Eco-humanism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)

Lydie Le Moine, Professeure agrégée d'anglais, Doctorante à l'université de Bourgogne Franche-Comté, École doctorale LECLA (ED 592)

Key words: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, globalization, ecology, eco-humanism, magic realism.

Mots-clés : éco-critique, éco-féminisme, mondialisation, écologie, éco-humanisme, réalisme magique.

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1998) is Kiran Desai's first novel, which obtained the Betty Trask Award given by the Society of Authors to first novels by writers under the age of thirty-five coming from the UK or the Commonwealth. In 2000, Kiran Desai explained in an interview with journalist Catherine McWeeney that her inspiration came from reading an article in the *Times of India* about a hermit who had lived in a tree until his death. There are also undeniable reminiscences of *The Guide*, published by R.K. Narayan in 1958, which also tells the story of a likeable manipulative conman turned guru. What makes Desai's novel unique, though, is both the socio-economic context when it was published, as far as India is concerned, as well as her literary and ideological choices. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a modern tale about conformity, identity, sense of place and belonging, empowerment, ecology and globalisation. It is told with irony and quirky humour, weaving whimsical, incongruous and farcical situations with poetic descriptions of oneness with nature, disguising a perspective on human ecology that is far from optimistic under the colourful varnish of magical realism.

Ecology, from the Greek word *oikos* – a place to live – is the study of the interaction between people and their dwelling and is not limited to specific environmental issues such as global warming or pollution. In fact, at the core of the novel lies a conception of human ecology that mostly owes to a certain strand of eco-

feminism. Eco-feminist theory has evolved along various lines as research and activism developed, which will imply briefly reviewing the tenets of an approach that is now quite diverse. My aim is to show how Desai makes her reader look beyond the usual standpoints of ecofeminist theory. She even challenges them through characters and situations that reflect the specific human ecology of a small Indian town, making them at the same time familiar and unexpected.

The fact that the protagonist of the novel is a man does not make the reference to eco-feminism irrelevant. It only bears the premises of further developments focused on a specific manifestation of human ecology not just limited to the concrete space where the characters evolve and interact. Indeed, some situations rooted in symbolism and magical realism allude to a wider level of human interactions that go beyond the local scene and are connected with eco-critical and ecofeminist issues, namely, the impact of capitalism, globalization and even neo-imperialism on small communities. Associating the return of Coca Cola to India to Sampath's access to public fame is no random quirk (67). Through this unexpected narrative choice that calls for further analysis, Desai teases her reader's curiosity while indirectly guiding it towards a specific horizon of expectation.

Places, Characters and Issues

The novel is set somewhere in the foothills of the Himalayas in the imaginary town of Shahkot and in a guava orchard, a former private property now unexploited: "part of an area reserved [by the Government] for the national forest." (50). Both places are "border spaces". Shahkot is a town small enough to hold onto the habits and mindsets associated to rural spaces but big enough to display urban advantages and what they imply for the inhabitants in terms of behavioural change. The orchard is a reminder of man's grip on nature. Yet, as it is no longer kept, it is assimilated to the wilderness on which it borders.

The title refers to what happened after Sampath Chawla, the main character, decided to escape from his parents, his sister and his routine in order to live in a tree. Each member of the Chawla family, and even Shahkot's inhabitants, end up affected by Sampath's decision. His name means "wealth" or "good fortune," yet those words somehow belie the kind of person he is in the first place: certainly nice but lazy, a failure at school, at home and at work, self-centred, eccentric, craving for a life free from responsibilities, constraints and conventions, who ends up thinking that his

freedom and inner completion will be found only by living far from everyone and at one with nature. He then decides one day to “leave the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing” (48) and settles in a tree in an abandoned guava orchard. He starts posing as a guru to keep his distance from society and preserve his freedom by faking being a seer. In fact, his wise proverbs are inspired by what he learnt about the inhabitants of Shahkot while, as a bored post-office clerk, he would kill time reading their letters before they were delivered (66, 75). His father’s exploitation of his celebrity may have brought temporary wealth to the family and fame to the town; however, what happens to Sampath in the end could hardly be deemed “good fortune,” unless it is understood in a twisted and problematic way.

The rest of the family is as colourful as the protagonist. Sampath’s parents cut two radically different figures. Kulfi, whose name refers to a dairy-frozen dessert – sweet, destined to melt or be eaten – does not fit society’s expectations, like her son. She seems mildly insane and, as the novel unfolds, becomes more and more obsessed with food and cooking unique dishes for her son only, which leads her into a quest for rare if not incongruous ingredients that finally turns into a hunt, which, as I will show later, pertains in exoticist imperialism and, as far as her relationship with her son is involved, vicarious infanticide. Mr. Chawla, the father, is everything his wife and son are not: controlling, demanding, disciplined, down-to-earth, and greedy. He soon turns his son’s situation into a profitable capitalist venture and encourages frantic consumerism among Sampath’s devotees. He is completely at a loss to properly understand his wife and son and their awkward behaviours. Pinky, Sampath’s younger sister, is self-centred, strong-willed, and mostly focused on her good looks to maintain “her position in bazaar society” (81). She is not interested in doing “anything useful for modern India” (80), as her father expects from her. Pinky’s world is as different from Sampath’s as Kulfi’s from Mr. Chawla’s. Each member of the Chawla family seems to embody a different take on individualism and its aspirations. None of them is spared by Desai’s sharp style. In their own way, they are all a mix of normalcy and eccentricity, the latter progressively taking over the former, which contributes to creating an atmosphere that remains familiar to the reader while at the same time drifting towards disconnection from reality and finally magic.

Because of the novel’s reliance on magic realism to tackle environmental issues, elements from the fauna and flora might as well be considered characters, just like the human ones. Indeed, appearing in chronological order, the guavas, the orchard

and the monkeys are crucial elements to the plot. It is a guava Kulfi gave to her son that provokes an epiphany in Sampath at the beginning of the novel (46-47), an epiphany that foretells what the reader is left to imagine has happened to him in the end (207-208). The orchard is a reminder of man's hold on the environment but also a sign that nature always takes back what is not exploited anymore. Sampath does not flee the world to live in the jungle, as an aspiring hermit heading to the solitude of the wild would, and his escape to the orchard is only circumstantial, motivated by the annoying chatter of the old woman sitting next to him in the bus as he is leaving town (49). Yet, the orchard is immediately associated to inner spiritual peace (50), a trait further accentuated as soon as Sampath starts acting as a guru, delivering apophthegms that come to be known as "the Sermon in the Guava Tree" (73), which instantly alludes to both Buddha's first Sermon after his awakening and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt, 5-7), making the old orchard a modern syncretic Indian version of the garden of Eden with a guava as the fruit of knowledge. This religious subtext will provide matter for discussion in the light of the conflicting standpoints at play when it comes to ecofeminism, nature and religion. The monkeys, which lived in the town then joined Sampath in his orchard, are a reflection of what happens in the human world when balance is lost. They act as a kind of ecological barometer that validates or invalidates human actions, embodying the consequences of the disruptions caused by the humans. The monkeys are Sampath's partners in harmony with nature but also symbols of the environment disturbed by man, for example, when they loot the town for alcohol, threatening man's world order because of man's inconsequence, as Sampath reckons when they come back to the orchard: "It was the fault of those who brewed liquor that had turned the langurs into alcoholics" (140).

The disastrous interaction between nature and culture in the case of the drunken monkeys is one of the multiple occurrences of the openly eco-critical stance of the novel. Its indictment of man's anthropocentric attitude towards nature calls for a reappraisal of the binary opposition "nature-culture" that would avoid simplistically opposing urban and rural worlds or associating women to nature. Feminism is certainly an underlying theme of the novel, with its depiction of women freeing themselves from social conventions in their own ways, yet the issue is not exactly dealt with along the usual lines of gender equality criticism. The novel was published at a time when ecofeminism as a theory was gaining momentum in India, thanks to

the works and commitment of writers – who were sometimes also activists – like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (2014, 1st ed. 1993), Bina Agarwal (1994), and Manisha Rao (1996), to quote a few, all of them contributing to theorizing ecofeminism along different lines of thought. Focusing on Sampath, Kulfi and Mr. Chawla, I will show how *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* challenges a certain form of ecofeminism by staging complex and ambivalent male and female characters and their equally complex and ambivalent relationship to the environment, often in unexpected ways.

From the beginning of the novel, Sampath is associated to decisive environmental matters. His birth seems to have finally set off the long-awaited monsoon rains that ended a severe drought supposedly related to geostrategic tactics and environmental problems all over the world:

> *'Problems have been located in the cumulus that have become overly heated,'* read Mr. Chawla from the newspaper. *'It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spurt of activity in Tierra Del Fuego.'*
> And a little later he reported to whomever might be listening: *'The problem lies in the currents off the West African coastline and the unexpected molecular movement observed in the polar ice-caps.'*
> And: 'Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India.' (1)

Later, Sampath's new status in Shahkot – his re-birth – is also indirectly associated to environmental issues and globalization. His settlement in the guava tree is advertised by the local news bureau as the manifestation of "unfathomable wisdom" (67) and reported along an awkward mix of news all related to environmental issues, the last of which cannot fail to startle for bringing a realistic touch in a text written as a fable and for the consequences on the environment the reader may know it implies: Coca-Cola coming back to India (67). Global capitalism and its consequences on the environment seem to lurk over Sampath's combined return to nature and access to public fame. Never again in the novel will the American brand be mentioned, yet it somehow warns the reader about forthcoming developments about capitalism leaving its negative mark on the environment, with Sampath as the unwilling catalyst of those events. His reputation as a guru soon turned into a source of profit for the whole family – with dire consequences on the orchard – only confirms what was foreshadowed by the reference to Coca Cola.

Nature, Culture and Finding Oneself

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is about finding one's place, defining one's identity (Escobedo de Tapia 175) and, ultimately, about social ecology. In this process, nature plays a decisive role as a place to live and to be experienced. It is a place that has to be discovered and not conquered. The second step implies adapting to it as much as possible and not immediately turning it into a commodity only suited to human needs. Then comes a new perception of nature's rhythms and workings that may leave room for a certain degree of awareness: one that emerges from deeply feeling oneself in harmony with one's environment. Desai's novel could be deemed "nature writing" as it describes what happens to people according to their degree of integration with the fauna and flora. It depicts various human perceptions of nature and their consequences on the different characters' lives, providing the reader with the ecology of the specific milieus that Shahkot and the orchard are. As the novel unfolds, human affairs and environmental issues become more and more intertwined and reach final unexpected open-ended conclusions. Desai is no idealistic nature lover, though. She does not discard the pastoral ideal of return to nature and oneness with it but she chooses the incongruous to highlight its limitations. When it comes to Kulfi and what she represents, Desai, following an even more critical streak, openly challenges the notion of "Mother Nature" that supposedly closely associates women and nature. Analysing how Sampath and Kulfi relate to nature then provides the elements to discuss how the novel hints at ecofeminism and whether it suggests its own view of ecology.

Sampath and his mother Kulfi respectively embody the ideal of "oneness with nature" and the concept of "mother nature". Yet, the pastoral bliss of the beginning (50-51) evolves into something that "turned [Sampath's] stomach, now that the whole business was not light-hearted anymore but mean and complicated." (186). Despite the disturbance introduced by the affluence of tourists and believers soon channelled and commercially exploited by Sampath's father, the "Baba of Shahkot" never loses his desire for oneness with nature. On the contrary, Sampath's experience intensifies, making him feel more connected with his natural environment as his senses grow "sharper," allowing him to be:

> acutely aware of every tiny sound, every scent and rustle in the night: the stirrings of a mouse in the grass, the wings of a faraway bat, the beckoning scent that drew the insects to hover and buzz somewhere beyond the orchard. (203)

What could be just another version of blissful pastoral retreat is pushed to its limits. Sampath finally turns into a guava, the most radical escape from the human world Desai could imagine to satisfy her character's obsessive longing for oneness with nature:

> They looked here. They looked there. Up and down the guava tree. […] Its painfully empty cot. But wait! Upon the cot lay a guava, a single guava that was much, much bigger than the others, star-based, weathered. […] On one side was a brown mark, rather like a birthmark… (207)

The brown mark refers to the birthmark Sampath donned on his cheek. His fate, despite all the poetically enticing descriptions of his discovery of inner peace in contact with nature, does not look enviable. He has become a cut fruit, taken care of by the Cinema Monkey who protects him from humans, but in the light of the monkey's erratic behaviour earlier in the novel, one can suppose the guava will only end up being eaten, or if not, soon rot. Oneness with nature at the cost of one's humanity and possibly one's life does not make the concept attractive. It is as if Desai was warning against a conception of oneness with nature that lacks balance and leads to an extremist rejection of the human world that is quite sterile. However, there is another possible reading that makes Sampath's metamorphosis look inevitable and almost desirable, yet with as grim a conclusion as with extremist environmentalism. Indeed, his transformation may appear as the only way to protect both his new way of life and his monkey friends. The hunt planned by Mr Chawla and the authorities is not motivated by the will to preserve Sampath's peaceful retreat. It is only to put an end to the monkeys' disturbing interferences in the commercial exploitation of his popularity. Disappearing by turning into a guava will radically end everything. Enduring capitalism's toxic effects or becoming a guava is presented as the only alternative, but in both cases, alienation seems inevitable, even though assimilation to a fruit is described in attractive terms when Sampath has an epiphany about what could help him find his true self at the beginning of the novel:

> He stared at the fruit, wished he could absorb all its coolness, all its quiet and stillness into him. […] 'What should I do?' he said […] giving it another desperate shake. 'I do not want a job. I do not like to live like this,' he wailed… And suddenly, before his amazed eyes, the surface of the guava rose even more and exploded in a vast Boom! […] Up on the rooftop, Sampath felt his body fill with a cool greenness, his heart swell with a mysterious wild sweetness. He felt an awake clear sap flowing through him, something quite unlike human blood. […] His heart was big inside his chest. (47)

Not only does he experience being inhabited by a new force that seems to provide him with a new self, he also knows what he will be looking for from now on. To his mother, sorry for the spoilt guava, who is asking whether he would like an egg instead – an allusion to the cosmic egg of many cosmogonies? – he answers: "'No, I do not want an egg,' he said. 'I want my freedom.'" (47). The quest that led Sampath to an orchard imbued of idyllic properties, until Mr. Chawla's greed turned this paradise into an extension of the city, shows the limits of a return to nature that forgets our condition as "environmental beings belonging to a social landscape" (Escobedo de Tapia 176). Inadequacy to relate to the "social landscape" finally turns the "environmental beings" Sampath and Kulfi into human beings disconnected from their own humanity, each one in different ways.

A Contrasted Approach to Human Ecology

Sampath's narrative is ironical, perhaps even a bit sceptical when it comes to deep ecology, yet it remains quite approbatory about back-to-nature aspirations. Kulfi's narrative, however, delivers sharp criticism towards some tenets of ecofeminism. Desai makes Kulfi an embodiment of the notion of Mother Nature that associates women to nature, life and procreation. What makes Desai's vision quite critical, though, is the way Kulfi's connectedness to nature evolves from quirky to problematic and finally monstrous. At the beginning of the novel, the association Kulfi-Sampath-Nature is clearly stated. She breaks waters and gives birth to Sampath as the monsoon rains finally hit Shahkot and relieve everyone from a drought severe enough to have caused food shortages. It makes Kulfi look like a caring and nurturing being, embodying an essentialist conception of women that was validated by some Western or Indian ecofeminists (Rao 128, 130). However, this conception was branded a patriarchal approach by others (Rao 128), as reflecting views inherited from androcentric religious systems neither really respectful of women nor of nature (Kaur 386). The novel does not associate religion or spirituality and women, so there are no religious roots to Kulfi's obsession with feeding her son and cooking new dishes for him only. Her obsession becomes her sole characteristic, making her a caricature of the nurturing woman in tune with nature, who evolves from a pregnant woman having pregnancy-related cravings to a predator of the environment. However, Kulfi's peculiar association to food and cooking makes the traditional assignment of women to the kitchen her path of escape from conventions, normality

and reality. As for Sampath, there is a dream Kulfi aspires to fulfil: expressing her culinary creative self, which is impossible in "her tame life in Shahkot" (K. Desai 76). Sampath's escape from town finally frees her from her conventional life. As she settles in the orchard with the rest of the family to take care of her son, she soon experiments a deeper relationship with him and with her natural environment at the expense of her relationship with the rest of the family from which she gets progressively estranged:

> Here, in the orchard, the hold of other people on Kulfi and her awareness of them retreated even further, and, like Sampath, she discovered the relief of space. […] All around her was a landscape she understood profoundly, that she could comprehend without thought or analysis. She understood it like she understood her son, without conversation or the need to construct a connection or maintain it. Pinky was a stranger to her […] But Sampath, she *knew.* She knew why he was sitting in a tree. It was the right place for him to be; that is where he belonged. (78)

The exclusive mother-son relationship only encompasses nature and not the rest of the family or the community, whom Kulfi candidly suggests to poison, were they intent on forcing Sampath to live in a hermitage and not in his tree anymore (128). Yet, she finally becomes so absorbed in her feeding task that she paradoxically disconnects even from her son as she becomes obsessed with cooking a monkey, not realising it would hurt Sampath who has adopted them as much as they have adopted him. Cooking a monkey would symbolically mean infanticide, as Sampath somehow assimilates to them, not to mention the sacrilegious aspect of the project according to Hindu tradition. Her link to nature is not related to identity, as it is for Sampath, but to activity. For her, nature is not a dwelling place, as it is for Sampath, it is a place to be exploited. On that point, she does not differ from her husband who turns the orchard and its surroundings into a source of profit. Kulfi's association with nature finally appears to be destructive: she is shown dreaming of conquering the world only to satisfy her desire of new exotic ingredients:

> She was the royal cook of a great kingdom, she imagined. There, in some old port city, ruthless hunters, reckless adventurers, fleets of ships and whole armies lay at her beck and call, were alert to her every command, her every whim. And sitting in a vast kitchen before an enormous globe, imperiously she ordered her supplies, sent out for spices from many seas away […] She sent out for kingdoms to be ruined, for storehouses and fields to be plundered and ransacked. She asked for tiger meat and bear, Siberian goose and black buck. […]… and monkeys! Monkeys! Oh, to cook a monkey! (154-155)

The underlying challenging of certain arguments of ecofeminism, that the West is the root of all the evils that struck the third world, is quite obvious in this extract. Preying

on the environment is neither a Western wrong nor a male-only misbehaviour. The initial association between Kulfi and Nature proves to be defective. It is no use to "understand" nature (78) if, in the end, it leads to abusive exploitation. Kulfi exemplifies the limitations of certain ecofeminist arguments that tend to stiffen dualisms and dichotomies. Through her character, Desai certainly challenges what Vandana Shiva wrote in *Staying Alive:*

> Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and practice. At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. (37)

There is nothing nurturing in the way Kulfi exploits the natural resources to feed her son. Even the connection between gender and environment at the heart of Shiva's version of ecofeminism seems to be challenged here as it is a woman who dreams of plundering natural resources to meet her mission as the nurturer not of a community but of only one person. Although associated to Mother Nature at the beginning of the novel, Kulfi proves to be, in the end, neither motherly nor as respectful of nature as her son: "The profusion of greenery and space exhilarated her. And while it reduced her son to a happy stupor, it incited her into a frenzy of exploration" (K. Desai 100). Kulfi's paradoxical and unconventional behaviour challenges the usual attribution of roles in some ecofeminist theories: her extravagant recipes are the expression of her free if not deranged spirit, as she is soon considered mad by the rest of the Chawla family (63), they do not have anything to do with being a nurturer in tune with nature.

In her article "Introduction to Ecofeminism: An Indian Perspective," Sanjukta Bala suggests that a specific form of ecofeminism is being devised by Indian female writers who are redefining the tenets of the initial theory in order to avoid simplification and address more openly the complexity of the issue by "questioning some of [its] standpoints" such as:

> 1. An essentialist connection between women and nature.
> 2. An unquestioning acceptance of the connection as monolithic and simplistic without recognizing that women's position in different cultures and societies can alter or change the modes of this connection.
> 3. The "purity and authenticity" of third world cultures that celebrate the connection. It does not take into account the social hierarchies inherent in such cultures and issues of class, race or gender.
> 4. Absence of the male voice.
> 5. Modernity and its negative impact on nature and human behaviour. (191)

Bala bases her argument on the studies of novels by Kamala Markandaya (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 1954), Anita Desai (*Fire on the Mountain*, 1977), and Anuradha Roy (*The*

Folded Earth, 2011). No doubt that *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* belongs to the same category with its fluid references to spiritual and materialist approaches of ecofeminism – the spiritual being linked to Sampath, a man, and not his mother, who looks more like a counter-example of how a specific strand of ecofeminism considers women.

Human ecology or ecofeminism?

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard also exposes the complexities of environment-related issues and the greed and incompetence that result in disturbing the ecological balance. Sanjukta Bala considers the novels she analyses as signs of a new form of literary ecofeminism that is "Indian by nature" because it shows India as "a real world of struggle, sufferings, economic imbalance, material inequality, sexual discrimination and survival" (192). Desai's novel also exposes similar plights of Indian society, adding religious bigotry, the pettiness and incompetence of the Army, the Police, the Civil Service and the scientific elites to the list. However, as she chooses to focus not on a single female character but equally on Sampath and Kulfi, and to a lesser extent, Mr. Chawla and Pinky, "ecofeminist" may not seem an appropriate denomination for the novel. As for deciding whether *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* belongs to Indian or global literature, it is a debatable issue addressed by Erin Fehskens in her 2013 article.

Taking Sanjukta Bala's arguments into account makes the term "ecofeminist" not relevant enough to characterise *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard.* The novel may hint at ecofeminist theories, yet, their categories seem too limited to match the complexity of the characters and situations it depicts. Following on Bala's steps, Sangita Patil, in *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (2020), reminds her reader that the umbrella term ecofeminism "focuses on the philosophical, practical and analytical study of the exploitation of women and nature" (13), which leads her to identify three main tenets of ecofeminism:

> The first, women are exploited by patriarchal development attitude because of their close association with nature and dependency on it. Second, women are saviours of nature. Lastly, women are life givers, nurturers and caretakers of nature. (17)

None of the women in Kiran Desai's novel match these criteria: Ammaji, the grandmother, Pinky, Miss Jyoti, Sampath's ex-colleague at the post-office, and the ice-cream vendor's sisters and cousins show no sign of interest in nature

whatsoever. It even seems that they are portrayed as such only to challenge ecofeminist representations within a narrative otherwise rooted in concern for ecology and feminism. The female characters are no activists; yet, each in their own way attempt at getting rid of the constraints society imposes on them. A specific link to Nature may – as for Kulfi – or may not – as for Pinky – be of use in their attempts to free themselves. Such characterisation echoes Sangita Patil's suggestion that it is "appropriate to look at ecological crises more as a general human problem than merely as a gender problem" (6). The ecological crisis staged in the novel is indeed related to social, economic and personal more than specific gender issues.

For Patil, the ongoing conflicting debates about ecofeminism make it difficult to devise a theoretical frame that would take all viewpoints and contexts into account. That is why she proposes to reconceptualise ecofeminism. In fact, she discards the term and suggests replacing it by "eco-humanism". After analyzing Indian novels usually considered as representative of Indian ecofeminism – as Sanjukta Bala did – she comes to the conclusion that even though the main characters are women struggling with the dire consequences of patriarchal rule combined with environmental disasters due to rugged industrialization, men also are victims of the same circumstances. Such reconceptualization stems from observing the controversies and reproaches addressed to the different strands of ecofeminism that seem to be unable to propose an inclusive discourse about women and about how to deal with the environment. The accusations of dualism or essentialism are inevitable when one forgets that "women" are not a homogeneous group, as Bina Agarwal made it clear when she devised her theory of "feminist environmentalism" (1992) – also a refutation of some of Vandana Shiva's arguments and statements. According to the different classes, cultures and castes they belong to, women's relationship to the environment is not the same (Kaur 2012). Reconceptualising ecofeminism into eco-humanism may prove a debatable solution to solve the theoretical conflicts of ecofeminism, as humanism is itself the field for much argument. Yet, the move provides valuable reading keys for Desai's novel. In Patil's opinion, the current perception of humanism is no longer an anthropocentric one, it is a perception "that is inclusive of all natural species [and] claim[s] that human beings have no right to destroy nature" (144), a theoretical frame she also calls "post-humanism". This conception fits Desai's approach of human ecology at large, and more specifically when dealing with the environmental impact of capitalism on individuals and

communities. First when she associates Sampath's access to public fame to the arrival of Coca-Cola in India (K. Desai 67), then when she describes how Mr. Chawla turns the orchard into a profitable business venture (29, 90, 118) and finally, when she suggests a way-out to what looks like a dead-end.

Market economy and globalization

In a novel whose tone is deliberately one of folk tale, magical realism and false ingenuity, references to the real world have all the more impact. In *Hullabaloo*, such references involve globalization, Indian consumer society, through the mention of real products whose ads hang around Sampath's tree (126), and, to a lesser extent, as details in passing, Bollywood films (85) and playback singers (196). The most significant historical reference is mentioned at the end of chapter 7, after Sampath used his ill-acquired knowledge to trick the visitors of the orchard into thinking that he is a spiritual man blessed with supernatural wisdom and not an eccentric man shaming his family. The event that turned Sampath into a dignified hermit and nosy onlookers into devotees is then reported in the local newspaper along with news about economic and environmental issues, current and prospective:

> There it was – a modest column introducing Sampath to the world, along with scarcity of groundnuts, an epidemic of tree frogs and the rumour that Coca-Cola might soon be arriving in India. (67)

The name of the brand provides a time indication that contextualises Sampath's story: Coca-Cola, driven out of India by protectionist laws in 1977, came back in 1993, at a time when the country was shifting towards economic liberalisation. The name of the company is also associated to the criticism its return to India soon raised among environmentalists, struggling for the preservation of groundwater resources in the rural areas where the plants were set up. The juxtaposition of the different events could be interpreted as lacking any relation of causality; yet, they all share the characteristic of being linked to the environment. What the name Coca-Cola conjures up in terms of environmental damage cannot fail to come to the reader's mind. In terms of textual coherence, the return of Coca-Cola to India at the end of chapter 7 is directly followed by the revelation that strikes Mr. Chawla at the beginning of chapter 8, which draws an implicit parallel between Coca-Cola returning to India and him making plans to exploit his son's popularity:

> It was at this point in time that Mr. Chawla had a realisation – all of a sudden, with a tumble and rush of understanding – a realization so quick and so

> incredible in nature that his heart was caught in a constant state of pounding: Sampath might make his family's fortune. They could be rich! How many hermits were secretly wealthy? How many holy men were not at all the beggars they appeared to be? How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts? (68)

India was a considerable market bound to expand the revenue of the American company. Similarly, Sampath's reputation as a holy man made it an asset to be commercialized for the greater good of the family's bank account. Mixing greed and reference to religion as a pretext for the accumulation of wealth, Mr. Chawla, head of the family, embodies patriarchal fast capitalism, preying first on his own son, whose name acquires a fiduciary value once his father starts commercializing his picture. In both cases, be it Coca-Cola coming back to India or Sampath's reputation turned into a good to be commercialized, the toll on the environment is heavy.

Erin M. Fehskens, in her analysis of the novel as global literature, quotes a series of studies on the impact of Coca-Cola bottling plants in India, which showed how harmful they were, particularly in terms of draining groundwater resources (6). As the family relocates in the orchard, Mr. Chawla makes illegal arrangements condoned by the community to prevent their urban habits from being disturbed by rural inconveniences: he taps "the hospital electricity lines" and gets "gushing water all day long" after siphoning a public water pipe (K. Desai 90), acting with the community resources with the same disrespect for the environment as Coca-Cola in the 1990s wherever they set their plants. He takes hold of the area and intends to transform it as an estate agent would:

> He envisioned a whole complex with a temple and dormitory accommodation for travellers designed to suit modern tastes in comfort, a complex that would be a prize pilgrimage stop and an environment that he could keep control of. (127)

The orchard is at the periphery of the town, yet central for its prosperity. For Fehskens, such redistribution of goods and power makes "*Hullabaloo*'s narrow geographical scope [expand] allegorically to represent a globalized centre and periphery" (5), with Mr. Chawla standing as "another, more rapacious and extractive allegorand of Coca-Cola's policies of its bottling plants" as well as "an allegorization of national government and multinational corporate mismanagement" (7). The transformation of the orchard into a pilgrims' and tourists' venue has dire consequences on Sampath's new dwelling:

> Sampath looked and found no help in the faces of his family. How much had changed since he had first arrived in the orchard such a short time back. How

> quickly it was becoming more and more like all he hoped he had left behind forever. Ugly advertisements defaced the neighboring trees; a smelly garbage heap spilled down the hillside behind the tea stall and grew larger every week. (K. Desai 181)

For Mr. Chawla, the disfigured orchard only prefigures the end of his commercial venture and beckons for him the moment to face his responsibilities, which he cannot accept:

> The orchard had disintegrated into a sorry state and he knew his life there was in danger of drawing to a close. […] There was something more: a terrible sadness and a feeling of vulnerability he did not wish to investigate […]. To think of such things, he was sure, would mean drilling holes in his watertight heart: all sorts of doubts would pour in and he would be a lost man. (179)

Facing his inner truth being impossible for Mr. Chawla, he carries on regardless with his project of managing Sampath and the monkey issue as he would a company, which results in Sampath literally leaping out of humanity and anthropocentricity by becoming a guava. Sampath's radical metamorphosis suggests that there is no liberation from exploitation of man and environment by man. Only a radical transformation of our way of interacting with the environment could achieve it, a transformation inspired by a post-human and deep ecological perception of who we are – which Mr. Chawla refuses to do – and of how nature should be acknowledged – which is exemplified by how Sampath relates to nature:

> If only it would reach out and claim him instead. If he stayed here long enough within reach of its sights and sounds, might it not enter him in the manner landscape enters everything that lives within it? Wouldn't the forest descend just this bit lower and swallow him in its wilderness, leaving his family, his devotees, to search fruitlessly for a path by which they might follow? (143)

Sampath's expectations are met in the end. Whether his example opens a new path to his family and devotees is unknown but it indicates that he has evolved and found – albeit in an awkward way – what he was looking for at the beginning, despite the disturbances to his quest caused by his father's greed and the visitors' devotion and curiosity.

Desai's indictment of global and local capitalism does not stage any group of environmentalists or activists because what is presented as reprehensible and even stifling in the novel is Shahkot itself, with its petty rules which led Sampath to flee the city and made his sister want to elope. As long as Sampath lives alone, his environment is preserved. The disruption of the natural order of the orchard is only

the result of the malfunctioning of the community, commoners and authorities, men and women, all equally driven by various kinds of greed. The novel explores different modalities of relationship with the environment and deals less with the preservation of nature than with the re-discovery of a way of life attuned with it, which would shape personal identities and bring balance to the community. The unexpected turn of events at the end suggests that finding this balance is problematic, unless radical change is implemented.

Sampath and Kulfi embody two ways of being deeply related to nature, to the point of disappearing in it, albeit in a different way. Sampath finally manages to live perfectly in accordance with nature's rhythms by becoming a fruit and Kulfi, whose only activity has become exploiting and exploring nature, gets lost in her venture: she is not seen returning from her quest for a rare orchid native of the West Indies, the last ingredient she needs to cook a monkey for Sampath. She lost herself in her dream of grabbing ever more natural resources whereas Sampath lost himself in his aspiration of being absorbed by nature.

Although Sampath and his mother remind us of some ecofeminist tenets, they also challenge them by showing that men are not the only ones who predate the environment or that women's idealistic association to Nature may prove arguable. The aim is to highlight the fact that an imbalanced relation to the environment affects the whole community. Consequently, environmental awareness in such cases should rather be linked to eco-humanism rather than ecofeminism in order to broaden the perspective and bring about emancipation from dualisms suggested by some ecofeminist approaches.

Works Cited

AGARWAL, Bina, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land's rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

BALA, Sanjukta. "Introduction to Eco-Feminism: an Indian Perspective." *Literary Endeavour*, Vol IX, Issue 3, July, 2018: pp 186-192.

DESAI, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain.* London: Harper Collins, 1977.

DESAI, Kiran. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard.* New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998.

ESCOBEDO DE TAPIA, Carmen. "Searching for an Environmental Identity: *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1996) by Kiran Desai." *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies,* vol. 39, 2018: pp.173-92. https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.173.92

FEHSKENS, Erin M. “Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* as Global Literature.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture.* 15.6 (2013) https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/13/ <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2366. Accessed March 2020.

KAUR, Gurpreet. “Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Novels in English”. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity,* Vol.2, n°5, September 2012. http://www.ijssh.org/papers/131-W00008.pdf. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

MCWEENEY, Catherine. “Interview with Kiran Desai”. First published in Bold Type 2000. https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/229/kiran-desai. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.

MARKANDAYA, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve.* New York: John Day Company, 1954.

NARAYAN, R. K. *The Guide*. London: Methuen Publishing, 1958.

PATIL, Sangita. *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel*. London & New York: Routledge, 2020.

RAO, Manisha. *Theory and Practice of Ecofeminism in India: an Analysis*. Pune: Women's Study Center, University of Pune, 1996.

———. “Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: a Review.” https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/numeri/n20/13_20_-Rao_Ecofeminism.pdf. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

ROY, Anuradha. *The Folded Earth*. London: MacLehose, 2011.

SHIVA, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India.* London & New York: ZED Books, 1989.

SHIVA, Vandana and Maria MIES. *Ecofeminism*. 2nd ed. London & New York: ZED Books, 2014.