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LIFE AND DEATH OF KOLLERU IN AKKINENI KUTUMBARAO'S 'SOFTLY DIES A LAKE'

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Abstract

The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, released on March 20, 2023, highlights the unprecedentedly grim realities about climate change. It is an urgent reminder of a rapidly closing window to address and stop climate change. If there was ever an urgency to assess literature from the point of view of environmental degradation, it is now. This paper studies the exploitation and deterioration of the freshwater Kolleru Lake in Andhra Pradesh, and its impact on the poor as depicted in *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumbarao. The book is an ecological memoir in which Srinivasa Rao looks back to his childhood and his early days in the village of Pulaparru, situated near Kolleru. We gain an insight to the people of the village and their lifestyle. It highlights how intimately humans are connected with nature and how much more they are dependent on it for their very lives. Through *Softly Dies a Lake* we come to know of a Kolleru that was once full of life, and this proof of life magnifies the sense of loss of the lake and the ecosystem as it was. The paper assesses the efficiency of ecological memoir as a literary genre to bring home to the readers the damage human greed has caused and continues to cause to the natural environment. The paper also attempts to show the evidence of 'slow violence' a term proposed by Rob Nixon that addresses the unseen but perpetual violence on our natural resources and environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecological-memoir, environmental exploitation, slow-violence

Introduction

Softly Dies a Lake was originally written in Telugu as *Kolleti Jadamu* by Akkineni Kutumbarao in the year 2014, and its English translation by Vasanth Kannabiran was published in 2020. The book is an ecological memoir in which Srinivasa Rao reminisces about his childhood, which was so intimately intertwined with the freshwater lake Kolleru. His memories take us 60 years back to a simpler but difficult rural life where nature and Kolleru flourished. Unfortunately, the past is in stark contrast to the present, where Kolleru, which was once full of life, is now reduced to a dried-up drain

due to excessive aquaculture and pollution. Kutumbarao wrote *Kolleti Jadamu* for two main reasons. Firstly, he wanted to document the degradation and neglect that Kolleru had suffered at the hands of the government. Secondly, he wanted to share the Kolleru of his childhood, the lake that was free of all the pollution, encroachment, and exploitation—a state that the author fears is completely and permanently lost.

Kolleru is the largest freshwater lake in Andhra Pradesh, situated between Krishna and the West Godavari district and connected to the sea through the Uppaleru river. The freshwater lake is a

rich ecosystem and home to a diverse aquatic life and birds such as pelicans, blackbirds, snakebirds, cranes, storks, hawks, herons, mynas, cuckoos, black bald hens, spotted-beak ducks, etc. It was recognised as a globally important wetland ecosystem during the Ramsar convention and was declared a Ramsar site in 2002. Aptly suggested by its name, *Softly Dies a Lake* depicts the life and the sad 'death' of Kolleru lake at the greedy hands of the government and the people.

The ecological memoir recalls Srinivasa Rao's childhood in his village Pulaparru and gives a detailed account of its people, culture, and their complete dependence upon Kolleru and nature in general. According to Akkineni Kutumbarao, "All the people in it are real. That village is real. Kolleru is real." (Kutumbarao xvii). We are introduced to the village of Pulaparru and its people, their community, their beliefs, and various stages of their lives.

I. Kolleru and Nature: Alive, Omnipresent and Nurturing

Kolleru is not just a passive landscape in the book. Instead, it is alive and omnipresent throughout the text. The very title *Softly Dies a Lake* highlights that Kolleru had been alive, and there are many instances that showcase the magnificence and power of the freshwater lake:

"The water was full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches...not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water a wealth of green grasses waving in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses the cattle, birds and insects. All living things depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony, Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth." (101)

Kolleru nurtured every one—human and animal alike—and every living being depended on it like a child depends on a mother. The village of Pulaparru was mostly inhabited by Kammadoras, who were farmers, and the Vaddirajas, who were fishermen. Both the communities depended on Kolleru for their livelihoods; while the Vaddirajas depended upon the fish that was found in the lake, the farmers fed their cattle and buffaloes the plants

and weeds that grew in its waters. Kolleru took care of everyone. Throughout the text, the lake is omnipresent and the lives of the people completely revolve around it. Right in the beginning of the memoir, we see 5-year-old Seenu (Srinivasa Rao) and his friends Kishtudu, Pottodu, and Dasu driving the cattle into Kolleru to feed and bathe them. There is plenty of evidence of a robust and thriving ecosystem and an almost idealistic coexistence of beings. The freshwater lake is full of lush green grass, fragrant and colourful flowers, and various weeds that provide abundance of food to the grazing cattle. The animals in *Softly Dies a Lake* are also not passive and appear to be interactive and responsive. While the cattle graze leisurely, the birds sit on them to hunt fish and seem to thank the buffaloes once they are done. The animals indulge in mischief; the buffaloes try to dunk the cranes in water, and the cranes fly off just in time. Sparrows and other smaller birds also feed on the ticks that clung to the bodies of cows and buffaloes and even cleaned their ears. Kolleru not only hosts cattle from a dozen villages but also welcomes diverse migratory birds from all over the world. The lake nurtures and feeds Seenu and his friends too. While driving the cattle, the children never have to pack any food, and a potentially exhausting task like driving and feeding the cattle becomes a pleasant and leisurely job due to the presence of Kolleru. While the cattle eat to their hearts' content, Seenu, Kishtudu, Pottodu, Rajulu, Dasu, Lakshmi, and Baby feast on the delicious and fresh lotus fruit, kalekayalu, allikayalu, cheemidi kayalu, etc., and drink directly from the stream. Throughout the text, there are colourful and lively instances where we see how a harmonious cacophony of lively noises—of children, various birds, aquatic life, and insects—fill the atmosphere. Nature truly comes alive in Kolleru and the village of Pulaparru.

II. Kolleru: Omnipotent, Menacing and Unforgiving

Besides nourishing like a mother, Kolleru is known for its temper. All the dreams and hard work of the farmers and fishermen become nothing in front of its rage and temper. Kolleru is not a lake only to cater to the needs and requirements of the people and animals. It seems to have a mind of its own. On one hand, it cares for and nurtures animals,

people, and plants like a mother; on the other, it floods with a vengeance. The year-long toil of the farmers is completely and mercilessly destroyed by Kolleru, as are the lives of the cattle and other animals it otherwise nourishes. For the villagers, Kolleru is both a mother and a monster, and the villagers have a saying that "There is no count of the harvest in Kolleru or the bullocks that die there" (13). This saying by the villagers highlights how the freshwater lake is not just a mere resource at the disposal and service of the farmers and the fishermen. It is nature with a force of its own, and we are reminded how trivial and at complete mercy we are to its power. The farmers might have worked day and night, hoping and preparing for a harvest, but a single unexpected flood in Kolleru washes away all their hopes of earning a living. After all, there is no account of harvests and livestock that have been swallowed up by the mighty Kolleru. One can only feel how immensely powerful nature is and how much the farmers are dependent upon natural resources. We are also reminded how fragile farming actually is. One might work relentlessly, but all the efforts would be in vain if not accompanied by favourable weather conditions. With climate change and the rise in global temperature, there will be no more dependable weather cycles, thereby severely devastating the average farmer. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, Kolleru floods twice, and both times it is heart wrenching for Kakayyagaru, Rangayya, Lakshamma, and other villagers to see their crops getting destroyed by the freshwater lake. During the second flood, one of the villagers, Purushottam, stuffs his cloth in his mouth and begins to cry. For these farmers, the harvest is their very source of living, and its destruction puts them in a dire condition of acute poverty and starvation. For villages like Pulaparru, there is little help: "The Government that should come to their aid could not even see these villages or these people. These people did not even know that there were governments and that their troubles could be ended. Who could do anything?" (157). Eventually, it is through the educated plan of Atluri Pitcheshwar Rao and the hard work of the entire village that the problem of flooding in Kolleru is temporarily resolved. The entire village contributes to building a

bund around five hundred acres and doing wet farming inside it. This is no ordinary feat, but all the people of Pulaparru selflessly work together to achieve it, and fortunately, though temporarily, benefit from it.

Most of the youth including Pitchhayya, Madhu, Seenu, Kishtudu, and Jhansi, who might have brought about some change, eventually leave Pulaparru to study for a better future, leaving the elders, the village, and Kolleru on their own. The people who are left are the ones who are least cared for by the government but are the first who would be severely impacted by the smallest and the slightest of climate degradation and pollution. These are the people who have least contributed to pollution, exploitation, and environmental degradation. Yet they are the ones to face the brunt of the devastating and grim consequences.

Throughout the memoir, we see the villagers treating their livestock, Kolleru, and nature with the utmost respect and compassion. They never take natural resources or animals for granted; after all, their very life depends upon them. Rangayya, Seenu's father and a farmer in Pulaparru acutely states: "For the sake of this harvest the farmer kills many living things...Not just snakes and scorpions, here many hundreds and thousands of lives coexist. Not just the water insects that we see, there are so many that we can't see. We deprive the ones who need water and wet the ones who don't need water. It is after committing all these sins that the farmer grows this harvest. This harvest provides food for the people of this world" (180). Farmers are evidently and naturally closer to the environment and are actually aware of what it takes to bring food to the table. We might even speculate how much privileged urban citizens think of the natural resources it takes to make the food they are consuming in affluent abundance. If basic necessities such as food require so many resources, how many more does luxury require and exploit?

III. Slow Violence in *Softly Dies a Lake*: Efficacy of an Ecological Memoir and Death of Kolleru

Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* describes slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out

of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." (Nixon 2) *Softly Dies a Lake* opens with a 65-year-old Srinivasa Rao standing on the shore of an almost-dry lake, mournfully wondering how it degraded and deteriorated to its present state. He wonders, "Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone?" (1). Kutumbarao wrote *Kolleti Jladalu* in 2014 and conceptualized the ecological memoir around the 1970s. Hence, we can estimate that when he begins to recall Kolleru from sixty years ago, he is remembering the freshwater lake from the 1910s or earlier. In all these 60 years, Kolleru did not get reduced to a dried drain all of a sudden. In the memoir, the people of Pulaparru and all other villages farmed and fished for subsistence. Their primary goal was to feed themselves and sell the rest. Unfortunately, this utilization of natural resources for one's basic needs slowly transforms into environmental exploitation with the advent of the fishing ponds in the 1970s. Since the introduction of fishing ponds and commercial aquaculture, Kolleru has been exploited and polluted in various ways. Borewells have been sunk in the lake bed to add the saline water necessary for aquaculture, causing the bed to sink and collect it in excess. All the chemical fertilizers, manure, and waste from aquaculture ponds have stagnated and polluted the surrounding lake water. Additionally, all the agricultural fertilizers, medical and industrial wastes, and toxins from nearby cities and industries flow into Kolleru. All this damage has continued for decades; it has been gradual, and its impact stares at Srinivasa's face only after it is too late, only after a glorious freshwater lake is on the very brink of its death.

Being an ecological memoir, *Softly Dies a Lake* very effectively highlights and unearths the presence of slow violence. It introduces the readers to a 'dying' lake and then takes them back to the time when it was brimming with life—when its fish was so healthy and strong that it could injure the fishermen, when its fish was popular for its taste and quality, when the children and people could drink its

water and eat its fruits without having to think twice. Through the memoir, Srinivasa Rao recalls fond memories and people: his childhood with his friends, his parents Rangayya and Lakshamma, and other elders who pampered and doted on him, the delicious food and fruits, the overwhelming pain and helplessness of the villagers during the floods, their extraordinary teamwork to build a bund and practice wet farming in Kolleru, and much more. Srinivasa's memories enable the reader to know the village of Pulaparru and its people intimately. It is through his recollection that we know how magnificent and glorious Kolleru once was, and this is exactly what Kutumbarao aims to do: document and preserve the memory of simpler times and of a Kolleru that was alive. Consequently, it leads to the horrifying and unfortunate realization that the Kolleru of Srinivasa's childhood is no longer there. Instead, there now exists a drying waterbody choked with pollutants and fish ponds. One can no longer drink directly from this Kolleru, and its fish are now full of pesticides and heavy metals.

Softly Dies a Lake is a memory that belongs to Srinivasa Rao, a man who spent his childhood in the lap of Kolleru, who swam in it with the snakes and the fish, who ate and drank from it and whose parents completely depended upon it and worshiped it. Through his memories we come to know of a world and reality from which most of the urban readers are detached. For people living in a highly urbanized world, removed from nature, the ecological memoir brings them back to a world that really matters, a world they are at the brink of losing.

IV. Conclusion

Softly Dies a Lake by Akkineni Kutumbarao is a powerful and significant work of Indian literature in today's time of climatic urgency. It effectively and aptly utilizes ecological memoir as a genre to highlight the slow violence and environmental degradation of Kolleru due to the callous greed and selfishness of humans. Perhaps it might be one of the appropriate "hybrid forms" (Ghosh 113) that facilitate the depiction of climatic change. More importantly, through this book we come to know of Kolleru that used to be omnipotent and nurturing. That memory of Kolleru consequently and brilliantly

underlines the devastating catastrophe that we have caused.

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