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**REREADING KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*
THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM**

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Abstract:

Postcolonial ecocriticism is one of the subfields within postcolonial literary studies. It brings postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging the imperial modes of social and environmental exploitation. My endeavour in this paper is to explore Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2006, through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. Set in the backdrop of rising insurgency in Nepal, the novel illuminates the postcolonial issues of quest for identity, pain of exile etc. on the one hand and environmental crises on the other and shows how the postcolonial crises are inextricably connected with ecological crises.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism, Environment, Exile, Identity, Postcolonialism

Kiran Desai, the daughter of the renowned novelist Anita Desai, is one of the significant writers of Indian Diaspora who has enriched the corpus of Indian Writing in English. *The Inheritance of Loss* is her second novel which won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2006. It highlights numerous issues like immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, terrorism, identity crisis, gender, class system etc. My endeavour in this paper is to explore the novel through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Let us first analyse the terms ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘ecocriticism’ in order to grasp the meaning of the newly coined term ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’. The term ‘postcolonialism’ has rightly been defined by Robert J.C. Young as “a politics and philosophy of activism that contests the disparity [between oriental and occidental cultures/peoples] and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past” (*Postcolonialism : A Very Short Introduction* 4). According to him, this activism has much to do with theorising the ideas of “a political practice morally committed to transforming the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which large sections of the world’s population live out their daily lives” (Young 6). Now the term ‘ecocriticism’ can be traced back to William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” published in 1978. Cheryll Glotfelty revived the term in 1989. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm is one of the most important books in this new field of criticism. The term ‘ecocriticism’ is a “semineologic level” for a “unidoctrinalist imputation” (Buell: ‘Letter’ in “Forum on Literatures of the Environment” The Modern Language Association of America 1091). Eco is an abbreviated form of ecology which is concerned with the relationship between living organisms (biotic component) and their natural environment (abiotic component). Similarly, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how the relationships between living organisms and their physical environment are reflected in literature. However, Simon C. Estok argues in an essay “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of ‘Home’ and ‘Power’ in *King Lear*”:

ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and secondly by its commitment to make connections... Ecocriticism , therefore, is not simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function - thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise - of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds (16-17).

We should note here that postcolonialism and environmental writing though directed towards specific goals (i.e. to protect nature and to promote the rights of abused peoples) always resists its categorisation as ‘protest literature’. Accordingly, postcolonialism and ecocriticism preserve the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing the readers’ attention to its profound concern for social and environmental injustice.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is one of the subfields within postcolonial literary studies. It brings postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging the imperial modes of social and environmental exploitation. In spite of the numerous ethical and political connections of social injustice and ecological crisis, postcolonial and ecocritical approaches have remained distant from each other for a long period of time. It is only in the first decade of the twenty-first century that this new critical approach emerged. Since then a growing amount of scholarship has focused on the correlations between environmentalism or ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. Let us recall what Upamanu Paboo Mukherjee writes in the book *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*:

Surely, any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) can not but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species (144).

In fact contemporary postcolonial crises are inextricably connected with ecological crises. Postcolonial ecocritics try to explore “the socio-political origins of environmental issues overriding the apolitical tendencies of earlier forms of ecocriticism that often seemed either to follow an escapist pastoral impulse or to favour an aesthetic appreciation of nature for its own sake” (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* 12). Thus they make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and non-human, visible in the world and in doing so, they help make them obsolete.

We may now study *The Inheritance of Loss* from the postcolonial ecocritical perspective. The novel is set partly in Kalimpong situated at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the north-eastern part of postcolonial India and partly in the American city of New York. In spite of being set in two totally different countries, the action is linked by the presence of Biju who is an immigrant in New York—a city where the poor and the deprived come from different third world countries in order to earn money and become rich. Let us recall what Desai says in an interview with BBC, radio:

The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys of Sai's grandparents as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance.

As the title of the novel suggests, the inheritance is that of loss in case of Biju as well as the novelist herself. As a diasporic writer Desai, in this novel, deals with issues closely related to colonialism and its effects.

Kalimpong, where the action of the novel partly takes place, represents India colonised by the British for about two hundred years. During that period of time, the colonisers affected nature and culture of India quite adversely. The novel shows how colonialism affects the Indian culture through generations as well as the Indian environment and Desai seems to sensitise her readers to think seriously about the social and environmental exploitation in postcolonial India. This paper attempts to show the novelist's continuing pursuit of social and environmental justice in an unevenly developed world.

Like the first novel of Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* too begins with a description of natural beauty. Let us recall the opening sentences:

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).

Cho Oyu, far from the madding crowd, serves as a gothic backdrop against which almost all the chief characters are presented. The calm and quiet atmosphere at the outset of the novel suggests the ecological balance which should not be disturbed at any cost. However this serenity of nature is broken by the GNLF men who come to the house of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge and demand food, shelter and his licensed rifle. "They had come through the forest on foot, in leather jackets from the Kathmandu black market, khaki pants, bandanas—universal guerrilla fashion"(4). The terrorist activities of these GNLF men turned the heavenly nature of Kalimpong into a hellish one. Let us recall such lines as: "They laughed a movie laugh, and then, also as if in a movie, the boy with the rifle pointed his gun at Mutt [Jemubhai's pet dog]" (5). Thus the bond of love between man and nature is broken by the Indian-Nepali insurgency. We may recall such lines as:

The GNLFF 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... Kalimpong was transformed into a ghost town, the wind tumbling around the melancholy streets, garbage flying by unhindered (280-281).

The Gorkhas don't bother about sabotaging their own motherland and its natural resources. They don't think of the loss they cause to nature. It is only because of the cross-cultural problems that the tranquil atmosphere of nature gets disturbed. They don't realise the fact that it is within some physical environment that man always exists and there cannot be 'is' without 'where' as Lawrence Buell has put it. The expression 'ghost town' is probably suggestive of the ultimate destiny of the human beings who are going to be extinct in no time as a result of ruthless destruction of nature. However some sensible people are still there to think seriously about the preservation of nature. SDO is one of them. He says: "I have become a keen gardener... since I arrived in Kalimpong. I look after my plants exactly as if they were babies" (226). When he 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). William Wordsworth's view of nature as an omnipotent spiritual power comes at once to mind. SDO seems to be the mouthpiece of Desai advocating ecocentric philosophy of life. Here she wishes to replace the anthropocentric philosophy of Christianity by ecocentrism - the view that non- human life forms, no less than the human species, possess importance, value and even moral and political rights. We may do well to recall what G.M. Hopkins wrote in "Inversnaid":

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet (13 – 16).

Moreover, Desai's profound concern for killing of animals finds beautiful expression in what SDO says regarding hunting: "Justice Sahib, you shikaris were too good, lions and leopards. Now if you go into the forest and if you see a chicken that has escaped from somewhere, you are lucky, no?" (225) Infact, lions and leopards are gradually getting endangered thus

disturbing the ecosystem and Desai is much worried about it. She is of the view that living organisms should “coexist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere.” (Glotfelty and Fromm 107) Otherwise the ecological balance of the whole world will be disturbed thus endangering human survival on earth. Another important character who serves as the mouthpiece of Desai is Jemubhai Patel. His profound love for his pet dog, Mutt, is suggestive enough of the fact that Desai wishes to change our anthropocentric attitudes into biocentric ones. Here Mutt is not a mere dog but it represents all the animals which form an important part of nature. Let us recall such immortal lines from S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

He prayeth well who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all (612-17).

Our anthropocentric attitudes are well expressed by the novelist in the following lines:

Dog died! The hilarity spread. They could barely stop laughing. In a place where people died without being given any attention. They died of TB, hepatitis, leprosy, plain old fever....And no jobs, no work, nothing to eat - this commotion over a dog! Ha ha ha ha ha ha (314).

Desai, a true environmentalist, creates the characters like Jemubhai, his cook and Sai to resist the anthropocentric philosophy which should be replaced by biocentric one thus conveying the message that we should have love and reverence for every living organism of nature.

Let us now explore how postcolonial and ecological issues are brought together by the novelist as an effective means of challenging the imperial modes of social and environmental exploitation. The ecological degradation caused by the terrorist activities of GNLFF men has its socio-political origins. During the colonial period the Indian-Nepalese people sacrificed a lot for India but after independence they are treated in their own country as slaves. So they form The Gorkha National Liberation Front “...fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority” (9). They consider it their birth right to fight for a separate homeland. “They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs” (9). They can’t forget how the British army and later the Indian

army exploited them for their selfish ends. They remain doubly marginalized as being poor and slaves of a prejudiced superior race. Their socio-economic conditions didn't improve even after the independence of India. India being the governing power exploited them socially and politically and marginalized them as non-Indians. During colonial period they were exploited by the British and after Indian independence they faced a kind of 'neocolonialism' being a minority or what is known as subaltern under the Indian government. So, they decide to rebel against this kind of social and political exploitation. Desai has created a character named Gyan who represents the Gorkhas. His dislocation from Nepal makes him a foreigner in India. As he comes from a different ethnic culture and background, he can't identify himself as Indian and suffers from an identity crisis. In fact, we can never get rid of colonisation because of social and cultural discriminations. As Trinh T. Minh-ha says in "No Master Territories": "...without the margin, there is no center, no heart" (16-17). And so, marginalization or discrimination continues to prevail in any society. In the north-eastern part of India the social and cultural marginalization of the Gorkhas gives rise to the Gorkhaland movement which causes environmental degradation as well as economic depression. "Every bamboo had been cut and sold, every lime was off the tree" (43) as "for a long while there had been severe food shortages, as there always were when political trouble arrived on the hillside" (45). During the time of insurgency when the Gorkhaland movement was at its peak, tea, timber and tourism – the three Ts of the Darjeeling district – suffered a great loss and consequently the whole economy was under threat. So, the people of these underdeveloped areas had to migrate to various developed countries to earn a living. Biju is one such character who somehow manages to get a tourist visa to the United States of America and stays there as an illegal immigrant. However, his dream shatters when he gets humiliated by the white Americans and has to move from one ill-paid job to another. "Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run" (3). So, in the USA as in India, he remains on the margin, on the periphery, socially as well as economically. What is worse is that his father, the cook in the Judge's house, doesn't want him to return home as he is proud of the fact that his son "works for the Americans" (14). Let us recall what his father advises him: "Stay there as long as you can...Make money. Don't come back here" (191). Thus Biju lives a diasporic life far away from his native land as a second class citizen and is agonized by a state of psychological exile. His heart remains in India. When he sees a homeless chicken he recalls his village. "Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life" (81). Losing ties with his indigenous culture and traditions, Biju, like Gyan, suffers a sense of loss or an identity crisis and finally comes back home 'from America with far less than he'd ever had' (317). However, after returning to his

homeland, he “felt exhilarated by the immensity of wilderness, by the lunatic creepers, the shooting hooting abundance of green, the great caterwauling vulgarity of frogs that was like the sound of the earth and the air itself” (315).

In conclusion, it may be reiterated that Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* sheds light on the postcolonial as well as ecological issues. Set in the backdrop of rising insurgency in Nepal in the 1980s, the novel illuminates various issues of postcolonialism on the one hand and environmental issues on the other and shows how the contemporary postcolonial crises are inextricably linked with ecological crises. Indeed *The Inheritance of Loss* is rich in Desai’s social and ecological wisdom.

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