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VIGNETTE OF ECO-NOSTALGIA IN AKKINENI KUTUMBARAO'S *SOFTLY DIES A LAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Softly Dies a Lake written by Akkineni Kutumbarao in Telugu as *Kolleti Jadolu* and translated to English by Vasanth Kannabiran is a revisit to, a recollection of and a nostalgia on the lake Kolleru in Andhra Pradesh. Hit by the aquaculture industry boosted by the Blue Revolution, fast booming industrialism, unsupervised governance of few authorities, uneven monsoon patterns combined with diversion of river waters and the greed of the humankind, Kolleru, a once sprawling body of freshwater in India, is currently reduced to its mere capacities. The splendour of the lake is at present remembered only through the recollection of memories by its natives, who lament over its degenerated state and hope to revive it back to its finery. This emotion, found common among the natives of a land devastated by climate change and ecological issues, called eco-nostalgia is a relatively new study in anthropology and discusses how it is encountered, experienced and reacted to. Though not studied much in literature, literature can prove to be an excellent medium at studying eco-nostalgia in human subjects as it is the characters and their experiences with the land and society that steer head the plot. Apropos this, this paper studies the depiction of eco-nostalgia in an environment seriously damaged and threatened by climate change using the four propositions of eco-nostalgia propounded by Angé and Berliner in *Softly Dies a Lake*; the practical possibility to study eco-nostalgia from literature based on true events and; eventually validates the worsened state of the land as the cause of eco-nostalgia.

Keywords: Eco-nostalgia, Kolleru, fresh water lakes, ecocriticism, climate change

Are climate crisis and disasters merely issues of the future? Definitely not, they are very much looming over us right at this moment. Over the years, humankind has, with or without awareness, suffered serious climate calamities at various geographical scales, which were predominantly caused by negligent human factors. Having hoarded the toils put forth on it and its bountiful resources for so long, the Earth, metaphorically, has finally begun to give back the repercussions in the form of climate change, a natural phenomenon that is now triggered unnaturally.

The 20th and 21st centuries alone, the Pandora chests of various natural and human-made disasters, have witnessed reckless disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, forest fires and heat waves. The dust bowl

that resulted out of erroneous agricultural practices, nuclear bombings that seriously damaged local ecosystems during the world wars, the Bengal famine that was caused by the inefficient governance by the British in India, GMO seeds and ineffective irrigation systems that destroyed soil fertility in India thereby leading to droughts and farmer deaths and the Chennai floods of 2015 caused by unexpected heavy rains, unannounced release of the dam water and poor sewage architecture are a few to state.

Often it is only during times of crisis such as these that people come to comprehend the damage done to land and nature. In many cases, it is only at the threshold of destruction and utter helplessness that humanity realises the need to resurrect what has been lost, and attempts to make amends. It is under such desperation and yearning to get back to the past that eco-nostalgia is induced, thereby generating the need for an ecological restoration through newer methods or methods of the past that were practised and then forgotten with time.

Over years with several developments and additions, the field of nostalgia has broadened and branched into multiple fields. What began to be studied in connection to the longingness and yearning to return back to the native land and as a psychic disorder, is currently being studied with aspects of childhood, social groups, age, persons, events and places among others (Sedikides et al.).

One such intertwine is the nostalgia for lost ecology, an increasing and alarming issue, called eco-nostalgia. Deliberated by Olivia Angé and David Berliner in their seminal text *Ecological Nostalgias: Memory, Affect and Creativity in Times of Ecological Upheavals* published in 2021, it addresses the feeling of nostalgia for an environment or ecology of a place, by remembering its natural landscape, life forms and resources that have been lost or damaged due to anthropogenic activities and climate change, over natural ones.

Eco-nostalgia, being a very truthful and largely experienced emotion, grows its root from disasters and the trauma that they have left behind. To make the claims of eco-nostalgia even simpler, and on how it shall be identified and applied, the duo, Angé and Berliner, has devised four propositions which characterise eco-nostalgia. This phenomenon of eco-nostalgia that has been considerably researched in anthropology and ecology is nascent to literary studies. Studying it in literature, especially in memoirs, realist and historic fictions, shall prove to be an excellent attempt to understand eco-nostalgia in human subjects, as these literary mediums capture the memories and actions (affect and effect) of human characters.

One such literary work that captures eco-nostalgia is *Softly Dies a Lake*. Originally published in Telugu in 2014 by Akkineni Kutumba Rao as *Kolleti Jadal* and translated to English by Vasanth Kannabiran in 2020, it is based on the deterioration of the lake Kolleru, one of India's largest freshwater lakes that was once regularly frequented by over twenty million native and migratory fauna. Spread over ninety thousand hectares, Kolleru once easily supported the livelihood of farmers and fishermen. The lake was also the source of one of the first successful models of community farming in India. However, over time, the lake was exploited in various capacities such as encroachments, setting up of thousands of illegal aquaculture ponds and release of industrial effluents and wastes.

Owing to immense anthropogenic greed and improper supervision, Kolleru has currently come under a pressing threat of destruction as its spread area has tremendously reduced and is covered in weed, its water severely polluted, and lately visited by a few of its original migratory fauna. Though the ruin of Kolleru has been captured in multiple media, only a very few have managed to successfully render its past glory in its entirety, among which *Softly Dies a Lake* is one.

Unlike Kalpana Kannabiran calling the work as "a biopolitical memoir and an eco-memoir," it is more a fiction that takes the role of a memoir to the readers of Krishna and West Godavari in Andhra Pradesh (Kutumbarao ix). In a way, memoirs, historic and realist fictions are in themselves products of eco-nostalgia, as they are written as an effect of nostalgia to bring back the past times in the form of a text. This is also the case with *Softly Dies a Lake* that is set in two different times, early 1900s and the 1950s. It is in one section a nostalgia of the past, agony on the present and dubiousness of the future and in another section a glorified revisit to the past through the experiences of Seenu. Seenu is the prime character of the story and the prime subject that reflects the attributes of eco-nostalgia. His recollection of the blissful past and memories of the days spent in

the virgin land emphasises the damage made to the locale and the need to revive the lost. Taking the memories of Seenu and accompanying characters as its steering wheel, this paper shall to study the depiction of eco-nostalgia in an environment seriously damaged and threatened by climate change using the four propositions propounded by Angé and Berliner; the practical possibility to study eco-nostalgia from literature based on true events and; eventually validate the worsened state of the lake as the cause of eco-nostalgia.

Angé and Berliner mention in their first proposition that “eco-nostalgias are spatial and temporal at the same time” (4). Eco-nostalgia is not purely temporal, as in reminiscing just about the past times and the memories associated to it. It is also a yearning to get back the lost place, land or space. Destroyed by “capitalist economies of exchange and extraction,” eco-nostalgia brings to the forefront the yearnings of the lost homeland and a strong desire to revive the lost even at the cost of “riots and social protests” (Angé and Berliner 4). Migration caused by such environmental crises only birth more eco-nostalgias in the future, whether or not a person or a community had to physically or mentally migrate by losing connection with the land. This is accurately captured in almost every page of *Softly Dies a Lake*. The mental agony and pain experienced by Srinivasa Rao alias Seenu and Radhakrishna is akin to that of the natives and has been aptly portrayed in the very first page of the novel as an amalgamation of nostalgia and ecological grief as it describes the spatial loss of a bygone glory,

What lay before them today was a filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs, a danger to the environment, a toxic net for birds. The Kolleru which had once nurtured so much life, having fallen into hands greedy for wealth, was now an image of destruction and death. The very fish that had once flourished so plentifully in the lake were now being bred for the market and were perishing of pollution in the fishponds. (Kutumbarao 2)

Every few pages of the novel is a recollection of the past and never fails to exemplify the glory of the lake that was once “full of greenery, grasses, bulrushes, fragrant flowering shrubs and a wealth of other wild green weeds and colourful flowers swaying in the breeze” (Kutumbarao 4-5). Such a lake that once was an abode to water snakes, leeches, lotus flowers and buds as large as Thirupati *laddus*, a thirst quencher to buffaloes, shelter to migratory birds such as “blackbirds, storks, cranes, herons, hawks, snakebirds, cuckoos, mynas, red-legged storks, spotted-beak ducks, black bald hens” is currently a lost Eden (Kutumbarao 10).

Through the second proposition that “eco-nostalgias unfold in natures-cultures” Angé and Berliner suggest that eco-nostalgia not only considers the personal memories that deal with only the self, but also ones that include the “longings [to] bring together humans, plants, animals, ancestors and a wide array of earthly organisms connected through bodily communication” (5). The default ritual of the children of Kolleru, in the past, in taking the buffaloes to the lake, hunting for the sweet fruits to eat and relish, the memories that stay stable of the kids being covered by leeches and using the slush of the lake as a medicine to clot blood, the dense growth of “the weeds, the bulrushes, the cork trees, the underwater plants, the rushes and the mosses” that made navigating through the streams difficult and the hunting for the *puridu* birds that would make a good meal are a few instances where the human life is shown to be intertwined with the nature (Kutumbarao 88). The fiction also shows how the human and non-human lives were also interconnected, as in

Flocks of quaking ducks floated alongside, overtaking them at times and being overtaken sometimes. Cranes would alight on the buffaloes and hunt fish from there. Laying their catch on the buffalo's back they would peck at the fish and eat it. ... There were so many birds chirping and circling the sky and creating a hullabaloo. The air was filled with the sounds of children minding the herds and calling out and warning each other. (Kutumbarao 5)

The bonding, interdependence and the sense of oneness as a community among people was a strong force that the natives of Kolleru relied on at all times. In spite of the high hopes that Rangayya had – when he thought of the village and its people as “ours”, four coming to aid one to end their troubles, the Vaddis trusting that the Kammadoras will not deprive them of their livelihood when considering using acres and acres of Kolleru while practising community farming – the fiction has proven that with capitalism and materialistic lust any big of a community shall shatter (Kutumbarao 28). The shock and utter denial of this in Seenu which is reasoned by

Radhakrishna who relates the bygone days to the present, neatly suggests how eco-nostalgia is registered through relationships made with people.

"Groups? In our village?" Srinivasa Rao asked in surprise.

"Why, is our village special? The whole country is splitting along religious, caste and party lines. What is so special about our village? Our village also split. After the collective farming stopped, in just two years the story returned to normal. Floods. No harvests. Starvation. One can't understand human nature. However good a thing may be, they will sacrifice it to their egos and get ready to suffer countless sorrows," said Radhakrishna ruefully. (Kutumbarao 190)

Eco-nostalgia, as discussed by Angé and Berliner also is "enmeshed through multiple sensorial captors" such as visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile (6). Few memories related to senses are remembered as the narrator recalls that "Kolleru would resound with the songs and calls of the fishermen who had come in search of fish" and that "Kolleru would echo with the sounds of a hundred ragas and notes" for the auditory (Kutumbarao 88); visual when the narrator remembers the birds that were "rising in flocks with myriad needs and desires... [in] many kinds and ... many colours" (Kutumbarao 140) and; gustatory when "the whole village enjoyed the feast remembering Vajamma" (Kutumbarao 193) and while Seenu's mother pleads with him to give up meat every time he sits to eat while Seenu contests that the fishes of Kolleru were tastier than the vegetables and greens. Though these sensory memories do not make the characters act immediately upon the degraded state of Kolleru, it makes them realise what they have lost and have them repent for it in the present.

In the third proposition, Angé and Berliner say that "eco-nostalgias are critical and creative" (7). This means that eco-nostalgia will inspire innovative and creative actions which would aim at claiming the damaged environment back to its prior state. One important aspect to be taken into serious consideration during times of revival is that the desire to reclaim the past should not degrade the ecosystem than it currently is (Willson et al.). This is a major concern shared among the advocates of eco-nostalgia that, in the lines of Virginia D. Nazarea, recreating the past must be "less of a romantic anachronism and more of a real possibility" (qtd in Angé and Berliner 8).

Softly Dies a Lake has recorded how humans have evolved over time to persevere, adapt and learn new methods to safeguard and prevent another fatal crisis through a crisis. One such incident is the loss of the hard-laboured harvest which caused much pain and agony among the farmers that they finally decided to "build a dam and secure it and guard it day and night ... [to] ensure that no causal floods entered these spaces, [and by] working night and day to prevent" floods recurring in the future (Kutumbarao 12). Another incident that brings out the different ways people think and try taking up an initiative to bring relief during a crisis is when the people of Pulaparru were blocked access to water by the people of Takkellapadu. They discuss if they could plead, threaten or cajole the people of Takkellapadu, appeal through the government or take things at hand and directly remove the obstruction created over the canal to get the water back, thereby exhibiting the need to devise plans and act when a necessity arises,

"They proved that if everyone decided nothing was impossible. They showed that when the necessity arose everyone stood together. There was no need to teach the people of Pulaparru and Chintapadu and Kovvada. Necessity alone taught them." (Kutumbarao 131)

This is also told from the perspective of the lake,

Children of my womb this is not how you should live. You can tear me, crush me, hunt my fish and take the gems in my belly, she challenged and provoked them. Perhaps only if what was there in hand was completely destroyed would they think of newer and greater things, she thought. (Kutumbarao 173)

Another circumstance where an entirely new and pioneering attempt was made to revive the lost farming is the introduction of community farming which was diligently practised for six years. It was ideated as a solution for floods that forced a few to lament over their fate and a few to migrate. With the harvest being the Holy Grail

to be sought, the whole village jointly came to work together, shared expenses and reaped the harvest, thereby making Pulaparru one of the earliest successful practitioners of community farming in India.

...In our Kolleru we should build a bund around four or five hundred acres, remove the water inside the bund and then do wet farming inside it. This is possible only if the whole village joins hands. The fields belong to everyone. The work is everyone's. The harvest is everyone's. In hardly three months your troubles will cease. Just work for three months. And get rid of all your troubles. Get over your troubles with your harvests. (Kutumbarao 164)

However, when one digresses from the primary motive (revivifying the lost) and takes advantage of the existing situation to advance their "political and commercial agenda[s]" is when Angé and Berliner's fourth proposition comes in, that it becomes imperialism (Angé and Berliner 9). Unlike the claims of the duo that it is the outsider who facilitates the deterioration of the ecosystem, in the case of Kolleru it is the natives who themselves begin the process. The land and lake become a colony under the natives who take the role of an imperialist. Post six continuous years of community farming, the Vaddis who got sensitised to money and wealth began to manually build thousands of fishing ponds and hunt down any bird that came near the pond, thereby severely damaging the lake's ecosystem.

The collective farming went well for five or six years. Then the trouble started. As soon as everyone began to have some money each one thought he was a hero. These people began to say, why should the Vaddis have the fish in the Chinnagundam? The Vaddis said, not just the Chinnagundam but even the fish in the creeks you have made to let water into the fields belong to us. There were no one to moderate and settle matters. (Kutumbarao 189)

The money thus earned is stored in "gunny sacks filled with [as] five hundred and thousand rupee notes" (Kutumbarao 191).

Angé and Berliner also mention that eco-nostalgia shall encompass not just the lamenting of what has been lost but what shall be destroyed and lost in the future too. This is seen in *Softly Dies a Lake* when Seenu and Radhakrishna along with the elders in the village discuss how the villagers, running after money, have damaged the lake extensively by exploiting its resources, releasing industrial waste into it and making illegal acquisitions, and how the government and few authorities have overlooked the issue. Also portrayed is the concern for the future generations that would be deprived of the resources of the lake,

But how will the future generations deprived of healthy food, water and air live on these notes? Today's elders think that their children will live safely in America with all comforts, forgetting that even in America there are selfish people like this, occupying land, destroying natural resources and polluting the environment. Unless everyone together tries to preserve the earth's riches and beauty, mankind will be full of disease and hell. (Kutumbarao 195)

This concern stays till the very last lines of the text: "Could this wrong ever be set right? How?" (Kutumbarao 197).

Another way in which the imperial attitude is observed is when the lands are classified as reserved but are continued to be exploited, which is true in the case of Kolleru. With many concerns raised by people, Kolleru which was made a protected site still has parts of it that are illegally used to breed fishes in the daylight. This accurately showcases the claim of Ann Bermingham as shared by Angé and Berliner that such activities will "have a long history under capitalism" (qtd in Angé and Berliner 10).

Hence in a nutshell, eco-nostalgia, with reference to Kolleru as depicted in *Softly Dies a Lake*, is linked to both temporal and spatial realms, has deep links with non-human elements, has aroused creative and critical reactions and has also borne imperialism as a by-product. Eco-nostalgia as studied through *Softly Dies a Lake* also suggests that people not always look back and practise ways and methods of the past to recover the lost, but as per the third proposition might also think newly to resolve and reclaim the place to its original state. *Softly Dies a Lake* is not just an elegy to the lake and its lost glory, but also a sincere apology for the harms caused and

responsibilities misused. As a literary work, it attempts to paint the lake in its pristine form and highlights that the human greed which when left unchecked can greatly damage a resource and impair it to the extent where redemption or resurrection would seem doubtful. At the same time, production of literature such as *Softly Dies a Lake*, as a creative action, is also a reason to believe that humankind does realise its mistake, wishes to mend its ways or tries to bring back the lost. Reading literature such as historic and realist fiction and memoirs on ecologically devastated societies expands the study of eco-nostalgia in human subjects, and proves that anthropogenic acts only push the Earth towards climate crises and that eco-nostalgia arises mostly among people in “societies upset by climate change” (Angé and Berliner 1).

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