

## Eco-Criticism in *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss*

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The phrase “literature and environment” came into common use among literary scholars in the United States and abroad in the early and mid-1990s when the scholarly organization called “The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment”. (acronym ASLE) and the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* were created. Although the phrase “*Literature and Environment*” is still sometimes used, many critics prefer the more inclusive idea of approaching literature in a way that explore the relationship between literary expression and all environments rather than focusing more narrowly on the interest in and concern for “the environment” (the world beyond human affairs) in literary expression. The word “environment” literally means “surroundings” as in the German equivalent *Umwelt* (or “around-world”) (George Hart, Scott Slovic, p.1)

Although writers throughout the world have always been interested in interactions between humans and the landscape, flora and fauna, literary scholars and others specialists in the arts and humanities (the visual and performing arts, history, philosophy, and related disciplines) have traditionally concentrated their studies on human expression and human experience, seldom considering the ramifications of human behavior for the larger planet and the impact of *nature* on human experience.

All developments of science, technology and commerce in the name of progress are mainly anthropocentric (human created) and definitely neglect the claims of our natural environment. Such a misbalanced view of progress in due course of time compelled man to make his progress bio-centric (earth created) so that the natural environment may be protected and its balance with human life may be maintained. Eco-criticism, a relatively new branch of literary criticism is obviously the result of the new consciousness that very soon, *there will be nothing beautiful (or safe) in nature to discourse about unless we are very careful* (Prمود K. Nayar, p. 291). Simply defined, eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticisms examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness or modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Eco-criticism takes as its stages the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one fact in literature and the other on land, as a theoretical discourse; it negotiates between the human and nonhuman. If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that *Everything is connected to everything else*, we must conclude that 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.

Most eco-critical works shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems (Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm). Compelled by the idea of saving the environment from total chaos, a number of creative writers of last two decades, made it a point to deal with nature as an important entity in their literary text. When these texts are studies from eco-critical perspective, the reader finds the inner-relatedness of all factors within the eco-system like social, political and phenomenon of natural world. Even the physical setting in the plot of literary text plays an important role in the total understanding of its meaning.

Both Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are socially aware intellectuals with deep concern for the environment. They do not merely preach nice things from ivory tower but have shown their serious commitment to environment in their prize winning novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. This paper examines the two texts from eco-critical perspectives to see how our environment is being subjected to decay and destruction and also points out the reasons that lay behind it too.

The river Meenachal in *The God of Small Things* evokes many images in the mind of Estha and Rahel. They often dreamt of the river in their childhood. They had reasons to do so: *It was warm, the water green like reapplied silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.* (Arundhati Roy -123)

As an object of beauty it seemed a joy forever. When Rahel returned twenty three years later the river *greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed*" (Arundhati Roy - 124). Though it was June and raining *the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed, cautious* (Arundhati Roy - 124).

The river which had the power to evoke fear was no more than *a slow, slugging green ribbon laws that ferried garbage to the sea now* (Arundhati Roy-124). Estha too found that the river, *smelled of shit and pesticides brought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils* (Arundhati Roy-13).

Shit and pesticides are the two sources of pollution mentioned here. The children of the shanty hutments on the other side of the river defecating on the river bed may be responsible for it. The water of the river is also used for washing clothes and pots upstream and receives 'unadulterated factory effluent' as well. Little wonder then that in summer "*the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hot*" (Arundhati Roy-125).

The river is not the only sufferer in the novel. Ayemenem once known for freshness, matchless greenery and rural quietness has changed when Rahel returns to it. Its population has *swelled to the size of a little town*. Estha now finds *the new, freshly baked iced, Gulf money houses built by nurses masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places* (Arundhati Roy-13).

To give a real Indian touch to the process of urbanization *small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways* (Arundhati Roy - 1).

The estate of Karri Saipu, also known as History House, has changed too. It is renovated and painted now a five star hotel called *Heritage*. The locality is described as *Gods Own Country* in hotel brochures. But what is the reality about it? *The view from the hotel was beautiful; but here too the water was thick and toxic. They had built a wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There was not much they could do about the smell...they knew those clever Hotel people that smelliness like other people's poverty was merely a matter of getting used to it* (Arundhati Roy, pp.125-126)

All these glimpse and many others scattered across Arundhati Roy's book present a very dismal picture of environmental degradation brought about by human callousness towards other living beings and inanimate things and senseless pursuit of money.

Kiran Desai's eco-critic approach becomes evident from the very beginning of the text. She begins her novel with the description of natural beauty of Mount Kanchenjunga with its *wizard phosphorescence*. The house in which the retired judge with his orphaned granddaughter Sai, a servant and a dog Mutt, lives is situated at a place from where the

beautiful treasure of nature can be easily enjoyed. *The rooms were spacious in the old manner of wealth windows placed for snow views* (Kiran Desai, 6-7)

It is an old house and stands in true testimony of contemporary eco-friendly architect where one can receive maximum of nature's blessings.

In contrast to the peaceful and serene atmosphere, the novelist has also portrayed the efforts of those who intentionally wish to break the lovable bonds which unite man with nature. Their only wish is to establish supremacy by disturbing its peace. *They had come through the forest on foot in leather jackets from Kathmandu black market...* (Kiran Desai, 4)

They are the young boys who have been demanding for a separate Gorkhaland. They used to disturb the silence of nature by firing the bullets. Their job is to terrorize people and rob their wealth, specially their guns. Thus terrorist activities, motivated by political reasons, easily turns heaven like nature into a hellish experience Desai like an eco-critic maintain here:

“Nature really exists out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ionized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas but actually present as an entity which effects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (Peter Barry, 252)

When the cook looks at the dried azalea and Juniper in the hut, he remembers the day when *they had burnt this incense all along the path* (Kiran Desai, 84) on the arrival of Dalai and Panchan Lamas in Kalimpong and the whole of the atmosphere was full of refreshing smell. But today's *greasy bus station with its choking smell of exhaust* (Kiran Desai, 84) appears to be in complete contrast of that day. Hostile treatment of nature in the hands of human being definitely affects human life adversely and gives rise to various problems.

*Like Gothe's sorcerer's apprentice, we have turned the tap on of technology without being able to control the flow. When mechanization takes over, the laws of life are bound to be trampled upon.* (Sisir Kumar Ghose, p. 114)

Our relationship with nature is a matter of faith. The more we rely on it the better is our realization of its blessing. It also becomes synonymous to God, provided we try to understand its mystery. When the SDO looks at the beautiful flowering creeper in the garden of the judge, he says: *Beautiful Blossoms, Justice Sahib. If you see such a sight, you will know there is a God.* Though a man of police, he loves such a beautiful creation of nature and looks after his plants exactly *as if they were babies* (Kiran Desai, 226). The observation of 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 spectacle of nature.

Thus we see that these two novels deal not only with the life style of the inhabitants of Ayemenem and Kalimpong but also its landscape. It 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 a days, so ecological balance is the foremost need of the day. The two internationally acclaimed novelists have highlighted this perspective through their novels. Their eco-centric approach can at least sensitize people to think seriously about these problems and to find out a solution for it.

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