



## Literature

*Elixir Literature* 63 (2013) 18363-18365

**Elixir**  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# Subsistence perspective in the novels of kiran desai and arundhathi Roy

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 11 August 2013;

Received in revised form:

29 September 2013;

Accepted: 5 October 2013;

### Keywords

Postcolonial trauma,  
Subsistence perspective,  
Ecofeminism,  
Survival base-catching up strategy,  
Connectedness.

## ABSTRACT

Ecofeminist theorists advocate the subsistence perspective as the lone solution for all postcolonial problems. Booker Prize winning Indian English writers Arundhathi Roy and Kiran Desai are analysed as having subscribed to the requirements of the ecofeminists. Far from the accepted surmise of these writers as having given a morbid picture of the postcolonial scenario, it is concluded that there is indeed a solution on offer- the retrieval of the female principle which is rooted in the connectedness of nature comprising its entire gamut of flora and fauna. The novels analysed are 'The God Of Small Things' and 'The Inheritance of Loss.'

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## Introduction

A host of postcolonial fiction on offer gives the reader fine pictures of the trauma experienced by a world in transition and at times gloomy forebodings of a bleak future where the chances of colonization in new garbs appear definitely on the cards. We have our share of Indian English fictionists who can be squarely tagged "post colonial" and who write as if they are insistent on satisfying the theoretical requirements perfectly. The warning is loud and clear and in this present, supposedly liberated social milieu, future does not seem to be promising for the marginalized sections and people belonging to the third world countries. It is disappointing that most of the writers in spite of their literary prowess fail to go beyond the scope of highlighting many relevant social issues, unfortunately leaving the disillusioned reader groping in the dark for a dependable solution. Arundhathi Roy and Kiran Desai are two women writers who have excelled in English novel writing and have won Booker prizes for their popular works 'The God Of Small Things' and 'The Inheritance Of Loss' respectively. The humble aim of this paper is to tell briefly that both the writers very artistically suggest the 'subsistence perspective advocated by the pioneers of the Ecofeminist movement in their prize winning novels.

## Ecofeminism

At the very outset it has to be conceded that this movement accepts the differences between different women's movements world over and attempts to project common concerns that emerge in the contemporary world. It is interesting to note the observations of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their jointly authored book titled Ecofeminism.

'In recent years we had increasingly been confronted by the same fundamental issues concerning survival and preservation of life on the planet, not only of women, children and humanity in general, but also the vast diversity of flora and fauna'. This assumes importance in the general background of the threat that the life sustaining systems are facing in this profit oriented capitalist world which promotes modernization at the expense of

the natural world. This leaves woman as the harder sufferer and Vandana Shiva, the activist further insists that even modern science is not gender neutral. It was Annie Marie Sacharand Lore Haag, two of the leaders of the anti atomic movement who articulated their vision of an alternative society based not on industrialism and consumerism<sup>2</sup> Man's subordination of nature is detrimental to human beings in that it is the life sustaining forces that are being destroyed. Man's domination also should be seen in this light. Any kind of freedom should not be at the cost of the survival base.

'To find freedom does not involve subjugating or transcending the 'realm of necessity'; but rather focusing on developing a vision of freedom, happiness, the good life' within the limits of necessity, of nature<sup>3</sup>. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva called this vision the subsistence perspective. Like the colonized man's desire to catch up with the colonizer which will only further his unpleasant lot, catching up strategy has only proved to be a wrong one for woman's movement also. In the name of globalization we witness the sad spectacle of regional cultures, communities and ecology being exploited. The way to counter this is not by seeing all traditions to be of equal value. We have to be on our guard as local cultures are deemed to have value only when they are fragmented and transferred into salable goods for an international market. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva exhort that instead of differences one should focus on diversities and interconnectedness. They reiterate that 'Universalism' should be based on human needs rather than on abstract human rights. They further insisted that these needs should never get classified as basic needs and higher needs [freedom, knowledge etc.]. The ecofeminists consider the destruction of the earth by the corporate warriors as their concern. Regarding sexuality they have similar opinion: 'It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple of state power to have its way'<sup>4</sup>.

Ecofeminists are opposed to war in the sense that these acts have connection with the culture of rape and violence. 'It is no

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coincidence that the gruesome game of war –in which the greater part of male sex seems to delight – passes through the sane stages as the traditional sexual relationship: aggression, conquest ,control of a woman or land ,it makes little difference<sup>5</sup>.

‘Ecofeminism’, the book coauthored by Maria Mies and Vandhana Shiva harps on the connectedness of everything which they regard as the spiritual dimension of life. They reject materialistic approach of life whether it is capitalistic or Marxist.

‘The ecological relevance of the emphasis on ‘spirituality’ lies in the rediscovery of the sacredness of life, according to which life on earth can be preserved only if people again begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect them as such<sup>6</sup>.

The God Of Small Things and The Inheritance Of Loss: Arundhati Roy has, as the protagonist of her novel, Velutha, The God of Loss and Kiran Desai has titled her Booker Prize winning novel as The Inheritance Of Loss. The discerning reader does not have to labour much to realize that both the writers are in fact lamenting the loss of connectedness and are craving for the redemptive touch to return and in essence, this is exactly what the ecofeminists call the female principle.

Both the novels abound in nature descriptions with loud remarks on the defiling acts committed on it by man fired by profit motive .Kiran Desai opens her novel with the description of the ‘wizard phosphorescence’of Kanchenjunga. The judge and his granddaughter, Sai live in a house designed by an eco friendly architect.This is juxtaposed with the militants who disturb the serenity of the place with their arrival. ‘They had come through the forest on foot in leather jackets bought fromKhatmandu market.<sup>7</sup>Connectedness can be severed by a handful of people. Arundhati Roy begins her novel with the description of the monsoon rains with all flora and fauna .She highlights the sorry sight of the shrinking river in the same breath. Rahel returns to her ancestral house which is on the bank of Meenachalriver, a powerful character of the novel. The river shrinks, poor natives defecate into it and agricultural land gets converted into concrete jungles.It is not difficult to read through the ecofeminist suggestions made by both the authors at the very outset. Arundhati Roy’s barb at the reason for this disconnectedness is open for the reader.

‘Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, pesticides bought with World Bank loans.Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils<sup>8</sup>.

For Kiran Desai it is the politically motivated terrorist who rips apart the connectedness. ‘Nature really exists out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised 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<sup>9</sup>. Technology appears to be anti-nature as ‘greasy bus stations with its choking smell of exhaust [p84] appears to be in contrast with the day when Kalimpong was full of refreshing smells’ in Desai’s novel.

Man’s subordination of nature is analogous with his suppression of woman .We have a pageantry of suppressed women in both the novels. Due to constraints of space only two random instances are included. In ‘The Inheritance Of Loss’ Jemubhai Patel ,the retired judge was culpable of having treated his wife as a sex slave. Her body was colonised and it is pertinent to note that it was participation in a freedom rally that finally resulted in her expulsion from his house.

In ‘The God Of Small Things’ it is the noted entomologist Benan John Ipe who is cited here as the woman basher and this character assaulted his wife on a regular basis. Both Roy and Desai take us through instances where children are discriminated and violated. Jemubhaipatel, the Anglophile judge gets best of everything as a young boy and is sent to England for higher studies.He is the pivotal character in Desai’s novel who seems to have inherited nothing but loss. In ‘The God Of Small Things’ Chacko gets Oxford university education while Ammu, his sister is deprived of this since she has to be married out.

Both the novels abound in transgression over women, nature, cultures and communities. In the ‘Loss’ Sai is apprehensive of man trying to establish his superiority over nature. Regarding the conquest of the Everest: ‘Sai had wondered, should humans conquer the mountain or should they wish for the mountain to possess them?’<sup>10</sup>

In ‘The God’ when Rahel returned after a gap of a few years to the Meenachal river ‘itgreeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed’-----Down river, a salt water barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of salt water from the back waters that opened into the sea.Sonow they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river<sup>11</sup> .A description of nature’s destruction by the needy man more potent than this will be rare.

In ‘ The God’ and ‘The Loss’ neglected childhood gets expressed through abuse at home, school and in the adult social circles. Roy’s Esthappen is the unfortunate victim of sex abuse and later he is forced to depose as a false witness, which finishes off the man whom he loved as his father-mentor. This leaves an indelible mark on his impressionable mind that he goes literally speechless in his later life. The unfortunate lot of these hapless children is the result of the disconnectedness fore grounded by the Ecofeminist theorists.

Both the novels have references galore of the ill effects of globalization such as fragmentation of culture into salable objects. Indian culinary skills when fragmented find respectability in ‘The Loss’ while it is ‘Kathakali’, the traditional art form of Kerala which is fragmented and put on sale for the Western tourist in ‘The God’.Both Roy and Desai clearly warn the reader of the subtle attempt of re-colonization in the form of financial aid from international funding agencies in their novels. The novels project other ecofeminist concerns like ‘marginalization’, ‘subalternity’, plight of the ‘diaspora’ and other victims of subordination.

### Conclusion:

The two Booker Prize winners have been studied in tandem as these writers, perhaps being women themselves, seem to have a better grasp of the female principle and offer the solution of connectedness for our concerns. Kiran Desai ends her novel with the reunion of Biju and his Pithaji.

‘Sai looked out and saw two figures leaping at each other as the gate swung open. The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, ifbriefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it.

Arundhati Roy also finishes her novel appropriately. The retrieval of the loss, the connectedness shall hopefully happen in the near future.

‘She had a rose in her hair.

She turned to say it once again: ‘Naaley’

Tomorrow.

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