

Ecocritical Approach to the Postcolonial Anthropogenic novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)

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Abstract: Meenakshi Mukherjee in "Twice Born Fiction" (1971) while paying attention to 1930-1964, *Indian Writings*, in the chapter entitled 'Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English', emphasizes on relationship of man and society that must aim at a definite location in temporal and spatial reality. (Mukherjee, 18) at the same time the Research paper through Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, (1998) takes us to the nineties to the displaced, marginalized modern man, their favourite protagonist who "exhibits deep urge to speak out, unfettered by restraints who virtually screams to be heard, asserts Viney Kirpal in her 'Introduction' to "The New Indian Novel in English" (Reimenschneider, Introduction, 29). The Anthropocene is one of the most influential concepts introduced by the Environmental Sciences and Humanities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Forster suggests, (Introduction, 18) Anthropocene Epoch can be seen having its origins in the post second world war era', what environmental historians have referred to as the Great Acceleration of economic impacts on the earth, hence he argues (Introduction, 18) it established monopoly capitalism at a high level of globalization as its principal driver.' By employing ecocritical analysis, this study examines not only the environmental themes, which tend to portray the complex interplay between Nature, culture, and society, but also allied ecological themes such as the contrast between urban and rural spaces, the symbolism of the Guava Orchard and interaction of Human and Nature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, temporal, spatial, Environmental Sciences and Humanities, economic impact on earth, capitalism, globalization, ecological.

One of the central concerns that has emerged in the intersection of literature and ecological studies is the problematic nature of the concept of place and its ethical implications. The idea of place can foster an ethics of violence and exclusion, which eco-critical scholars explore in light of how place-based imagination is fundamentally linked to issues of identity and belonging. These issues in turn, influence the ways humans interact with their broader environment.

The non-human world considered as the 'other' has often been exploited by human in several modern Indian English novels, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), and Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Reading these works through an ecocritical lens suggests that they all absorb a sense of environmental responsibility.

Desai's simple novel, published in 1998, presents a rich tapestry of characters and narratives set in the fictional Indian town of Shahkot, which offers a unique perspective on the intricate relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Desai uses shock and mystery in the opening scene as she introduces readers to Shahkot, where Kulfi conceives Sampath Chawla, the main protagonist at a time when the town is severely afflicted by intense heat, but through "Divine providence", (perhaps, irony intended), he is born on the day when the town gets blessed with thunderous shower of rain, followed by dropping of food supplies from a Swedish relief plane.

Such happy incident of Sampath's arrival in the earth followed by long awaited Rains can possibly be not construes

as a coincidence, hence the neighbours assure Kulfi, child's mother, that "her son is destined for greatness" (Desai, 12).

On the contrary, Sampath's life is terrible, both ways, on the side of family as well as profession; he is rather derided as a complete failure. For he feels unmotivated and cares little about anything other than following his whims and desires. Sampath somehow whiles away his time, both at the post office as well at home. There is no doubt that he is different from others, usual routine and usual expectations of the society make him restless and he sees his existence as "a never-ending flow of misery".

He is eager to learn other subjects that interest him, for example, during the wedding of his chief's daughter, Sampath was assigned the task of restocking the 'serbet' glasses; the work lacked excitement hence, he decided to explore the property, which brought him into a room full of bridal accessories. Sampath's spirit brightened as he took in the exquisite scents of rose water, musk, mothballs, marigolds, and baby powder. He wrapped himself in the lengths of cloth, clutching the pink, green, and yellow hues to his face. He wore a nose ring and looked through the jewellery box of a distant relative. He lighted a lamp so that he might be seen in his finery, and imagined himself as a magnificent bird, taking him far away to another world. Completely wrapped in his world of imagination, he finally left his room, dressed like a maiden, he plunged into the fountain, showering the women with water. Sampath, misunderstanding the crowd's yells for expressions of adoration, began to undress, causing widespread chaos. Intoxicated by his indulgence into the unreal, he gets shocked to know he is fired from work.

Sampath's discomfort and desolation is described deftly by Desai,

How he hated his life.It was a prison he was born into.....He felt bitter at heart. Surely, he thought, his surroundings were detrimental to his mental health. (Desai, 43)

Desai quite admirably, in her very first novel at the age of 27, delves deep by critiquing Anthropogenic microcosm society for its pervasive patriarchal, social and material expectations. She undertakes the issue of mental health also, through Sampath's feeling of dejection and helplessness. He badly needs help but there is none in the family to even try to understand his wants and desires except his mother Kulfi who too is labelled by Sampath's father and mother as not normal. Desai leaves no stone unturned in lashing out at Mr Chawla's sense of self-proclaimed sense of 'normalcy' and the consequent sense of 'superiority' over the supposedly 'ab-normal' mother-son.

Readers are informed about Kulfi after she was married to Mr Chawla,

he had developed a sort of exasperated affection for his wife, even when it became apparent that she was not the normal daughter of a crazy family as Ammaji had conjectured, but the crazy daughter of a crazy family as he himself had surmised.' (Desai, 64-65)

Desai brilliantly critiques the idea of normalcy through this novel, the social myth surrounding the idea of what is normal. Lennard Davis in his chapter 'Constructing Normalcy' undertakes the notion of normal and says,

The Concept of a Norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm." (Davis, 29)

Ian Hacking in "The Taming of Chance" (1990) observes, that the word 'normal' became indispensable because it provided a way to be objective about human beings especially given the separability of the notion of normal from its opposite, namely the pathological.

Foucault's idea underlined in his speech on biopower" endorses Hacking's pathological view of the 'normal',

By "biopower" which I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be significant namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy of power, or in other words, how starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. (Foucault, 2007, 1)

It can very well be seen that going by the political strategy, or the pathological view, the construction of the idea of 'normalcy' is well evinced in the way Sampath is judged. He certainly does not fit into the norm of 'normal behaviour' he is so much unlike his father; however, he is presented as a caricature in Desai's wry sense of humour, we are told,

He hoped to inspire his family to seek out a day as full of promise and activity as his own would be. (Desai,20)

Desai critiques what Davis refers to as the concept of 'norm'; Sampath and his mother are hence 'outsiders' not just in this family but at universal level such people will be considered. It is interesting to see how Desai through the use of metonymy in 'exasperated affection' intensifies the irony when Mr Chawla in his sense of self-proclaimed greatness denounces Kulfi as 'crazy' her craziness rather than becoming a hurdle rather boosted his superiority as the

'head of the family..... it gave him secret satisfaction despite all his complaining.' (Desai, 65)

Step by step, Kiran Desai builds up the story with intricate threads of satire, faith, humour and pathos. Around Shahkot, there is a guava plantation. Sampath, tired of parents' expectations and city life and after being suspended from his post-office job finds solace beneath the large guava tree on the outskirts of the city. It eventually diverts poor Sampath to Nature where he finds great solace and tranquillity.

Mr Chawla obviously is piqued at Sampath who cannot follow the everyday routine of running and competing for promotion and success, so lectures him. But seeing Sampath, his son, 'who ran and sat in a tree? (Desai, 65) is completely beyond his comprehension. For an egotistical man like him who has taken up the mission to control, guide and manage family matters, this crisis is unfathomable, how and why his son, a human can sit upon the Guava tree amidst monkeys and other perceptible and imperceptible creatures?

Despite being written off as useless, Sampath emerges as a man of profound understanding and is called a 'Tree Baba'. The absurdity of the entire situation points to a scathing criticism of Anthropocene epoch that defines 'norm' for people and the novelist's critique through the lens of Ecocriticism. For, he becomes a great man as predicted by many due to the good omen associated with his birth; and Sampath finds the lives of monkeys, birds, and insects intertwined with his own and his oneness with Nature and amidst lot of 'hullabaloo', Sampath, adamant as he was not to relinquish his tree-his home, he just vanishes, mysteriously.

Desai takes a satirical jab at Mr. Chawla in showing how he cunningly exploits Sampath's popularity by using ways and means to make financial profit as being a successful Man of the house he now adopts the strategy of 'Make hay while the Sun shines'. Desai is simply brilliant in depicting the unscrupulous human behaviour as she mocks her victim, Mr Chawla' for his lack of emotional and spiritual understanding. She clearly shows how this lack further aids to his insensitivity to understand his son's problems for his materialistic mind can consider Sampath only as a misfit in the anthropogenic society, where human success is often judged on different parameters.

Environmental Crisis

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, argues that while Europe and Capitalism, specifically mentioned as carbon economy, are often blamed for the climate change, this problem cannot be

wholly attributed to the 'Other'. Instead, it results from "human actions over time", he further asserts that 'Anthropogenic climate change' as Dipesh Chakrabarty and others have also pointed out, "is the unintended consequence of the very existence of human beings as a species." (Ghosh, 154). Referring to climate change, Ghosh suggests that the only thing it has in common is circumstances of "freakish improbability", we are living by our current standards of normality, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms' (Ghosh, 32).

Nature Signifying Spiritual Power

As the issue of environmental degradation is increasingly becoming global, attention to the ways in which fiction works to reflect, problematize and calibrate human-environment relations has made many literary scholars interested in recent times. This change as can be evinced, is not confined to the Western literatures. In India, ecological issues have been a part of spiritual, cultural and socio-political tools long ago as witnessed in Tagore's *The Waterfall* for example. The postcolonial fiction is full of nature elements either as setting or background and as actors in the story. In these writings nature is frequently loaded with symbolism, and it is used to express anxieties about the impacts of modernization, the displacement of culture, the issue of social disparity and the issue of environmental injustice. Ecocriticism, in reality, refers to examining a literary work about the problems of the modern environment and ecology.

Symbolism –Sampath and Nature

Desai uses symbolism to express Sampath's oneness with Nature.

One day, tired of people meddling with his life, and while watching the Guava orchard, and the Guavas hanging and trees hovering over them, he suddenly decides to climb that tree and make it his home. Oblivious of the peace and tranquillity of mind the orchard will give, Sampath is astounded and greatly relieved. His decision to live there makes people associate him with a hermit.

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is a book that considers environmental issues at several levels. Sampath regains a link to the non-human world that has been lost to the other characters. He finds great respite from his dull, purposeless life and likes the company of Shahkot monkeys. Conversely, the story exposes the readers to the pervasive Anthropocentrism of the narrative's other characters.

There are two ways to experience the novel's ecological heart. The novel's rich green language and Sampath's perspective on the non-human world are reminiscent of the mystical world of Nature, as envisioned in romantic poets' poetry that provides solace and calm. The novel's other characters' anthropocentric viewpoints reflect man's apathy towards the natural world. When seen through an ecocritical lens, the work makes a compelling case that actual serenity can be found in Nature alone. In contrast, man's pursuit of tranquillity, in isolation from Nature always leads to unhappiness.

Kiran Desai uses vivid visuals to describe the beauty of the pristine Nature. Kulfi, Sampath's mother is always shown venturing into the woods,

Far away on a hillside roamed the lady responsible for Sampath's nutrition, a tiny figure on the crest of the university research forest, disappearing and reappearing among the trees, emerging at the point where the forest bordered the fields so as to check the cane traps she had set for pheasants and other wildfowl...the profusion of greenery and space exhilarated her. And while it reduced her son to a happy stupor, it incited her to a frenzy of exploration. (Desai, 100)

Readers get very interesting list of the spices and ingredients arranged creatively by Desai and used by Kulfi to cook highly nutritious food only for her dear son,

.....Kulfi sliced and pounded, ground and smashed, cut and chopped in a chaos of ingredients and dishes. 'Cumin, quail, mustard seeds, pomelo rind', she muttered as she cooked. 'Fennel, coriander, sour mango,...and perfumed kewra. (Desai, 101)

Kulfi's special cooking food for Sampath in fact makes for the most humorous parts in the novel. The climax takes place when the devotees and later a journalist decide to spy on Kulfi's kitchen. The spy's attempts get thwarted by Kulfi and such instances are described in a mock heroic pattern,

But each time, as if she had been forewarned, Kulfi caught sight of the spy just in time and cracked him over the head with a broom. You could get yourself killed in the BUFHM, he thought, and watched from the bushes as she continued her work..... (Desai, 104)

The Postcolonial Themes--Myth, Superstition and Tree-Baba

The novel in a very humorous way develops Sampath's journey on the lines of Indian Writers' subjects ranging from superstition, myth, even mysticism, reminding us of R.K. Narayan, his novel *The Guide* for instance where Raju the Guide, totally disheartened and broken, is found sitting under a branch and seeing a hermit kind of person, people in that village, unhappy over a long drought look at him with the hope of a miracle happening. The novel emphasizes how Faith of a few can facilitate a miracle, a happy resolution as Raju feels compelled to believe in the hope he has instilled in them for a miracle to happen. Fortunately, Rains come, but Raju dies; he has sought redemption in his life in the progress made from a ruffian to a saint and the novel ends with his death, a befitting spiritual ending.

True, Desai employs her wit and humour to critique the anthropogenic world that has lost touch with the human association with the Nature, the ecological sustainability that human species need to learn urgently. Ironically, the devotees', specifically Mr Chawla, needs to understand. Desai depicts how Mr Chawla in his pride and vanity of considering himself the wisest person in the family, has blighted any scope to see his wife at least a 'normal' person. Readers are told, that seeing her over-indulgent activities in getting pheasants and spices from the forest he was thinking of sending her to a 'mental home' (103).

As the years passed, he found he understood her less and less instead of more and more....Did she think like a human being?

Desai in these sentences clearly foregrounds the distinction between pride and humility, ignorance and knowledge, that human beings have imbibed by forgetting who they were, and what they are. The irony is implicit here; lines are blurred between who is wise and who is unwise and who is normal and who is less of a human being here.

Desai attempts to subsume all these issues connected with anthropogenic indulgences through the long established subjects of myth, superstition faith and finally to the bigger question of Ecology and human existence.

It will be pertinent to underscore the gap of almost 150 years between Narayan's *Guide* (1958) and Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in terms of the subject spread across time and space.

Meenakshi Mukherjee while commenting on R.K. Narayan's novels in the chapter, 'The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English' says,

If complications arise, they are bound to be resolved by the end and normalcy restored. What is emphasised as its Indianness, by which are meant a good humoured inertia and a casual tolerance which almost any reader in country is expected to recognize as familiar. (Mukherjee, 81)

Desai's novel cannot end with normalcy restored nor with a predictable, happy ending. The novel corresponding to a huge leap in time and space is bound to critique the existing norms; here she takes recourse to several issues, not just the issues of mental health and 'norm', 'normal' but the ecological concerns alongside the people's sense of superstition which Sampath exploits with his sharpness of mind; it is interesting to see how he weighs his situation and the fame he gets through his special skill. The novel mentions how Sampath after watching the ripe Guava on the tree gets inspired to sit there and weave interesting facts of the people he had gathered while reading their letters secretly and telling those very facts to them thereby impressing them with his art of forecasting their lives and destinies.

Nevertheless, the predictions about Sampath becoming a great man do come out to be true, but the linear narrative essentially defies the predictability of a circular/ realist mode, for the novel ends with mysterious disappearance of Sampath the 'Tree Baba'.

The question that remains to be answered is, if he fears that his fake identity might get disclosed or because he is reluctant to spend his present life of living away from the people amidst Nature, and monkeys. Desai leaves up to the readers to formulate possible message through their consciousness and their understanding. The humour is left intact, for when Sampath is searched, everyone finds a big Guava hanging on its own and the monkeys too have disappeared by then.

Ecocriticism is seen universally critiquing anthropogenic intervention in man-nature quintessential interdependent

association since time immemorial. The research explores Desai's critical jab at the anthropogenic intervention in not just the human sphere but how that exponentially interrogates his limitations; the novel undertakes the broader implications of her ecological perspective in the context of postcolonial literature, emphasizing the importance of local ecosystems and indigenous knowledge systems. Desai unravels pressing environmental concerns while providing insights into postcolonial identity's complexities, thereby highlighting the novel's contribution to the broader conversation on the intersections of literature, culture, and the environment.

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