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1. Research Scholar
Department of English
(Darbhanga House)
Patna University, Patna
2. Associate Professor of
English, B.N. College,
Patna University, Patna

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An Ecocritical Study of Kiran Desai's Novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard

Binay Kumar Singh¹ and Dr. C.N. Pandey²

Abstract

The present research paper attempts to study Kiran Desai's novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard from the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a new branch of literary theory, which studies the relationship between man and his physical environment. It is concerned with the portrayal of nature and man-nature relationship in literature. The paper examines how environmental issues are represented in the works of art and literature, exploring how human life has been adversely impacted by environmental loss due to man's nefarious and avaricious acts such as industrialisation, explosive population, urbanisation, deforestation, etc. It also critiques the anthropocentric attitudes of human society through the portrayal of the characters of the novel. Desai's novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, in which Sampat happens to be the protagonist, has ecocritical elements in ample measure, and it seeks to show that living in harmony with nature has become the need of the hour for humanity at large if the earth has to become a safe and happy place to live on. The paper attempts to analyse and appraise Desai's Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard against the backdrop of ecocriticism as well.

Keywords: Nature, Environment, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Pollution

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An Ecocritical Study of Kiran Desai's Novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

Introduction

Kiran Desai is a celebrated Indian novelist writing in English; she was born in 1971 in India and is Anita Desai's daughter, a novelist of international repute. She was educated in India until she was 14; afterwards, she moved to England and America for further higher education; her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, came out in 1998. The novel has won the 1998 Betty Trask Prize, serialised in *The New Yorker* and included in the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing*. *The Times* has made a remark on Kiran Desai that she is the most appealing voice of the new generation and that her book is fresh, funny and delicious which defies comparison with that of any other novelist. She has won the Man Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Moreover, her stature as a writer is growing larger with time.

Ours is an age of science and technology. Human life has become easier and more comfortable thanks to scientific and technological advancements. However, these developments in science and technology are the chief causes of environmental loss and degradation. Undoubtedly, industrialisation has benefitted the human race by providing the products and gadgets which have made human life easier, more comfortable, and more luxurious. Nevertheless, alongside these products, reckless and unchecked industrialisation for the sake of maniac power through scientific progress, especially by the developed countries of the world to maintain or enhance their economic hegemony are responsible for the presence of the alarmingly increasing measure of detrimental gases in the atmosphere. These pernicious gases cause air pollution. Moreover, industrial waste causes water and land pollution. Furthermore, the various means of transport cause air and noise pollution.

Our environment is no longer safe for the survival of life on earth due to the increased quantity of pollutants in the air. It has become really tough for us to get fresh air due to ever-burgeoning pollutants in the environment. Most of the mega polishes in the world have got too polluted to live in. For instance, our Delhi has become too suffocating in terms of excessive pollution and population to live in. Even the food we eat is adulterated and contaminated with the pernicious effects of chemicals. Worse still, the increased air pollution is causing global warming and ozone layer depletion leading to green-house effects—which implies that life on earth has got jeopardised and the ecosystem has been upset. Therefore, environmental degradation has become a menace in our contemporary world, which urgently needs to be addressed and overcome for the sake of a better future for mankind. Literature has a key role to play in raising people's ecological consciousness by representing and highlighting environmental issues and, in fact, it has tried its utmost to do so and it still continues to do so. Several poets have sung the beauty of nature and glorified harmonious human co-existence with nature. For example, William Wordsworth, the greatest romantic poet, has viewed nature as a pulsating reality with its own consciousness. The American poets like Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Robert Frost, etc., who glorify nature, are worth mentioning from the ecocritical perspective. Emerson and Thoreau were transcendentalists who philosophised over nature, exhorting humankind to follow a simple way of living. Emerson's first book, *Nature* is reflective, recording the impact of nature on him. Thoreau's book, *Walden* is a meditation on simple living amid natural surroundings. The Indian writers who are significant from the ecocritical point of view are R.K. Narain, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Amitabh Ghosh and Kiran Desai and so on. Therefore, ecological issues are amply represented in literature as well.

Ecocriticism is a new offspring of literary theory that studies the varied approaches adopted by several writers in their writings about nature and natural surroundings. It appraises a work of literature by examining whether the work of literature in question is capable enough

to represent ecological issues well, to highlight harmonious man-nature relationship and to create sufficient awareness of ecological needs and issues. As for its precise definition, Cheryll Glotfelty in her famous book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* has defined ecocriticism as a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As a concept ecocriticism first came into being in the late 1970s in the meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association), a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West. However, Michael P. Branch, in his introduction to a series of brief position papers, all entitled 'What is Ecocriticism', traces the term 'ecocriticism' back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay entitled 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'.

Ecocriticism is still an emergent movement. It is yet to acquire a strong theoretical footing; it is still on the margins, as compared to other full-fledged literary theories. However, it has taken a strong foothold in the USA and continues to gain currency. As it exists in the USA now, it takes its bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose works celebrate nature, the life force and the wilderness. These writers were Ralf Waldo Emerson, Margret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, famously known as transcendentalists: the heralds of the first American literary movement 'Transcendentalism' to attain cultural independence from European models.

The UK version of ecocriticism or green studies takes its cues from the British Romanticism of the 1790s. The man who is said to be the founding figure of the UK version of ecocriticism is the critic Jonathan Bate, the author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 1991). British eco-critics are also of the view that many of their concerns are evident before the word 'ecocriticism' existed in Ramond William's book *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973). As for its infrastructure, it is less developed than in the US. There are as yet no indigenous journals or formal bodies for ecocritics to join, even though there is a UK branch of ASLE, but relevant course options on undergraduates' programmes are gaining currency.

Ecocritical Elements in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard

Sampat Chawla, the protagonist of the novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is born of the Chawlas, Mr. Chawla and Kulfi, in the small town of Shahkot in northern India on the day which witnesses the end of a long-standing drought when a powerful monsoon sweeps over the region. That is why he is christened 'Sampat' since his birth betokens the arrival of good fortune. However, while growing up as a child, he does not look promising and sharp-minded. Rather, he is lazy and sluggish, not showing a penchant for anything materialistic. As a matter of fact, he wants to live his life on his own terms, no matter how whimsical they seem to the world. In a way, the novelist wittingly or unwittingly seeks to show from the portrayal of the unambitious and unworldly Sampat that one can bring real fortune only when one leads a natural way of life amidst nature because nature is indeed merciful as well as bountiful. Further, the seeming capriciousness of Sampat negates the crass over-ambitiousness and materialism, which characterise the contemporary human society. Once he wished to be a bird to fly in the unknown land where he could be free and live in the lap of nature. Here, the bird is symbolic of happiness, freedom and nature. His father thinks that he is a lazy and sluggish boy, not interested in studies and anything worthwhile. This becomes evident when Mr. Chawla admonishes his son, bursting out, "All right? You don't sound very certain." (Desai 22). When he fails to land any government job. His father, Mr. Chawla indignantly calls him "a cross between a potato and human being" (Desai 26). He somehow procures a job for Sampat at a post-office in his home town itself and his job is to sort out mails and letters. However, he is least interested in this new-found job. Besides, he is not serious about anything materialistic and mundane. His only pastime was to spend his time alone with his devices which really engaged his mind.

The town of Shahkot depicted in the novel acts as a microcosm of India, where the characters seem to be caught up in the vortex of modernity and tradition. The novelist, along with ecological issues, deals with the theme of alienation with humour and irony. Like Raju in the novel, *The Guide* by R. K. Narain, Sampat becomes a spiritual guide for common people, forecasting their future by fleeing away from his home out of boredom and shame. When he loses his job after being fired by his boss, Mr. D.P.S. for his negligence in his task assigned to fill glasses with sherbet in the wedding of his boss' daughter. He happens to reach an orchard by bus; but to our utter amusement, he slips through one of the windows of the bus, and then he sneaks into the orchard and he settles himself on a guava tree amidst trees, enjoying serene calm and peace provided by nature, away from the hustle and bustle of a town's life--which is reminiscent of Wordsworth's pantheistic view of life. In a way, he starts vegetating in the verdant environs. The novelist depicts his new-found jubilation in the guava orchard in these glowing sentences: "This scene filled his whole mind and he wondered if he could ever get enough of it. This was the way of riches and this was a king's life, he thought. . . and he ached to swallow it whole, in one glorious mouthful that could become part of him for ever". (Desai 51) Here, through Sampat's fleeing into the orchard from the maniac materialism of a town's life, what Desai seems to beckon to us is a 'return to nature'. Then alone life on earth will be enjoying a pleasant harmonious co-existence. That is, she outrightly denies the prevailing anthropocentric worldview, which has possessed human society today. Sampat's eventual refuge in the orchard amid the natural ambience with other forms of life is, in fact, his long-cherished freedom from the materialistic world, which is trapped in a rat-race and insane consumerism, where success is a fixation and measured only by material achievements. His freedom is like his childhood fantasies, which Desai depicts in these words: "This orchard matched something he had imagined all his life: myriad green-skinned globes growing sweet-sour and marvellous upon a hillside with enough trees to fill the eye and enough fruit to scent the air". (Desai 50)

Desai's ecological vision is not hidebound, and confined to plant life alone. On the contrary, it is really broad and includes animal life in its ambit as well. Desai thinks that life on earth will be endangered if we, humans, remain self-centred and concerned with our own human life, as liberal humanism, the brain-child of Renaissance, goads us to. When the people of Shahkot and the visitors at the orchard start getting disturbed by the disruptive behaviour of intoxicated monkeys, who have got intoxicated by drinking the alcohol brought to the orchard by one of Sampat's visitors, and soon get fed up with the intoxicated monkeys' ruckus in the orchard and the town of Shahkot, Sampat's defense of them shows that he has compassion for other forms of life also—which demonstrates the novelist's empathy with life as a whole. She puts forth his defence of the intoxicated monkeys in the following words: "What can they possibly know?" "The little one lights up his dad's hookah when everyone else is fast asleep." (Desai 123). Further, the various ideas suggested and the various steps to be taken to capture the drunk monkeys are infantile as well as callous, and they show the all-pervasive anthropocentrism in the novel.

Sampat starts growing famous as a Monkey Baba by predicting people's future by means of his knowledge of their lives gained through letters or mails sent by them when he was doing his job at the post office. But his mercenary father, Mr. Chawla, starts utilizing his son's new-found fame as a religious commodity by making fortune out of it. He even starts thinking of turning the orchard into a tourists' place, being unaware of how detrimental it would prove to his son, and it does become one, to his opportunistic ends. Mr. Chawla happily reacts to his new-found fame, saying: "Sampat might make his family fortune. They could be rich! How many hermits were secretly wealthy? How many holy men were not beggars at all? How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts?" (Desai 68) Here, Desai denounces Mr. Chawla's commodification of his son's religious fame, and in one sense

she shows that overly ambitious and materialistic people like Mr. Chawla are simply blind to ecological needs and issues along with other higher concerns of life to suit their vested self-interests. Here, the anthropocentric mindset of people at large is represented through the portrayal of Mr. Chawla, who is concerned with nothing but materialistic pursuits. This mindset is not inclusive since it does not include the wellbeing of other species of life except for that of human beings mainly because the earth is meant for human life alone—which is leading several species of life to extinction.

Before Kulfi, Sampat's mother, serves food to Sampat, she says to her husband, Mr. Chawla, assuring him: "I have fed the food to a chicken beforehand to make sure it is not poisonous". (Desai 103) Again, this statement of Kulfi contains the same anthropocentric mindset that represents entire mankind. That is, the life of a creature like a chicken does not mean anything to her. What matters to her is her son's life because it is her son's life and he (Sampat) is a human being. Over time, to ensure quality food for Sampat, one chicken after another was used for the sake of experiment as an official tester no matter how many chickens died. Here, Desai says: "One chicken after another had been named the official tester to Sampat. When one keeled over and died, from natural causes or tainted food, a new one was kept tethered in its place." (Desai 103) Here, our callous scientific experiments which subject animals to such a cruel torture are also questioned, along with the ideology that man is the most important creature on earth.

Conclusion

The novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai is a serious perusal of ecological issues, which are facing our contemporary world apart from being a hilariously comic novel. It seeks to awaken us to the grim challenges, which must be addressed urgently so as to make our earth a safer and happier place for a harmonious co-existence for all forms of life, serving as a profound reflection on the mutual relationship between man and his physical environment through the portrayal of the protagonist Sampat and other characters. The protagonist, Sampat, being weary of the hubbub of the materialistic life of the town, Shahkot, finds a soothing refuge in the nearby guava orchard with the plenty and bounties of nature. Desai has adroitly tried to raise ecological awareness, highlighting critical environmental threats and exigencies, and exposing man's self-centredness and his puerile understanding of ecology and life's problems. The novel turns out to be a serious critique of anthropocentrism and ecological issues, which the contemporary human society must address, presenting a stark contrast between the tranquil and soothing shelter of nature and the cacophonous and confounding noise of the human society. Desai critiques man's insensitivity and indifference to nature as well as presses for a potential redemption through renewed ties with nature. Thus, the novel, *The Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, appraised from the perspective of ecocriticism, urges us to renew and rethink our relationship with nature so that we may forge a sensitive and inclusive relationship with our motherly earth. To sum up, Desai, through this hilarious novel, seems to be teaching us the lesson that real happiness and fulfilment does not consist in the maniac pursuits of material possessions but in harmonious coexistence with nature at a time when our human society is riven by flagrant materialism in the march of so-called progress and advancement.

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