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Patriarchy And Environmental Exploitation In The Inheritance Of Loss

i) Neelam Yadav

Research Scholar

Banasthali Vidyapith

ii) Geetha Yadav

Associate Professor-

Department of English & Modern European Languages

Banasthali Vidyapith Rajasthan

Abstract

The paper focuses on the issues of ecofeminism and various kinds of suppression in the fiction *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. The novel can be read through the prism of ecofeminism, a movement that relates the exploitation of the nature with oppression of women in patriarchal and colonial societies. The novel follows an ecological approach for the discussion of intricate ecological environment shown in Kalimpong and illustrates that the process of environmental degradation is equivalent to the marginalization and silencing of women and the subaltern community. The cultural shock, emotional stifling, and male violence which women characters like Nimi and Sai have to endure, are the same types of domination which exploit land and natural resources. The paper discusses the effect of colonial modernity, patriarchal rule, and political instability on relationships between people and their surroundings. Desai questions the interrelation of colonialism, patriarchy and globalization through the theme of loss, displacement and inherited trauma. According to the study, *The Inheritance of Loss* is a piece of ecofeminist theory that defines loss as a transgenerational and collective state and holds that social, gendered, and ecological suppressions cannot be distinguished.

Keywords

Ecofeminism, Ecological Degradation, Gendered Oppression, Patriarchal Suppression, Nature and Women.

Research Objectives

This paper attempts to look into the ways in which ecofeminist ideas may be applied to the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. The paper investigates the theme of the oppression of nature and women simultaneously in the novel, also evaluates the effects of colonialism, patriarchy and globalization on gender relations and environment. It evaluates how the female characters have been depicted as the victims of social, cultural and ecological discrimination.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, textual and interpretive approach. It primarily focuses on close reading of *The Inheritance of Loss*, through ecofeminist literary theory as the primary approach for further analysis. The interpretation combines the ideas of feminist theory and postcolonial criticism to comprehend the ways of intersection between gender, environment, and power. The textual analysis is supported by secondary sources, such as books on ecofeminism, journal articles, critical essays and postcolonial studies. The analysis concentrates on the thematic coverage, character, and contextual reading to examine the trends of oppression and domination.

Introduction

Ecocriticism has within academic and literary circles been a major literary and critical movement in the 1990s. The discipline is interdisciplinary as it deals with the interaction of environment with literature in an environmentally-oriented approach to the study of literature. Ecocritics understand literature in the light of environmental issues such as pollution, ecological interactions, sustainability and climate change. They try to look how literature reflects and determines, how we see the natural world, and how it impacts our cultural attitude and behavior towards environment. The field of ecocriticism has expanded beyond traditional literary studies. It includes anthropology, philosophy, history, and environmental studies, with an aim to explore the connection between literature, culture and the natural world. As well as it bridges the gap between science and humanism in environmental issues. Ecocriticism, when applied to the many genres of literature such as poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama, essentially assumes that the natural environment is a key element in defining the meaning of literary works.

At the end of the twentieth century, a critical paradigm has arisen, called ecofeminism, which relates feminist oppression with the destruction of the environment. Theorist like Vandana Shiva, states that natural world and women, both are controlled and exploited by colonial and patriarchal systems. These are interrelated oppressions which can be analyzed in literature especially the postcolonial fiction. At the center of feminist ideas is liberty, freedom to make personal choices and not to meet other people's expectations. Although the term feminism has been defined differently, and there has been an argument regarding the accurate list of injustices against women. The movement basically deals with structural disparities in the political, social and personal arena.

Kiran Desai: Literary Context and Achievement

It is Desai's second novel which made her famous and one of the greatest authors of her time. She was born in January 1971, in New Delhi. Before relocating to the United States, they lived in England for fourteen years. She is a daughter of a famous writer, Anita Desai, whose novels received three nominations in Booker Prize. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is the first novel Kiran Desai published in 1998. In 2006 her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, was published, and won in 2007 the 'Vodafone Crossword Book Award', the 'Man Booker Prize', and the 'National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award'.

Ecological Setting and Environmental Consciousness

The Inheritance of Loss set in the town of Kalimpong in the beautiful foothills of the northeastern Himalayas. The descriptive picturesque beauty created by Desai in the novel shows her admiration of nature. The novel highlights the importance of conserving nature as well as the impact of human actions on nature. Characters are impacted by climate change and environmental degradation, which Desai uses to highlight the need for increased environmental awareness and action. She appreciates nature through her descriptions of the landscape of Kalimpong, misty mountains, thick forests and spectacular waterfalls. The novel represents the theme how humans exploit the environment to their own advantage and environment is deteriorated as a result of the never-ending quest for dominance and power over others.

Kiran Desai takes an ecocentric style, and her descriptions of landscapes and nature are splendidly beautiful. Kanchenjunga mountain is presented at the beginning and ending of the novel, which helps to create harmony and underline the role of the mountain for development of plot, "Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms as its summit" (Desai 1). Desai represents the house of an old judge that is located in a peaceful and beautiful location. After being pure and caring, the Himalayan background turns into an amnesic witness of political violence, cultural degradation, and loneliness.

Ecofeminist Framework: Parallel Oppressions of Women and Nature

The Inheritance of Loss captures the intricacies of migration, globalization and political unrest as it highlights gendered and ecological distress. The novel reflects ecofeminist issues as it helps to see that patriarchal and colonial systems of power subjugate women as well as nature. Ecofeminism is a theory that is crucial in that it asserts patriarchal, colonial and capitalist systems form the fundamental basis of natural exploitation and oppression of women. Kiran Desai indirectly poses ecofeminist themes by depicting the disability of women, marginalized groups as well as the natural environment of the Kalimpong. "They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs." (Desai. 9)

Ecofeminist theory holds that women are exploited using the same logic that is used to exploit nature. *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai is a strong ecofeminist work and offers an insight to the

interdependence between the suffering and degradation of nature and the suffering of women, “The house stood on the edge of a precipice, the land beneath it slipping away, the forest rising wild and uncontrolled, as if the balance between man and nature had been lost forever. Everything appeared temporary, uncertain, as though one strong movement of wind or rain might bring it all crashing down” (Desai 1). The destructive power of capitalist, colonial and patriarchal ideology is shown in the novel, which portrays destroyed landscapes and voices of women that have been oppressed. The novel proposes that both environmental sustainability and gender justice are aspects of true liberation, and proves that healing requires respect, empathy, and balance towards women, environment, and marginalized groups of people.

Nimi: Patriarchal Violence and Silent Endurance

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, women are subjected to psychological, social and emotional oppression. Nimi, the wife of the judge, is one of the most tragic examples of the novel. She undergoes domestic violence and is suppressed by the patriarchal power. Her misery is similar to colonized land; they are both under control, abused and eventually destroyed. Internalized colonial attitude of Judge makes him hate his wife due to her native customs. He treats her in the same way, how colonists treated colonized land, “She had fallen out of life altogether. Weeks went by, and She spoke to nobody, the servants thumped their own leftovers on the table for her to eat, stole the supplies without fear, allowed the house to grow filthy without guilt until the day before Jemubhai’s arrival when suddenly it was brought to lustre again” (Desai 179). When she gets married, her name was changed into the new one, that was chosen by Jemubhai’s family, and in a few hours, Bela becomes Nimi Patel. The fact that Nimi had mastered the art of silence is an embodiment of female oppression, as well as ecofeminist survival. She is the most tragic and sorrowful female figure in the novel, an illiterate, simple-minded subaltern woman who was discriminated because of her gender. Her role mainly reflects her subaltern position in real life. She is portrayed mainly in relation to Jemubhai, her husband who beats her to death, “after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the nights” (Desai 171).

Nimi is under subjugation of men and thus, she is controlled by her father later by her husband until her death. She is closely isolated with her mother and sisters since childhood to her marriage to Jemubhai that was necessary for the reputation of her father in society. Nimi is a case study of being victimized by patriarchal systems, where marriage is not an union of two souls and families but takes place only for the sake of dowry. This can be seen when “the Patels dreamed of sending their son to England, but even after visiting the moneylenders with an offer of ten thousand rupees at 22 percent interest, they still did not have enough money. There still wasn't enough, though, and they began to search for a bride” (Desai 89).

Nimi’s life is clouded with deprivation, injustice, oppression, alienation and loneliness. She depicts how traditional women are bound to suffer by the hands of their husbands. Both physical and mental abuse results in severe depression and lack of concern related to her situation. She did not accompany her husband on tour, unlike the other wives. She is so used to being locked up that she does not think of escaping. She, therefore, is not able to overcome the abuse and humiliation she underwent in marriage, “Why do you have to dress in such a gaudy manner? Yellow and pink? Are you mad?” (Desai 172). She was asked to, “Take those absurd trinkets off” by her husband without any excuse (Desai 172). She lives in a world where men are the kings and she cannot rebel or divorce her husband. Rather, she does not say anything in retaliation against Jemu’s treatment. One example is, “when one day her husband found footprints on the toilet seat—she was squatting on it, he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl” (Desai 173). She becomes habitual to this type of treatment asking nothing, telling nothing.

Kiran Desai portrays that immediately after marriage, women are introduced to face everything, positive or negative, without any privilege of staying in the houses of their parents, her uncle tells her, “You are your husband’s responsibility. Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married – you got your share and it is not for daughter’s to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go ask for forgiveness” (Desai 306). As a result, despite having long-standing family ties, the majority of Indian wives have a lonely and isolated life. Their voices are not heard and they are not even treated like human beings. It is because of a ruthless patriarchal system in which Nimi loses her identity and sanity, “the quieter she was, the louder he shouted, and if she protested, it was worse” (Desai 305). Nimi dies in an apparent accident when she lights a fire on a stove in the house of her brother in law. She is killed without a witness or inquiry, “as was so many other Indian women in a place where human life was cheap, standards were shoddy, stoves were poorly made, cheap saris easily burst into flames” (Desai 307). To her, who is trampled

by patriarchal society in her life, death is the ultimate salvation and all that is left. Her life has thus been troublesome and challenging.

Sai: Modernity, Alienation, and Resistance

Even after her educational background, and her modernity, Sai is not emotionally attached to the surrounding world. Her alienation is an indication of the larger ecofeminist problems related to displacement of modernity and globalization whereby people, especially women, are no longer in contact with nature and the communities, “Sai felt a terrible loneliness. She had no friends and there was no one she could speak to. The English she spoke was awkward, her Hindi halting, and she felt herself suspended between worlds, belonging fully to none” (Desai 85). Her displacement is what Vandana Shiva identifies as the displacement of women out of ecological knowledge systems over the modernity, “The marginalization of women and the destruction of nature are not separate processes; they are linked through the same logic of domination” (Shiva 3). The process of Sai losing her connection with nature represents the process of increased loss of connection to nature that is experienced by humanity. Despite being surrounded by stunning natural settings, she exposes the ecofeminist justifications of contemporary lifestyles by remaining emotionally detached.

Nevertheless, Sai is also represented as a powerful young woman who believes in her judgment. She is smart, sincere, fearless and independent. Sai falls in love with Gyan who is her mathematics tutor, but their affair does not proceed to fulfilment. Gyan lies and pretends to love her. Sai is quite aware of the reaction of Gyan, “She had learned not to hope for too much; she had learned to accept what came, to live with it, to make do” (Desai 286). He loses her painlessly and does not even strive to touch her heart. Since Sai does not conform to the images of a meek Indian woman, instead she makes Gyan feel inferior. She proves to be better than him, instead of a cowardly, easily conquered lady he anticipates. She challenges him on several occasions to express her thoughts,

By saying that she is angry about his loyalty to the GNLF. His reaction is not satisfying when Sai finally tackles him. The experiences have made her grow up. Desai represents Sai with no fears and is ready to face anything, who accepts reality and denies illusions, “She had learned not to hope for too much; she had learned to accept what came, to live with it, to make do” (Desai 286). Although Desai shows Nimi as a woman who is so oppressed and not bold enough to defend her freedom and dignity. Desai’s description of Sai shows a brave young woman in modern India that needs the strength to create her own life in a harsh society that is characterized by corruption, violence, political issues and poverty. Women remain vulnerable even though Lola and Noni, despite becoming more independent, live in terror all the time whenever political instability occurs. They are vulnerable as their environment is comparatively weak.

Symbolic Parallels: Women and Nature

Desai uses the symbolic parallels between nature and women using imagery of silence, endurance, and loss. Women are physically and emotionally abused without resistant action, in the same way the Himalayan landscape is being victimized and forgotten. They are both supposed to foster, to suffer and to be quiet. It is the same experience of oppression that forms the core of ecofeminism which claims that environmental sustainability and gender justice are the two elements of liberation. In the relationships between people, or that between people and nature, the story of Desai challenges the thinking processes and mindsets which insist on dominance over coexistence. Just as the devastation of the environment is ignored in the quest for power, women's suffering is not given much attention in the novel.

Postcolonial Context and Colonial Legacies

The novel places the ecofeminist issues in a postcolonial environment. Colonialism did not only exploit land, but it strengthened patriarchal forms also. Internal colonial attitude of Judge causes him to mock his wife and the aboriginal culture, demonstrating how colonial ideology encourages both misogyny and ecological negligence, “He preferred everything English... the Indian ways filled him with disgust”, and “An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one” (Desai 169). Vandana Shiva says that colonialism and patriarchy collaborated to ruin native knowledge and ecological order. Desai uses broken relationships, alienation of culture and negligence of environment to depict this destruction.

Conclusion

The ecofeminism of *The Inheritance of Loss* is impossible to detach it from its postcolonial environment. The effects of colonial domination on women, environment and marginalized communities are still felt long after political independence. Ecofeminist reading adds to our knowledge that loss is an ecological and gendered collective phenomenon, it is not just a personal loss. The ecofeminist approach of the novel therefore enhances the understanding of the themes of resistance, identity as well as loss in the novel. In the end, the novel demonstrates that liberation can only be ensured by overthrowing interconnected oppressive systems that mistreat women and the environment.

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