

Unforgivable Human Error: Study of Environmental Degradation and Man's Indifference in *Softly Dies a Lake*

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Abstract:

In view of the shrinking water bodies due to global warming, there is a pressing urge to redress and revive the lakes, ponds and other water connectors from the verge of extinction. However, environmental issues are always side-lined or lost in between Anthropocene and 'geologic' debates, and ecology is compromised to 'green notes' in the process. Akkineni Kutumbarao in his eco memoir, *Kolleti Jadalalu*, translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran as *Softly Dies a Lake*, recollects the 'kaleidoscopic past' of Asia's largest freshwater lake Kolleru, and laments for its present fragmented and diminished state. His accusation on man's utter indifference to global warming, reckless digging of fish tanks and irresponsible draining of toxic waste into one of the major lifelines of Andhra Pradesh rings clear in his utterance, "We have all turned into voters but not responsible citizens". The novel points out the treachery of the government as a cause for the ruination of Kolleru's ecosystem. The symbiotic relationship between man and nature is thwarted in the face of man's domination on nature. Despite Kolleru being designated as a Wildlife Sanctuary under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, and declared as a wetland of international importance in the Ramsar Convention of November 2002, the natural reservoir is decaying and turning barren as men in power fight over profits. This paper focuses on the conflict between protection of people's subsistence and environment sustainability causing profound damage to environment and biodiversity. The article aims to halt and reverse the destruction of ecosystem. It calls for urgent action against environmental injustice with special reference to Lake Kolleru.

Key words: Kolleru, Ecosystem, Anthropocene, Eco Memoir, Eco-nostalgia.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have become so immune to Anthropocene environmental degradation that even the crisis and its inevitable impacts are often accepted nonchalantly and indifferently. According to Amitav Ghosh, the "imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" conditions the mass inability to understand the grim reality of climate change. The advent of capitalism and industrialism have made the matters worse by ushering exploitation and oppression of labour and natural resources. The combined effect of complacency on the part of intellectuals, the government, the policy makers towards the aggravating dangers of environmental crisis, and complete disregard for nature, have pushed our earth towards environmental catastrophe. Worldwide, ecosystems are destroyed by conflicts between people's livelihood and environment sustainability. Kolleru lake which forms the vital wetland ecosystem of India, is located in between river deltas of Krishna and Godavari of Andhra Pradesh. It happens to be one of the largest fresh water lakes in Asia, which supports the life of 200 bird species and diverse aquatic life. However, this vast storehouse of diverse flora and fauna, and habitat for hundreds of migratory birds, has dwindled into a mere drain due to unregulated aquaculture, particularly shrimp farming or carp cultivation. The lake which is the source of livelihood for more than three lakh families, suffer great ecological

degradation owing to the Blue Revolution in Andhra Pradesh which prioritized aquaculture over environment. This shift from rice cultivation to aquaculture was fuelled by the growing global demand for seafood. The Blue Revolution of 1980s therefore created a longstanding impact on the livelihood of the people by affecting their water resources and basic food supply, damaging the ecosystem and poisoning the water environment and human lives. Kolleru Lake, the lifeline of so many species, has now become a death threat due to unchecked aquaculture, leading to significant environmental impacts.

This paper is a critical exploration of Vasanth Kannabiran's translated text, *Softly Dies a Lake*. The paper argues that the debate between people's right to livelihood and maintenance of ecosystem acts as the major impediment in the restoration of Kolleru. The paper also harps on the responsibility of the fish-consumers for the changing trend and incidence of demand on the fish market leading to increased emergence of fish tanks and utilization of chemicals in aquaculture. It looks for a middle-path between the conflicting interests of human livelihood and that of nature's eco system. The paper looks for measures of restoring the pristine glory, rich biodiversity and picturesque beauty of the lake.

RESEARCH GAP

The existing body of literature has examined the novel from the lenses of ecocriticism, eco-nostalgia, and impact of Anthropocene on the environment. Although, these studies have proved to be insightful, several gaps in research do exist which creates opportunities for further inquiry. The intricate relationship between memory, nostalgia and activism is yet to be explored in greater detail with reference to the novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*. There is a dearth of scholarly literature examining the novel as a part of the genre of "eco nostalgia", and its impact on the community.

OBJECTIVE:

Although this paper critically examines the novel, *Softly Dies a Lake* from an ecocritical perspective, it seeks to explore how memory can be used for fostering ecological awareness, enabling cultural transmission, inspiring transformative action and providing restorative justice to environment. Moving away from mere eco-nostalgia, the paper strives to analyse literature as a potent pedagogical tool to teach ecological consciousness and regional ecological history. The paper will take into account how Anthropocene inspired changes in ecology haunt the present, and affect future sustainability of resources. It will try to provide a comprehensive framework integrating man's well-being with nature's safety.

DISCUSSION

Akkineni Kutumbarao's elegiac eco-memoir *Kolleti Jadalu*, translated into English from Telugu by Vasanth Kannabiran as *Softly Dies a Lake* is a gruesome reminder to man's unforgivable and irreversible error, faithlessness and selfish extraction of nature. The genre of eco-memoir allows the author to chart the symbiotic relationship between nature and human that existed and was nurtured when Nature was yet to be controlled by the humans. The personal touch in the narrative influences readers to relate empathetically to nature and inspire them to reflect on individual action and life-experiences. Eco-memoirs have always been instrumental in articulating issues of environment and in promoting ecological sustainability. The characteristic personal touch in a memoir enables authors to bond with the readers and make environmental issues more accessible and comprehensible to a wider community. Akkineni Kutumbarao's text is a clarion call to all Indians to stir them from their indolence and inertia and act on an emergency against the abuse of India's internationally important wetland of Lake Kolleru of Andhra Pradesh. The largest fresh water lake in India, harbouring thousands of migratory and resident birds, now truncated through water deviations and land reclamations, reeks of death and destruction. Kolleru's wildlife sanctuary lies forgotten both by birds and humans. Now, all the aura and glory of Kolleru are lost as the migratory birds, the chief constituent of its characteristic vibrant beauty and sonorous nature, have ceased visiting the lake after countless winged creatures lost their life in the filthy, toxic waters. It is an undeniable fact that the calm waters of the lake which was once home to innumerable strong gigantic

fishes have been segmented into money mongering chemically cultured fish tanks. The incessant draining of untreated industrial effluents and sewage into the lake have left the water filthy and toxic. The water has become unfit for drinking further because of contamination of agricultural pesticides and chemicals used in prawn farming, leading to scarcity of drinking water in the surrounding regions. The people now have to depend on Kaikaluru, a town near the lake for drinking water. The alterations in chemical and biological compositions have ruined the lake's rich bio-diversity.

Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* is actually a living memory, a "tribute" as well as an "apology" and "penance" for an unforgiveable human error. The text harps on the question of "intergenerational justice" for the avoidable but deliberate theft of resources of survival and security from the future. The rhetorical question at the very end that, would the future generation forgive their ancestors for "(a) human error that impoverished their lives immeasurably. Made it unliveable"? (197) forces the readers to reflect on the irreparable environmental damage caused by humans. Akkineni Kutumbarao frames his narrative in the form of an 'ecological nostalgia', with Srinivas Rao, the protagonist, fondly reminiscing the past beauty of Kolleru, the largest fresh water lake in India, located in between Krishna and Godavari delta of Andhra Pradesh. The term "ecological nostalgias" coined by Olivia Angé and David Berliner expresses the overlap of the aspects of nostalgia and ecology discerned in the contemporary narratives of ecological crises. They emphasize the role played by literary texts in bridging the relationship between human memory and environment to formulate the conservation efforts of the contemporary times. The novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*, is not simply a passive emotional longing for past environmental states, but it is also a creative, political response to the ecological devastation of the present. It is socially productive as the text orients environmental actions with a futuristic vision. Kolleru serves as a living emotional anchor evoking both joyful memories of childhood, of intimate integral connection between humans and nature of the past and at the same time, awakens people to the sorrow of loss in the present. Kutumbarao takes us back down the memory lane to a time when Kolleru was rich in biodiversity and flourished in nature's bounty, and contrasts it with the picture of ruination and sorrow of the present. Decades earlier, Kolleru used to be fed and nourished by canals from Krishna and Godavari, and streams like Budameru, Thammileru, Akkileru and Naguleru. This once bountiful, boisterous, erratic but simultaneously nurturing, nourishing and all-embracing lake also acted as a natural flood reservoir for the deltaic plains. The novel traces Rao's disillusionment and sorrow at the present dismal, fragmented, state of Kolleru, striped of all its beauty, grandeur and charm. Kolleru, had been the lifeline of hundreds of villages and the meeting ground of thousands of migratory birds, stout fishes, and infinite number of aquatic species thriving in its waters. Kolleru wetlands have been declared as internationally important in the 2002 Ramsar Convention. The lake was designated as wildlife sanctuary under India's Wild Life (Protection) Act in November 1972 for its immense contribution towards bio-diversity. It was a host to 200 species of birds, including the endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper, 6000 Spot-billed Pelicans, Cranes, 5000 Asian Openbills, and around 63 fish species according to Kolleru Committee Report of 2010 (Rao, 2015). Kolleru was noted also as India's "Important Bird Area" by the Bombay Natural History Society (Rao, 2015). The rise of anthropocentrism and the advent of Anthropocene driven changes have led to the disruption of the ecological harmony of Kolleru. Human indifference, greed and utter neglect are key factors responsible for Kolleru's uncertain fate and its transformation from a premier 'biodiversity hotspot' to a threatened, dying ecosystem. The author moans and says, "The Kolleru which had once nurtured so much life, having fallen into hands greedy for wealth, was now an image of destruction and death" (2). True to its name, *Softly Dies a Lake* documents the slow and painful death of a magnificent, lively river Kolleru due to the utter neglect of the people and the irresponsible management practice of the government.

However, the novel does not stop at mere lamenting for a lost ecosystem, but also fosters ecological consciousness and urges the readers to cultivate a sense of environmental commitment. In the text, Kolleru becomes a character with a mind of its own; caring, nurturing, life sustaining and feeding villagers at one-time, and vindictive and life-threatening at other times. A common village scene of Pulaparru at the very

inception of the memoir, reminds the readers of the thriving robust ecosystem and idealistic, harmonious coexistence of nature and human beings of the past. However, Kutumbarao not only draws readers' attention towards the nourishing maternal aspect of Kolleru, but also points out its erratic temper and frequent outbursts. The people of the moors have to battle through a precarious existence coping with the erratic waters of Kolleru often flooding the adjacent lands, destroying crops and sweeping away lives. The author comments that, "There is no count of the harvest in Kolleru or the bullocks that die there" (13). The statement highlights human being's fragility and puniness in the face of power of nature. As a measure to control the propensity of floods leading to loss of life and food, the villagers mainly consisting of farmers and fishermen devised a plan of collective farming. For the initial five or six years, the collective farming proved to be successful and both the Vaddis and the Kammas reaped enough profits. However, there soon arose a conflict of interest among the groups which allowed outsiders to encroach upon the fish tanks for a more capitalistic gain. The text reminds man of his limitations, and suggests that his effort to manipulate and control nature is delusional. After all, man is reliant on nature for his fundamental needs of survival. Simultaneously, the text stresses on man's inherent propensity to adapt and coexist with nature. The novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*, serve as a poignant reminder of the "slow violence" inflicted by man upon the ecosystem of Kolleru Lake. Rob Nixon defines anthropocentric "slow violence" as a gradual, often invisible or ignored environmental harms caused by man affecting the powerful and the affluent, and the poor and the marginalized disproportionately (Nixon, 2011). Kutumbarao's book is a creative exploration of the effort of the writer-activists to give voice and visibility to the issues of environmental crises through literature and art.

The slow violence inflicted by man often remains indiscernible and overlooked until the impact becomes catastrophic, as is true in the case of the Kolleru lake, which is now known as India's "fish bowl" (Ramakrishna, 2007). However, the economic surge enabled by market expansion, has brought about environmental catastrophe and has harmed public health irreparably. By 2006, 1776 fish tanks occupying nearly half of the lake have transformed and disrupted the lake's ecological environment and economy (Shekhar & Basava, 2024). Research findings have showed that the increase in illegal fish tanks have impeded the influx of water in the lake and have led to the reduction in the lake size. The water of the lake being lowered due to shortage of supply, the water weeds *Phragmytis karka*, which serve as the habitats of mostly the cranes and herons, become visible. These water weeds are burned to dig more and more tanks, meeting the increasing demands of the largest fish markets of country, Kolkata being one among them. As a result, illegal fishing keeps on flourishing, and chemicals and fish foods get flushed into the lake each day making the water unfit for drinking and leading to hydrological alterations. The consequences of uncontrolled aquaculture and chemical pollution on the environment are far reaching and, in many cases, irreversible. Not only the water quality is degraded, there are also depletion of oxygen levels in the air, disruption of ecological balance, endangering of native fish species and decline of migratory birds due to the pollution of the lake. The uncontrolled use of chemicals, antibiotics and nutrient-rich effluents has also affected the natural flow of water, leading to flooding in upper sanctuary areas. The construction of illegal fish tank bunds also allows sea water to intrude through these structures and increase the salinity of the lake. The damaged eco system paired with altered pattern of rainfall and sea water intrusion are posing serious environmental challenge and leading to unprecedented increase in floods in the nearby regions. The size of the lake is further reduced through the construction of dam on Tammileru river and channelizing of Budameru into the Krishna River, which has also contributed towards the increased incidence of flood in Andhra Pradesh. Data reports reveal that in September 2024, life in Andhra Pradesh remained affected by flood for weeks due to extreme rainfall. Gantasala Peddiraju, an inhabitant of the villages surrounding the lake and a victim of inundation says, "It felt as though the sea had come closer to our homes, flooding the villages, roads, and farms. No one expected the water to reach this far — all the way to the Eluru-Vijayawada Road, part of National Highway 5 (NH-5)" (Shekhar & Basava, 2024).

Thus, the economic boom in Andhra Pradesh and the resultant upgradation of social status of its people, has ushered simultaneous displacement of traditional sources of livelihood and income. Despite the laws and the Protection Acts, Kolleru is fraught between the discourse of politics and environment. The environmentalists agitating over ruination of ecosystem and exploitation of Earth's natural resources, are muted. Although, the Central Government issued an order in 2006 to demolish all the illegal tanks in an initiative to protect and conserve Kolleru, but it has led to resistance from the people. The conflicts have intensified as the Andhra Pradesh State Government has failed to address both the legal dictum and the socio-economic issues of the local community. Although, the State Government acting upon the Supreme Court Orders, is willing to demolish the illegal fish tanks, it is met with resistance from the local farmers who are demanding protection of their livelihood and sustainability of aquaculture farming. Andhra Pradesh State Government agrees to carry out the Court order of denotification of jirayathi lands but grumbles over payment of compensation. Concurrently, an overwhelming majority of powerful aquacultural farmers and the politicians are advocating for curtailing the width of the lake or reducing the contour from +5 to +3, and adapting it for more monetary benefit, overlooking the question of livelihood of the jirayathi landowners. The jirayathi landowners are thus caught in a limbo as their lands fall within the ambit of the lake. The ecologists opine that reduction of the size of the sanctuary is not a viable option as it will make Kolleru more vulnerable to ecological destruction and will affect its socio-political economy. So, the ecosystem of the wetland is further pushed to peril as governments fight over destruction of habitat and conservation of Kolleru. The conflict between the government of Andhra Pradesh and the people is longstanding. The government is therefore in jittery and is awaiting an integrated action plan to balance environmental protection with socio-economic security of the people.

CONCLUSION

Kutumbarao states that, "Like a map of the world divided wantonly by crooked boundaries Kolleru was split by bunds. Broken bunds" (01). The bunds are both literal and metaphorical; the fate of Kolleru Lake remains in flux as the dispute between the farmers and the fishermen, the environmentalists and the aquaculture farmers, and the legal and illegal aquaculture farmers rises. The text attributes to the conflicting interest of multiple sectors, the complex eco-political dynamics and mass indifference towards environment for the impeded conservation of the wetland. It emphasizes the fact that though human lives revolve around the ecosystem of Kolleru, sufficient ecological understanding is lacking amongst the various stakeholders. This text helps to raise awareness amongst the policy makers, scientific community and various other stakeholders of society about the uniqueness of Kolleru Lake, and about its economic, ecological and scientific value. The memoir also highlights the importance of restoring and conserving the lake. It aims at drawing both national and international attention towards the restoration of the lake. This paper advocates for proactive intervention of the government addressing the conflicting interests of multiple stake holders and integrating environmental dynamics to restore Kolleru Lake, India's largest freshwater ecosystem. The paper presses for public awareness and involvement, and stronger legal enforcement to stop repeated encroachment by illegal aquaculture farmers. The pressing issues of biodiversity loss, health hazards, frequent floods, water scarcity, loss of livelihood and economic burden are all obscured or sidelined and are masked by tourism marketing. The promotion of a "pristine" image of Kolleru in tourism advertisements, disconnects people from its grave environmental reality and projects a half-truth or an illusory experience. Simultaneously, promotion of tourism propels people to excavate ecological history of a specific region, which again inspires community led restoration efforts. The novel, *Softly Dies a Lake* blends memoir and environmental report to awaken readers to the larger ecological issues and to the need for a balanced coexistence between man and environment. This paper not only highlights the symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature but also argues for a greater emotional connection with the environment and advocates for a more sustainable existence.

