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The ‘Loss’ of Human-Sanity or of Eco-Stability: An Eco-Critical Appraisal of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

Outstanding among the women novelists who have enhanced Indian English literature and won honour and International acclaim are: Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Santha Rama Rau, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Veena Nagpal, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. She appeared in literary aura in 1997 with her first publication in the New Yorker and in Mirrorwork, and in an anthology “50 Years of Indian Writing” edited by Salman Rushdie in which Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard was the concluding piece. In The Inheritance of Loss Kiran Desai treats with fabulous insight, warmth, and often intense sarcasm; topical issues related to politics and terrorism as well as immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, colonial neurosis, identity-formation and subjectivity, and the nationalist, gender, cultural, ethnic and class differences that inform these processes. The text is abundant in natural resources: it begins with nature, with perfect serenity and calm; the lingering effects of nature on humane world comes repeatedly as a ‘leit motif’ throughout the setting; and even at the end, it concludes with nature depicting it as the decisive haven of man, which we people do least care to bother about in our dreary steadfastness. But the crises tutor us to value the yet underrated substance to cover up the ‘loss’ created by our unmediated brutality on ecological poise.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, loss, nature, harmony, imbalance etc*

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, migrational, 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 Zabwawla, 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. She, with the very publication of her former novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) has been globally applauded to be one of the finest novelists in the trend. My humble attempt here is to read this second novel of Desai from the point of view of the inter-connection between the world of environment and the material world of humans.

Ecocriticism, also known as ‘literary ecology’ or ‘green’ literary studies, is a field of environmental movement that emerged in the late twentieth century as a somewhat deferred reaction in Humanities especially in the 1960s and 1970s. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. A number of early ecocritics looked at the movement chiefly as a way of “rescuing” literature from the ongoing distancing between readers, text and the world, that had been ushered in by the Structuralist, Formalists as well as Deconstructive studies in theoretical realm. These ecocritical nonconformists sought to reconnect the work of nature writing with environmental understanding and vice versa, to prove congenial eco-friendly poise between the two. The first definition is to be found in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), an important anthology of American ecocriticism:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. 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 texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 1996: xix)

Ecocriticism is, then, an avowedly subjective way of study, as its comparison with Feminism and Marxism propounds. Ecocritics usually tie their cultural analysis explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda. In this respect, ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Greg Garrard, in the introductory chapter titled

'Pollution' in the famous Routledge guide to *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*, defines ecocriticism from a broader perspective. According to him, ecocriticism is 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself' (Garrard 5). Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneering theorists of ecocriticism, explains in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology* (1996) that 'ecocriticism' is derived from the Greek words: *Oikos* and *Kritos*. The term 'ecocriticism', which is formed by the combination of these two words, means according to William Howarth, 'a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action. . . So, *Oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls "our wildest home," and *Kritos* is an arbiter of taste who want the house kept in good order, no boots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original decor.'" (Glotfelty and Fromm 69)

Unlike the debut novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is a different kind of novel with fabulous insight, warmth, and often intense sarcasm. Topical issues related to politics and terrorism as well as immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, colonial neurosis, identity-formation and subjectivity have been dealt with by Desai in this novel. From a supremely funny and engaging debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), Kiran Desai moved on to write *The Inheritance of Loss* where the prevailing mood is one of implacable bitterness and despair. Set partly in India and partly in the USA, *The Inheritance of Loss* explores with uncommon intimacy and insight some of the pertinent issues of today's globalised world. It deals with the quest for individual identity and the struggle for the search for one's root in a world where the concept of home has undergone a significant change during the post-globalization era. The novel consists of fifty three chapters which includes the anxieties and tension of the people living in two different worlds: the New York life is remarkably different from the life in India. The Indian part of the story deals with a makeshift family comprising of a grumpy retired judge, his young granddaughter, his old and loyal cook and his pet dog Mutt, and a small coterie of Anglophiles in the wake of a political disturbance that shakes them out of genteel retirement challenging their older ways of life. The American part of the story narrates the story of Biju, the son of a judge's cook, who struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant in New York, moving from one ill-paid job to another and trying to stay one step ahead of the INS, and is compelled to experience the anxiety of being a foreigner as well as the unfairness of a world in which "one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king" (269). Some common historical factors like colonialism and the century-old economic and cultural subjugation of the third world by the dominant West have affected these characters and their destiny. This search for personal and familial roots is inextricably linked with many larger issues of India's colonial and postcolonial history, and the history of a thriving Indian diaspora. The very opening sentence of the novel is significant from the view of this analysis as it introduces an evocative natural setting—the colour of dusk that permeates whole days, the mist moves 'like a water creature across the great flunks of mountains' (1), and the grand peaks of Kanchenjunga briefly visible above the mist, 'gathering the last of the light' (1) – which establishes the centrality of the landscape in the story. Like the first novel of Desai, this novel too begins with a description of nature. Cho Oyu, far away from the rustle and bustle of mundane world, owing to neglect and apathy, serves as a gothic backdrop against which all the major characters are presented: Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Cook, Gyan, and their affectionate pet Mutt. The peaceful, calm and beautiful nature surrounding the people living in a remote mountainous region at the beginning of the novel is suggestive of an ecological equilibrium. There is a harmony between man and nature. This harmony or poise is first broken by the appearance of the GNLFF boys. In contrast to the undisturbed and tranquil ambience, the novelist has also portrayed the efforts of those who deliberately try to destroy the congenial link between the material world of men and the world of nature. The GNLFF men come to the house of the retired judge to affirm their demand for a 'free' land, and very much like hooligans they demand food and shelter, and of course the licensed rifle of the retired judge. They have come through the forest on foot, wearing leather jackets bought from the Kathmandu black market, khaki pants like 'bandanas universal guerrilla fashion' (154). The job of these GNLFF boys is to terrorize and rob people. Terrorist activities like this turn the heavenly nature into a hellish one and the activities of the GNLFF men is chiefly concerned with the demand for a separate state for the Gorkha tribes in northern West Bengal. These activities of the GNLFF boys in the novel is reflective of the turbulent mid 1980s period when the Nepalese Indians who were 'fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority' had started demanding an independent home land 'or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs' (9). Kalimpong, a beautiful but strategic location in the north-eastern Himalayas, where India merges with Bhutan and Sikkim, has a long history of war, bargaining and betrayal between India and the bordering Himalayan states. Situated in the remote location of Kalimpong, the unrefurbished house of the retired judge, like Emile Bronte's 'Wuthering Heights' or Hardy's 'Wessex' or Narayan's 'Malgudi', develops a kind of umbilical cord with nature. In fact, among the family members of the judge, Sai is the one whose connection with nature is spontaneous. Desai gives ample instances in the text to emphasize on the harmonious relationship between Sai and the surrounding environment of Cho Oyo. When Sai comes to Cho Oyo for the first time from the convent school, she feels as if the luminous moon is shining to show her a new way of life after the death of her parents. This place where she arrives for the first time is new and different from the atmosphere of the convent school where she had to go after the death of her parents. The retired judge in Cho Oyo is her maternal grandfather. When Sai arrives at Cho Oyo, instead of her grandfather, she is welcomed by the Cook, who like a typical Christ figure is always there to help her in growing up with all sensitive quotients amidst the ancient setting of a dejected house:

So, as Sai waited at the gate, the cook had come bandy-legged up the path with a lantern in his hand, blowing on a whistle to warn away jackals, the two cobras, and the local thief, Gobbo, who robbed all the residents of Kalimpong in rotation and had a brother in the police to protect him. (24)

The description of the love affair of Sai's parents, too, is scripted in terms of man's relationship with nature. The narrative constantly swings between the present and the past, and we find later that Sai's mother was not accepted warmly by her maternal grandfather. So, like Sai, she too was bound to stay at the boarding school. Sai's father was a spaceship pilot, and professionally was so competent that he was chosen among his colleagues to become the first Indian to go to the space. The love relationship between Sai's parents has been described by Desai in such a manner that one feels the presence and participation of natural environment in their coming close to one another:

They became acquainted in this grassy acre, cows tethered to enormous rusty lawn mowers slowly grinding back and forth before a crumbling Mughal tomb. Before a year was up, in the deep cool centre of the tomb, golden indirect light passing from alcove to hushed alcove, duskier, muskier through the carved panels each casting the light in a different lace pattern—flowers, stars—upon the floor, Mr. Mistry proposed. She thought quickly. This romance had allowed her to escape the sadness of her past and the tediousness of her current girlish life. (26)

The love affair of Sai and Gyan (Mathematics teacher of Sai) 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. Before Gyan's entry into Sai's life, it is like an 'over hot summer afternoon', when 'all over the town side, the heat has reduced the town people into a stupor' (65), and Lola, Sai's another tutor is described as follows: 'Lola was in the garden picking caterpillars off the English broccoli' (66). 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. Quite interestingly, Desai uses 'rain' as a central metaphor to signify the close bonding of Sai and Gyan. 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. The more we rely on it; the better is our realization of its blessings. When the SDO looks at the beautiful flowering creeper in the garden of the judge, he says, "Beautiful blossom, Justice Sahib. If you see such a sight, you will know there is a God. (226)" The observation of the SDO justifies that in order to avoid the growing 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. This serenity of nature presented in the first section of the text is disturbed by the growing Nepali insurgency. During the time of insurgency, when the Gorkha land movement was at its peak, the 3Ts – tea, timber, and tourism, suffered a bad loss. All the roads were blocked and the bridges were set on fire. The markets were closed and food prices rose high. The impact of the protests of the GNLf men evidently disturbs the peace and serenity of Cho Oyo. Sai comes to know that it was none other than Gyan who out of sympathy for the Nepali protestors divulges the information that the retired judge keeps three guns at home. Gyan's feeling for the Nepali insurgents upsets Sai, and consequently she distances herself from Gyan:

"You told them about the guns, didn't you?" she was shouting all of a sudden. "You told them to come to Cho Oyu? You did, didn't you, DIDN'T YOU?" (261)

It is because of this particular strong feeling for the Gorkha tribe that Gyan betrays Sai. In the case of Gyan, it is his love for the native tribe which wins over his love for Sai; who according to Gyan is an intruder in their native land. In order to suppress this violent protest of the Gorkhas, the local police chase and brutally assault the protestors. The whole town of Kalimpong turns into a battlefield where no vestige of serenity is left. Men become dehumanised, people are murdered, and even curfew is launched to restrict acts of violence:

The GNLf boys had burned down the government rest house by the river, beyond the bridge where Father Booty had photographed the polka-dotted butterfly. 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 hovering, angelic peace of dawn and dusk in the mountains. The circuit house was burned, and the house of the chief minister's niece . . . even one man's anger, in those days, seemed enough to set the hillside alight. (280-281)

At this time of crisis, it is nature again which helps the residents of Cho Oyo to move on in their life. The uneducated Cook believes that the world 'goes in a circle' and the 'bad things' soon will pass away. During the curfew, it is the natural food available in the surrounding hilly region of Cho Oyo which acts as a support system for the whole family of the judge:

For the first time, they in Cho Oyu were eating the real food of the hillside. *Dalda saag*, pink-flowered, flat-leafed; *bhutiya dhaniya* growing copiously around the cook's quarter; the new tendrils of squash or pumpkin vine; curled *ningro* fiddleheads, *churbi* cheese and bamboo shoots sold by women who appeared from behind bushes on forest paths with the cheese wrapped in ferns and the yellow slices of bamboo shoots in buckets of water. (282)

The Judge's love for Mutt, the female pet dog, in the novel also hints at the fact that nature through her creation definitely supplies whatever we miss in our real life. Mutt is an interesting character in the text. When the GNLf men threaten to kill Mutt, the judge in order to save Mutt decides to give away the rifles. The hollowness which the judge face sat the emotional level is compensated by his love for Mutt. Like his own daughter, Mutt is always a constant companion of the judge, "Mutt followed him to his room. As he sat brooding, she leaned against him with the ease that children have when leaning against their parents" (113). His filial affection for Mutt is so intense that he often called her by sweet names like 'my darling', 'Mutton chop', etc. Such an affinity with an animal indicates man's deep connection with nature. When Mutt is kidnapped, the judge becomes depressed to such an extent that he is reduced to absolute nothingness. Mutt's disappearance from the Cho Oyu make the judge learns the biggest lesson of his life: "We should be dying," the judge almost wept. The world had failed Mutt. It had failed beauty; it had failed grace. But by having forsaken this world, for having held himself apart, Mutt would suffer. (291)

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. Archana Bhattacharjee has rightly commented that the novel "reminds us of non-human perspectives like trees, rivers, mountains and animals and their relevance in the total understanding of environment. Nature is rapidly being gobbled up by culture now days, so ecological balance is the foremost need of the day". The description of Kalimpong does not restrict the town within this mini-ecosphere; rather it becomes a replica of the broad world inhabited by us. It clearly echoes the words mentioned by Glotfelty that over-exploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet Earth. The GNLf attack stops not only the movements of vehicles or machineries, but the natural flow of living too, gets prohibited. Science's invention of ammunitions has been started to silence human voice. A cry for going back to the Mother Nature is found at the concluding segment of the novel. And this is clearly scripted in the text. We can conclude with Glotfelty by stating, 'literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.' (Glotfelty & Fromm xix)

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