

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN BOOKER WINNING INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Novelists are the chroniclers of the contemporary society. They write on the contemporary issues and create awareness among the readers. Now environmental pollution pose a great threat to human. In India 6.2 lakh people died of pollution problem in 2013, which is six-fold jump from one lakh in ten years back. 620 million Indians practise open defecation, which pollute land and water bodies that affect the health of millions of people. Arundhati Roy's concern for the Meenachal river, whose water body is polluted by the 'shit, and pesticides brought with world bank loans'. Kiran Desai's criticism on the inability of the government in providing sanitation to the poor, who use railway tracks for defecation. Aravind Adiga's severe attack on the rulers ignoring the river Ganga, which is filled with 'feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids' are discussed in this paper. This paper explores how these Booker winning writers proved their social concern by dealing with the issue of environmental pollution in India.

Key words: Booker Prize, environmental pollution, The God of Small Things, The Inheritance of Loss, The White Tiger

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Novelists are the critics and chroniclers of the contemporary society. They are the protesters of social anarchy and moral police, having the great responsibility of exposing the squalor prevailing in the society in which they live. Chinua Achebe calls them 'teachers', and 'an organic part of the society'. The novelist is a custodian of the society, and he reflects and interprets his coeval culture. Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kiran Desai bagged this coveted prize

for *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Aravind Adiga for his debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008). As all these writers are the social conscious, they dealt with the endangering theme of environmental pollution in their works.

India is noted for her rich history and profuse environment. For the last few decades, there has been a tremendous gradual change in human lifestyle. The fast-growing industries lead a lot of environmental issues. Destruction of forests,

emission from vehicles, extracting of natural resources adds fuel to the environmental pollution that direct to lot of health related complications on human beings. The Global Burden of Disease 2013, which tracks deaths and illnesses from all causes every 10 years, found that the air pollution has caused 6.2 lakh premature deaths in India in 2010, which is a six-fold jump from the 1 lakh deaths in 2000. This evidences that the polluted air is the largest killer in India after high blood pressure, tobacco use, and poor nutrition.

Balram's birthplace Laxmangarh is a typical Indian village with defunct electric poles, broken water tapes and malnourished children. The pigs were sniffing through sewage. When the Ambassador car of the Stork arrives the village, "the hogs and stray dogs near the tea shop would scatter, and the smell of dust, and sand, and hog shit would blow into the shop" (WT, 24), which becomes responsible for the air pollution.

In India, one in three live in critically-polluted areas that have harmful levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂) and lung-clogging particulate matter larger than 10 micron (PM₁₀) in size. In 2012, the Central Pollution Control Board has monitored air pollution in 180 cities in India, where only two cities, Malapuram and Pathanamthitta in Kerala meet out the low level of air pollution (50% below the standard). "Barely 20 Indian cities follow Euro4 emission standards for new vehicles, most follow Euro3. Euro4 is seven years behind European standards and Euro3 is behind by 12 years," says Anumita Roy Chowdhury, research and advocacy, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). In Delhi, one death occurs every hour due to air pollution. About 1,400 vehicles are added to the roads each day and contribute to more than 70% of air pollution.

"The latest urban air quality database released by the World Health Organization reconfirms that most Indian cities are becoming death traps because of very high air pollution levels," said the Director General of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) Sunita Narain said on May 8, 2014. "Of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, 13 are in India, says the database. Delhi is among the most polluted cities in the world today. Are our national government and cities prepared to

take urgent action to protect public health?" she asked. (Zee News)

Now-a- days, river pollution has become a peril in India. Even the sacred rivers like the Ganges have been facing the curse of pollution. It leads to not only the non availability of fresh potable water, but also results many contentious and dangerous diseases.

As there was no medical facility in Laxmangarh, Vikram Halwai in *The White Tiger* was taken by Balram and his brother Kisan to the hospital, located on the other side of the river Ganga. Vikram was spitting blood from his mouth, hence his sons washed his mouth with the river water, 'but the water was so polluted that it made him spit more blood.' (WT, 48)

The Ganga has an extraordinary religious importance in India for Hindus. It runs for about 2,500 kilometres, with more than two dozen major urban centres located on its banks. It is the water source for about 40% of Indians in 11 states and it plays a major part of the largest population in the world with over more than 420 million people who rely on it for food, water, bathing and agriculture. But, now it has become one of the topmost ten polluted rivers in the world, and it stands on the sixth place in the list of the most polluted rivers in the world. "Most people who live along the banks of the river vouch for its toxicity. So choked is the drain with industrial effluents and sewage that calcium, magnesium, fluoride, mercury, beta-endosulphan and heptachlor pesticide makes both ground and tap water unfit for drinking," found a study by the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in 2008.

Generally, growing population, poverty, urbanization, industrialization, agricultural run-off, improper agricultural practices, religious and social practices like cremation of dead bodies on the bank of the river, throwing of un-burnt or half-burnt bodies in the rivers, mass bathing in the rivers, idol immersion in the rivers and throwing of animal carcasses are the major sources of water pollution.

Arundhati Roy's social concern for protecting the natural resources like water is revealed when she narrates the return of Rahel to Ayemenem in *The God of Small Things*. Years later, Rahel returned to Ayemenem through the

Meenachal river, which 'greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.' (GST, 124) Roy narrates that the river has become narrow and succulent weed filled, because of the encroachment. More rice was cultivated for the price of Meenachal river. The plastic bags dumped in the river seemed as "sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat. Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness." (GST, 124)

The Green Revolution in India has promoted the use of dangerous chemicals in the form of pesticides, weedicides and fertilizers. Pesticides and heavy metals leech into the water table and then find their way into our bodies through farm produce, poultry and dairy products. Pesticides, insecticides and herbicides used in agriculture production affect the human reproductive system, dysfunction of human organs, birth defects. Industrial effluents cause cancer, skin and lung disease.

Roy attacked the ill effects of the import of pesticide in the name of Green Revolution during the 1970s. After Estha's re-return to Ayemenem, he walked on the banks of Meenachal river, which 'smelled of shit, and pesticides brought with world bank loans'. (GST, 13) Because of the excessive use of pesticides, the water in the Meenachal river was polluted and became unfit for the aquatic creatures that most of the fish in the river had died. The fins of the survived fish are rotted and had broken out in boils. People had taken a bath and the women washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents. The writer stresses the negligence of the government in controlling the factories from releasing the effluents into the river. Periyar river in Kerala State has a number of factories on its lower bank - fertilizers plant, chemical factories, metallurgy and rayon units. A study conducted by Prof. Malviya reveals, "over 170 million litres of effluents are discharged into the river, containing suspended solids, metals, urea, ammonia, fluorides, chlorides and other toxic chemicals."

It is a staunch faith of the Hindus that Lord Shiva has a very strong relationship with the

goddess Ganga, who has the purificatory element. Therefore, every year, millions of Hindu pilgrims take holy dip in the river Ganga, seeking spiritual purification. Many Hindus cremate their loved ones in the river banks and throw the ashes in the sacred river. They believe if one dies or is cremated in the Ganga, he or she will get 'moksha' and get liberated from the cycles of rebirth, but the fact is that it is gravely polluted.

As a boy Balram visited the Ganga river to cremate his mother. On nearing the bank of the river, he smelled a 'stench of decaying flesh rising' and 'a pale-skinned dog was crawling and sniffing through the petals and satin and charred bones.' (WT, 17) The semi-burnt body of his mother became a black mound and a dog started to lick it.

Varanasi, which is located on the bank of the river Ganga is a believer's town of death and deliverance. It is the final stop and religious capital for the Hindus and many believers go to die there to release from the cycle of reincarnation. Hindus believe taking a holy dip in the Ganga will cleanse them from their sins. An estimated 60,000 Hindu bathes in the Ganga every day. Despite environmental concern, some 250 bodies are prepared and cremated every day on the Ganga River. "On an average, we cremate more than 250 corpses every day. Many of these poor families who come here cannot afford the cremation wood required for the pyres and therefore sometimes partially burnt bodies float in the river," Pradeep Chaudhary, who is in charge of a famous ghat told DW. In spite of so many initiatives taken by the Government of India like Ganga Action Plan and National River Conservation Plan, the peril continues.

The river, Mother Ganga, 'daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth' is called by Balram as 'river of Death', because its 'banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it.' (WT, 15) So he urges the Chinese Premier not to dip in the Holy Ganga, otherwise, his mouth would be filled with 'feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.' (WT, 15) Not only the problems of human feces, but the stench of goat

feces wafted out from the open door of the government hospital is also narrated by Adiga, when he had taken his father to the Lohia Universal Free Hospital.

Through the harangue of the GNLF activist, Kiran Desai has highlighted her concern for the protection of the Teesta river. Stones are quarried from the river for construction works. "Every day our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are laborers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad." (IL, 159) The drunken man who was arrested by the police in Jemu's gun robbery case was working on rebuilding the roads. His work was "filling stones from the Teesta riverbed into contractors' trucks, unloading them at building sites, clearing landslides that tumbled over and over in the same eternal motion as the river coming down." (IL, 263)

According to the National Ganga River Basin Authority, which has been trying to battle pollution for years, the amount of toxins, chemicals and other dangerous bacteria found in the river are now almost 3,000 times over the limit suggested as 'safe' by the WHO.

Roy also highlights the devastating effect of the rivers, because of the government's undue importance in the name of promoting tourism. Since the sea water has turned into thick and toxic, the tourists were offered to enjoy their swimming and bath in the artificial swimming pool in the Kari Saipu's estate converted Five Star hotel. The Cochin airport looked like a local bus depot that it is filled with bird shit and spot-stained kangaroo-shaped dust bins. Vehicles were crammed in the roads of the airport area.

Another important reason for the environmental pollution is the practice of open defecation. Open defecation results in a faecal load of 2,00,000 metric tons per day, which finds its way into the soil and water bodies, contaminating them with pathogens (3RGNWDM, 2002-03). Open defecation deteriorate the quality of drinking water, makes the water unfit for drinking purpose and enhances the chances of water borne diseases.

India's widespread open defecation and high population density constitute a double threat.

The selected writers deal with the issue of Open Defecation in their writings. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimate that there are more than 620 million people practising open defecation in India, in which 18% of urban India still defecates on open while the percentage of rural India is as high as 69%. (indiasanitationportal). The latest Census data expose that the percentage of households having access to television and telephone in rural India exceed the percentage of households with access to toilet facilities. In a meeting, Jairam Ramesh, the then Minister for Drinking Water and Sanitation termed India as 'world's capital for open defecation' (ibnlive.news). "It is a matter of shame, anguish, sorrow, anger," Ramesh said, noting that over 60 percent of all open defecation takes place in India and promised to build one lakh 'bio toilets' in about 300 backward gram panchayats. (The Hindu, 21.11.2013) The UN general assembly has designated World Toilet Day on 19th November to raise awareness on the importance of toilet.

Adiga narrates the dearth of toilets in the capital of India. In New Delhi, next to Buckingham Palace, the royal apartment in which his master, Mr. Ashok stays, there was a slum. The construction workers who build malls and giant apartments in Delhi live there. They are from the village of darkness. Adiga mockingly calls that these men "were defecating in the open like a defensive wall in front of the slum: making a line that no respectable human should cross. The wind wafted the stench of fresh shit to me." (WT, 260) He found a gap in the line of the defecators. They squatted there like stone statues. By crossing these 'stone statues', the feces was replaced by the stronger stench of industrial sewage.

Robert chamber observes that there are links between open defecation and under nutrition, and reasons for the blind spot. The latest reliable available national level estimates for India showed 48% of children under five years of age as stunted (IIPS 2010). That children in India are shorter on average than children in Africa has been described as 'the Asian enigma'.

Although around 275 million people in India gained access to improved sanitation between 1990 and 2011, 615 million still defecated in the open in 2011 (WHO and UNICEF 2013). India's proportion of open defecation in the world has risen from 55% in 2006 to 58% in 2008 and around 61% in 2011 (WHO and UNICEF 2013) In India one in three women faces troubles in accessing safe toilet facilities. (UNICEF 2013) Among the countries practicing open defecation, India stands top at the world level with 620 million people, (JMP UNICEF-WHO 2013) among which Jharkhand state is in the worst place that only 8.3% of the people having accessed to toilet facilities, whereas in Tamil Nadu it is 26%. The states with best access to toilet facility are Tripura, Sikkim and Kerala, where 80% of people have access to toilets. (UNILEF 2012 Report) The defecation on the boundaries of the water sources is a common scene in India, especially in rural India, which is keenly observed by Arundhati Roy. As a grown up man, Estha noticed the other side of the Meenachal river,

"Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed riverbed. The smaller ones left their dribbling mustard streaks to find their own way down. Eventually, by evening, the river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake." (GST, 125)

When the contaminated water is used for drinking purpose, it causes many water borne diseases, as it carries pathogenic microorganisms. Defecation on boundaries of water bodies results in bacteriological contamination (Water Aid, 2011). Rajgure observes that about 600 million episodes of diarrhoea and 40,00,000 childhood deaths are reported per year due to contaminated water and lack of sanitation. An estimated 80% of all diseases and one-third deaths in developing countries are caused by consumption of contaminated water and on an average. Open defecation remains the predominant norm and poses one of the biggest threats to the health of the people in India.

When a portion of *Mon Ami*, the bungalow of Lola and Noni was grabbed by the local Gorkha people in Kalimpong, the area near their gate was used as a bathroom and the native Gorkha children

defecated in the open. When Lola and Noni walked by, the little children lined up in rows to spit at them.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* the GNLF activists stink the toilet of Jemu, as they have been practised to defecate in the open. When Sai was returning from the Dehradun convent to Kalimpong, she noticed the railway lines in the early morning that the tracks were lined with 'rows of bare bottoms'. "Close up, they could see dozens of people defecating on to the tracks, rinsing their bottom with water from can" (IL, 30) On looking at the scene, the innocent Sai asks the nun the reason for open defecation, "Because of the drop," said an earnest bespectacled scholar seated next to her, "the ground drops to the railway track, so it is a good place." (IL, 30)

The policy brief for the parliamentarians state, "Indian Railways is a major contributor to open defecation in the country on the toilets, in the trains, open right on the tracks. They are also the largest employers of manual scavengers, in contravention of 1993 legislation on abolition of manual scavenging."

Writing is not just to entertain the readers. The novelists' social concern for ecology, the ill effects of pollution, and their intention to make the readers to be aware of protecting the natural resources is revealed in their writings. Only through the tough action by the government and official could prevent the future decay. Now a special ministry is set up for Ganga Cleaning and Water Resource, and the minister Uma Bharati said that there is no dearth of funds for Ganga cleaning, which leaves a ray of hope in the minds of the readers who read these works.

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