



UGC Approved Journal

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.7



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume IV, Issue X
October 2017
www.ijellh.com**

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Ecological Consciousness in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

Abstract:

Kiran Desai's debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), on the one hand, manifests Nature as a source of peace and tranquillity; on the other hand, it also throws light on the estranged relationship of man with his environment. In its background, the novel echoes the popular modern world's song of anthropocentrism. The central character Sampath's escape from the human-centred society to a guava orchard, which soothes his perturbed heart, is utilised by his father for his family's material gains at the cost of his son's peace, the tranquillity of the orchard and the natural life of the monkeys dwelling in Shahkot. The other chief characters of the novel too seem apathetic towards the non-human world. The novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, presents a world where, instead of Nature, man has become the centre of life. This research paper, through an ecocritical reading, is a preliminary attempt to discuss Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* as an ecologically conscious novel.

Today the world is exposed to many ecological problems and that is because of man's developing disbelief in traditional knowledge and the erosion of ethical values in his behaviour that cherish the significance and holiness of the natural world and encourage the conservation of the non-human world. A philosophy called Deep Ecology advocates a balance between human and non-human world and directs the activity of man to avoid self-destruction. Using this tool of Deep Ecology literary critics as a response to modern ecological and environmental crisis study the 'literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of 'natural' or non-human...' (Childs and Fowler 65). In critical theory, 'the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment' (Glotfelty XVIII), is called Ecocriticism. Many contemporary Indian English novels such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) etc. at some level describe a condition where non-human world is taken as the other and is exploited by man. Ecocritical readings of these novels suggest that they all imbibe ecological

consciousness in themselves. Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is also one of those contemporary Indian English novels which sound ecologically conscious.

The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms describes ecocriticism as, "The study of literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of 'natural' or non-human phenomena which bears upon human experience – encompassing (amongst many things) issues concerning fauna, flora, landscape, environment and weather" (Childs and Fowler 65).

Ecocriticism in fact denotes the practice of studying a literary work in connection with the issues of present day environmental and ecological crisis. As Oppermann mentions in one of his papers, 'Ecocriticism actually launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis' (Oppermann). Christopher Cokinos of Kansas State University, in a position paper '*What Is Ecocriticism*' observes ecocriticism as "the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the non-human world and our relationship to it" (Cokinos 3). An Earth-centred study of a literary work is the core of Ecocriticism. Principally, it endeavours to develop a kind of ecological consciousness among human beings by studying the connection between a literary text and its environment.

Currently, Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) which started in America in 1992 is an association which promotes Ecocriticism. The official website of ASLE manifests,

"ASLE seeks to inspire and promote intellectual work in the environmental humanities and arts. Our vision is an inclusive community whose members are committed to environmental research, education, literature, art and service, environmental justice, and ecological sustainability" (ASLE).

Likewise, Organisation for Studies in Literature – India (OSLE-India) is a forum for promoting ecocriticism, especially in India and also in other Asian countries.

The phrase 'ecological consciousness' comprises two independent words, 'ecological' and 'consciousness'. 'Ecological' is the adjective form of the word, 'ecology' and according to *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* 'ecology is a science that deals with the relationship between groups of living things and their environment' (Merriam), hence, 'ecological' stands for 'the relation between a group of living things and their environment'. 'Consciousness' is awareness or to know about something which is happening or occurring around or with a person. In this sense, the term Ecological Consciousness means the awareness that one has about one's ecosystem. That is to say, how everything is going on in our eco-system, what our ecosystem has for us, or is there any danger to our ecosystem?

Although the Renaissance ended in England by the year 1660, yet globally, its central idea of 'humanism' has never been out of man's mind and his behaviour, and now our present world is dealing with a distorted form of this 'humanism' i.e., anthropocentrism. For an anthropocentric, the Earth is an open place which can be exploited for the progress and development of human beings, even at the cost of each and every entity of the non-human world. Hence, Anthropocentrism can be defined as a conviction that takes human being as

the most important creature of the world. Actually, this human-centric model of life was promoted and popularised by the Greeks. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* suggests, 'Greeks were the first to focus on 'Man-Apart' – that is, humankind without reference to the physical environment in which the species subsists, – as merely one element of a complex ecosystem' (Childs and Fowler 65). In the area of environmental studies, Anthropocentrism is understood as the principal reason behind the problems prevailing in the eco-system.

There are many elements which together make *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* an ecologically conscious novel. The central character Sampath Chawla shows his connection with the non-human world which has been long lost among the other characters of the novel. The pain of ecological crisis is well felt by Sampath. His sympathy for the monkeys of Shahkot is evident. On the other hand the novel brings forth the persisting anthropocentrism among the other characters of the novel in front of the readers. The ecological essence of the novel can be felt by two angles. First, the lush green language of the novel and Sampath's view towards the non-human reminds us of a Wordsworthian view towards the nature, that is, nature as a source of peace and tranquillity. Second, the anthropocentric attitude of other characters of the novel shows how apathetic man has become towards the non-human world. In the light of an ecocritical reading, the novel very well states that Nature is still the source of the true peace; however, man is searching peace standing apart from Nature which could never lead to happiness.

The language used by Kiran Desai is rich in imagery describing the pleasantness of Nature. The prevailing petrichor while the arrival of first rain in Shahkot can be experienced in these lines. 'The monsoon was in town. Kulfī watched with unbelieving elation as the approaching smell of rain spiked the air like a flower, as the clouds shifted in from the east, reached the trees at the town's edge and moved on' (Desai 9). This pleasant essence of Nature coming from the language is apparent throughout the novel. The novel also emphasises at the self-healing power of Nature. Nature itself corrects everything to maintain ecological balance. The earth is neither only for man nor can man alone survive long in the absence of the non-human. Man should have a reciprocal relationship with Nature. Nature by change in climate gives a chance to everything to grow and develop. The novel describes the changes and the vitality of Nature after the rain in Shahkot; 'Soon the winged ants would be flying and lizards would grow fat on dozens of multiplying insects. . . Fungus and mould would sprout green and voluptuous and armies of mushrooms would gather in the cupboard under the sink' (Desai 12).

In the novel, the central character Sampath Chawla's feelings for Nature are no less fascinating than any romantic poet of the Lake. The novel expressed his desire to live in accord with Nature, his treatment of nature as a teacher and the calmness felt by him in the lap of Nature in these words, 'Oh, if he could exchange his life for this luxury of stillness, to be able to stay with his face held towards the afternoon like a sunflower and to learn all there was to know in this orchard' (Desai 51).

At the marriage of the daughter of Mr. D.P.S, Sampath had been given the responsibility of filling glasses with sherbet. In addition to that he also had to wash the emptied glasses and refill them. However, when he came upon a room piled high with wedding finery, his craving for the call of the wild, the unknown, the natural, the peaceful dominated him,

‘He uncorked a bottle of rose-water... Sampath...could also discern the scent of musk, mothballs, marigolds and baby powder. Of sandalwood oil. Oh, scented world! He felt his heart grow light’ (Desai 37).

‘... he felt a sudden sharp longing, a craving for an imagined world, for something he’d never known but felt deep within himself’ (Desai 38).

Sampath’s craving for freedom from the man-made world where he had a limited access to nature because of the rules and boundaries of the mundane life always pushes him to do something which seemed unusual and impractical to the people of Shahkot. Frustrated by the attitude of people towards him after his unusual behaviour at the wedding ceremony, finally at the end of chapter five of the novel, Sampath realised what he wanted, and that was ‘his freedom’, “he said, ‘I want my freedom’” (Desai 47).

Later the guava orchard became the dwelling place for Sampath; life at the orchard was just as the same as he had imagined all his life; ‘myriad green-skinned globe growing sweet-sour and marvellous upon a hillside with enough trees to fill the eye and enough fruit to scent the air’ (Desai 50). Sampath’s love for the non-human is also visible in his act of defending monkeys when they had drunk alcohol. He playfully defended the monkeys in these words, ‘What can they possibly know? When rest of the household is sleeping, the child puffs on his father’s hookah’ (Desai 123).

The novel, like the works of Wordsworth presents Nature as a source of peace and tranquillity for the central character. The modern man has developed a misconception that development and progress as man apart from non-human world can bring peace, however the novel provides a plot where the real peace is shown to be achieved by Sampath through reconciliation with Nature; ‘Yes, he was in the right place at last. Tiredness rolled over him like a wave and, closing his eyes, he fell into a deep slumber, lodged in a fork in the guava tree’ (Desai 51).

Anthropocentrism is also apparent in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Sampath’s father Mr Chawla, for the material gain of the family didn’t hesitate to sell his own son as religious human material. When Sampath was not ready to leave the orchard and he was already getting popularity as Monkey Baba, his father thought to commercialise Sampath’s dwelling in the orchard though at the cost of his own son’s happiness. Sampath had left his town and decided to live a reclusive life to get freedom from the man-made society which was no source of peace for him, but his father developed the same man-made world in the orchard which later brought discomfort and sorrow for Sampath.

Another case in point of Man’s apathy for animals is perceptible in these lines of the chapter eleven of the novel, ‘I have fed the food to a chicken beforehand to make sure it is not poisonous, (Desai 103). Kulfi produced meal for Sampath containing unknown ingredients which could be poisonous so she first tested that dish on chicken. A chicken’s life was of no importance for Kulfi. ‘One chicken after another had been named the official taster to Sampath. When one keeled over and died, from natural causes or tainted food, a new one was kept tethered in its place’ (Desai 103). Kulfi represents all those human beings who do fatal experiments on the animals. For them no other entity in this world is as important as human beings.

One more pure example of prevailing anthropocentrism among the characters of the novel was their attitude towards the monkeys dwelling in Shahkot. No doubt on many occasions the monkeys remained miscreants, yet, who the real culprit was, monkeys or the man. Monkeys had developed the habit of drinking alcohol, but would there be this habit unless the negligence of the man who left the bottles of alcohol in the orchard which the monkeys got from there. One of the devotees of Sampath became Desai's mouthpiece in defending monkeys, as he said, 'It is not the monkeys' fault. Always men are the degenerate one...' (Desai 123).

The human-centred plans suggested by various characters to get rid of the monkeys show that man feels that everything which belongs to earth is only for his use, and he will decide what/which should be there and what/which shouldn't be. A proposal that caught up a weird method of killing the Cinema Monkey and displaying its carcass to disband the troupe of monkeys was drafted by Verma of the university. 'They would disband just like that and disappear quietly into the forest' (Desai 161). Similarly, the Brigadier suggested that he would, '...organise a firing squad whereby fifty or a hundred men would be dispersed throughout the brush, discharging their rifles every twenty to forty minutes to scare the monkeys. ...the monkeys would surely get the jitters and would disappear from there, never to return' (Desai 162).

These anthropocentric solutions to deal with the monkeys suggested in the novel depict how insensitive man has become towards the non-human world. In chapter Twenty-three of the novel Sampath's helplessness can be seen in these words, 'Leave me alone, I am going to be sick. Leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone. . .' (Desai 190). These words represent the feelings of all those people whose personal freedom is taken away by the man-made society. The increasing anthropocentrism has now come to this level that man not only decides what/which non-human should exist in his world but also he controls other human to fit in his world.

To conclude, in this age of environmental crisis, ecocritical reading of a literary text has emerged as a tool for the scholars of literature to participate as an environmentalist to make the readers ecological conscious. In this paper, the ecocritical reading of Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* has also been done with the same purpose. The novel on the one hand reminds the readers about the tranquilising qualities of nature, so on the other hand it also depicts an anthropocentric society. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* presents a picture of contemporary India, where in the age of transition a person may feel alien in the anthropocentric society which has been losing all its value for the non-human world. The novel ends when Sampath left the orchard in search of some peace and the monkeys also left the place, however the people of the town thought that Sampath had been transformed into a guava. This ending symbolises something, and that is; man with an anthropocentric attitude is living in his own imaginary world and is unable to understand what he has been losing. Sampath's father in an obsession for money lost his son.

In the novel while suggesting solutions to get rid of the monkeys, each character ended saying that the monkeys would run away into the forest. It shows the ironical thought process of human beings. First man cuts forests for his use, forces the creatures to leave their natural dwelling places and when those creatures in search of some habitat come to the man-made cities and town which are built in the place of forests, man uses various techniques to send

away those creatures to the forest. Where are those forests? Where would these creatures go? Can man answer these questions?

No doubt, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, at some level brings its readers' attention towards the increasing ecological crisis, at the same time it has presented Nature still as the best source of peace and tranquillity.

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