is the voice of unnoticed Jarawas. *The Last Wave* has certain prominent themes to explore. *The Last Wave* as a literary text provides environmental justice, a portrayal of realism through fiction, and a voice for the people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. *The Last Wave* is a novel of social insight too. A massive exploitation of Andaman and Nicobar reached heights during the colonial oppression. The protagonist of the novel is Harish Kumar from Hyderabad, who has a struggling life. His marriage also turned out to be trouble; he is not blessed with a flourishing career. Prasad provides him an opportunity to work for a magazine on Andaman and Nicobar Island. He

also feels he wants to abandon his distress; he wants to leave behind his struggles. When Harish and his colleagues reach Andaman and Nicobar Island, they feel relaxed from the anxiety of modern life. Pankaj Sekhsaria takes the backdrop of the beautiful landscapes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in his novel *The Last Wave*:

“Spread over more than two acres of land, it occupied a little rocky outcrop located a small distance from the edge of the ocean. Towards the southern side of the campus was a small patch of mangroves. Beyond that and towards the right, the land climbed up a gentle slope to a little plateau that had a beautiful view of the small bay”. (Sekhsaria: 2014)

Pankaj Sekhsaria, through his novel *The Last Wave*, informs the masses of the way modern transformation has been posing a threat to indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Pankaj Sekhsaria voices out to conserve the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with a sustainable paradigm. The novel *The Last Wave* can also be explored from a perspective of eco-criticism. Firstly, Pankaj Sekhsaria wants to reveal all the reasons that are responsible for the deterioration of Andaman and Nicobar. Secondly, the impacts of climate change on the ecosystem of Andaman and Nicobar Island. The title of the novel *The Last Wave* depicts the giant waves of tsunamis, which had completely distorted the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The plot of *The Last Wave* unfolds through different characters: Harish (protagonist)—a researcher; Seema—a local anthropology research scholar; Davis—a biologist by profession who serves crocodiles in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; and professor Kutty—a senior biologist who warns the masses about the endangered ecosystem of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The crux of the novel is to unfold the vulnerable ecosystem of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Pankaj Sekhsaria’s *The Last Wave* depicts the way a sense of belonging changes with the

circumstances of life. The narrative shifts from busy Hyderabad to serene Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which shows the loneliness of the protagonist. When Harish comes to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, he is not able to accommodate the nature; he feels that life is too difficult on this island due to the absence of modern basic amenities, but as time passes, he realizes the worth of a peaceful life, which is devoid of anxiety of the modern era. At the end of the story, he becomes attached to nature; his journey to watersheds, long walks on beaches, and the way he explores forests become an unforgettable moment for him: “Going away, even if for a while, would help him. He was coming around to accepting that, but something he could not quite place a finger on was still disturbing him... And where would the people of these Islands go?”. (Sekhsaria:2014)

On Andaman and Nicobar Island, Harish learns how to live in coordination with Nature. The life journey of Harish depicts the valuable bioregion Andaman and Nicobar is. Bioregionalism voices out for harmony between man and nature. The lives of the people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands rely on nature for financial independence. Particularly the Jarawa community Felix unfolds the way they collect honey from the honeycomb on the tree. They extract honey without threatening honey bees. Felix learns how to extract honey organically from the Jarawa community. Felix shows his anger when the Jarawa community was harmed by the Welfare Department. In bioregionalism, reinhabitation means “becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it.” (Berg and Darsmann 1977) Felix on Andaman and Nicobar Island learns how to shed off the capitalist agenda and how to adopt a natural ecosystem. *The Last Wave* reveals the way different characters of the novel develop an eco-consciousness to have a sustainable living. Eco-consciousness helps people to live according to natural resources and to maintain harmony with

nature. Pankaj Sekhsaria lays lots of emphasis on the life of the Jarawa tribe. This tribe lives in the dense forests without any contact with the outer world. They are dependent on the forests for their lives. Their cultural, religious, economic, and social institutions are formed by forests. The Jarawa tribe has been protective of the forests. According to the author, the Jarawa tribe is "the real people of the forests" (164) and "real ustads." (148) The Jarawa tribe has contributed a lot to maintaining dense forests: "All of the best forests stand only inside the boundaries of the Jarawa Reserve." (199) The influx of humans is acting as a threat to the Jarawa community, which is forced to move outside "come out of the forests, into the settlement on the fringes." (38) The Jarawa community is often objectified for their bare bodies. Anil Tripathi, who works with Tribal Welfare Development, "takes pride in how many Jarawa women they have come in contact with and how they have touched their naked bodies." (137) Jarawa tribe is coming at the verge of extinction now. Pankaj Sekhsaria shows the approach of anthropocentrism is ruining the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to Timothy Clark, anthropocentrism is the belief that only humans and their interests are valuable and can take precedence over those who are non-humans. "Anthropocentric mindset is the assumption that man should have dominion over the rest of creation." (Kerridger :537)

The themes which emerge as the pre-dominant in *The Last Wave* are deforestation, paced up industrialization, animal poaching, forest encroachment, displacement of the Jarawa community. Pankaj Sekhsaria puts together the real environmental hazard into the fiction. These environmental hazards are massive due to influx of human beings and over exploitation "these are census figures... in 1951, the population of the Andaman and Nicobar Island was only 19000 people,...today, this number has increased to more than 250000...most of them have come from outside,

from the mainland-labourers, traders, petty businessman. They moved deeper to find land to encroach upon". (36) Rapid urbanization and influx of population has brought environmental devastation to the Island. *The Last Wave* reminds how the Andaman and Nicobar's natural functional structure is hampered by humans to accommodate more people forests are cut down how self-centric human beings are, "S. K said, pointing ahead...there he was a mouse of a man nibbling away a giant rainforest" (194). only a few patches of green canopy are left on the Andaman and Nicobar Island in the name Green forests. Here Pankaj Sekhsaria gives an alarm the way human's sinister plans are ready to take over the finite amount of space at the expense of non-humans. William Ruckert correctly points out that man's catastrophe defect is his anthropocentric perspective and his urge to dominate, humanize, domesticate violate and exploit natural things (The Eco-criticism Reader: 113) Human's extreme interference in Nature has brought degradation. Industrialization has brought lot of injustice to Nature. Sekhsaria through his novel wants to reveal how the social decadence has brought environmental catastrophe? Continuous exploitation of non-human spheres can lead to ecological imbalance "drier, more brown, and with the associated forms of small plants and animals are also changing, even disappearing." (185)

There are so many factors that are found to be responsible for ecological imbalance: government apathy, negligence towards nature, and corruption. Sekhsaria, in his novel *The Last Wave*, frequently talks about the Andaman and Nicobar Trunk Road, which is the home of pink orchids. The reference of the Andaman Trunk Road gives a glimpse of destruction. The pink orchid is the metaphor of environmental destruction. Pankaj Sekhsaria urges sustainable development. Another important concern of Pankaj Sekhsaria is road construction, which claims forests, lands, and homes of many innocent voiceless animals.

Roads make the transportation easy, but they provide a threat to its biodiversity "into a wooden frame...quickly sucking out everything (191-192). The Jarawa Tribal Reserve was established in 1957, expanded to cover a large area, and now exists only on paper; nothing exists in reality. Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* holds a mirror of synecdoche to voice out against the global environmental injustice meted out to the indigenous groups of people of the Andaman and Nicobar Island. Environmental degradation in the Andaman is similar to what Rob Nixon refers to "slow violence". Speaking in an interview about the tradition of unconsulted displacement of people in the name of natural preservations "invisibility, of finding narrative and imagistic forms of communicating profound damage that is diffuse and scattered across time and space" an important component of ecological imperialism(Christensen 3) *The Last Wave* is an insight into the "jarawa tourism" that is the newly developed concept on the Andaman and Nicobar island "enchanted islands package" jarawa tourism promotes the mixing of jarawa tribe with people to reveal the way they live in their own tribal world. The Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 is a remarkable event in Pankaj Sekhsaria's novel *The Last Wave*. Harish and Seema go out to see the turtle camp at Galathea Bay where both of them are fascinated by a close encounter with a giant Leatherback turtle who comes on the shore to lay eggs. Seema gets overwhelmed after witnessing this whole even "ancient creature" the way it is producing its replica in the world to live. Seema and Harish feel the strong tremors of earthquake soon everything starts to collapse. Seema gets drown into the grey vortex of the twirling water whereas Harish is fortunate to be escaped from the water current. Harish gets shifted to a hospital for his treatment. During his hospital stay he finds a room partitioned for some special patients. But he becomes shocked when nurse informs him that he is a "jungliee" from Kadamtala who had got infected with measles. The nurse brings in the notice of Harish

hesitantly Jarawa community were not washed away in Tsunami but they got caught up by measles. Harish gets the glimpse of jarawa community in his mind it appeared to him that "the story of the Great Andamanese was being replayed here, with criminal callousness."(276) seema's letter which reaches to Harish after her sudden death a piece of paper informs him about her unspoken love further that letter becomes a perspective for the jarawa tribe she alerts Harish "You have no choice but to keep moving, going where the road takes you. Even if you turned, what lies ahead is probably no different from what you have gone by."(277)

The epilogue of Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* ends up with a sympathetic albeit imperfect understanding of the other. A fierce looking jarawa man enters into a room to meet Harish. The jarawa man recognises fear of Harish and introduces himself as "Erema". He points out towards an empty space in attempting to ask how he has lost his wife Seema in a great tidal wave. Harish stammers with Seema's name Erema informs him consolingly that he himself had lost his daughter in Tsunami and his son is suffering from measles "garam bhukhar" this moment emancipates Harish from grief of his wife's death Harish feels that there are uncountable number of people who had lost their loved ones.

The novel ends up with Harish's resolution to stay on the island despite people advised him to go on the mainland. Harish decides that "he would stay - at these crossroads, in these islands, so, he hoped, would Erema's people."(232) this decision of Harish is the output of his informed understanding of connection between humans and nature. Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* is the narrative of "climate trauma" *The Last Wave* unfolds several incidences of climate disasters- the jarawa tribe, the giant leatherback turtle, tsunami, decaying forests, increasing influx of humans further the novel reveals the way these climate concerns are posing threat environment the narrative gently urges the readers to take a serious note of

vulnerable environment to save the mother Earth.

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