

EXPLORING ECOFEMINISM AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

The Booker Prize-winning novel The Inheritance of Loss written by Kiran Desai finds its epistemic texture in the background of diaspora studies and explores the theme of loss in terms of homeland, identity as well as natural habitat. It also deals with shades of modernism and feminism. The present paper highlights the Ecofeminist dimension of the novel in the inter-text and sub-text of diasporic reality and the phenomena of identity. Thereby, the present paper attempts to unravel the fractured self, intertwined within the novel.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women, Diaspora, Identity, Loss.

Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement gained momentum, addressing issues related to gender equality, reproductive rights, and social justice then some feminists began to express concerns about the impact of environmental degradation on women's lives. In essence, ecofeminism emerged as an organic extension of feminist thought driven by a desire to integrate environmental issues into the broader discourse on gender, justice, and equality. Ecology and Feminism have been debated recently, and both women and nature are nurturers and this aspect of nurturing and caring is being exploited by male institutions. While ecocriticism studies the connection between literature and the environment, feminism is a movement that promotes women's rights. Simon Estok's insightful observations in *The Journal of Australian Universities: Language and Literature Association* (2001) the differences between ecofeminism and ecocriticism may be clearly defined as that the two approaches complement each other toward defining more fully what each approach is. The earth's ecological disasters are directly caused by human scorn for the rights of other natural elements as Estok (2001) states that in "ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis" Contrary to ecofeminism, which emphasizes women's agency and the environment's dominance, feminism acknowledges the patriarchal existence of women and to focus on women and nature problem. Renowned French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'Ecofeminism' in her book *Le Feminisme Ou la Mort* (1974). Later it was evolved by Ynestra King around 1976, and it officially became a movement in 1980 and established itself as a mainstream movement and left behind its primarily academic origin. Ecofeminism is both a movement and a philosophy as there is no single definition that applies to it. It arrived in the early 1990s, which was in the third wave of feminism. Karen Warren, in her work *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000), examines the following:

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is an umbrella term that captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections within social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature. (1)

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In the patriarchal world, women are compared to nature and men are compared to culture as women are called weaker sections of society and men as strong. The comparison of women to nature and men to culture is a concept that is deeply rooted in various cultural and literary traditions. Susan Griffin in her work *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (2016) explains the close relationship between women and nature, and how males see women as being a part of it. In her prologue, she makes the following claims:

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (Griffin 2016, 1).

This metaphorical association has often been explored in literature to convey complex ideas about gender roles, societal expectations, and power dynamics. The comparison of women to nature and men to culture is deeply rooted in various cultural and literary traditions. The connotation between women and nature and men with culture is also grounded in historical gender stereotypes and traditional societal roles. In this comparison, women are often depicted as embodying qualities associated with nature, such as nurturing, fertility, and cyclical renewal. On the other hand, men are linked to culture, which encompasses traits such as intellect, reason, and societal structures. This metaphor has been used to reinforce and challenge traditional gender norms, exploring the intersections of gender norms, identity, and societal expectations. Women's significant contribution to environmental protection is a result of their unique bond with nature; it is not coincidental. The definition of Ecofeminism is a fresh perspective on life and manner of thinking. It promotes the development of a harmonious interaction between man and nature as well as between people of different genders. It also advocates for a healthy relationship between women and nature. Law's value is changed by ecofeminism, and law's value will also influence how ecological feminism's core requirements evolve. Ecofeminist ideals started to fit into the system of influencing preference values. When it is established as a legal value sequence that reflects a consensus of values, it will unavoidably influence the evolution of human nature in society. Rosemary Ruther in her work *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1989) says that there is no freedom for a woman in a society of domination. Before delving deeper into the text, it's critical to provide some context for the theoretical framework that explains how the oppression of women and nature led to the development of ecofeminism as a literary theory. This theory holds that women and nature are connected by their shared experience of being oppressed by indifferent patriarchal civilization. But the writers have only lately become aware of the harm that the ongoing abuse of our environment poses to humanity, as well as the concerns about women and the environment.

Vandana Shiva, is an Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, ecofeminist, and anti-globalization author. In her text *Staying Alive* (1988), Shiva redefined what development is, what women's roles are, and how we think about the dominant western patriarchal model. Shiva also outlined how rural women suffer from ecological damage and how they start to regenerate. In addition, Vandana Shiva critiques the Western philosophy of development and its detrimental effects on women and the environment in developing nations. She also participated in the 'Chipko movement' started by Himalayan women to save trees from falling in 1974. Shiva in one of her interviews in *Talks on Feminism* (2009), said that women are the first ones to know that water is polluted. They are the first ones to know wells are dry. They are the first ones to know water is saline. Through ecofeminism, we get to know that women and nature are inseparable parts of our culture as they help develop humankind. Even all over the world women have come forward to protect not only themselves but also nature. Shiva contends that an ecological path of harmony, sustainability, and diversity—as opposed to one of dominance, exploitation, and excess—is the only way for nature and women to survive and be freed. Once again, she claims that women are essential to the environment, protecting it as well as being victims of ecological maldevelopment. Because of this, her fight offers a non-violent, non-gender-specific, and human-centered alternative to the prevailing paradigms of development, science, and technology. This viewpoint holds that because development strategies are usually focused on promoting the Gross National Product, the market economy, the scientific revolution, colonization, and corporate sectorized agriculture, which is a mal-development process and a source of violence against women and the environment.

Another Ecofeminist Chhaya Datar founding member of "Stree Mukti Sanghata" and "Forum Against Rape" (Women's Liberation Organization), in her work titled *Ecofeminism Revisited* (2011), talked about the problem faced by rural women and how they are dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. She also raises awareness of environmental degradation by presenting a significantly different development program, also she talked about globalization highlighting the decentralization of power. In the work titled *Tradition of Prudence Lost: A Tragic World of Broken Relationship* (2003) Aruna Ganadason demonstrates how globalization has led to the extinction of ancient agricultural traditions. Her main argument is that the economy privatization and liberalization of the livelihood of people by every sector. She highlighted in lines "What of the life and livelihood of the farming community in India? How is this community going to survive when its intricate web of relationship with the earth is broken?" (75). Simultaneously making references to the effects that industrial projects such as nuclear reactors, dam development, and others have on the rural community.

To stop the dominance of men over nature they started many environmental movements such as the Chipko movement (1970), the Navdanya movement (1991) in India, and the Green belt movement in Kenya (1977), also many women came with these issues while fighting to protect the environment, which is one of the major concerns of this paper, affected by both the oppression of women and the destruction of nature.

Identity is a non-descript term that relates to our ideas, feelings, psychological presence, residence, and even our desires, dreams, and longings. Similar to the national identity, the individual identity is created by a sequence of haphazard and frequently strange accumulations. Several variables are involved in the establishment of an individual's identity and there must be an identity for every man who lives in the world. In the novel Desai examines through the character of Biju how identity and ecology are connected and affect individual life.

To further explore ecofeminism and the quest for identity in the literary context, this research paper will focus on the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, published in 2006. Desai portrays women in the novel as closely tied to their natural surroundings, highlighting their nurturing and caring instincts towards the environment. Women and nature are said to be closely related to each other for a variety of reasons, such as biology, culture, and historical effects. Shiva (1988) highlights that the goal of ecofeminism is to redefine how society views the agency and production of both women and nature. Ecofeminism in *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is evident through the portrayal of women's deep connection with their natural environment. The novel takes place in the hilly forest area of Kalimpong, in the Indian foothills of the Himalayas. There, an elderly and spiteful Judge named Jemubhai Patel resides in an enormous stone home named Cho Oyu with his teenage grand-daughter Sai, his servant 'the cook', and his cherished dog Mutt, but he doesn't seem to enjoy anything even after his retirement. The narrative's description of nature and the terrain, which spans from Manhattan to the Himalayas, takes up a significant portion of the novel. Topography, visual beauty, a wide range of vegetation, the sky's shifting hues, cloud patches, rain, fog, the peaks of the mountains, the Teesta river, dense woodlands, a group of homes, vapor, ice, etc. The narrative begins with a description of nature that culminates in an ecocentric idea "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" (Desai 2006, 1) elaborates Desai's keen perception that precise even the various components of a tree possess sensual beauty and symbolize that "Kanchenjunga glowed black, and beyond, between the pillars of the trees, a path led to the house" (19). The shifting seasons, the mountains, the Kalimpong people, and the interior psyche of her characters are all described in a captivating way. In addition, to describe the spectacular and all-encompassing tranquil beauty of Kanchenjunga, the author paints a detailed image of the town and the scorpions where the cook finds it "living, loving, reproducing in the pile. Once he'd found a mother, plump with poison, fourteen babies on her back" (1) and Sai saw a live big squid whose "eyes were as big as apples to scope the dark of the ocean" (1). Desai attempts to delve deeply into the lives of characters like Judge Jemu Bai Patel, his granddaughter Sai, Gyan, Sai's math instructor, the Cook and his son Biju, the Judge's neighbors Lola and Noni, the callous Father Booty. By using an Ecocentric viewpoint, the author skillfully depicts the breathtaking terrain at the foot of the Himalayas, which gives Sai space and serves as a bridge between her past and present. The retired judge's home, where he lives with his orphaned granddaughter Sai, a servant, and their dog Mutt, is conveniently located near a beautiful natural gem as "The rooms were spacious in the old manner of wealth, windows placed for snow views" (6). This line shows that the house is made where one can feel fresh air and can breathe freely. Even though it's winter and the weather is cool, Sai, the judge, and even Mutt find that nature may be a source of vitality. They participate in their endeavors and take delight in the beauty of nature at the same time. They favor

sitting on the veranda because they participate in their endeavors and take delight in the beauty of nature at the same time. They favor sitting on the veranda because "inside the house, it was still cooler, darker, the freeze, contained by stone walls several feet deep" (Desai 2006, 6). Sai is incredibly passionate about the natural world and its beauty. While reading a story about enormous squid from an old National Geographic, Sai is sitting on the porch. Occasionally, she glances up at Kanchenjunga and notes its wizard luminescence with a wince. She is obsessed with Kanchenjunga's utter solitude and beauty, and its effect can be seen everywhere in nature. As the novel records the "place was also infested with scorpions living and loving, and reproducing the pile" (Desai 2006, 1). One day, the cook at Sai's home discovered a mother scorpion, "plump with poison, fourteen babies on her back" (1). This is how the novelist uses her own freshly coined language to imagine the surrounding natural environment and the creatures that inhabit it. To allow herself to become one with that, Sai closes the magazine and enjoys going for walks in the garden. As described in the novel:

The forest was old and thick at the edge of the lawn; the bamboo thickets rose thirty feet into the gloom; the trees were moss-slung giants, bunioned and misshapen, tentacles with the roots of orchids. The caress of the mist through her hair seemed human, and when she held her fingers out, the vapor took them gently into its mouth. (Desai 2006, 2)

Sai considers Gyan, her math teacher, in this thoughtful setting. Since Jemu Bhai was an impersonal man the authorities of the residential school in Dehradun sent her daughter Sai, to her grandfather's house after his daughter and son-in-law died in an accident in Russia. Sai moved with her grandfather to Cho Oyu after that. Sai is alone in the hills, without someone her age to spend time with. She becomes infatuated with Gyan, her young math instructor, as a result of her loneliness. In the middle of nature, Sai and Gyan's love blossoms. Sai and Gyan "enjoyed the walk to Cho Oyu and experienced a refreshing and simple happiness, although it took him two hours uphill... the light shining through thick bamboo in starry, jumping chinks, imparting the feeling of liquid shimmering" (Desai 2006, 71). But Gyan is compelled to break his vow of love after becoming embroiled in the Nepali uprising for Gorkhaland's independence. Furthermore, the author has depicted the efforts of people who purposefully seek to sever the loving links that bind man and nature, in contrast to the calm and serene surroundings. Their sole goal is to achieve dominance by upsetting its tranquility as "They had through the forest on foot in leather jackets from the Kathmandu black market." (Desai 2006, 4). These are the young lads who have been calling for their region of Germany. They used to shoot the bullets, breaking the silence of the natural world. Their objective is to intimidate individuals and pilfer their possessions, particularly firearms. Consequently, terrorist, politically driven actions can quickly transform a beautiful place like nature into a terrible place. In this light, Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009) supports the idea that humans misuse nature. He records that, "Nature really exists out there beyond themselves, not needing to be ionized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (Barry 2009, 252). The binary opposition of black/white, which is one of the main characteristics of ecofeminism, is made abundantly clear when Jemubhai Patel encounters severe racial discrimination due to his Indian heritage. The young, attractive girls were heartless and cruel to say the least "Phew, he stinks of curry!" (Desai 2006, 39). It turned Jemubhai Patel into an Anglophile who detested everything Indian. There are moments when the suffering and humiliations are so terrible that Jemubhai dissolves them in sobs of self-pity. As a result, "He saw nothing of the English countryside, missed the beauty of carved colleges and churches painted with gold leaf and angels, didn't hear the choir boys with the voices of girls, and didn't see the green river trembling with replications of the gardens that segued one into the other or the swans that sailed butterflyed to their reflections" (Desai 2006, 40). Irony ensues when the judge despises his culture, background, and even the color of his skin because he feels ashamed of it. Throughout his entire life, he feeds the feeling of rejection in his psyche. Desai's account of Biju's life in America is laced with sensitive moments and poetic, melancholy thoughts of Biju's hometown in the Kalimpong mountains. Biju's focus on the environment is apparent when he muses over his village laying in his bed in the basement. Biju had dreams of his hometown, his village, his grandma, his father, the sound the grass made as the breeze blew over it, the meandering path of the stream, and the buffaloes in the river. Biju remembered that as a child- he'd been part of a pack of boys who played so hard they'd come home exhausted... He remembered bathing in river, feeling his body against the cool firm river muscle, and sitting on a rock with his feet in the water, gnawing on sugarcane, working out the sweetness no matter how his jaw hurt, completely absorbed. He had played cricket, cricket, and

cricket. Biju found himself smiling at the memory of the time the whole village had watched India win a test match against Australia on a television running off a car battery because the transformer in the village had burned out. (Desai 2006, 270)

Biju is a perfect example of the predicament of the undocumented immigrant, who has no future in his home country and must put up with appalling conditions to work illegally in the United States. Constantly evading immigration authorities and frequently deceived by employers, Biju suffers even more since his father, who writes to him frequently pleading with him to assist his equally impoverished friends' children in finding employment in America, is pleased that his son is succeeding there. Similar demands from his family affect Biju's buddy Saeed from Zanzibar. However, in his case, these 190 young men show up to his apartment and place of employment requesting assistance and a place to stay. Ultimately, every character in the novel adopts Sai's viewpoint, which holds that loss rather than fulfillment frequently defines life. Desai examines the suffering of immigrants and the injustice of living in a world where one must move to be a servant, while the other side journeys to get royal treatment. Despite their strong desire to be part of American society, Indians are not well accepted there, according to Desai, immigrants such as Biju held fast to their cultural and religious taboos so they "might not fall through the filthy differences between nations" (Desai 2006, 136) due to the lack of opportunities and backwardness people have to leave their homes and it is all for the gain of identity. Biju faced bone-chilling cold, alienation, shame, and estrangement all of which added to his complete loneliness overseas. He was not immune to nostalgia in New York lying in his basement bed, dreams of his village of his father, and grandmother. It is not only romantic nostalgia but an unrest need to relocate the vision of the homeland amid cultural surroundings. He finds it difficult to accommodate in these adverse conditions in the company of rig rags coming from all corners of the world.

To conclude, *The Inheritance of Loss* illustrates the desolate lives of characters who have been robbed of love, dignity, or other essential emotions in life in the setting of ecocriticism. Set against the opposing backdrops of an exceedingly lush region Desai successfully tries to convey that despite the bloodshed, hypocrisies, hatred, and helplessness, there still runs in the world a common thread of love, bonding, and of companionship—a softness that no amount of human depravity can abolish. In addition, it is an ecofeminist analysis of *The Inheritance of Loss* in the context of diaspora and identity can illuminate the novel's exploration of how environmental issues and gendered experiences intersect. It allows readers to understand the characters' struggles within a broader framework of ecological and feminist concerns.

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