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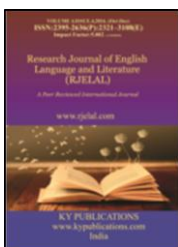
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ECOCRITICAL READING OF KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper highlights the need for environmental preservation, the burning issue of the day in large scale debates; by voicing the ecological concerns of Kiran Desai, the youngest ever Booker Prize winner. Desai, in her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) locates the narrative in Kalimpong; in the foothills of northeastern Himalayas where the murky atmosphere of dense forests, lush green valley and snow-covered mountains of Kanchenjunga present both the celebratory and minatory manifestations of nature. Depiction of seasons, animals, birds, insects and pastoral life enrich the novel from ecological perspective. This paper unravels the binary of Nature/Culture and its reciprocity which further reveals how both are interconnected to each other. The paper also highlights the political unrest of the day-Gorkha insurgency, still prevalent and turbulent in the valley. It also exposes Desai's concern for open defecation which again is the prominent issue of the day. Along with highlighting the socio-environmental issues; this paper warns against minatory aspect of Nature too, via depicting the disastrous natural calamities. Thus, it conveys the need of seeking recourse to intrinsic value of nature instead of an instrumental one by adopting the ecocentric approach over an anthropocentric one.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentric, ecocentric, Nature, Culture, Celebratory, Minatory

The repercussions of anthropocentric advancements manifested in the already injured Mother Earth, intensely warn against the cataclysmic outcomes, if not checked. So it becomes the liability of litterateurs of the time to awake the masses for environmental preservation; and being a sensitive writer, Kiran Desai, the youngest ever Booker Prize winner seems to acknowledge her responsibility in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Written in the backdrop of Gorkha insurgencies (still haunting the landscape in 2017 too) with equally poignant diasporic voices and cross-cultural narratives, the novel effectively resonates the ecological consciousness. This novel is deeply knitted in natural surroundings and has

effectively tried to cover the different organisms of ecology which further echo the changing patterns of humanity. Desai, through this novel, highlights the need for environmental preservation, the burning issue of the day in large scale debates; by voicing her ecological concerns. She locates the narrative in Kalimpong, in the foothills of northeastern Himalayas. Indeed the murky atmosphere of dense forests, lush green valley and snow-covered mountains of Kanchenjunga present both the celebratory and minatory manifestations of nature. Depiction of seasons, animals, birds, insects and pastoral life enrich the novel from ecological perspective. But ironically, the same ecological richness of Kanchenjunga results in making it the

battleground for the greedy warmongers who want to possess it. At times the attitude and mood of the characters is articulated by the natural background which is personified as a character and can be seen interacting with the author and characters of the play. The novelist seems to warn the readers against the minatory force of nature which is resultant of anthropocentric destructive and violent activities and conveys the need of seeking recourse to intrinsic value of nature instead of an instrumental one.

Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty defines, is the "Study of the relationship between Literature and physical environment" (XVIII). Unlike other literary theories, it embraces biotic as well as abiotic components of the cosmos. It is an umbrella term and under the big marquee of environmental literature is included- nature writing, deep ecology, ecology of sites, Ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, eco theory, unheard voices and the reinterpretation of canonical works from past (Love, 5 ). Ecocriticism seeks to unveil the binary of nature/culture, accentuates the representation of nature in a literary work; the atrocities inflicted upon it and its resultant devastating consequences in culture, thus emphasizing the reciprocity between nature/culture. The novel under study certainly presents an ecocritical bent of the novelist.

*The Inheritance of Loss*, which won the prestigious Booker prize (2006) and National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award, is a study of 'loss' as almost every character is caught with the dilemma of loss: Sai, an orphan girl who has lost her parents, loses love and peace of mind in her adolescent infatuation with her tutor Gyan; Judge has lost his past glory and cook is separated from his son Biju who is wriggling in a foreign land for his lost identity. And above all Kalimpong has lost its splendid glory under the vortex of violence and insurgency caused by separatists of Gorkhaland National Liberation Front. Desai has portrayed landscapes almost as a character which with its incessant presence affects the characters and is also reciprocally affected by them. All the characters: Sai, her grandfather, his cook and cook's son Biju and their neighbours Lola and Noni are connected with the environment of

Kalimpong. Kalimpong too is affected by the atrocities of Gorkhas' demand for Gorkhaland. Beginning and ending of the novel with the description of Kanchenjunga provides it a perfect symmetry and highlights how the peaks play a crucial part in the narrative.

Opening lines of the novel takes us to a heaven of miraculous beauty enriched with bounty 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. (1)

The beauty of such natural scenario can truly, as Desai suggests, "raise the human heart to spiritual heights" (12). Exterior landscape in fact helps in exposing the interior landscapes of the characters. The hollow and lone lives of characters seem to be exposed by the 'immensity of landscape' which further intensify the emptiness of their lives. Sai's gloomed arrival is aptly suggested by the gloomy landscape: "Kanchenjunga glowed macabre, trees stretched away on either side, trunks pale, leaves black, and between the pillars of the trees, a path led to a house" (19). On his way back to his home Biju realizes that he hadn't seen such vastness from a long time, "The sheer, overwhelming enormity of mountainside and scree coming down the flank of it. In places, the entire mountain had simply fallen out of itself, spread like a glacier with boulders, uprooted trees"(315). He is bewildered by 'the immensity of wilderness' and by the abundance of greenery. But simultaneously the problems of road remind him of his father, "So, feeling patient in the way one feels before the greatness of nature, impatient in the way one feels with human details" (315). Truly the binary of nature/culture and its dichotomy affects the human beings thus making it a perfect chain of ecosystem. In fact, this interaction; the 'definite link between nature and culture' (Nair, 292), is so intense that nature is frequently personified and at times human beings are also naturalized. Comparisons are like: Trees like

giants, caress of mist like a human being (2), Banana trees alarm like a man by 'flapping their great ears' (105), Teesta river came 'leaping' (31), swollen presence of forest, the knockings of bamboo, sound of *jhora*, mist charging down like a dragon (9). Not only nature is personified, in fact the persons are also naturalized. Judge, the grandfather is described as 'more lizard than human', and dog as 'more human than dog' (32). The powerful transfer of epithets provides a certain kind of ecological equilibrium.

With the variations in circumstances, the nature also registers its affinity. When Father Booty was exiled for being an illegal immigrant, the river Teesta is depicted colorless and it reflects darkness only as if suggesting the dark destiny of Father Booty. On the day of burning of Indo- Nepal treaty, the riot broke up. The buses were set on fire and this fire spread to bamboo jungles. When cook is running to escape from the burning forest flames, the nature reveals its overpowering might and violent form. Desai says, "Above was Kanchenjunga, solid, extraordinary, a sight that for centuries had delivered men their freedom and thinned clogged human hearts to joy. But of course the cook could not feel this now and he didn't know if the sight of the mountain could ever be the same to him (277). It could not be same and in fact it grew worse with the changing of the seasons. Rain and winter among curfews and strikes trapped Kalimpong in its own madness (279). Under the political unrest it is reduced to a hotbed of violence and riots. Communication became impossible, school, colleges were closed and none could move outside.

Love and affection is also reflected by mountains. The union of cook and his son Biju is celebrated by the mountains. When Biju arrives at gate and cook leaps at him, landscape too, like a human being cheers up and the novel sums up with the beauty of Kanchenjunga once again. "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent"(324).

Exploitative effects of culture are repeatedly highlighted in the novel. With increased utilitarian tendencies, the nature is tremendously affected. In Manhattan, Biju witnesses the

blackened water( due to oil leakage) of Hudson ; full of dead whales and carcasses pulverized in factories (267) and at *Cho Oyu* the plum flowers being watered in rotten blood of path lab, present a dreadful sight (63). Frequency of landslides has enhanced which reflects the apparent repercussions of greed of so called cultured man and aptly depicts the 'minatory' aspect of Nature as warned by the British ecocritics. (Barry, 242) Desai has reflected her concern over the calamity of landslides due to population explosion on hilly areas:

In order to accommodate the population boom, the government had recently passed legislation that allowed an extra story to be built on each home in Darjeeling; the weight of more concrete pressing downward had spurred the town's lopsided descent and caused more landslides than ever...it looked like a garbage heap rearing above and sliding below. (196-197)

The loss of beauty of Kalimpong is mourned even by the inhabitants of Kalimpong as a lady laments, "Darjeeling has really gone downhill, remember how lovely it used to be" (197).

Another ecocritical argument in the novel is the writer's vehement critique of open defecation which has accentuated the deterioration of the environment. She seems to have a presage much before the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2014, when honorable Prime Minister launched *Swaachh Bharat Mission* which aims to make India free of open defecation. While Sai is on her train journey from Darjeeling to Kalimpong with nun, the text exposes a filthy sight. Desai exposes, "It was early in the morning and railway tracks were lined with rows of bare bottoms. Close up, they could see dozens of people defecating onto the tracks, rinsing their bottoms with water from a can" (30). The nun aptly calls them 'dirty' and rejects the excuse of poverty.

The novelist has also questioned the plundering of earth's resources by depicting the greed of land grabbers. Desai wisely raises a question through Sai's mind, when during her visit to museum she comes across the socks of Sherpa Tenzing who climbed the Everest and questions:

Should human conquer the mountain or should they wish for the mountain to

possess them? Sherpas went up and down, ten times, fifteen times in some cases, without gory, without claim of ownership, and there were those who said it was sacred and shouldn't be sullied at all. (155)

The sacredness of nature is preserved even by the climbers but now the Gorkhas were claiming 'Gorkhaland for Gorkha' and this war of power and greed for ownership reduces the serenity and discolors the beauty of nature, resultant in the landscape 'being gouged by termites from within' (233). Unfortunately the angelic peace of dawn and dusk in mountains is replaced with the fire of greed which works as a two edged sword, working against its bearer too.

Not only the Indian landscape is portrayed, novelist takes us to the cross cultural land of New York too. Biju's vain attempts for quest for identity in New York's narrow basement and cabins give a deplorable sight. He is forced to sleep among mice and to sear beef. Beef becomes a major issue in the novel and the novelist satirically exposes how people differentiate an animal into 'holy cow and unholy cow' and for Biju it becomes synonym as 'Job and no job' and finally with due respect to rituals and Hindu customs he leaves the job at beef serving restaurant and adopts a new job at Gandhi café which doesn't serve beef. The narrowness in which he is forced to live makes him nostalgic of his childhood which aptly glorifies pastoral life enriched with nature. Desai says, "He remembered bathing in the river, feeling his body against the cool river muscle, and sitting on a rock with his feet in the water, gnawing on sugarcane...complexly absorbed" (270). Biju also remembers the reminiscences of his father's childhood:

How peaceful our village 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 a *choolah*, better than anything cooked on a gas or a kerosene stove...fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from the buffalo..."(103)

Biju's lying in a foreign land and realizing the worth of pastoral life, certainly depicts the emptiness of hollow modern life.

Ecological wealth of flora and fauna enrich the novel from an ecocentric perspective. Animals, birds and tiny creatures are discussed in detail. Mutt, the pet of Judge, is beautifully portrayed like a character. Her lovely activities can make any dog lover reminded of his/her own pet. She is the only solace to Judge's lone psyche. He inflicted atrocities on his wife Nimi, cut the family links off and behaves rudely with everyone. But he becomes childish and a pampering one for Mutt. He is outraged in fury when mutt is kidnapped. Mutt's destiny keeps hanging in the air as the novelist has not provided answers for her whereabouts. Sisters Lola and Noni keep Mustafa, a male cat that is always depicted lying in their lap. Cook worships snakes like deity and becomes afraid in fear of offending a couple of cobra. Uncle Potty keeps a rooster and Father Booty has a dairy of cows and he is so fond of his own cheese that he condemns the Amul's cheese as a plastic cover. Besides pet another tiny creatures are also given the space in narrative. Lola's insensitive and westernized attitude is revealed when she picks caterpillar from cauliflower and throws it to a waiting bird that squeezes its body like toothpaste. She believes that soldiers must be carnivorous and says, "We are animals after all and to triumph you must taste blood" (195). Sai attempts in vain to kill ticks first by drowning it in a can and then by flushing it. Disgraceful and cruel laughter of St. Xavier's boys over the beheading of a chicken truly reflects the hysteria of the drastic times (237). Portrayal of searing beef and repeated discussion of chicken and mutton preparation, certainly contain the potential of offending any vegetarian.

Besides fauna, flora is also a crucial part of any landscape and novel is not bereft of this. The recurrent imagery of flowers connotes various aspects of novel. Kanchenjunga is called as a land of flowers. And text acknowledges, "Everyone in the Kanchenjunga loved flowers" (256). When SDO visits Judge's house for inspecting the robbery scandal, he is overwhelmed by the flowery creeper and says, "Beautiful blossom, justice sahib. If you see such a sight, you will know there is a God" (226). He further tells that he looks after his plants like babies. Desai even exposes how the warring Mughal emperor Jahangir wept for the loss of iris flower. "The

Mughals had descended from the mountains to invade India but despite their talent in waging war, were softened enough to weep for the loss of this flower in the heat..." (172). Depiction of flowers from rotten blood of path lab contains the deep message for environmental preservation. Symbolically the narrative presents the flowering of love too, through the portrayal of adolescent infatuation between Sai and Gyan. But the violent insurgency spoils this too and ironically in the 'land of flowers' the flower of love is faded without being blossomed.

Flora of Kalimpong is so abundant that it can serve the needs of human even in the time of strikes and boycott. During unrest, the dwellers of Kalimpong seek to their kitchen garden and it supplies them with their daily needs. Ironically, at a time, when the infidel man is discoloring the land by bloodshed, forest fire and pollutants, nature still is serving humanity, truly keeping its name intact as Mother Nature.

Healing power of nature is acknowledged by the writer at various junctures. From Gyan's ancestral account we come across a Memsahib who is depicted finding solace in beautiful nature. She writes to her daughter, "My darling daughter, it is wildly beautiful here and the beauty almost, almost makes up for the loneliness..." (142). Indeed it reminds of Keats' oft quoted immortal poem 'A Thing of Beauty' where the beauty of nature is proposed as the perennial source of pleasure despite all the despondence on the earth. Similarly during visit to library when Sai feels nauseated due to motion sickness, Father Booty suggests her to see the horizon for cure. But unfortunately the same tranquility is disturbed by the protesters:

The GNLFF boys had burned down the government rest house by the river...In fact, forest inspection bungalows all over the district were burning, upon whose verandas generations of ICS men had stood and admired the serenity...the circuit house was burned. Detonators set off landslides as negotiations went nowhere. Kalimpong was transformed into a ghost town, the wind tumbling around the melancholy streets, garbage flying up unhindered. (280-281)

The political unrest has harmed the inviolability of Kalimpong to the extent that it is metamorphosed into a 'ghost town'.

Thus the novel bluntly exposes how the severe effects of brutality inflicted upon a land can affect the every component of ecology. Dreesse in *Ecocriticism* aptly finds the landscape and man inseparable and believes in the harmony of all forms of life. He warns, "If one is not safe, none of us are" and emphasizes on "... recognizing one's position within the multitude of life forms in the universe and taking some responsibility for their well beings" (116). Truly, there is dire need for reconsideration of the anthropocentric approaches and its replacement with ecocentric approaches so as to save the Mother Earth from catastrophic ramifications. Thus it's a matter of vital need to aware the masses of environmental preservation so as to maintain its sanctity not only for present and coming generations, but for its own self too.

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